

Olde tyme gigging

Locals reach into past to honor Ozark traditions

Above: From left, Don Foerster, Ray Joe Hastings and Mike Gossett get a feel for their equipment before heading out for a night of traditional gigging on Current River. **Right:** Before aluminum johnboats and electric lights, gigging in the Ozarks was done by the light of a pine-knot fire suspended above a handmade wooden johnboat. **Below:** Brian Foerster, left, holds up a northern hogsucker he just gigged while his father, Don, hollers to giggers watching from another boat. This was likely the first fish gigged using all traditional equipment in more than 50 years.

by Jason Jenkins



Under a waxing November moon, adrift on Current River, three men in a wooden johnboat peer intently into the clear water below, gig poles at the ready, searching the gravel bottom for their quarry.

Bathed in the moonlight, white-barked sycamores stand as sentinels along the river's banks. The passing gravel bars glow like snowdrifts along a winding country road.

Aside from the occasional word spoken among the trio, the only sound on the water is the crackling and popping of a pine-knot fire burning in an iron basket that hangs over the side of the boat. Suspended just above the water's surface, the resin-filled wood oozes its pitch, feeding the flames that light the task at hand. Golden embers tumble from the basket, hissing as they meet the chilly water.

A thick, black smoke and the smell of turpentine rise as the 20-foot-long craft floats sideways down the river. The fishermen use their hats to shield themselves from the choking smoke and the brightness of the flames.

Without warning, Brian Foerster thrusts his gig into the depths. Then with equal quickness, he raises it high. The first fish gigged this night — a northern hogsucker — silhouettes against the moonlit Ozark sky.

"Hey, hey, looky there!" exclaims Brian's father, Don, of Van Buren. "How 'bout that!"

While many a hog molly, as they're often called here in Ripley County, would be gigged by others this November night, Brian's first catch represented more than just fish for the fry.

Though gigging is still popular today on Current River and other clear, spring-fed streams in the Missouri Ozarks, Brian's fish was likely the first to be gigged using all traditional handmade equipment in at least a half century. It's been roughly 75 years since the practice was common.

For the most part, modern materials and technologies have supplanted the traditional ways.

Aluminum johnboats with jetted outboard motors have replaced handmade wooden crafts that would have been push-poled upriver by the boater. Fiberglass gig poles have overtaken hand-hewn wooden ones. Quartz-halogen lights powered by portable generators have made burning pine knots

in a fire basket obsolete. Even the hand-forged fishing gig — a true Ozark stalwart — has become more rare as those who forge them pass on.

But on this night, a small group of traditional craftsmen paid homage to their Ozark ancestry and a way of life that has all but disappeared from the hill country.

"It's been more than 50 years since anyone has seen this, and you might never see it again," says Bob Cunningham, a sassafras paddle maker from West Plains who came to witness the spectacle. "This is a chance to connect with a bygone era."

Today, a gigging trip is as much a social event as it is a food-gathering endeavor, but the practice grew out of a subsistent lifestyle that was prevalent in the Ozarks through the Great Depression and even until World War II.

"It was fun, but it helped put food on the table," says Ray Joe Hastings of Doniphan. "There was no electric, wasn't no television, so you made your own fun. But you could fry up your fun, too."

A member of Ozark Border Electric Cooperative, Ray Joe is an authority on gigs and gig makers in southeast Missouri and northern Arkansas. Since the early 1990s, he has collected gigs, researched their origins and uses, and even learned the traditional

method of hand-forging them. He's also versed in fashioning handmade wooden gigs poles, including those used during the traditional gigging night.

"Giggin' and huntin's always been in my blood," says the 71-year-old, who recently published "Bow & River Gigs Used in the Clear Streams of the Ozarks," a historical and personal reflection on this aspect of Ozark folk culture.

After collecting them for several years, in 1994 Ray Joe came across a beautifully crafted gig made by Paul Martin, a blacksmith from Bunker in Reynolds County. He sought Martin out, imploring the gig maker to teach him the craft. Initially, Martin refused, but eventually Ray Joe — and a \$1,500 honorarium for participating in a traditional arts apprenticeship through the Missouri Folks Arts Program — convinced Martin to share his knowledge.

"He said the only reason he did it was for his burial," Ray Joe says, adding that Martin passed away a few years ago.

Since learning the gig-making techniques, Ray Joe has shared the knowledge twice through the apprenticeship program, most recently this past year with Steve Orchard from Van Buren. It was Steve who crafted the gigs and, along with Ray Joe, the fire basket used during the gigging outing in November.

"Boy, I was just tickled to death," says Steve, who grew up gigging on the Jacks Fork and Current riv-

ers. "It's been quite an experience. Modern machinery made it cheaper to produce gigs, but they're just not as artistic."

In nearly 20 years of collecting, Ray Joe has accumulated more than 500 gigs and other gigging accessories such as lanterns, bows and fire baskets. Some of his collection is on display at the Current River Heritage Museum in Doniphan.

"That's an Irv Ellerman," he says, pulling a three-prong gig from the box. "Even though they're like snowflakes, you can tell who made them by their individual style."

Though he didn't grow up gigging on the Ozarks' larger rivers, Ray Joe fondly recalls another type of gigging — known as "bow giggin'" or "bow and spikin'" — where a smaller gig attached to an unfletched arrow was propelled by a short wooden bow. The technique was used to catch fish on smaller streams, such as the Fourche

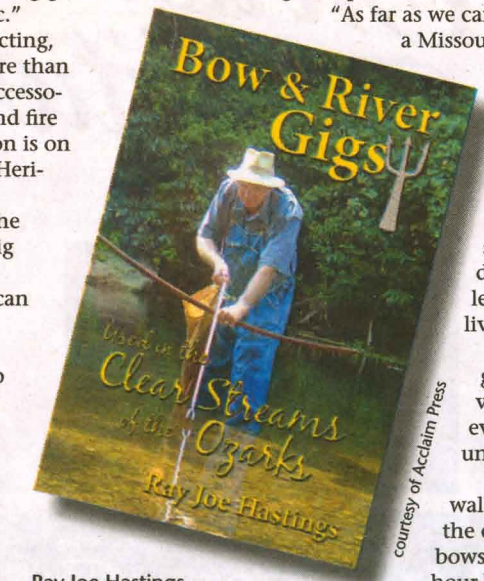
and Briar creeks in Ripley County where Ray Joe grew up.

"As far as we can tell, bow giggin' was mostly a Missouri thing," he says, noting the

practice was only prevalent in a handful of Missouri counties — most notably Ripley, Carter and Shannon — and just a few counties in northern Arkansas along the border. "We don't know how it started exactly, whether settlers devised it on their own or if they learned it from the Indians who lived here."

Though Ray Joe recalls bow gigging during the day, his most vibrant memories are of Saturday evening outings with his father, uncles, brothers and cousins.

The family would gather, then walk about a mile and a half down the creek carrying their lanterns, bows and gigs, arriving about a half hour before dark. Here, they would soak the bows and gig shafts in the water to keep them from breaking when used.



Ray Joe Hastings spent about three years writing his book on the history of gigging in the streams of the Ozarks.

"I'd listen to the grown-ups talk their talk, then, when it started getting time, you could hear them frogs start in," Ray Joe says. "That was the hint to start stringin' the bows."

Today, modern game laws restrict gigging to non-game fish such as suckers, carp and buffalo during a season that runs from mid-September to the end of January. While gigging on the big rivers has continued, bow giggin' has all but died out.

"You never hear about people going bow giggin' anymore. It's just died," Ray Joe laments. "Kids nowadays want video games and computers and stuff. It's just a different way of life."

As the moon rises high on this special November night, Ray Joe and the others who made the traditional gigging outing possible take satisfaction in the tribute paid to their Ozark folk heritage.

Though modern technology may trump the old ways, their efforts this night may ensure that pine-knot flames once again dance above the clear waters of Current River, happily greeting another hog molly on the end of a hand-forged gig.

To learn more about Ozark gigs and gig making, or to order an autographed copy of "Bow & River Gigs," contact Ray Joe Hastings at 573-996-7580. For more information on the Missouri Folk Arts Program, visit maa.missouri.edu/mfap/ or call 573-882-6296.

