

The Jesuit Pond

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On a warm spring day in 1964, I stood frozen with a tense grip on my fly rod at a place I called The Jesuit Pond. The first largemouth bass I had ever lured to a fly inspected my dime store bug with a hungry stare. Frustrated by the standoff, I gave the fly a little twitch and the bass sailed to safety with a single stroke of its big tail. The fish had won this first encounter, but it changed my life. I was fourteen years old.

The Jesuit Pond, whose proper name is Mirror Lake, is a man-made impoundment on forest property owned by Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama. The springs that endowed the lake were dammed in the 1830's. These are the very springs from which the college, and the Spring Hill area of Mobile itself, derived their names. Constructed with cedar planks driven into the soft bottom, the little lake had walls like a swimming pool. Grassy meadows met the water where the walls dropped off and large oak trees draped the lake's perimeter. It was perfect bass habitat. The Jesuit Pond was a quick two mile hike from Wilmer Hall, the "home for dependent children" on Old Shell Road where my parents had deposited me in the fall of 1963. It wasn't the first time they had asked me to endure foster care, but it would be the last. When I was offered the chance to move home again, I refused to go. Wilmer Hall, known as "the orphanage" by local residents, offered the first stable platform I ever had. I chose to remain there over the discord and hostility of living with my parents. The decision was never forgiven.

The orphanage was arduous. I adapted easily, but never conformed. In south Alabama a bass was called a green trout and a bluegill was called a bream. I refused to skewer a worm with a hook and kept only the fish I could not release unharmed. It was many years before I met another fly rodder. I collected a pile of travel brochures from the Smoky Mountains to the Rockies and when I started tying trout fly patterns like the Royal Coachman with a mail order tying kit, the staff and residents labeled me a crazed alien.

Swimmers appeared at Mirror Lake during the blazing summer months. They were usually Jesuit priests from the college who lounged on the wooden platform in the center of the pond. Swim suits were optional. These clergymen and faculty members understood the pursuit of true trout like Rainbows. They knew exactly why dangling worms from a bobber was not for everyone and encouraged my persistence.

The little lake was my laboratory. I observed the effects of temperature and food supply with acute attention. The bass would stack up in the cool emission from the spring and almost every afternoon I would send my fly floating out to them. Catching fish became predictable. I left my rod in the trees nearby to save carrying it and to spare me the wrath of my guardians who thought this fly fishing business was getting out of hand.

Mirror Lake gave me direction. I replaced the monotony of poverty with the challenge of fly fishing. I substituted mediocrity in school with excellence at the Jesuit Pond. The ability to bring in average grades without opening a book landed me on the doorstep of the University of Montevallo, south of Birmingham, with a scholarship in hand. I was on my way.

In the 1970's, demands for top soil to build the interstate highway nearby and encroaching housing projects, disturbed the springs at Mirror Lake. Its flow dwindled to a drip. In 1979, hurricane Frederick delivered a direct hit, leveling many of the shade trees and leaving the stagnant water unable to support fish. My Jesuit Pond was reduced to a stagnant sump that bubbled methane through clouds of algae.

From Mark Twain to Howell Raines, authors have launched their characters down the right track on the fisheries and waterways of the South. When I was four years old, I permanently recorded the image of the first fly fisher I ever saw and used it as a passport to navigate the circumstances of a childhood I did not choose. I was the fountain from which all hope flowed. Hopes that would not have flourished at all if the interstate and the hurricane had arrived at the Jesuit Pond before me.