

The Fishing Boys of Lazios
Steve Welling
welling@yahoo.com

It is Saturday morning, and it's a Lazio's day!

Get dressed fast, or you'll get stuck with the sting-ray bike that occasionally throws its chain and soon after, its rider. Me and my brother Nate, accompanied by friends Dan and John, pump the 3 miles to "the docks". There, at the foot of 'C' street was a world class sea food restaurant, "Lazio's" as well as some great access to fishing into Humboldt Bay. Choose any spot along the pier. Park your bikes and fishing gear -- the fishing boys all get along. Although I had seen the older kids sell them fish they had caught, our dealings with Lazio's were limited. On days when we had money, a lady at the counter would reach into her refrigerated glass display case and produce a piece of rock cod or sole, commensurate to the value of coins we had tossed up on the counter.

If you didn't bring any money for bait, there remained the unsavory task of turning over rocks exposed by the tide to reveal loathsome black mud worms. Slimy jet black, perhaps 3 inches long, their pinchers were huge, and we were certain that a direct conflict would cost us a finger. It was a chance we never took, we never offered them a fair fight. A fishing knife quickly dispatched them, though it seemed their wriggling bodies never really died. Put these decapitated worms on a line and drop it straight off the dock into that murky bay water. One never knew what all might live down there, but only a bottom dwelling bullhead would take the worm bait.

A bull-head fish was a step the wrong way down the evolutionary ladder of ugliness. They were a slimy mess of sharp-as-nails spines with no safe handle provided by nature to reckon with them. Who can say but what the boys looked equally as hideous to the fish, as each wriggled with all their might to prove they had a right to exist. Some of the greatest battles on the docks of those days were between young boys with rusty fishing knives held in vulnerable wet and slimy hands, against nasty, caught -on-a-hook-but -not-done fighting, bullhead fish. Those fish displayed remarkable power for their size, and any puncture wounds they landed from the spines were painful. However, It was the kind of pain that could dissipate almost immediately in the excitement of a great fishing day, or follow a young fisherman all the way home on a slow day when the fish just weren't biting.

Now equipt with bait either purchased or earned, your line was a candidate for everything from a ray to a sand shark.

One time a mighty Dungeness Crab grabbed our line and wasn't about to let go of his prized piece of bullhead. We flipped it up on to the pier and began chasing after it. It turned and began chasing us. It quickly found a path through the doc's huge timbers to the water. Sometimes something bigger down there, some menacing beast we could only imagine, would take our lines and run with it until line or pole were surrendered. Those strikes on our lines were the things boyhood legends were made of. But in between the monster strikes and the crabs and rays, was typically a steady stream of perch and jacksmelt. As the morning turned to afternoon, these were the fish that we took home with us to eat.

One day as we arrived home with a plastic bread bag full of fish, my brother Nate suggested, "Hey, let's build a fire in the middle of the road and cook our fish in it". None of us boys (aged 10 and 11) had any logical objections to that.

I should add that our road dead-ended at our property, and there were no houses across the street. We were the only legitimate users of the road. It really was a wonderful place to build a fire. However, it may not have appeared that way up above on busy Harris street, running perpendicular and elevated around 10 feet higher than our road. Harris offered an excellent if only brief view of our activities to passers by.

And so it was that within a few minutes of getting a small cooking fire started, some well-meaning citizen must have called in to report an asphalt fire of unknown origin in the middle of dead-ended Russ street. A few minutes after that, here came a huge fire truck with fully deployed sirens, wandering down the other end of our road.

Our first instinct, to run, was sort of nullified by the conspicuous fact that the crime scene was right outside our house. The only possible house.

All four of us boys, determined to avoid any hard prison time if possible, nervously stood up and waited while a single fireman in full firefighting attire stepped out and surveyed the scene. He didn't say anything at first. What could he possibly say? Then, thankfully, he looked over at a 5 gallon bucket full of water that we were using to wash and clean the fish. "I see you have some water ready in case of emergency," he said. Then smiling, he said, "Have a good day, boys!" and got back into his truck. It wasn't until he had safely cleared the bend and went out of view that we started laughing. It may have been a safe place to build a fire, but we knew we had gotten away with something that day. I wondered if firemen had kids at home that liked to fish at Lazio's also.