



**FROM THE
RIVER
TO THE SEA
...FOREVER
By Riley Love**

This is speckled trout just one example of the bounty that comes at the mouth of the Mississippi.



If you wanted to feel the soul of our country, you might dip your hands into this water. From the headwaters in the far north land of the Great Lakes, from the Ohio River in eastern steel mill country of the Three Rivers and across the Great Plains from the great American West where the Missouri begins, it flows.

The Mississippi River carries within its current grit of the farmland worked by generations of families. It brings crumbs of the brick and mortar that built the cities and particles of the engines that powered the roaring civilization which

hastens our lives. But moreover, after each man and woman's ashes have settled into the dust it brings their water, the essence of us all, back to its eternal source – to the sea where it will join again with all the water of every being that has ever lived and every existence that will come.

Fishermen are drawn to great places like this. Like the other extraordinary fisheries of the south and east of our continent, it is a confluence of overlapping seasons for multiple species that create a spectacular angling destination. Venice, Louisiana, nicknamed

"The End of the World," where North America's largest river joins the sea, was a proper target for our 15th annual father-son invitational tournament. It would be the last day of fishing for the tournament's patron and founding spirit and it would so live up to this name.

Early morning on the first day came after a long night. There was at least another hour of darkness pending, but Sammy Hagar's "All Night Long" was pounding from the Venice Marina's sound system and chains of little red and green lights glowed tirelessly. Both came directly from the manufacturer without an OFF button.

Plodding up the long wooden stairs, thoughts turned to stopping by the MRI scanner to peek at the tequila molecules that had crystallized into a small hammer just behind the eyes during the wee hours of the morning. This hammer bangs a brass gong in cadence with the heartbeat until dissolved by either beer or Bloody Marys. It was time to get everyone loaded up for a day offshore. Our boats were leaving from a nearby marina, but this was the central nervous system of Venice fishing. The marina had been standing since 1985. A pretty good lifespan on this delta, redundantly reshaped by hurricanes. Indeed, it was almost destroyed by Katrina in 2005. A lot of intensity – good, bad and bizarre – flows down into the Gulf of Mexico from this place.

It was time for me to double back for my son, who was trying to get

A large wooden boat hull under construction, showing the intricate wooden frame. The hull is made of many curved wooden planks joined together. In the bottom right corner, there is a smaller image of a finished blue and white boat on the water.

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his medication down. He was just out from another cancer surgery at the base of his brain. It had been a three-year fight of radiation, chemotherapy and surgeries.

The surgeon had not wanted him to go. Venice had been Hunter's choice and there was nothing anyone could do to stop him. The term is stoic, based on the ancient Greek school of thought. My son was a stoic. Now there was no more gong or hammer, just the morning breeze and the stars still

frozen in the blackness up above ... and fishing with my son.

Every other hat or tee shirt you see here reads, "Tuna Town." Venice is a real hotspot with some tuna species here about any time of the year. There is a bluefin season, but the yellowfin is the main staple. Lots of blackfin and some bigeye overlap when they slow down. Plan for day one was putting Tuna Town to the test.

The modus operandi for local captains is to tear ass. The large

center consoles they favor are long and sleek, then they pile on the big outboards, lots of them. This lets them cover a tremendous range to include structure such as the Midnight Lump, drop-offs and a multiplicity of oil rigs well offshore. A primary decision is to go east or west of the Mississippi River channel. Early in the year, the flow of fresh water is greater, with a larger push of muddier water out into the Gulf. In Costa Rica these days, FAD {fish attractor devices} trips far out in the Pacific have become very popular. In Louisiana, the petroleum industry has already taken care of this. Inshore, the horizon of gas rigs resembles an apocalyptic movie set, and by the time you get well out in the Gulf, the platforms are staggering structures. Oil production in the Gulf of Mexico was breaking records in early 2017 and so they aren't likely to go anywhere for a while.

Depending on the time of year, techniques vary from trolling to vertical jigging to our strategy du jour: drifting with baits in free spool. Later in the summer, topwater lures come into play. Overlapping species could include wahoo, dorado, sailfish and marlin. Our captain liked to stay above the oil rig in the current, with a faster rip concentrating the fish better than a slower flow.

It can get red hot, but we had to wait a little while to get bit. Capt. Rene Luminais of Paradise Charters was skipping the 36-foot Yellowfin we had drawn for the day. My job was trying to get Hunter

to drink some Gatorade. The wind sang around "Elf," the massive oil rig that was our FAD du jour.

"So, you're writing the magazine article, eh?" He asked while the baits soaked, "What will it be about?"

Hunter sighed as I belabored him again. If I hadn't learned what stoic was, I knew it now. "Rods bent U-shaped and screaming reels. You're gonna love it."

Randy Rutherford's rod next to me suddenly bent into a tortured "U" of graphite scoliosis and the reel screamed like a Banshee during a rectal exam. Tuna possess a network of blood vessels, or rete mirabile, usually found in warm-blooded vertebrates, which allow them to maintain their body temperatures up to 50 degrees Fahrenheit above that of their environment. Because of this, their muscles metabolize and produce energy at a much higher level than most other fish. Thus, they can swim faster and farther than the others. They have hearts 10 times larger and gill surface area 30 times larger to exchange oxygen compared to more sluggish fish as well. This combination of factors makes hooking one on a drift like dangling your line over a highway overpass and sticking a Harley Davidson blowing by. Randy's focus was trying to keep his shoulders in their sockets.

Federal regulations limit anglers to three yellowfin per day. They must be at least 27 inches to the fork of the tail. That size limit would be no sweat. The season is open all year-

Black drum thump their way through the area, and will give you a fight.



Hunter Love was happy to fish for anything, anywhere.

round. Our boats had a relatively slow day with tuna to 416 pounds and wahoo to 70 pounds. There was the occasional big Jack, shark, and other persona non grata.

But, back to the central tenet of this article: there were multiple species targeted in our crosshairs before the day was done. The angler is never painted into a corner if one style or species runs cool. When things lightened up a bit, we went on a daytime swordfish drop. But there were many other good ideas in the hat. The interior

structures hold a litany list of snapper species, tilefish, etc. When you don't get bit where you are, you fall back on plan B, C, D ... for us that was American red snapper.

Red snapper are most common in this northern aspect of the Gulf of Mexico, less on the western side and least common on the Florida side. They tend to move in shallower in the cooler months and out farther in the summer. These fish held on muddy bottom where the flow of river water had created some gentle channels. We limited



This tuna was one for the books.

out in no time, including limits for the captain and mates. Essentially every fish was a keeper. We would come to use it all. These are close enough in that the inshore boats can hit them on mild days. They spawn up to 20 times per year which explains how well they stand up to fishing pressure.

If your heart stopped beating for several days, your circulatory system was frozen into ice and your brain had been lost along the way hundreds of miles ago, then you just might not be eaten up with the prospects of going for redfish. We would find the redfish were ON.

The redfish population continues to be regulated with the goal of at

least 30 percent of adults escaping the inshore habitat to breed far offshore. Louisiana's regulations easily achieve this. After some poor years in the 1970s and '80s, a 16-inch minimum size limit has been in place. This has resulted in average weight of redfish taken recreationally from 2.02 to 4.41 pounds. One fish over 27 inches may be taken. Redfish become mature enough to spawn at about 3 years of age and 26 inches in length and between 4 and 9 pounds. This population begins to move offshore to spawn. There seems to be plenty of opportunities to hook much larger fish in the marshes. The season is 365 days per year and the bag limits

and creel are more generous than the fisheries in Texas and Florida.

The day fishing inshore frequently targets other species such as massive black drum, sheepshead, catfish, tarpon, flounder, grouper, cobia and mackerel. But the spotted seatrout, known in Louisiana as speckled trout, is a mainstay. Anglers harvest on average more than 6.5 million fish per year in the state. The size limit is kept relatively low at 12 inches to primarily target males, which rarely grow much larger. Females are usually sexually mature at this length and have the opportunity to spawn at least once before they are caught. The season is all year round and when

locating a good bite, all the fishermen in the boat can get a limit of 25 in a single stop easily. Large fish can be targeted in the spring when they move into shallow water for the season's first spawn. Then they move out into cooler temperatures.

Early in the year, such as Memorial Day, the water conditions dominate the fishing strategy. The river is higher and water in the marshes is dirtier so bait fishing on spinning gear is the choice. Later in the summer as the water becomes clear, casting artificials including top water plugs becomes productive. There are hundreds of square miles of habitat to fish so that even on windy days there is protected back country to fish.

The water here is vibrant with oysters, crab and shrimp. There are hundreds of square miles of this. It stands up to the fishing pressure like no place I have ever seen.

When you are there, out on the water, you can feel its vitality.

This is an unadulterated fishing environment. The ultimate metaphor is the marina's fish cleaning station, which becomes electrified by activity at the end of the day. Fillets removed from carcasses are measured in the thousands, not hundreds of pounds each afternoon. Upstairs, the music rocks and the beer flows. Waitresses and captains with heavy accents and French surnames fuel the boats and the anglers so by the next sunrise

once again it's time to GEAUX!

When planning this trip, I did a lot of asking around – well-known fishermen, editors, managers at the local marinas – because I needed a lot of help with logistics. None of the all-inclusive lodges could accommodate our group. One name kept coming up: Capt. Johnny Powell of Grand Slam Charters. His reputation for integrity was not overstated. He was extremely patient and singlehandedly organized dozens of inshore and offshore boats and captains for our tournament. My son and I spent our last days fishing together with him.

Hunter Love was a fisherman, true of mind and spirit. A knight whose only armor was within his



Alligators know where the meals can be found in Venice, Louisiana.



VENICE MARINA

The investigating angler will find there are numerous lodges nearby as well as marinas with condos and houseboats for rent. Several lodges and outfitters share the rectangular basin where Venice Marina is the beating heart of this fishing Mecca.

Rhonda Arceneaux was the manager who set our group up with cabins and meals for three days of fishing. I'm fixating on the crab and shrimp boil (with all the fixins) she put on under the pavilion one night. I became part crustacean that evening. These folks have a real downhome humor and friendly spirit.

Venice Marina maintains multiple big walk-in freezers to store your fish and is well-equipped to prepare them for flight or shipping if you wish. We had brought a cubic sports utility vehicle of cooler space for the trip home. We would come to need all of it.

REMEMBERING HUNTER

His family would particularly like to thank the International Game Fish Association for their very personal gestures at the time of his passing. Additionally, we would thank Bass Pro Shops and The Kentucky State General Assembly for their recognition.

The river flows, it flows to the sea
Wherever that river goes that's where I want to be
Flow river flow, let your waters wash down
Take me from this road, to some other town
All he wanted was to be free
And that's the way it turned out to be
Flow river flow, let your waters wash down
Take me from this road, to some other town
Flow river flow, past the shady trees
Go river go, go to the sea
Flow to the sea
The river flows, it flows to the sea
Wherever it goes that's where I want to be
Flow river flow, let your waters wash down
Take me from this road, to some other town.
"The Ballad of Easy Rider," by Roger McGuinn,
The Byrds



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JJ SPINGLHYER
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