

RETURN TO THE TORTUGAS

BY RILEY LOVE

"I've got a big one!"

The thick pole was bent u-shaped in my small hands and was being pulled down toward the boat's gunwale.

"Try to keep your rod tip up, partner," said my father looming large next to me. With his strong hands the rod seemed to come up easily.

Part I

"That's it; make him tire himself by working against the rod."

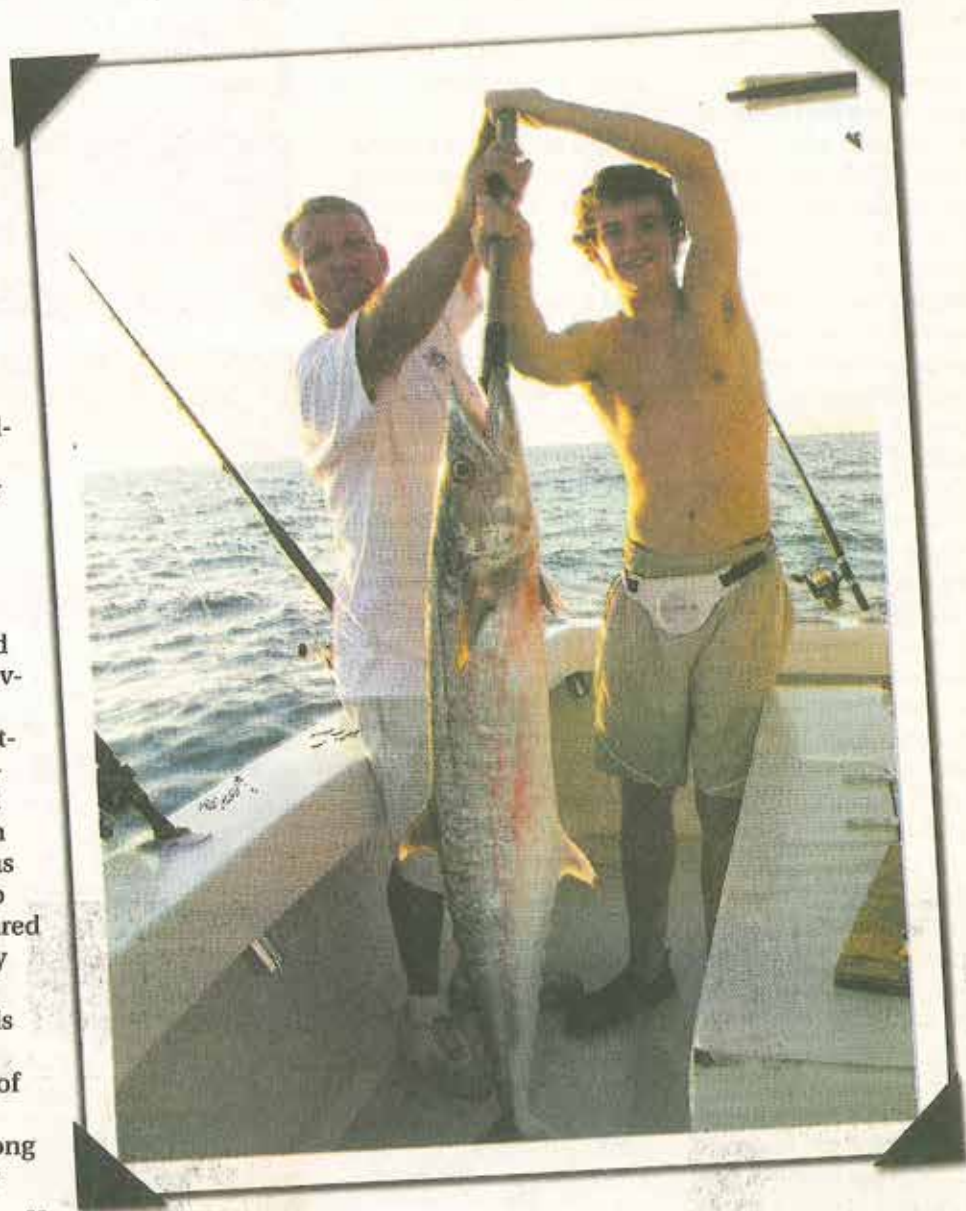
"Man, he's strong!"

I was covered with sweat when the big grouper was finally on the deck beside me.

"You did a good job on that fish son." Dad smiled down at me and put his hand on my shoulder. I was beaming.

"I've got a big one, too!" my brother Mike shouted from across the deck. We smiled broadly at each other. We could not have been happier, here with our father fishing together in these islands, the Dry Tortugas.

I looked across the water, just making out their low profiles in relief against the horizon. The old brick fort was prominent even several miles away. But it was the water itself that captivated me, literally taking my breath. The contrast between emerald green and deep hues of blue was extreme in the bright sunlight. The water was about a hundred feet deep but so clear that bottom structure declared itself in outline and an absolutely beautiful contrast of color. So remarkable were the colors of this wonderland that they would imprint on my mind for the rest of my days and become part of the dreams that sustain me during long nights of work and dreary winter



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weather. We would go on to fish many beautiful places but I would never forget these blue and green waters.

But beyond the pleasure of the physical beauty of this seascape was the element of mystery foretold in the outline of the coral reefs. Each one was its own small world populated with fish of huge dimensions and exotic shape and color. Beneath the dappled surface before my young eyes great dramas of predator and prey were being played out. The denizens of these haunts were in wait for me to come with my rod and line and reveal them in their strangeness and enormity. Such splendid mystery, it was a young boy's delight.

The sweat and sea spray ran in my eyes and I rubbed them with my fin-

gers. When my vision cleared I was fifty years old again, staring down at my glass on the bar observing the process of the ice cubes melting. The glass was shared only by two lonely olives. I thought of my father, we had gone on to share fishing experiences from Ecuador to Australia. He had been dead now for a year.

Before my mind could stop my voice I uttered the word, "Cremated."

Seated next to me, my brother Mike shifted the hand rolled cigar he had just started to the side of his mouth and looked down at my drink.

"Yeah man, you sure cremated that martini." He swigged back the rest of his own glass and added, "Let's order another round."

"Huh, what? Oh sure, why not?"

We were seated at the bar on the strand across the street from "The Southernmost" house in Key West.

We had walked down Duvall Street after a day of sight seeing. We were all assembled now, six fathers and their sons gathered for a three day fishing tournament to the Dry Tortugas. Stretching the numerous surgical scars on my body, I craned about to check on the boys out on the end of the pier taking photos. Behind them the wind was beating the shallow water of the bay into a dirty gray-green ruckus.

"Six straight weeks now, they've had these unseasonable winds." Mike leaned forward on his elbows and took a drag on his stogie. "I think it's a record."

I had set this trip up over six months ago because the boats are booked up months in advance. All monies had been paid. I accessed weather reports from previous years, calculated the moon phase and done all the homework. Normally this time of year the sum-

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Ft. Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas National Park

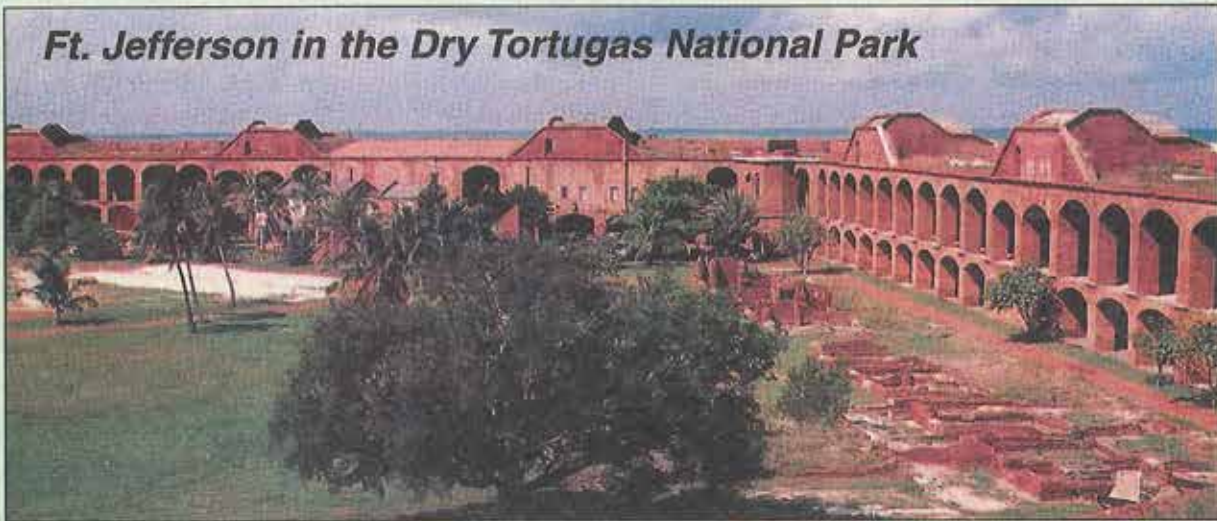


PHOTO BY MARSHA CARPENTER

Ponce-de-Leon of Spain discovered Florida searching for the Fountain of Youth in 1513. He discovered the seven islands, calling them the "Tortugas," because of the abundance of sea turtles. These are known to include green, hawksbill, and loggerhead species today. These were an important source of fresh provisions for seafarers. There was no freshwater, and over the years the islands became known as the "Dry Tortugas." The U. S. Government purchased Florida from Spain in 1822. In 1829 the government began plans for a fort to guard the entrance to the Gulf of Mexico and the all important passage to the Port of New Orleans. This was to be part of a system of coastal forts. Work began in 1845 and was on and off again for 30 years and was

never fully completed. The fort came to contain at least 16 million bricks in its walls which were 45 feet high and eight feet thick. The top of the fort was designed to catch rain water and funnel it into 109 cisterns. The fort was made obsolete by the development of the rifled cannon which could breach the eight foot thick walls in nine hours. It was used as a national quarantine station, then as a naval and marine garrison. In 1905 it was made a bird preserve by the Department of Agriculture. President Franklin Roosevelt made the fort a national monument. President George Bush increased the protection of the one-hundred square mile area in 1992 by making it a national park.

Return to the Tortugas – Part 2

Standing on the dock the next morning, the air was completely still. Not even a breath of wind stirred the mirrored surface of the ocean and you could have water-skied all the way to Fort Jefferson. I was watching a massive stratocumulus cloud above us. Jet stream winds at high altitude were now altering its shape but I was thunder-struck by the resemblance of the cloud's outline to the likeness of my father. A spirit with the strength to reach out his hand and hold back the wind? Perhaps, if any it would be him.

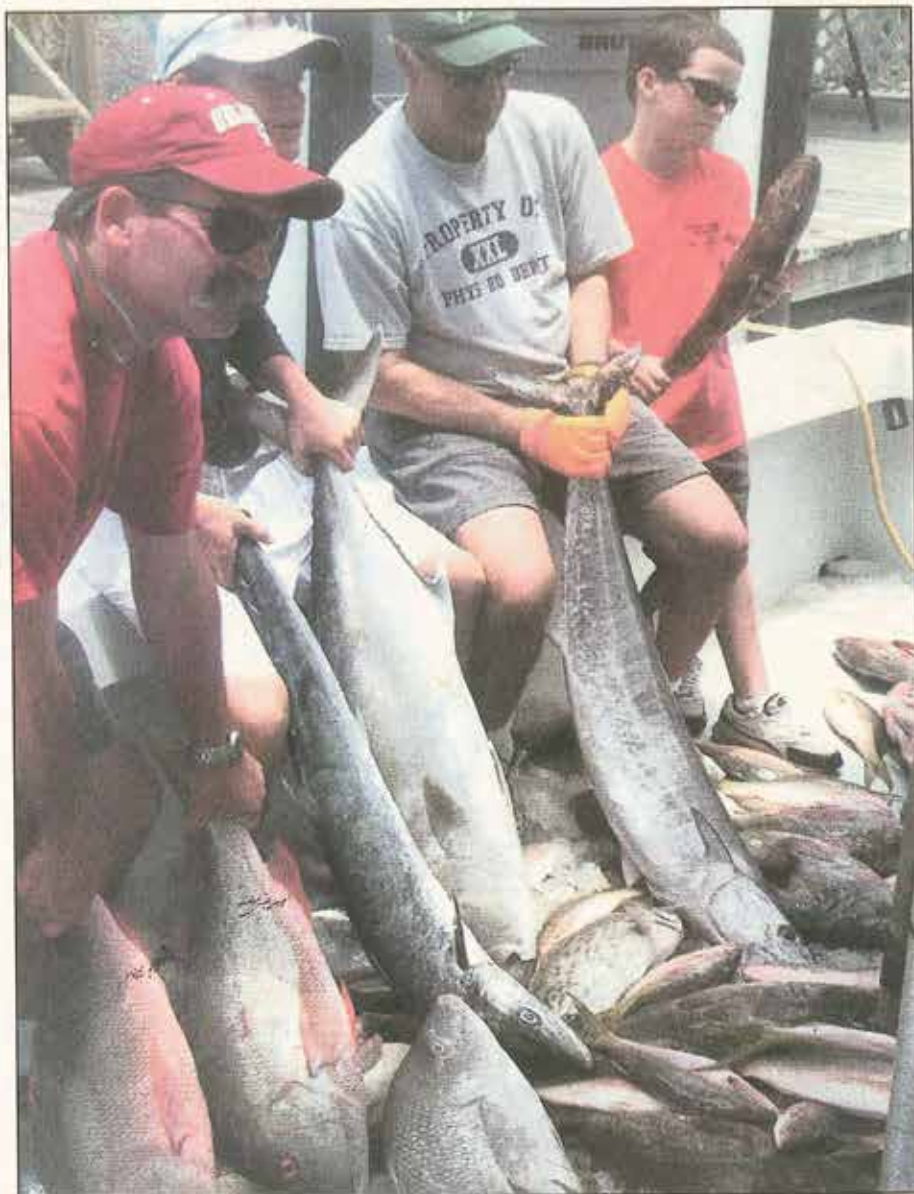
I lost track of time, staring at the cloud with my mouth open when Dan Marino and his son, Tony, both in from Phoenix Arizona again this year for the tournament walked out on the dock. "So," Dan said, "there really is an Andy Griffiths Charters."

"Sure, what did you expect?"

"I dunno," he shrugged, "maybe some guys walk out dressed like characters from 'Andy of Mayberry' and sing Y M C A?"

We loaded the boats. Bait and ice were provided but otherwise they were as empty tents requiring us to supply all provision. Live pin fish could be caught around the dock for the live wells, but otherwise "livies" were not provided. There was plenty of squid and frozen ballyhoo however.

Eddy Griffiths, a son of the original Captain Andy would skipper the boat that Hunter and I would share with Dr. Jim Zellmer and his son James from Paducah, Kentucky. Eddy was back in the family charter business after five tough seasons in



This was part of the catch from the trip.

the lobster game. He, as well as the other captains, were all experienced fishermen and had amiable person-

alities.

The boats left the dock together at noon, but not before Hunter thor-

highly soaked Uncle Mike with the deck hose and I got to ham it up with my best Long John Silver, "Them's that dies will be the lucky one's!"

Then, (I couldn't help it) ... "Aaarrrgh!"

June in the Keys is prime dorado season. Typically, easterly winds bring both weed lines and the Gulfstream in close to the reef's drop-off. We needed a longer run than usual to make the depth where dorado were congregating this day however. Some of the golden beauties came aboard the boats with varying amounts of good fortune and we also hit a couple of spots on the reef along the way.

At this point we started firing up some really nice bites. Red and black grouper started piling into the big fish box on the back deck. My fishing companions were out on their first saltwater trip and it was wicked fun to watch them test a 10 to 15 pound grouper mano-a-mano.

"Hey Jim, who's got who?"

"Man, I don't know yet!"

Just when it seemed like things were going well, they changed. They got better. We got into big schools of yellowtail that were in a mood of very aggressive cooperation. One fish after another, absolutely gorgeous like yellow pennants came to the box. Three times we hit a torrid bite that afternoon and almost never needing to go to the measuring ruler to check the size for a legal limit. Better still, fresh yellowtail appeared on the dinner menu. It was the old triad of pleasure—catch 'em, cook 'em, and eat 'em.

By this time it was time to haul yellowtail for the Tortugas and it was at this point that we had a reality check with the trade off for the economy of Captain Andy's boats. They only cruised a little over 8 knots or just barely able to outrun the lighthouse at the edge of the reef.

Eddy Griffiths and the other captains made up for this as best they could by running hard and late. And so, later that night we were anchored in view of the lights of Fort Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas, just in time to wet a line before retiring.

With the sun rising, it was as I'd hoped it would be. The clear water, the green and the blue splendor had waited for me over the years to return once again, bringing my son. Ponce de Leon discovered this place in 1513 and named it for the abundance of sea turtles he had found while searching for Florida to find a fountain of water that could restore his youth. Standing on the deck with my son, I crossed the threshold of a generation, of family value placed upon taking your son onto the sea to fish together. It was a small irony, a decidedly good one.

There is a lot of area to fish in the 100 mile square of the park. Captain Eddy and the others have a ton of GPS coordinates for good spots including numerous deep holes over 200 feet. We would spend the morning using the depth finder looking for productive bottom to anchor up on. This was often in 50 to 100 feet of water. There was so little current that the baits descended needing little lead; this made for easy fishing for the boys.

We got productive right away. We'd hit a bite and when it slowed we'd move a little ways. The bites came well enough that we didn't fret over trying for live baits. By mid-morning the contents of the fish box were making the big box look a lot smaller. I noticed that there were no other fishing boats around us all day.

During our previous trips to the Tortugas we traded with the crews on shrimp boats for their "bottom trash" to use for bait and chum. This is the by-product of trawling with their nets over sandy sea bottom at night and is comprised of small fish, crabs, rock shrimp and the heads of the shrimp they clean. There are usually garbage buckets full of this trash sitting on their decks and they would be happy to trade six-packs of beer for piles of it. Captain Eddy and the others liked to bring their own bait however.

When I asked him about fishing behind the shrimp boats when they dumped their "trash" in a huge extravaganza of chum, he related that his experience and that of the other captains was negative. "You end up catching a lot of little fish and throwing them back," he said, "we catch more good fish by staying away from the shrimpers."

Dan and Tony Marino were fishing with my brother Mike and his son Michael. They had spent the morning over the horizon and had the only slow morning, but by early afternoon it really started to fire them up. Each boat had a couple of fish they were sure would win the prize money the dads had wagered

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during the "organizational dinner" the night before. On our boat Jim Zellmer had a really good mutton snapper and James had boated the biggest black grouper. My son Hunter was presently trying to better the large barracuda he had landed.

Just then one of the other boats ran in next to us and lowered away. It was Mark Gillespie and his son Will who had just gotten a big amberjack that had taught him how to dance a jig all the way around the boat's perimeter three times before coming along side. You could see him still sweating in the bright sunlight. They were fishing with Jim Morehead and his son Matt from Lexington, Kentucky. They had barely started when Jim Morehead seemed hooked on the bottom, except the bottom of the ocean doesn't pull that hard or make you smile that large. Eventually he showed us a truly nice mutton

snapper. I fingered the big roll of c-notes in my pocket that had been anted into the pot. The competition was getting serious.

I radioed their boat, "Yo, yo, yo, dude. You're going to throw that minnow back aren't you?"

"I'd bet my butt on my fish."

We had plans to change fishing partners, skin dive and let the boys take a walking tour of the fort, but abandoned this to optimize fishing time. Andy Griffiths Charters offers a three night trip and it should probably be opted if these extra curricular activities are desired.

By late that afternoon the three boats had taken on dorado, wahoo, king mackerel, barracuda, shark, amberjack, black, red, strawberry and scampi grouper, mutton, red, mangrove, silver, hog, yellowtail and lane snapper. Also picked up were porgy, parrotfish, rainbow runner, ray and even moray eels.

We started fishing early and continued into the evening until it was time for a fresh grouper dinner.

Then it was time to haul yellowtail once again, this time east to the Marquessas, a group of small keys 20 miles west of Key West.

It was dark when all three boats had their hooks in the bottom and were tied up side by side. We were sheltered in between the low lying mangrove islands of the Marquessas in six feet of crystal clear water. With the boats tied together everyone was able to move back and forth between them and the night took on a party atmosphere. Salsa and rock music played from the speakers. One mate got his captains goat by throwing out a rod with a big bucket on the line that tugged in the current like a huge fish. The captain struggled mightily against that bucket until the whoops and laughs tipped him off.

Baits were thrown out and intermittently small sharks, holding forth in the shallows, made the reels sing. Despite all this commerce between boats, absolutely no one revealed the secret contents of their

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boxes. They were like poker players holding their cards close to their chest. The prize money was burning a hole in my pocket.

The next morning came without a reveille. One by one uncombed heads with blinking eyes appeared on the deck, aroused more by the smell of bacon, eggs and coffee than by the rising sun.

As I watched my son tossing out a line from the back of the boat I thought of Mel Fisher. He struck treasure four miles south of where we were anchored when he discovered the "Nuestra Senora de Atocha," a wrecked Spanish galleon. He had become rich recovering \$200 million in gold doubloons, silver pieces and jewels from her hold. We had both gotten the reward we had sought in these waters.


Back at the dock at last it was time to stand and deliver. Fish boxes were poured out onto the decks and it was indeed like days of yore — the catch was huge. What photographs we took don't begin to

do justice to the hundreds of fish which were discharged forth. There were dozens of dorado, buckets of yellowtail, piles of grouper and snapper. Fish from each boat came to the scales, vying to claim the prize money. Trash talk was flying but the boasting was backed up with one great specimen after another.

Finally, Mark Gillespie came forward with a big wahoo, only to be beaten by his son Will with an amberjack, one pound larger. Cameras snapped and fillet knives came out. Captains, mates and patrons all pitched in but it still took hours to clean the mess. In the end, we had at least a couple of hundred pounds of fillets packed in the coolers for the trip home.

That night, settled in at the "Conch Republic" restaurant in Key West I was again watching some ice cubes melt, and fighting off the urge to slip out the back door with the prize money. Breathing in the night air that blew into the open room from across the harbor, I realized

the wind was picking back up. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. Around our table, came great claims of fishing prowess and boasts of confidence from the boys. At the next contest Lefty Kreh or Chico Fernandez might be lucky to bait their hooks and Zane Grey or Ernest Hemingway were certainly of a lesser caliber. We all stayed out late for another swell Key West evening.

Until our next fishing journey I would dream again of the places where my father and I have fished in the sun. Slipping into my son's bedroom, I'm placing a photo from our trip next to a picture of his grandfather. I've decided to sit here and watch him sleep, finishing this writing with my notebook on my lap. His sleep has so often been troubled by the battles he has already had to fight in his young life. But he's smiling now and I know that for the rest of his days, his dreams can take him to a place of blue and green waters. 



12 year-old Alicia Peters from Ohio holds up a 25-inch redfish with the help of Captain Jamie Allen.

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