FISHIN' IN THE OL' CHARITON

Times are changing even down at your favorite fishing hole. The Chariton River has provided many fishermen with the thrill of sport and meals for the table. The big fish from this river is not as common as the monster of yesteryear. In the early 1900's it was not uncommon to see a 70-80 pound catfish being taken from the Chariton. The methods of fishing on the Chariton River have changed since the early 1900's because of conservation laws and changing habitat. The times have changed, but many fishermen can still remember the old methods and the fish they caught in the Chariton.

One of the most common methods of fishing, that is now illegal, was hand fishing. Hand fishing was outlawed because it took advantage of the catfish while they were breeding. Generally, fishing by hand caught big fish but not many in numbers. Hand fishing was done with the hand, hay hooks, or large fishing hooks. The catfish would lie under logs and rocks. The fisherman would wade into the water and feel under the debris in the river with his hands. When he found the fish, the fisherman would reach his hand or place a hook into the mouth of the fish and through its gills. He would then be in for a battle with the fish, which usually fought vigorously. A fisherman who used his bare hand would often have his hand and forearm torn by the teeth of the fish. Local conservation agent Wayne Martin stated, "Fishermen who illegally hand fished would often come into town during a hot day wearing long-sleeved shirts." They did this to cover the wounds from their battle. Although the method is now illegal, it is still known to be used today.

One of the most interesting ways of fishing was used at the Yarrow Mill in Yarrow, Missouri. Although this method is not illegal, it is not used today. Kenny Weber, whose father operated the mill, explained, "The fish were caught in the forebay of the mill." The forebay is a reservoir or canal from which water is taken to operate equipment, such as a water-wheel or turbine. Mr. Weber continued, "When the gates of the forebay were opened, fish swam into this area but could not swim out because the current of the river was too strong. When the gates were shut, the water drained and the fish would be left in the bottom of the forebay in about a foot of water. Trying to catch the catfish out of the forebay was much like catching a greased pig." Many large catfish were caught by this method. It is known that Henry Weber, Kenny's father, captured a one-hundred-pound catfish out of the

Right: Mr. Crawford (left) and Mr. Kinkade hold the giant catfish they caught in the Chariton River in 1906. Below: A group of fishermen surround their catch from the Chariton River.
forebay of the mill. Kenny Weber commented, “After the catfish was caught, he released it in the farm pond. He fed it corn and scraps from the mill to fatten the fish to be butchered.”

Trammel net and seine fishing are examples of restricted fishing. The trammel net consisted of three pieces of net. One six-inch mesh would be placed on each side of a two-inch mesh net. The nets would have a cork line on the top and a lead line on the bottom. Mr. Weber explains, “The cork lines would keep the net upright in the water, while the lead line would keep the net from floating down river. The net was stretched across the river so no fish could get by. The fish would swim through the mesh holes in the first net and would then get caught in the middle net.” Because this method caught several fish at a time, it was outlawed in 1939.

Catfish like slow-moving, muddy water that is not too shallow. The Chariton River once had holes in the river bed 20 to 30 feet deep, and many logs and rocks created an ideal catfishing habitat. The channelization of the Chariton River changed catfishing drastically.

In 1904 Peter Vitt started a campaign and survey to determine the cost of straightening the channel of the Chariton. Following the 1903 flood, people sought relief from the untamed river. A total of $180,000 was raised to straighten the Chariton.

The channelization of the river destroyed this ideal catfish environment. The Chariton now flows swiftly with shallow, fairly clear water. There are not as many deep holes and not as much cover for the large fish the Chariton used to harbor. The large catfish weighing over 50 pounds is not common in

George Vanlaningham (left) and Arthur Nardini display the 45 lb. catfish and the 22 lb. carp they caught on the same night in 1947.

Henry Weber (left) and Charles Hays are shown releasing the 100 lb. catfish into the farm pond. This fish was caught earlier in the Chariton River.
By Darren Schneider
Kent Snipes

the Chariton River since it was rechannelized.
Fishing methods in the river have changed and so have the species inhabiting it. Where the bass and large catfish haunted dark holes of the former winding, sluggish stream, now the smaller catfish and carp feed in the shallower, much-straightened water course. The rechannelization of the Chariton River was a step forward in progress, but a step backward for fishing.

Henry Weber (left) and Sie McAninch display another example of the huge fish caught in the old Chariton.

These photographs of the old Chariton (above) and the new Chariton, after rechannelization, were taken on the same day in May, 1949. (Photos courtesy of the Missouri Conservation Department)