

## Fish Stories

# Searching for the Right Pair of Shoes

By Rob Tillitz

My new school shoes were wrecked by the time I had the steelhead wrestled out of the creek. That was in the rainy fall of 1961. I was almost nine, and it smelled like fir trees, mud, and fish roe there where my world began. We'd just moved to tiny Pescadero, from urban Oakland, and I was still sporting penny-loafers.

I'd spotted the 15-pound steelhead from the high, suspension bridge we braved in order to cross Pescadero Creek. It was drizzly, and the stretch of creek under the bridge was a long, pebble-gravel bar. Perfect for spawning. The hen was the larger of the two; her speckled back emerged completely out of the murky water. When I saw her, my adrenal gland opened like a faucet. I promptly threw down my schoolbooks, slid butt first down a muddy bank, and then waded in totally without a plan. The big hen was so startled, that in trying to get away in the shallow creek, she shot up into a miniature dead-end estuary where there was almost no water. I closed in kicking with my ruined loafers, and pounced excitedly on the trophy. It took a bear hug to contain the silverside. I didn't figure out how to grab her by the gills until later, when I carried my prize into mom's living room, smirking like the Cheshire cat. Eggs leaked out the fish and onto the carpet. Between that, and my ruined shoes, mom was not as excited as I was.

But the next night, when we feasted on an Italian-baked steelhead dinner, I was the guest of honor and it was the beginning of something. I wondered if I could become a fisherman, and concluded: "Time will tell."

Later, we moved to Montara (near Half Moon Bay). Often I'd come home from my classes and, in my school Keds, climb down through aromatic Monterey Cypresses to the rocky shoreline where I'd explore for salt-water game. Abalones were easy, to get back then. I got good enough at diving for them to earn the handle, "Robalone." with a surf pole I caught rockfish. Then figured out how to catch eels with a baited hook on a bamboo stick.

I brought plenty of dinners home, all right, but often had to slog to school the next day in wet gym shoes.

I was a student at Half Moon Day High School, and grew up with the legend of Mike McHenry (the *Merva W*) and Gene Law (the *Visit*, and now the *Ms. Law*). The small-boat guys called Mike and Geno, "The big boys that fish up north." They were indeed heroes to many.

I got my first deckhand job on a somewhat lesser boat, bought rubber, knee boots and threw all my other shoes away. I was a fisherman now and finally had myself situated with the only shoes I should ever need.

One night, while out dancing, I pulled my Levi cuffs down over the knee boots, trying to look stylish. It

worked. But the next morning, reeking of beer, I felt this burning pain on my lower legs. I looked and found perfect, red rings where the boot's top collar had rubbed my calves raw while I dazzled the girls with my ability to do the hully-gully, and a form of the frug. Very next paycheck, I got dancin' shoes.

In 1979, I bought the *Visit* from Gepo. That was significant for me. A few years later, freshly married, I moved with my bride to Crescent City. Two springs after that, while bringing in a load of crab gear, a freak wave buried the back deck as we passed the mouth of the Klamath River. It began one of those unfortunate series of events that left the *Visit* capsized. Things happened so quick that we just barely got off a *mayday* before water was coming in the cabin door. I got the life raft inflated, but it drifted out into the mast rigging that stretched across the water.

The stern and deck were completely under, the boat on its side, even as the three of us scrambled up onto the starboard bow. Minutes later, we decided to dive in before the boat completely sank: We were afraid the suction would take us under. After that, I learned that the suction thing is a myth.

The end result was I ended up in the cold ocean still wearing my boots. One crewman had on a wet suit, the other a life jacket, and I was flapping

like a sea gull trying to stay afloat. The ocean was sloppy, and ugly, and smelled of raw diesel.

I don't remember how many times I sank while doubled-over trying to get my heavy boots off, but I clearly recall giving that up to yell "help" at the guys now in the raft. Thoughts raced, and I offered up a prayer asserting that I had not-yet-born kids that still needed raising. "My destiny is not complete," I appealed.

It was just then that a wave, white with carwash-like foam on top, roared my direction. It picked me up and carried me most of the way toward the raft. Then as it continued on, the raft slid off the wave's backside and before I knew it the boys were pulling my tired frame into the raft. Frozen numb, the first thing I did was strip off those wretched boots and toss them out the door of the enclosed raft.

"Yes!" I said, triumphant. And I never wore rubber boots again.

These days, I've got a teenage daughter who wants to be a marine biologist. She, in a sense, would be stepping into my shoes because her vocation is a living that depends on the ocean. As a biologist, she won't likely have to endure the same risks. Moreover, her paychecks will be regular and predictable. But, will she have as much fun? Will she nonetheless spend her life, as I did, searching for the right pair of shoes?

Time will tell. N4