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Catfish and Controversy at the Okie Noodling Tournament

I think I'll noodle 'til I die. If that's not what kills me.

—Jerry “Catfish” Rider, *Okie Noodling*

THE DEEPER YOU GO, the darker it gets. That, in a nutshell—make that fish maw, for a more appropriate metaphor—is noodling, otherwise known as handfishing, hogging, grabbling, stumping, cooning, or dogging.¹ It’s true of the sport itself, which involves submerging partly or fully in your river, lake, or pond of choice to trap catfish in their nesting holes or under brushpiles, jamming your arm through their mouths—getting “tore up pretty good,” of course, in the process—and bracing for a tussle. It’s true of noodling’s murky history, unrecorded beyond “a few photos here and there of Native Americans holding up fish,” as Bradley Beesley, director of *Okie Noodling* and *Okie Noodling 2*, puts it.² “Most of the guys I’m in touch with are now in their forties; they were taught by their fathers, who are now in their seventies. I haven’t yet found the great-great grandfather who’s going, ‘I remember when,’ but that’s because there was a time people didn’t think much about it. It was just a technique for catching fish: ‘It doesn’t matter if we’re gonna hit it in the head with a rock or whatever; we’re gonna bring you dinner tonight.’ There wasn’t a culture built around it.” Yet the nothing-if-not-colorful culture that now exists is at the root of noodling’s equally unclear future, fraught with controversies—not the least of which is its newfound status as a cult phenomenon (based in large part on the success of Beesley’s own documentaries).

Before there was controversy (of which more later), however, there was the first annual Okie Noodling Tournament and Fish Fry in 2000, founded by Beesley himself in the course of making his first film with the help of Phil Henderson, one-time fisheries biologist and current owner of Bob’s Pig Shop in Pauls Valley, Oklahoma, on whose premises the tournament is set every July. Now approaching its twelfth anniversary, the event sheds a very public (not to mention scorching) light on a very private pastime.

This year, as the clock nears noon, you wouldn’t know from a glance around North Ash Street that the tournament was already underway at fishing holes across the Sooner State. Sure, the setup is complete: there’s the weigh-in tent with its scale, chalkboard, and holding pools; the demonstration tank brimming with 3,500 gallons of water, pumped in that morning by the fire department from the hydrant across the street; bleachers, a stage, and a few kiosks have been erected. Yet the mood seems as sleepy as it does on any other day in this small town, with only a couple of kids running wild and a pair of cowboys striding by on horseback.

Only inside Bob’s do you begin to get an inkling of what’s to come. Already a few tables are ringed round with good ol’ boys yukking it up amid too many cans of Budweiser and rib platters; already the cooks and servers are picking up the pace with expressions somewhere between grins and grimaces in preparation for the “bizarre chaos” Henderson guarantees will ensue with his usual cheer.

Sure enough, fast-forward an hour, and it’s like something out of Hitchcock’s *The Birds*: from out of nowhere, scattered individuals have multiplied into throngs at the intersection of Ash and Agnew. Some are setting up camp under trees—precious property in the one-hundred-degree heat—with lawn chairs and coolers; some are staking their claims on the bleachers; a line is already stretching out the door of the Pig Shop from the order counter, and the first pickup trucks are beginning to pull up to the weigh-in tent with contestants waiting for aquatic biologist Joe Bidwell and his team of graduate students from Oklahoma State University to record their catches. Meanwhile, a dense band of spectators is gathered around the tank as a red-bearded, bandanna-capped guy in trunks emblazoned with the words “Noodlers Anonymous” lowers himself into the water for a demo. Slogan notwithstanding, there aren’t many among them who don’t already know that this is none other than Lee McFarlin—being about as close to famous as fishermen, especially handfishermen, ever come: the star of Beesley’s documentaries has gone to appear on ESPN, the



Discovery Channel, celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay's BBC series *The F-Word*, and more.

If you can make your way to the front, you'll get an eyeful of flurry: Lee on one side, his partner on the other, maneuvering and grabbing at the twenty-pound flathead trapped in a box between them. If you can't, there'll be other chances; the weigh-in deadline of 7:30 P.M. is hours away yet. Nothing to do but kick back with a Sno-cone and a pulled-pork sandwich or a plate of catfish fresh from the giant, bubbling fryer out back. (When the tournament started, the contestants donated their catches to the for-profit fish fry; now, farmed fish is offered for free, Henderson explains, because "this game warden came up to me a couple of years ago and said, 'You aren't selling those fish, are you?' And I said, 'Oh, no, we're just selling the plates the fish are on.' And he said, 'Well, that's good, because you can't sell wild-caught fish in Oklahoma.'" Oops.) Buy a souvenir T-shirt from Henderson's daughter Heidi, as filled with as many deadpan quips as her dad about the "crazed grab-bag of happenings" she finds herself helping to assemble every year. Check out the materials at the promotional booth for women's roller derby. Watch the photo shoot as noodlers by the twos and threes—sweaty, grimy, bleeding, and grinning in their fishing caps and

Above: A noodler takes to the stage with his winning catch.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIT WITHEY © 2010

cargo shorts—pose for the camera, the ones that didn't get away dangling from their fingers. And just let the afternoon melt away in the heat, still swelling along with the crowd—which, of course, is prime for people-watching. In fact, what distinguishes this "little fiesta," in Henderson's words, from other fishing contests is something I'll call the Fearless Freak Factor, described by a friend of mine as "the rednecks ogling the hipsters and the hipsters ogling the rednecks."

Though the diversity actually extends to bikers, families, and, increasingly, tourists from as far away as Norway and Japan, the description is not inaccurate. *The Fearless Freaks* is the title of another documentary by Beesley that features The Flaming Lips, the only rock band out of countrified Oklahoma to achieve megastardom. Known worldwide for their psychedelic sound and surreal live shows involving dancers in bunny costumes, bouncing balls, fake blood, and fire, they were known as heroes to those of us who grew up in the 1980s on the outside of the dominant local culture. Me, for example—the daughter of liberal, secular-Jewish intellectuals who couldn't wait to get out of the reddest of red states in the Bible Belt.



What I didn't know until Beesley made it clear to me in *Okie Noodling*—underscored by a Lips soundtrack—was that even some of those rural folk with monotone drawls and cowboy boots, the ones who personified rampant provincialism for us hipster-prototypes, felt like outsiders, too. They were and are noodlers. As McFarlin put it rather poignantly during an interview for the film, “Noodlers are like carp or drum. They’re the bottom-feeders, they’re the trash, they’re the scum-suckers...They’re the lowest on the totem pole as far as the bass fishermen, your tournament trout fishermen...Noodlers are the very last to be talked to or heard about.” A decade later, all the recent fanfare notwithstanding, their struggle for respect continues—most notably in Missouri, where, as in the vast majority of states (excluding Oklahoma), handfishing is illegal; the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) holds that it depletes local catfish populations.³ The implication of the department’s position, explains Mary Grigsby, a professor of rural sociology at the University of Missouri who is working on

Above: With a Band-Aid on one arm and a catfish on the other, Buster Garrett of Eufala, Oklahoma, flies his colors.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIT WITHEY © 2010

a book about noodling culture, is that “noodling is not fair play. Fair play is not going into the hole when the catfish are trying to reproduce, blocking the hole, and grabbing them off their nest.”⁴ Champions of the sport dispute that perception fiercely, citing as the real reasons for its prohibition politics and a trial legal season that was badly managed and failed to generate revenue from fishing licenses. Recalls Gary Webb, at sixty-six a fiery yet affable spokesman for the aforementioned Noodlers Anonymous, “The [MDC] didn’t exactly treat us right. At first they compared us to poachers, shooting turkeys off the nest and spotlighting deer.”⁵ And the stigmas handfishermen face go far beyond their perceived lawlessness, Grigsby notes: While they see themselves as courageous and self-sufficient, living a lifestyle that sensibly values frugality, responsibility, and intergenerational community above all, “noodlers are portrayed as crazy, ignorant, backwards rednecks”

by a media that privileges the urban/suburban, middle-class norm. In short, the noodlers emphasize their fearlessness; the media, their freakishness. (Indeed, the potential for eye-popping and jaw-dropping is undoubtedly why newsmakers turned their attention to the admittedly unsightly sport at all, from the 1989 appearance of Jerry “Catfish” Rider on *Late Night with David Letterman* onward.)⁶

Granted, such tensions are inherent in the sport. On the one hand, noodlers prize the intimacy it entails, the direct contact they have with both the fish and their noodling “clan.”⁷ With “no hooks, no bait, [and] no fear” (to use the tournament’s official slogan) between them, they’re equipped with nothing but their wits, their bare hands—and their comrades, whom they literally trust with their lives. After all, the dangers of noodling are very real. You can get bitten by a poisonous snake. In certain tight holes a catfish can clamp down on your arm and, as veteran noodler Clarence “Scooter” Bivins puts it, “you’ve basically just stuck your hand in a vise.” You can get trapped in crevices. Without your buddies to watch out for you, you can, in short, drown. (It’s telling that most of the noodlers I’ve interviewed hold day jobs with high risk factors as well: Bivins is an assistant fire chief; McFarlin is a burner specialist, fixing gas pipes; his son-in-law, Joshua Garcia, works in surveillance at a casino.)⁸ Meanwhile, says Grigsby, “you also trust others to keep their mouths shut”—whether because what you’re doing is illegal or because fish-rich locales constitute prime real estate. When he first started filming, remembers Beesley, “It took me about a year to find guys who were willing to take me out” and make their favorite holes known: “A lot of them have spent decades cultivating these spots.” On the other hand, now that handfishing is in the spotlight, the noodlers are caught between a rock and a hard place like none they encounter underwater. Should they milk their minor celebrity and prove they’re not just “poor hayseeds,” in McFarlin’s words, by promoting the sport they love, or will promotion itself be noodling’s downfall? “It’s kind of a secrecy thing,” admits Bivins, “and when all of your places are being discovered, it just kinda shoots you out of the saddle.”

But for now, at least, camaraderie still trumps competition, and the romance of living off the land—or rather on and in the water—endures. Though “the omnipresent theme among the noodlers is the adrenaline rush,” as Beesley puts it, the joys they describe are as meditative as they are physical. As McFarlin is fond of saying, “When you’re out there [noodling], it’s you and Mother Nature. You can kinda see our ancestry. You can see where we evolved from before there were tools and guns. I’m happy

when I think, hey, I coulda made it then.” Beesley agrees. “For me it’s so exciting when you’re just about to catch a fish with your hands or you walk down the riverbed and you start getting butterflies, exploring these creeks and rivers and seeing the things only twelve-year-old boys get to experience.” Meanwhile, Mary Grigsby cites “reciprocity and interdependence” as core values of the noodlers she works with, whose skill allows them to “share with their community, feeding people at fish fries” and in private, for instance by providing for the elderly. And sure enough, to ask Bivins what he loves about noodling is to learn first and foremost not about the activity per se but about the conviviality it engenders: “For one thing, I keep a deep-freeze full of meat, and I can give it to my friends. I’ll have them come and haul hay or something”—he lives on a ninety-acre farm—and I can pay them in fish. And we have fish fries.”

A typical fish fry reflects as clearly what noodling’s all about as the sport itself. As Bivins explains:

My thing is, “Tell anybody, tell all.” Anybody’s welcome as long as they respect the property and the people around them. I prepare [my catfish] perfectly, better than any restaurant would consider cleaning it...It gets to where you’re preparing the meat so that you cut all of the red out, down the backbone, distinguishing the fat versus the meat, and cleaning it all away. Some people watching might think you’re wasting a lot of fish, but it’s not worth saving that extra few bites so it’s gonna taste bad whenever you eat it. Whenever it’s cleaned, it’s nice and white, no red and no black, and that way it’s just 100 percent better. People will come out and say, “Oh, I don’t like fish,” and I’ll just say, “Well, that’s fine, but try mine just this once.” And they’ll say, “Oh my God, I never knew it tasted like this.” We kinda got the batter to the way we like it. We use cornmeal, flour, garlic salt, and pepper, and sometimes we’ll even add some cayenne pepper. The tartar sauce we make homemade, because there’s no comparison to storebought. That’s something that everybody looks forward to.

Then my wife usually puts on a huge pot of red beans with ham. For sure we’ll have french fries, usually made the old style, where we’ll just wash [the potatoes] and run ’em through [the dicer] so they’ll be square and natural. And my friends will bring chips and hot sauce or something to snack on. I don’t try to tell anybody what to do. There’s a few that might sip a little whiskey, a few that might drink a little beer, and we always have some iced tea around.

Also we play country music. We have a drummer and a fiddle player and I play acoustic guitar and sing. So we have a good little group. My dad played music, too, and there’s one guy that played with him that still plays with us. It’s old-time country music, like Merle Haggard and George Strait. You respect your elders, and that’s what he loves, and he still feels good enough to do it, so we’re gonna make him happy. When he leaves we’ll venture into the more upbeat stuff.

So is this an adults-only affair, I ask? “Oh, no,” Bivins assures me. “A babysitter out in the middle of the country is something you can only wish for. So yeah, there are lots of kids. They just get right out in the middle of everything and play while the adults sit around and talk about the next grabbling trip.”

Back at the tournament, Bivins’s description echoes even as the TV camera crews descend and the mood begins to shift from one of mellowness to mania. By six, the motorcade at the weigh-in tent stretches for blocks. If you nudge your way through the crush of bodies toward the roped-off entranceway, you might just catch a glimpse of three ham-shouldered, sun-reddened guys in ripped-up T-shirts, gingerly making their way off a truckbed; slung over the collarbone of one is a bespeckled, bewhiskered creature that looks as though it hasn’t evolved in millennia. It’s behemoth. It’s ugly. And you have to admire it. Sure enough, everyone cheers—as much, it seems, for the fish as its catcher; for the primordial death-battle that must have ensued; for every pound it was about to officially weigh—representing as each one does, according to Phil Henderson, a year of hard-fought life on the mean streets of rural waterways.

The rules of the contest are few but crucial. There are monetary prizes for the largest natural-caught fish, the largest natural-caught stringer (a group of three fish), the largest fish caught using scuba gear, and the largest stringer caught using scuba gear, as well as a separate category for female noodlers.⁹ The fish must be flatheads, the only type of catfish that may legally be noodled in Oklahoma; they must be caught in-state; and they must be brought in live—dead fish are disqualified. So how do the organizers know the contestants followed the rules, that the fish weren’t line-caught or driven in from Texas? Well...they don’t. “We really have to kinda go by the honor system,” admits Henderson. Adds Beesley, “Every year somebody accuses somebody of cheating, and I’ll be like, ‘Well, he has to sleep with himself.’” Ultimately, he insists, “It doesn’t matter to me who wins or loses. The purpose of the tournament is to bring together these guys who kind of have been overlooked in the fishing community.” Needless to say, most noodlers, for whom trust in community is so essential, wouldn’t have it any other way.

Suddenly a buzz runs through the crowd as Joe Bidwell writes a number on the chalkboard: 59.24 pounds. Folks, we have a winner! (It just so happens to be Scooter Bivins.)

And so the attention turns to the stage, where prizes are announced and the Okie Noodling Queen is crowned by her predecessor with about as much articulate poise as you’d expect from someone whose only duties today appear

to have involved knocking back her weight in beer. To be sure, a sizable majority of attendees have been keeping close pace all day. And so, many begin their loose-limbed, sun-spent shuffle toward home; and so still others start to move, almost involuntarily, to the music as a band takes the stage, playing red-dirt rock as only alt-country Oklahomans can. And so another festival winds down as the sky darkens and the heat wanes. As Phil’s daughter Heidi succinctly puts it when she steals away from the souvenir booth to whisk me into the Pig Shop’s walk-in cooler for a quick nip of our own: “It’s a slice of Americana you will not forget. I can tell you that.”

NOTES

Many thanks to Bradley Beesley, Scooter Bivins, Rebecca Eskreis, Joshua Garcia, Mary Grigsby, Heidi Henderson, Phil Henderson, Lee McFarlin, and Gary Webb for their insights.

1. Burkhard Bilger, *Noodling for Flatheads: Moonshine, Monster Catfish, and Other Southern Comforts* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 20. The variations in terminology are, of course, regional.

2. So Bilger concluded in the course of his research; for more on indigenous handfishing methods, see *Noodling for Flatheads*, 19.

3. See “Why ‘No’ to Noodling?” <http://mdc.mo.gov/fishing/regulations/sport-fish-regulations/why-no-noodling>.

4. Grigsby is understandably adamant about maintaining her own neutrality on this issue.

5. Reasoning that “they don’t want some poor redneck trying to tell the legislature what to do,” McFarlin highlights the role played by lobbyists for the sporting-goods industry in ensuring that handfishing remains illegal. One can certainly sympathize with such conspiracy theories.

6. Rebecca Eskreis, a filmmaker at the University of Southern California who is currently working on a feature narrative titled *Noodling* that is set in Pauls Valley, became fascinated by the sport after reading about it in the *New York Times*, in all its “zany, macho” glory. Without discounting that aspect, she quotes the observation of an Oklahoman friend that “Whenever there’s a tornado, [the news crews] always find the one guy with no teeth” to interview. A New York native herself, Eskreis aimed to avoid such stereotyping by shooting her film in Pauls Valley, using a cast entirely made up of locals.

7. Some Missouri noodling groups “call themselves clans, as in kin and friends of kin,” explains Grigsby. “It’s this idea of shared experiences, norms, and values that they associate with noodling.”

8. “I think most noodlers find a trade where they use their hands a lot,” Jerry “Catfish” Rider concurs in *Okie Noodling*.

9. The majority of noodlers are men, to be sure. Referencing her interviews on the topic of fish fries, Mary Grigsby observes that their self-perception as big-game hunters is borne out in interesting ways: while, traditionally, men went out to get the fish, women foraged for wild mushrooms and the berries with which they baked pies.