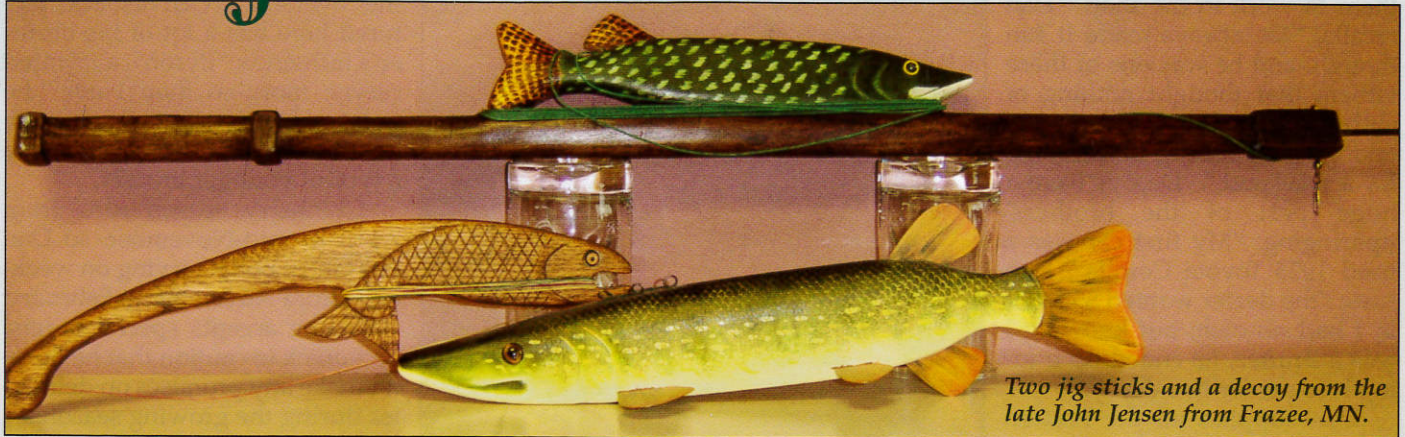


JIG STICKS:



Two jig sticks and a decoy from the late John Jensen from Frazee, MN.

Art Form on the Ice

By Kirk Schnitker

“Keep jigging,” I said. The fish was big and he took a swipe at the decoy, but missed and exited as fast as he came in. It took about a minute of jig stick finesse, then Mr. Pike came back for another look at the decoy. This time the spear was cocked and loaded and fried fish was on the evening’s menu.

Unless you’re an ice fisherman or spearer you might ask, what is that “jigging, jig stick” talk all about? Generally speaking, these are short stiff wooden fishing sticks that hold fishing line and are made and rigged so that the line can be let out and retrieved in an orderly fashion. The jig stick is used for (1) ice fishing or (2) darkhouse spearing. There are differences; but it’s called a jig stick in either case. There are simple differences in design between the two, but they serve similar purposes.

Ice fishing jig sticks often have a spike at one end. It works like this. You sit over your hole, bait your hook and take line off the stick to let the line down the hole in the ice. When it reaches the desired depth, you jig the line up and down, or you set your bobber and stick the jig stick into the ice via the spike keeping it nice and dry and ready to use. Not all ice fishing jig sticks have spikes, and these can be used like a spearing

decoy jig stick where you simply hold it by the handle and jig away. This is where the jig stick gets its name, for to jig is to jerk, twitch, pull up slow or fast, or any number of things with the stick with the objective of (1) getting a fish to bite the bait or (2) come to the spear decoy. The jig sticks with spikes are rarely used anymore. Nowadays, ice fishing poles with reels are the norm. Spearers, on the other hand, commonly use jig sticks to jig their decoys so they continue to be made for those who spear.

Longtime collector, angler, and man of the world, John Banholzer, recalls days when nearly every ice angler would be using spiked-end jig sticks. Not much of a fan of them, John concedes they were the only option back in the old days; and, he says, “They weren’t worth a damn when you think about it.” As he said, “They had no reel; we used heavy black braided line, and they were crude and clumsy.” But they were the norm and “all kinds of companies made them,” as well as fishermen for their own use.



Fine sticks with the premiere carved fish versions and those sometimes called the “poor man’s sticks.”



Two very nice Burdett Jacob jig sticks.

Years ago I bought my first jig stick from a collector-peddler friend of mine. Soon enough he found me another, and thereafter I bought all the jig sticks I could lay my hands on that had two qualities — craftsmanship and age. Back then I really found they were available. Of course, as I bought, I got more discriminating; but it never ceased to amaze me just how many different kinds of jig sticks there were. If I had to categorize them, I would say there would be four categories. The first would be commercially manufactured sticks. Some of these are well made and readily collected. The second would be those that are *hand-crafted* but were produced for sale commercially. When we see a fair number of the same type of these sticks, we assume they were small home shop operations where they were made for sale. The third would be those early sticks made by fisherman for their own use. Some of these are nothing more than a crude stick with no line holding device, but others are true works



A nice assortment of well made jig sticks likely from the 40's to the 60's.

of art. The fourth category would be more contemporary sticks.

There was a time when commercially manufactured jig sticks were not available. During this time there clearly was demand for them, for we see many different hand made, home-made, one-of-a-kind jig sticks from this era that spans generally from the 30's to the 50's and 60's.

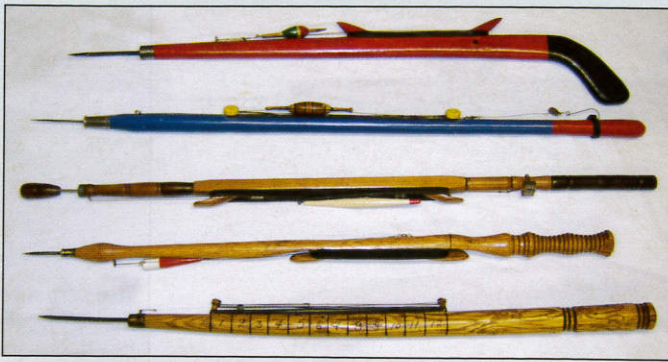
The manufactured sticks are primarily from the 50's and later. It's those hand-made, well done sticks that most of us collectors enjoy; for there is no end to the variations in design or craftsmanship. There is also no end to the amount of creativity that went in to the eye appeal of the stick. Some are carved. Some have inlay. Some are laminated. Some are paint-



A nice assortment of factory jig sticks with the exception of the bottom two which are probably homemade.



These sticks all are unique in their own way. The top has unique spike. Second is a converted pool cue. The next has a carving of Korea and Japan and a screw-off end-cap for storage of gear — surely military veteran piece. The next has a lion carving. Second from the bottom is simply well done with great lines, and at bottom is an outstanding lathe turned birdseye maple stick.



Nice assortment of sticks.



Well made sticks by makers who wanted more than just utility.

Four contemporary sticks with the top two by the author, then an Otis Lael stick, followed by a very nice Larry Lange jig stick.



ed multicolors. Some are short and some are long. When I look at an old well made jig stick that has quality craftsmanship and art mixed in, I have to wonder just what kind of man took the time to embellish a

stick that did not need all the embellishments. I guess he's just like that guy who wants a nice gun to hunt with. The only difference is, with the jig stick, he made it himself.

One could write a good deal

about commercial sticks and many are noteworthy. Some are quite common and plain, with spikes or not. Some have reels, some are wood, and others are metal. Newer varieties have fiberglass rods and are made for lighter line. On the other hand, since my focus here is the hand-crafted sticks, my task is much simpler; for of the multitudes of old high quality jig sticks that are out there, few can be attributed to a maker. There are a few exceptions.

Without a doubt, the best information on quality, early jig sticks is to be found in Donna Tonelli's books, *Top of the Line Fishing Collectibles* and *Fish & Fowl Decoys of the Great Lakes*. She has identifications and photographs of some of the best sticks that can be found. Valuable information can also be found in *Folk Art Fish Decoys* by Donald J. Peterson.

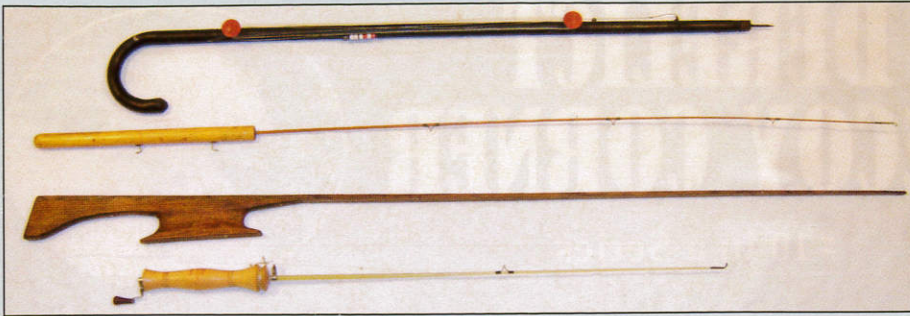
Most would agree that the most coveted of all jig sticks are those made by William Faue from Hanover, Minnesota. These sticks are said to date back to the 20's;



An assortment of plainer, but well constructed, jig sticks.



Nice early jig sticks with 2nd and 3rd from top being attributed to John Ryden.



Top to Bottom: cane conversion, Biek factory manufactured stick with bamboo rod, very odd and long stick made of walnut, Heddon factory stick. Some say middle two longer sticks are for open water fishing.

however, some collectors would put them being made later than that. Either way, they are scarce and truly "top of the line" jig sticks. Additionally, and like most other sticks found made by the same hand, they were done with a wide range of quality and craftsmanship. Clearly, those with the painted fish and "kissing crappies" versions are the premium pieces. There are other sticks that are well made; some very nice ones are attributed to Burdette Jacobs from Glen, Minnesota and John Ryden of Aitkin, Minnesota. But other than the makers just mentioned, few sticks, whether well

made or not, have known makers.

With this article are photos of many early and some more contemporary jig sticks. We know some can be identified and attributed to a maker; others cannot, which is too bad. For some are done so well that the maker deserves recognition. On the other hand, these pieces embody nearly all of what hunting and fishing collectors desire — quality, utility, craftsmanship, and art. They are getting harder to find, whatever your search method is; but good sticks are still readily available. Keep looking for jig sticks; and look for those that please you because of their style,

lines, utility, carving, or otherwise. When you buy that first one, I know you'll want another; and you'll be happy you developed admiration for this aspect of ice fishing history.

In their own way jig sticks make for a very nice compliment to a collection of general hunting, fishing, and sporting artifacts. Minnesota collector, John McCormick, is among the growing number of jig stick fanciers. When asked what it was that brought him to the acquiring of a very nice jig stick collection, he said he came to enjoy them as a unique form of folk art. He went on to say that he considered the maker and his "applying his artistic talent the only way he could." Many jig stick collectors would agree for so many old sticks are very well done. It's a good reason to collect them! □

(Author's note: Kirk Schnitker can be reached at kirkschnitker@gmail.com and he collects fish decoys, early breweriana including Hamm's and ... jig sticks. The author extends his thanks to collectors John Banholzer, John McCormick, and Robert Beugan for information and photos of their sticks.)



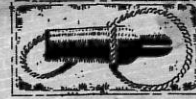
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