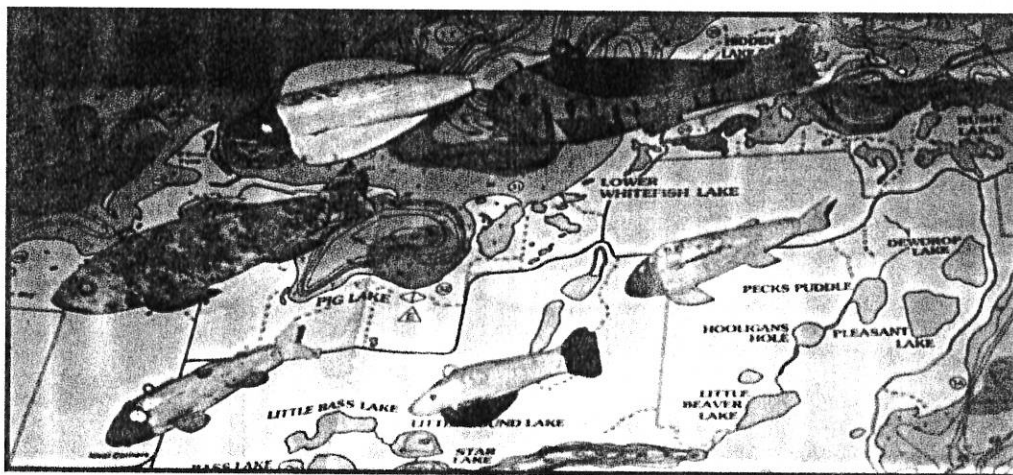


"WHITEFISH OPEN"

NEW SPEARFISHING COMPETITION IN MINNESOTA

by Tim Spreck and Kirk Schnitker



A group of old, authentic whitefish decoys resting on a map of the region.

In the Northern Minnesota Brainerd Lakes region there lies a string of lakes with a long established history of spearfishing. These lakes, the Whitefish Chain, are comprised of fourteen lakes ranging in size from more than 3,000 acres to less than 200, with depths ranging from over 100 feet to less than 15. Occasionally, the search for vintage spearing decoys on the Whitefish Chain will produce a quality find. The size of a decoy used for spearing whitefish is generally from 1 1/2" to 3." Whitefish spearing continues today; however, the primary focus of dark-house fishing on the chain is the Northern Pike. Old spearing decoys for Pike are also found in the area from time to time.

The tradition of carving spearing decoys for use is one which has evolved into the notion of carving for competition. Competitions for contemporary fish decoys judge entries on their appearance as well as their ability to "swim." This

Tim Spreck of the "Whitefish Open" shows off a 42-inch, 16 pound pike taken with one of his own decoys.



"swim factor" has to do with how the decoy reacts when placed in water. Some nose-dive to the bottom; some glide smoothly in large arcs, and others do fast spirals. It is this "performance criteria" which decoy carvers are confronted with in making fish for competition as well as for use in spearing. On January 11-13, 2002, a group of seasoned decoy makers gathered for the first "Whitefish Open." For this group, the combination of the scenic beauty of the region and the competitive desire to harvest pike with the decoys carved by their own hand was an idea whose time had come.

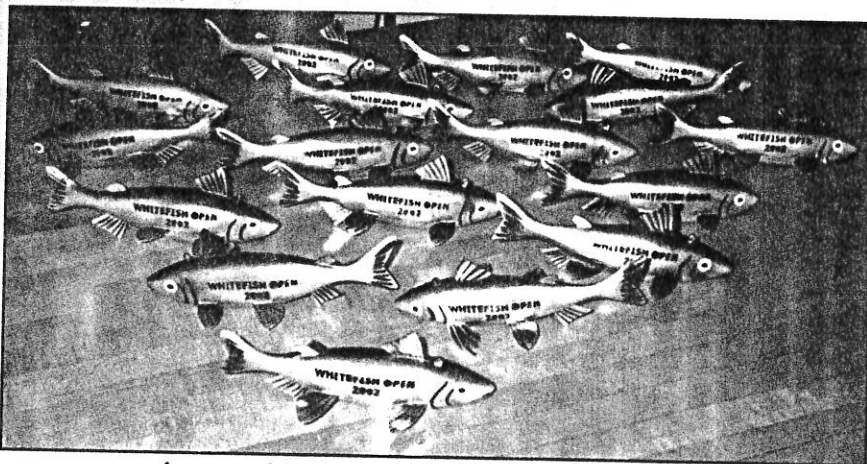
The criteria for entry in the "Whitefish Open" was fairly simple. Each carver was required to make and use his own fish decoy for spearing. The field of entrants for the first year was comprised of eight highly regarded fish carvers from Minnesota and Michigan. At the inaugural outing for what promises to become an annual event, the field



Five of the eight participants – (left to right) Bob Johnson, Paul McNeal, John Pususta, Mike Holmes, and Tim Spreck after two days of hard fishing.



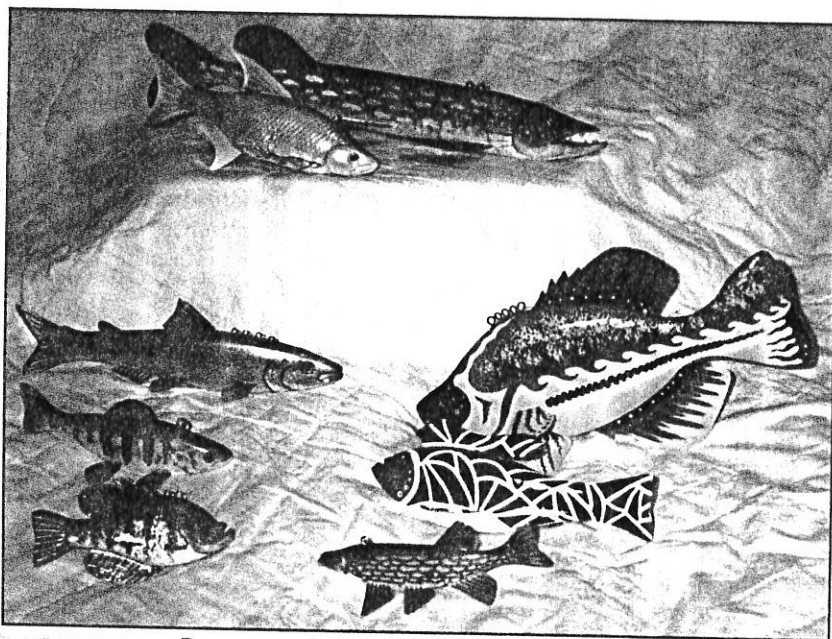
Winners Bob Johnson (left) and Paul McNeal with two of their fish.



A group of trophy and limited edition commemorative fish decoys.



Mike Holmes (right) and John Pususta display their spearing decoys.



Decoys made by the eight participants for the "decoy swap."

was comprised of Bob Johnson, Paul McNeal, John Pususta, Mike Holmes, Kirk Schnitker, Mike Ott, John Oman, and Tim Spreck. These eight carvers have won dozens of awards in national fish decoy competition over the last few years, and all are serious spear-fishermen. As an added attraction, each carver brought one of his handcarved fish decoys to be traded.

The first day of the tournament was beautiful and sunny. Most of the fishermen did not even need to use their darkhouse heaters as the temperature topped out around 30 degrees. Pig Lake, where the group

set up operations is one of the smaller lakes on the chain at 191 acres. It is well known for its abundant fish along the shoreline and in its shallow bays. This lake's underwater terrain can be very unforgiving. An excellent location with proper depth and weed cover could be within two feet of a massive underwater cliff which would prove unsatisfactory for spearing.

The team of Kirk Schnitker from Champlin, Minnesota, and Mike Ott from Pine River, moved their house across the bay late Saturday after finding no fish. Kirk is an attorney but really has surrendered his heart to the pursuits of outdoor activities like hunting and fishing. Both Kirk and Mike are highly regarded fish decoy carvers with very different styles. The team of Mike Holmes from Iron Mountain, Michigan, and John Pususta from Montrose, Minnesota, had limited luck with their slow-moving, ultra realistic spearing decoys. They are among the elite of decorative, working decoy carvers in the world. After having no spearing opportunities, they moved far across the bay and

relocated near a channel.

After the time honored and ritualistic consumption of many beers, the team of Tim Spreck from Stillwater, Minnesota, and John Oman from Sebeka, Minnesota, were pretty well shut out during the first day's competition, even after they collaborated in the creation of an impromptu flasher decoy made from a crushed beer can. John is known as a talented carver of beautifully executed, realistic fish decoys, and Tim is known primarily as a folk art carver.

As twilight approached, it became evident that there were not going to be any trophy fish taken that day. Several pike were spotted by the group but only a few were speared. At the end of the first day, the bragging rights for the largest fish taken went to Bob Johnson of Brainerd, Minnesota. Along with his spearing partner, Paul McNeal from Erhard, Minnesota, who is the reigning Minnesota carver of the year, Bob had speared two fish and was the standing tournament leader.

Day two saw the group of contestants once again dragging equipment across the lake for yet another try to unseat the tournament master. As warm and sunny conditions gave way to a cold, dark wind in late morning, it became obvious that the chances to win the contest were slipping away. As if to add a final blow, Bob Johnson and Paul McNeal took another pair of bigger, more impressive fish. Although the other teams saw several fish in late morning, the opportunities to spear any were fleeting.

Kirk Schnitker managed to lose one of his favorite decoys while

attempting to spear a Northern Pike. Even after the creation of a retrieval tool crafted from a long board and a landing net, he was unable to recover the decoy. At the agreed upon closing time of 11a.m., the awards were presented and the pictures taken. Bob Johnson and Paul McNeal placed first and second. The trophies were in the form of collaborative working decoys made by event promoters John Pususta, Tim Spreck and Kirk Schnitker. They made a limited number of 16 similar commemorative fish as well.

The participants proclaimed the first-ever "Whitefish Open" to be an overwhelming success. The spearing tradition of the Whitefish Chain and its history of rugged folks was reborn for a new generation. The cold wind, the snow, the difficult proposition of luring a fish into the range of a spear with a decoy of one's own creation really defines sportsmanship in its truest form. The feeling of seeing our young, local guides, Jason Trout, Joe Goerges, and Dylan Wieson learning the subtleties of making decoys from these eight master decoy carvers gave a sense of staying power to the art and the sport. The continued annual success of this event will provide testament to the craftsmanship and sportsmanship of the spear fisherman and the rich spearing tradition on the Whitefish Chain.

(Editor's note: Tim Spreck and Kirk Schnitker are both well known fish decoy carvers, promoters of their sport, and collectors of vintage spearing decoys. You may reach Tim at 651-439-1110 and Kirk at 621-789-5151.)

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