



the CRAYFISH TALE

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MY FIRST CRAYFISH CATCH

It was many years ago, and my first crayfish catch was a mistake. Yes, I had not planned to catch crayfish, yet I did. Want to know how ?

During my last two years in high school, I spent summers practicing in the field of a future career. Unfortunately I did not know for sure what my future career would be, but I had some ideas. For a while I wanted to become a farmer, or agronomist as we liked to call it. So I worked at a farm during the summer months hoping to learn something.

The following year I had changed my mind, and now I thought it would be great to become a forester like my good friend Nils. His father was a forester, so Nils 'knew' his future career would be walking in his father's foot steps.

And when Nils one day invited me to join him spending a summer in the forests of western Sweden, practicing to become a forester, I accepted.

After graduation from 11th grade of high school in Stockholm, I packed my rucksack and a small suitcase and took off for the woods.

The train brought me to a little town not far from where Nils' father had been active as a forester. And he knew people in the business in that area and was

able to find a suitable job for a couple of greenhorns who wanted to learn about forestry.

At that time most timber from forests was floated down rivers to the nearest sawmill. But floating timber logs down rivers was not always an eventless journey. Here and there the river had rapids or maybe a dam where timber had to be helped along its journey down the river. One such place was where Nils and I were placed in order to help the timber keep floating along its way. Where the country road crossed the river over a dam was a little lumber jack's cabin. That's where Nils and I hung out for a few weeks of timber floating.

In addition to the dam where the road went across the river, there was also a timber flume that floated the logs over the rapids down to the water below the dam. And the timber flume had to be fed logs in a proper sequence to go down the V-shaped wooden construction carrying both water and logs. It was our job to make sure only one log entered the flume at a time and that there always was a log on its way down to the river below.

The job was fun, and we were both proud to be given the responsibility to perform this very important function. Sometimes logs piled up so fast in front of the dam that we had to run along the

wooden floating piers with long poles to separate the logs when they managed to bunch up and keep other logs from floating freely down the flume.

The little lumber cabin by the river had two bunks and a kitchen nook where we fixed breakfast and dinners unless we rode our bikes down to the nearest village for some more elaborate food than a frying pan and a stew pot could produce.

Each morning we made our breakfast of oat meal, a stick-to-the-ribs porridge we both had learned to like. Porridge and milk sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon was our standard food each morning.

Nils and I were teenagers, and at that age nobody likes doing dishes. The porridge pot made for a messy dish that both Nils and I disliked cleaning.

One day, after breakfast and before we were on our way to some outlying area, we decided to simply leave the pot and the dishes in a little backwater eddy of the river next to our cabin. Any thing to avoid doing dishes and to dry them was welcomed by both of us. I remember how I was especially anxious to place the pot, still with some leftover porridge in it, so that it would not float away down the river while we were away up the river tending logs.

Coming home after work that day I went down to the river to reclaim the porridge pot and start heating up some soup for dinner. As usual, the river flowed peacefully along toward the dam with the flume. The little inlet with the eddy was still protected from the flow of the river, and there was our porridge pot still sitting undisturbed in the water of the Black River.

But there was a difference. I looked into the pot and couldn't believe my eyes. There were crayfish in it, big black crayfish that were still eagerly chomping on the leftovers of the oat meal porridge.

I pulled up the pot by the handle, carefully not to lose any of the crayfish and brought it back to our cabin. I showed it to Nils and he was just as surprised as I had been.

But what would we do with just a few crayfish? Of course we both realized that we had caught a highly coveted critter that sold for quite a substantial sum in stores. And this was before the Signal crayfish from California had been introduced to Swedish rivers and lakes. The crayfish season had just started, so we were actually legally holding these specimens in our oat meal pot.

But three or four crayfish don't make much of a meal - for two hungry teenagers... So we returned them to the river and made our dinner stew in the same pot. After a quick rinse maybe...

But the thought that the river we were camping at had lots of crayfish in it did not leave us alone. Sure, catching crayfish in a porridge pot is not very efficient, and of course we had no crayfish traps with us. We did not even have salt to cook them with if we wanted to.

But Nils knew the head forester of the district, a friend of his father's. So the next evening we walked up to his office in the village and asked if he knew anyone with a couple of crayfish traps to lend us. He did, and happy as larks we walked back to our logging cabin and started planning for a better catch of crayfish than our first. We found some bait, pieces of bacon we had

planned to use for our next breakfast and we were ready for another crayfish attack.

My father, who lived in Stockholm, and who had for years been an avid crayfish catcher, came to my mind. Wouldn't he love to get a load of crayfish sent up to him to remind him of his days of catching them and selling them to the local hotel? Of course he would.

So I decided to try to catch at least a score – 20 crayfish – of them and send them up live by express rail. If I packed them carefully with some wet grass in the box, they would probably make it in good shape although August temperatures could be rather high, even in Sweden.

Now Nils and I started catching crayfish in earnest for several days. Before we went to bed in our little cabin, we baited the traps with our store bought bacon, placed the two traps in the little inlet on the river, and each morning we pulled up dozens of large, almost black, crayfish, the local native crayfish some biologist decided to call *Astacus astacus*.

Several mornings, before leaving the cabin for some logging work, we emptied the night's catch in a wire fish basket, laughing at the thought of a coming crayfish dinner. A visit to the nearby town had brought us both a box of salt and some bunches of dill. In August, every grocery store is stocked with dill knowing that most everybody in Sweden cooks crayfish with dill.

My father had caught thousands of crayfish when I was younger, but not until now, in the wild woods of the timber district, did I really enjoy eating crayfish - spiced by having caught them myself.

Toward the end of the week I had plenty of crayfish in our fish basket. Now I had enough to send a box of live crayfish to my father in Stockholm, the crayfish expert of olden days when we used to live in the country. I found a wooden crate with slats allowing for air but not for escapees. I filled it with 20 of the biggest and liveliest crayfish, and got on my bicycle to pedal them to the railroad station in the nearby town. Before I registered the box for rail transport, I managed to get a pail full of crushed ice to make sure the crayfish would arrive alive and kicking the next day. I recall how proud I was being able to do this for my father, who surely would enjoy the crayfish.

It was Friday and I was convinced my father would be able to cook the crayfish the next day after arrival at the Stockholm rail freight depot. I returned to our cabin by the river, and if I remember correctly, Nils and I had another meal with super big and fine crayfish for Friday dinner. I was in advance congratulating myself for being able to send this gift to my father who would surely deeply enjoy the crustaceans.

The following week Nils and I had to go into town for an errand. I took the opportunity to run over to the post office, where I knew they had a phone booth. I was going to call my father and find out how the crayfish transport turned out. He answered immediately, and I asked if the crayfish had arrived. Yes, he said, but I noticed a hesitation in his voice as he told me about their arrival. Yes, they had arrived all right, but not quite all right. They were all dead on arrival.

As I had sent the crays out on a Friday with anticipated arrival the next day, something had

happened, and my father was not informed of their arrival until the following Monday. When he arrived to take possession of the box, the crayfish had all succumbed to the heat and the unexpected wait over the weekend. Had he been informed that Saturday, they would have been fine, but by the time Monday came around, all the ice was long

melted and the heat did them all in.

I was devastated. I blamed the catastrophe on both the rail express and myself. Obviously I should have sent them during the week and not over the weekend when rail freight service slowed down with this miserable result.

Probably I was more disappointed than my father.

Greetings

Trapper Arne, Sr.

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