

## Menhaden

Billie fed me a meal second to none I've ever had! Give her a little applause – and remember where to point those visitors when they come over here looking for the “real experience.” Heaven's sake, don't take them out fishing. That's too real!

What say? Yes, I did go out a few times, but I hope I have learned all I need to know about menhaden fishing and won't find it necessary to try it again.

Before I spent some time with Billie's dad out on the Rappahannock and onto the Bay, I never had even heard of menhaden. But Stile gave me the Junior College education on that. Yes, he does, and yes even if you don't ask.

Most of you here have been in Reedsville long enough to be menhaden experts yourselves. But for the few of you who aren't, you may like a few of those “real life” facts – I'll keep it short. I also will not let us slide into an argument about overfishing – I deplore it as much as anyone does, but I looked into it closely.

It is my honest, unbiased, and informed opinion that there is simply too much conflicting information to stop me from helping out on Stile's “On the Dole.” He still hasn't told me why he named his boat that, because I've seen him at work, and he is definitely not on the dole.

This is one of those topics where people go round and round, each side with their heels dug in, never getting the other side to change their mind. I know, you'll say that's just human nature. That has some truth to it, but I think a lot of us here, maybe most, can bring up a memory of something important we changed our mind about.

Anyway, I saw how there were two strong but opposite opinions about overfishing the menhaden and I found myself mulling it over. You have all probably heard it said that “it's not the things you know that get you in trouble, but the things you know that just ain't so.” You also probably heard or read that this quote comes from our own Mark Twain – but that just ain't so.

I'll confess a little family history here. All my immediate family were the very most rabid racists. Some were true Klansmen, dressing up in robes and burning crosses. But two of my uncles joined the Army together. Both were sent to fight in the Korean war. Both saw active combat. Any man who lives through that is changed, and I see a few of you out there who know the truth of that. But here's my point – they were gone from home for three years but when they came back, there wasn't a racist bone in their bodies. They had changed. Never discussed it, never ranted when they heard their relatives spout that hatred, just lived lives without it. One started his own radio service shop, and hired a black man to serve as front counter man and cashier. Some people in town wouldn't shop there because of it, but it made no difference to him.

So I don't buy that it's “just how people are.” I think sometimes, like with the menhaden, we argue from what we've heard, not from serious scientific study. Any of you ever heard that bumblebees cannot possibly fly? Do you believe that bumblebees can't fly, or that somebody has a goof in their calculations? Some of you can remember when whooping cough was every mother's nightmare. Now it's gone. But for years, there was an ongoing debate about whether it was caused by bad air – miasma they called it – and children died or suffered greatly from it. It lasted so long they called it the 100 day cough. People argued that vaccination would not help. Why? Not because they knew anything about it. They “heard” it. It may sound foolish today, when we have almost kicked whooping cough to the curb, and eventually people changed their mind. Why? Because the truth was eventually too obvious to deny. Modern parents know that giving the kids their DPT shots before sending them to public school is a wise choice because the scientific realities have made it clear. My uncles came to know that skin color was not a good basis for how you treat people. So we change our minds by what we'll call “scientific persuasion,” but we also change our minds based on what we'll call “living a life.”

This is all complicated by the fact that sometimes “they” are onto something. Scientists of 1700s and 1800s cut their patients’ veins and drained blood out of their bodies to get rid of the bad stuff that was making them sick. They used leeches to the same purpose. But people began to distrust doctors, began to call them “bloodsuckers.” Science eventually found its way to the germ theory and later to discover viruses. So science has come along and has made phenomenal progress, but the trust the medical profession lost with its dirty surgical saws, its leeches, its reliance on partially poisoning a patient to kill the disease inside her – that lack of trust survives in a lot of ordinary folks.

And that explains why we can’t agree on whether we’re overfishing the menhaden. Some scientists say we’ve fished them down to the point that the ospreys are dying off. Did I mention that Stile showed me how the osprey will lead you right to the fish? Other scientists say they’ve counted the fish over the years and they are holding up fine. People concerned with ecology – saving the planet from people – want to believe the first set. People whose livelihoods depend on the fish haul want to believe the second bunch. I myself looked at both sides, and came to a draw. The worst of arguments is when both sides can support their own side, but neither side can prove their own case.

I really was going to give you some lessons about the menhaden, but I spent so much time talking about miasma and bloodsuckers that I’m all out of time. If we are able to get together tonight – rain willing – I promise not to be so longwinded about nothing.

What? Oh, I know you’re just joshing around. I’ll just give one piece of advice, something I almost never do, but you asked for something. Here it is: Don’t think because a man doesn’t know a particular thing, that he doesn’t know anything.