



The Lure of the Past

Antique tackle and more are on display in north Mississippi

By Deborah Roberts



Anglers have used artificial fishing baits for more than a century, and a vintage collection at Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks (MDWFP) North Mississippi Fish Hatchery is luring visitors back to the past.

Emily-Jo Wiggins, director of the hatchery's Visitor Education Center (VEC), said around 70 of the center's 200-plus lures are on display at any given time. There are almost 300 items in the entire collection of antique fishing gear, including boat motors, rods, and reels.

Though area residents donated many items before the VEC opened, most of the lures came from Jim Foerste, a Lawrence County native who retired from MDWFP after serving as lake manager at Lake Mary Crawford for many years.

"Once word was out there, it spread," said Wiggins, who joined the VEC staff shortly after it opened in 2009 and became director in 2012. "Large donors are recognized on plaques, but many items are donated anonymously. I even found one bag tied to the front door."

Most are bass lures, while many others are intended for crappie. "Some of these, you can tell they've been used quite a bit," Wiggins said, "but others are still new in their original packaging."

While many of the items are permanently displayed, others rotate in and out, so there is always something new to discover. But seeing the collectibles is only half the fun. "It's not uncommon to hear anglers stop and talk about fish they caught, or supposedly caught. The stories grow all the time," Wiggins said. "Gentlemen who have been fishing all their lives tell their stories. It's very interesting."

Vintage Lures

The oldest pieces in the collection likely are the hand-carved lures from the early 1900s, according to Wiggins. "They are

all painted different colors," said Wiggins. "One even looks like a frog head someone carved."

Commercially produced lures in the collection date back to the 1920s. "I didn't realize fishing with lures was so popular back then," she added. "You usually think about people in the past fishing with live bait, but so many lures were available to those who could afford them."

Wiggins said the early bait manufacturers most people are familiar with are Heddon Lures of Dowagiac, Michigan, and the Fred Arbogast Company of Akron, Ohio. The late James Heddon, who founded Heddon Lures, was inducted into the Bass Fishing Hall of Fame in 2020. Often regarded as the father of the modern fishing lure, he began making wooden lures from broom handles in the late 1890s. He and his son, Will, manufactured their first fishing lures in 1902. The VEC's collection includes several early Heddon Lures:



Heddon River Runt Spook Sinker

It was introduced in 1933. The original Heddon River Runt was made of wood rather than plastic and has painted eyes. The first of the River Runt Spooks was called the "standard sinking" model because, given that it weighs only half-ounce, the lure sank slowly and gave the user control over how deep the lure traveled. Instructions suggested the angler count to 15 before retrieving it.



Lucky 13

This series started in the 1920s and is one of Heddon's most popular lures. The collection features seven different types, including the Red Head Frog Scale, Tiny Lucky 13, and Baby Lucky 13. The Lucky 13, which Wiggins found advertised in an old Heddon catalog for 90 cents, was touted as "a great topwater lure popular with striper, salmon, and bass fishermen alike." "If you know lures, you can look at a Lucky 13 and identify it quickly," Wiggins said. "They all have that curved or concave head."



Heddon Crackleback

From the 1970s, it is made of plastic to resemble a small whale or dolphin with painted eyes, simple screw eye hardware, two treble hooks, and a large diving bill. With the crackled-paint effect, it is sometimes called "fancy back."

VEC HOURS OF OPERATION

March-October
8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Tue-Sat,
except holidays / Closed Sun-Mon

November-February
7:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Mon-Fri,
except holidays / Closed Sat-Sun



Zara Spook

Manufactured beginning in 1932, these popular topwater baits were among the first plastic fishing lures.



Baby Torpedo

It is part of the Torpedo series, reportedly manufactured from 1925-1939.



Sonic

Introduced in 1957, it is so-called because of a “vibrating fin” that, according to Heddon, created a sound fish would respond to.

PLAN A VISIT

The Visitor Education Center at the North Mississippi Fish Hatchery is adjacent to Enid Lake, off Exit 233 on Interstate 55. The center, the first and only facility of its kind in Mississippi, features a native habitat area, 10,000-gallon aquarium, interactive exhibits, displays, artifacts, fishing rodeo pond, gift shop and gallery, and the World Record White Crappie. The facility offers guided and self-guided tours, as well as programs and workshops for the public.

Fred Arbogast reportedly started his fishing lure business in the basement of his home in the late 1920s. The VEC collection also includes several of his company’s vintage baits:



Hula Popper

It was introduced in the late 1940s. A 1950s catalog claimed the Hula Popper “has everything every fisherman could ask for in a topwater lure. Can be plunked, popped, twitched, or jerked to make noise or commotion on the surface. Killer for big bass. Makes bass fighting mad. Equipped with a small skirt.”



Jitterbug

Made originally of wood and introduced in 1937, this peanut-shaped Jitterbug is thought to be Arbogast’s biggest contribution to the world of fishing lures. An early ad for the Jitterbug noted, “A remarkable Action of Noisy Surface Bait Fascinates Fish and Fisherman. ... Its loud paddling action captivates and gets fish.”



Jitterstick

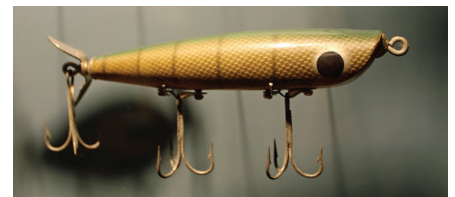
It was a popular early Arbogast topwater bait.

Other interesting lures by lesser-known manufacturers include:



Lazy Ike

A wooden lure from the 1930s, it was used to catch walleye, bass, and crappie. This unique lure is curved like a semi-circle and described as, “simple in design but deadly on the end of a line.” The collection contains several, including the popular red-and-white one.



Dalton Special

A classic Southern bass fishing plug, it was originally hand-carved from wood in the 1930s but later manufactured by Shakespeare and other companies through the 1950s.



Hot Spot

Made by Cotton Cordell from 1958 to 1980, it comes in five sizes. Cordell, who is revered as one of the most influential fishing tackle designers, reportedly said he started making lures because he could not afford to buy them.



Nip-I-diddee

A wooden lure made by South Bend Lures in the late 1940s, it was touted as “one of the deadliest lures ever devised for Bass, Pike, Pickerel, Channel Bass, Weakfish, and other species of freshwater and saltwater gamefish.”



Injured Minnow

A wooden lure introduced in the 1920s by the Creek Chub Bait Company of Indiana, the minnows floated on their side to suggest they were injured and, thus, easy pickings. The VEC has three of these lures on display.

Motors and more

Doug King of Southaven donated many of the motors in the collection. Currently on display are three motors, two of which are made by Evinrude, a Wisconsin company that started manufacturing outboard motors in the early 1900s. The Evinrude 1.5 hp Sportsman, made in 1948, was one of the first motors to have a full crank cord with a spring return and a propeller guard. At only 15 pounds, the Evinrude 1.1 hp Elto Pal, circa 1938, was one of the first ultra-lite models. The third is a 1922 Johnson 2 hp motor.

Wiggins said the Man-u-Troll, hand-cranked trolling motor from the 1930s, is one of the most interesting items in the collection. “You have to pump a lever continually to keep the propellor running,” she said. “We demonstrate it quite often. It takes a lot of elbow grease.” While the Man-u-Troll was donated before Wiggins came to work for MDWFP, she has been told a visitor wanted to donate something for the “new fishing museum” and came across the motor for \$11 at a yard sale. “Realizing that it was probably valuable, the people here asked him if he was sure he wanted to part with it,” she said. “He stated that he bought it for the museum and that he was certainly not going to use it.” Similar motors have been listed on eBay from \$200-\$750.



Lowrance FISH-LO-K-TOR

The VEC is also fortunate to have one of the first FISH-LO-K-TOR, portable sonar units that Lowrance introduced in 1959. Known as the “Little Green Box,” this unit was donated in mint condition by Frank Hall of Water Valley in 2016. “We were thrilled to get the fish finder in such good condition. Mr. Hall was an avid fisherman and babied his equipment,” Wiggins said. “The original paperwork is still with it, and it still works.”

Other items in the collection include:

- Vintage rods and reels, some still in their original package. Dr. Sam Polles, Executive Director of MDWFP, donated several from his personal collection.
- Rod and reel cases, some made of leather
- Creel baskets, antique tackle boxes and a wooden bait box
- A nice selection of lead weights in their original metal boxes from the 1930s
- Plastic worms, some so old they do not have markings or manufacturer name
- A metal container that once held fly line lubricant
- Cortland Line Co. sponge used for fly line lubricant
- Vintage hooks still in their original boxes
- A handmade barometer fashioned from an old soft drink bottle
- A fishing magazine from the 1930s

Significant donors to the collection also include Ruben Johnson of Oakland, Ed Bridges of Pope, and the Minor family of Baldwin. All contributions are appreciated.

When someone donates an item in its original packaging, it holds added appeal. “It’s like a look into the past,” Wiggins said. “When something says, ‘as seen in Field and Stream,’ that’s part of its history.”

If you have any vintage fishing tackle and would like to donate it, Wiggins said the VEC would be happy to accept it. For more information, email emily-jo.wiggins@wfp.ms.gov.

Deborah Roberts is a freelance writer for Mississippi Outdoors.