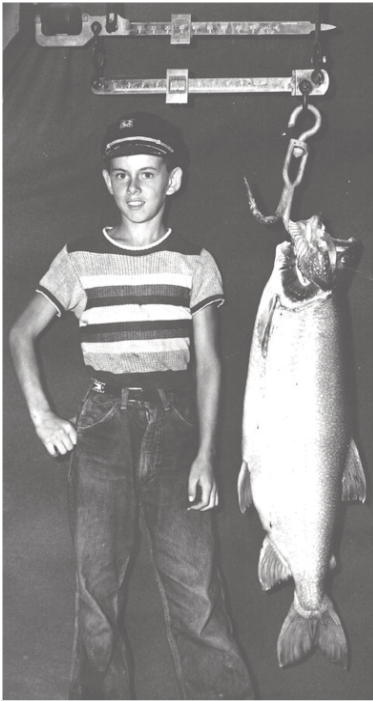


## The Beacons of Big Green

*Norton, Walker still the guiding lights*

By Dick Ellis



LEFT: Captain Dennis Walker held the state record lake trout for 14 years when he landed this 47 inch, 34-1/2 pound monster while row trolling Big Green Lake as a 12-year old boy with guide Ernie Schroeder, who worked for Dennis's father, Ray Walker. ABOVE: Big Green Lake Guide Dennis Walker shows off another lake trout caught by Randy Rothenbueler on Wisconsin's deepest inland lake

It's been almost six decades since Dennis Walker's mammoth struggle with a lake trout from a small row boat on Big Green Lake. Guide Ernie Schroeder worked the oars and offered encouragement but not a hand of help on the rod as the fish and fight came to the surface and down again to the depths on three separate occasions. When the fish,

a 47 inch, 34.5 pound monster surrendered to a 12-year old boy and a Sutton spoon, she was destined to hold the state record for 14 years. And Walker was destined to fall further yet under the spell of Wisconsin's deepest lake and premiere inland lake trout fishery.

"Ernie was a great, jovial old guide," the now 69-year old skip-

per said on Big Green this week, one eye on the arsenal of rods ready for another lake trout strike. "He was one of 17 guides working for my dad, Ray Walker at Swan Point Resort. My dad guided too until he was 82-years old. The Walkers and the Nortons have been here for 80...90...more than 100 years. When Mike Nor-

ton and I retire it might be the end of an era."

Like Walker, Captain Mike Norton has been a beacon on the intimidating Big Green Lake for anglers from throughout the Midwest who come needing more experience and expertise to find and battle lake trout. Norton's ancestry stretches back to the 1800s. A book on his famed father, lake trout angler Bud Norton, rests in the cabin for his client's enjoyment as his pontoon boat cuts the water in search of more trout. I joined each captain for half-days of fabulous fishing last week, and caught limits too of great conversation and Wisconsin history.

Randy Rothenbueler of New Berlin and I joined Walker in the morning on his 38 foot pontoon boat. We would troll spoon and dodger combinations with minnows on the bottom or close to it in 60 to 125 feet of water. By early afternoon, the great bite would continue on Norton's 45 foot ship with the company of hometown girl Alyssa Sondalle, a senior majoring in Psychology and Spanish at UW-Madison. Both boats are specifically rigged for big parties up to 12 people seeking relaxation and a unique experience on Big Green chasing lake trout.

Firing up the grill is a major part of the party on each boat.

We headed out on the 7300 acre water, Wisconsin deepest lake with a 237 foot maximum depth, knowing that Walker groups had boated 27 fish over three consecutive days with a large laker of 12 pounds. Before the popularity of Big Green grew decades ago and fishing pressure increased, a 12 pound fish was below average

“From about 1953 to 1960, lake trout here averaged 14 pounds,” Walker said. “Only one man would fish for them illegally out here with multiple Sutton spoons on a hand-held line and occasionally catch a real big fish. Someone hooked the line and saw what he was using and the secret was out .”

Walker armed six rods for lakers and started to prowl the deep water. It wasn't long before Rothenbueler had all the fights he could hope for over several hours while I worked the camera. When double hits and even a triple strike intruded on good conversation and our personal history lessons from the echoes of Big Green Lake, Walker jumped to the rods with the spring of that little boy in the row boat 60 years before.

Each guide would guess when the fish was small by the reaction on the rod and order us to reel in slowly from the depths to enable its safe release. We would keep a few fish over the 17 inch minimum for the frying pan.

“The possibility that a fisherman could come here and catch a 14 to 30 pound lake trout put Big Green Lake on the map,” Walker said. “The fishing is very good now and it should get better as the water warms into July.”

We boarded Norton's vessel and the great fishing continued. Norton clients had taken a 19 pound lake trout days before, with recent fishing in general outstanding. “That was an exceptional fish that easily could have been 25

years old,” he said. “I think there are 30 pound fish in here but that's not the story. The story is the uniqueness of what we have here, the great fishing for large groups of friends and business associates and the lake itself.”

The Norton family, he said, has worked on Green Lake since 1858 using steamboats to transport men and goods from location



LEFT: “Hometown girl and UW-Madison Psychology and Spanish major Alyssa Sondalle is glad to give up her studies for the summer to tangle with lake trout on Big Green Lake with Mike Norton's Guide service.

TOP: Guide Mike Norton expertise and experience on Big Green Lake is known to lake trout anglers across the Midwest.

to location. Steamers would also pull small boats out onto the lake where they would row and fish for lake trout. With legendary days of his own still on the horizon, his father Bud started out as an anchor boy assisting guides and clients on those boats. His great, great grandfather guided Jefferson Davis.

“Lake trout fishing is something you can count on,” Norton said. “They're here every day if you know how to find them. On Green Lake we have something very unique. Family, friends, experienced anglers, novice, or business associates can get together, troll, and catch fish. We make the fishing as hands on as possible for our guests.”

After Alyssa Sondalle and Rothenbueler flipped a coin to see who would “man” rods set at bow and stern and brief instructions from Norton, we plodded on. Ac-

tion again was fast and furious, with several very fat lakers to 25 inches part of the catch.

“The size of our lake trout has moved up,” said Norton. “We get eight to 10 pound fish pretty regular. This is prime time. Summer will also have more challenging times where we may have to average an hour of fishing for one trout. Right now we're catching three or four fish an hour. But you don't have to get up early to catch these fish. They're mid-day biters.”

By bouncing bottom with flashers and minnows and spoons in 60 to 80 feet of water, fishing action never stopped. With the exception of one lake trout taken by Rothenbueler suspended 30 feet down in 80 feet of water, all of the fish held tight to the bottom.

It didn't take long to catch a story and the idea that the lake trout population in Big Green is healthy. With that kind of reliability over the decades and the sheer beauty of the Green Lake area,

two captains who know the water better than anyone never did feel compelled to take their business elsewhere.

“Green Lake is beautiful. It never does get too busy or crowded like other lakes do,” Norton said. “We have the lake itself to offer. Lake Michigan charters usually can handle a maximum of six people, and I don't know of any other charters anywhere where the parties grill out on board as they fish like we do. Sea sickness here is unheard of. And, Big Green Lake is the premiere cold water lake trout fishery in Wisconsin. If someone knows where they can find more and better lake trout fishing inland, I'd like to know where it is.”

To contact Mike Norton's Guide Service, call 920-295-3617 or northfish@vbe.com. Visit the Norton website at www.biggreenlakefishing.com. Contact Dennis Walker's Guide Service at 920-294-0611 or (cell) 920-572-0622. Visit his website at www.greenlakefishing.com. *W*