

If These Walls Could Talk

Memories part of Bob Ellis Classic

By Dick Ellis



The Bob Ellis Classic is held annually in memory of the late, great row troller, shown here with a 41 pound November fish taken from Papoose Lake in a 12 foot skiff. (Ellis family photo)

When we put a new bathroom in this old cabin in 2007, we found a note on a two-by-four scribbled some 50-odd years ago by my uncle, Bob Ellis. He was a young man then, building four cabins staggered on 1500 feet of lakefront on the Manitowish Chain near Boulder Junction in Vilas County. He was literally building his dream so that he might follow a bigger dream of

fishing muskies, hard and often.

We found out from the scribbled note that it was raining that summer day and the exact time when he worked alone in the quiet of northern Wisconsin. Bob has been gone for two decades this year. But his nephews and nieces and our spouses who found the note, scribbled something personal back to him, signed the piece of lumber, dated it and put it back in to hide across the ages until maybe someone else finds it on some rainy tomorrow.

There are old memories up here on the top of Wisconsin. Our family vacationed at Uncle Bob's, invading his resort once a year with a ruckus that only seven kids can bring. But it seems that new secrets like hidden notes or people from yesterday pulling up to the pier to tell a story that they remember most about Bob Ellis never end.

Bob's nephews and nieces

bought the cabins when Bob was killed in a boat collision while row trolling on a November day for muskies on Papoose Lake in 1989. We didn't have homes. We didn't have money for luxuries like cabins and property. But some memories are priceless and you find ways not to lose them forever. Papoose, anyway, was the lake several years before where Bob had taken his biggest musky, a 41 pound fish mislead by a home-made bait crafted during the winter months and brought to its end by an old man fishing in an unstable, 12-foot rowboat; a boat he would often

push across ice to find the open water and the big fish he so loved to chase.

Work and stories elsewhere have kept Lori and me away too long in 2009. This weekend, I arrived at the cabin and began the annual chores of raking pine needles and oak leaves and cutting shin-high weeds and grass. My brother and cabin partner, John Ellis, was futilely trying to coax water up an old well in the garage next to more dates scribbled on lumber by Uncle Bob that told him exactly when the sandpoint well was pulled and re-driven over the years. 2009 will be



A few of the many shapes and makes of row trollers participating in the 6th annual Bob Ellis Classic. (Photo by Juris Ozols).



Bob Ellis Classic Coordinator Patricia Strutz, a northern Wisconsin musky guide (info@ablondandherboat.com) caught and released a musky during the event. (Photo by Juris Ozols).



Bob Ellis nephew Bob Johnson prepares to release a 41 inch musky during the Bob Ellis Classic. Johnson also caught and released a 44 inch musky and took first and second place during the 6th annual tournament for row trollers. (Photo by Jim Ellis)

41-inch musky fell for the same Special in deep water. Both fish were released, and Johnson would claim first and second place in the Bob Ellis Classic. More memories.

Day-time work done at the cabin this weekend, we launched our row trollers and set out to work the deep with the sun slipping in the west. Usually, at this time of year, with enough family row boats on the water we can find the occasional big suspended walleye and a cooperative musky or two over a few days of fishing. Not this time.

Before the long drive back to the Milwaukee suburbs Sunday, there were boats to pull from the lake, and a few clean-up chores to tend to. Two musky rods were stowed, and I hung two musky baits on the strip board in the bedroom; back in line with all of the other the old and battered soldiers of yesterday's musky battles. If these walls could talk, I think.

Then again, in a Bob Ellis cabin...sometimes they do. *Wo*

added to that workman's journal. To the east, my brother-in-law, Bob Johnson, hammered away at a new deck on the Uncle Bob property he had purchased with my sister Barb.

If you walk into our small cabin, you will find musky baits hanging from strip boards nailed at the top of bedroom walls, some of them the Bob Ellis specials made with care so long ago. When Bob died, my brother Jim Ellis began to make the homemade lures. I know it was part of his grieving for a lost uncle. His not-so-good first baits evolved into killer baits over the years. Those of us who row troll...all of us...catch more muskies and big walleyes on Jim Ellis Specials over the deep water that Uncle Bob coveted for big fish than any store-purchased lure.

Last week, Jim Ellis and Bob Johnson returned to represent our family in the 6th Annual

Bob Ellis Classic, a row trolling tournament held in his honor and superbly coordinated by Patricia Strutz, a northern Wisconsin musky guide with her own expertise in row trolling and musky chasing. Friends of Bob Ellis and row trollers in all shapes and makes of boats come to simply fish for muskies and remember a life lived well. Strutz calls it "an eclectic group full of camaraderie and spirit."

Jim and Bob returned also to Papoose, the deep lake where Bob's life ended but also where he caught his largest fish. A plaque at "Bob Ellis Landing" reminds visitors to use the water with safety and respect. My brothers launched no doubt hoping that some of the Uncle Bob magic would shine down on their efforts. But they also launched armed with Jim Ellis Specials.

Twenty minutes after setting out, Bob Johnson waved Jim

over. A musky conservatively measured at 44-inches had already fallen to a Special over 60 feet of water. Two hours later, a



Legendary row troller, hall of famer and Sayner row trolling guide Buckshot Anderson and Chris Anderson during the Bob Ellis Classic, fishing from fellow hall of famer Porter Dean's boat. (Photo by Dick Ellis)