THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

By

HENRY DOYLE

HENRY DOYLE
12670 VENTURA BLVD.
NORTH HOLLYWOOD, CALIF.

With civilized man invention often gets out of hand and results in doing more harm than good while primitive people generally seem to have devised ways and means that accomplished their objects without impairment to continuing usefulness.

(1) So plentiful grew the wild grapes that when Lief Ericson landed on New England's shores about the year 1000 he gave the land he discovered the name of Vineland. To-day the native grape no longer exists on our eastern seaboard and probably not one in a thousand of present day New Englanders are aware of its earlier abundance.

(2) Four centuries ago from Southern Canada to, and including Mexico, the wild turkey abounded. To-day they are numerous only in remote areas of the latter country and even there they are threatened with early extinction. Again it was civilized man's depredations that effected this change.

(3) When the Pilgrim Fathers landed there in 1629 they found the Indian population subsisting on foods of Nature's offering. They had done so for centuries and apparently their sustenance requirements were fully provided for while still leaving ample stocks which Nature could draw upon to maintain the various species intact.

(4) In those days the sky was frequently darkened from the flight of wild pigeons when, after their day's foraging, they returned to their nightly resting places. From this source the Indians satisfied their needs without dimishing the stock but with the advent of white people a senseless slaughter ensued which, in the course of but a few generations, completely exterminated this species.

From Northern Greenland to Long Island Sound the Atlantic salmon

was formerly so plentiful that articled labourers, living as apprentices in their masters' households protested vigorously against salmon being served too frequently at their meals. Even as late as 1783 Peters reported in his History of Connecticut that "shad, bass and salmon more than half support the province" and he recorded in the same year, "salmon filled the Connecticut River for many days and no finite being can number them". Yet so rapid was civilized man's depredations that only thirty four years later another writer reported salmon had become so scarce in the Connecticut River they had rarely been seen there for "15 or 20 years".

Turning to the Pacific we learn the like lesson; aborigines killed to survive; the Cacausians for the love of killing, plus its monetary advantages. Thus fur seals and sea otters continued to abound when Indians were the only human inhabitants; what they captured of these animals made no dent in the supply. But white man's inroad almost exterminated the fur seal before interested governments intervened and did exterminate the sea otter before these governments considered taking action.

All varieties of wild ducks abounded in the vast marsh lands of the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys and other sections of California, and still do in bird sanctuaries such as Lake Merritt in the midst of Oakland's 300,000 population. In Oregon, Washington and British Columbia these birds were equally plentiful. To-day they are everywhere so scarce there are limits on one's daily bag and none can be offered for public sale.

Too often whiteman's inventions made animal slaughter very easy. Always under the guise of necessity they advocate new methods and appliances as beneficial to mankind; condemn those who oppose adoption of the latest fad or fancy; and loudly proclaim such opposition was blocking the road to

progress. Too often their representations prevail and too often the after results illustrate the truth of the old story of killing the goose that laid the golden eggs. I offer here an example.

Before whitemen settled on the Pacific Coast its great rivers, the Columbia in the United States and the Fraser in British Columbia, were famous for their sturgeon fisheries. Nowhere else on the American continent was this royal fish found in such abundance, and no men were more appreciative of its uniquely fine qualities as a food than the native Indians who lived on or near the banks of those rivers.

The sturgeon is a fish that swims deep and obtains its food largely on the river bed. They are sluggish in their actions but large and powerful and, in jeopardy, capable of putting up a game fight. When mature they weigh a minimum of forty pounds with an average of more than one hundred and individuals of 1000 to 1250 pounds weight were quite common. It can therefore be readily understood that the capture of such monsters would tax the ingenuity of primitive Indians. However they succeeded.

A crew of four or five Indians fished from a canoe of about 20 foot average length. Paddles supplied its motive power and one baited hook was the weapon of capture employed. This was let down to the river bottom where it lay loosely. A stout line connected it to the canoe which drifted along with the river current, gradually drawing the line along in its wake. Presently a sturgeon gulped down the moving bait; the hook fastened in its jaw; and the fight was on.

Now all became excitement aboard the canoe. Several of the Indians paddled strongly while one steered and the others took up the slack in the line or played it out again as the resistance strengthened.

At first the hooked fish regarded its plight as a passing inconvenience, soon to be shaken off. This was succeeded by irritation as the obstruction continued to hold; and finally it became alarmed as the pull of the line tautened and a strength matching its own exerted a steady pull in an opposing way. Repeatedly the sturgeon made short, powerful lunges, now on one side, now to the other, or it sounded suddenly and as quickly rose toward the surface. Eventually the fish tired from its unwonted exertions and was pulled as close to the canoe as the crew thought was safe and then, gently as possible, was eased sufficiently alongside as to bring it within reach of a stout club which an Indian wielding with all the strength at his command, brought down on the victim's head.

Immediately the sturgeon cast off its sluggishness; sounded again; and renewed its fight against surrender. Its strength was weakened however; this time the resistance was shorter before the club could be wielded again, and, although it took many repetitions of the attack, eventually the sturgeon was brought alongside and paralleled to the canoe where it lay quiet, stunned to obliviousness.

Now came the trickiest part of the monster's capture. The sturgeon lay quiescent alongside the canoe but its weight was from a quarter to half a ton or more and the problem was how to lift it from the yielding water and deposit it safely in the canoe.

Quickly the Indians took positions along the length of the canoe on the side on which the sturgeon lay. Gradually they altered their positions so their united weight would lower the vessel on that side until they brought the lip of the canoe level with the river's flow; eased the

fish alongside; and on a signal from their leader suddenly flipped the sturgeon aboard; stepped back to assist their effort; and laid their prize safely in the bottom of the canoe without an extra drop of water being shipped in the endeavour.

But now came another vital part of the Indians problem. It was true the sturgeon was aboard the canoe but it had only been stunned by the club beating; would shortly and quickly revive; and having done so would thrash about; hitting the frail dugout canoe with blows of its body, tail or head with sufficient force to split the canoe from end to end, and, as most of these coast Indians do not know how to swim, carry them to death in the river's murky waters.

Once again necessity brought them to the solution of the new problem. The sturgeon is a cartilaginous fish with the spinal column consisting of gristle instead of bone and whereas bone is difficult to cut through a cartilaginous substance can easily be penetrated by a knife.

Quickly a sharp blade was stabbed into the sturgeon's nape, severing the spinal cord and with it cut the fish was rendered paralyzed, unable to move any part of its body. All that remained to be done was to paddle the canoe ashore, land and dismember the catch, distribute amongst the tribe the portion to be eaten fresh, and put in the smoke house what is intended to be preserved and stored for winter consumption.

This was the Indian way. They had followed it for centuries past; got from it what food they desired without diminishing the available supply; and left for succeeding generations what the bounty of nature had supplied. Their inventions were crude but sufficient for their requirements; and the

promise of like following like appeared certain for their successors.

But when the inventive whiteman became interested in the capture of sturgeon how his accomplishments put the Indians puny efforts to shame!! Instead of one hook to the line of probably fifty feet in length he laid down a rope approximately 1000 feet long. To this small drop lines were attached, spaced 18 inches to 2 feet apart and on their free end of each a stout fish hook was fastened. Its point was filed down to razor sharpness and its barb entirely ground off. No bait was attached for none was needed. On coming in contact with one hook the fish pulled away only to find this action caused the point to penetrate its flesh still deeper. In thrashing about to release itself other hooks adjacent to the first one helped to render the sturgeon's struggles hopeless, while even if an occasional fish did manage to disengage itself it probably died of its wounds and lacerations.

Until the mid 1880s residents of the Columbia River area only used its sturgeon for local consumption but about 1886 they realized that what they found to be an exceptionally tasty food could be marketed profitably in the eastern States. In 1889 687,000 pounds of sturgeon were shipped east in refrigerated cars and so great a demand ensued that in 1892 a total of 3,570,000 pounds of sturgeon was marketed. From this peak a decline set in. By 1897 the annual catch did not reach one million pounds; by 1903 it had dropped to 26,150 pounds, and never since has this royal fish been plentiful enough to support a commercial fishery.

When they had killed the Columbia River sturgeon fishery its exploiters transferred their operations to the Fraser River. In a few months time the authorities saw the Columbian experience was in a fair way to have a Canadian counterpart and they stepped in with fish restrictions that

halted the slaughter. Even so, however, the catch of 1898, the first year of Fraser River operations, a total of 750,000 pounds of sturgeon were marketed. It dropped to 278,650 the year following and to only 30,000 pounds in 1903. The whiteman's inventive methods were much more successful than the Indians. The only trouble was that while the operation succeeded the patient died. Once more history repeated itself and the despoilers passed on to other fields of endeavour.