The Ultimate Metal Killer Fish Trap

By William Blauser

The subject of this article is perhaps the largest and most complicated metal killer fish trap ever made (Figure 1). As an avid and passionate collector of odd and unusual metal fishing devises and contraptions that were meant to grab and hold a fish, I have enjoyed a chase that has lead me down many strange avenues over the past 35 years. None, however, have lead me to such an almost unimaginable and extraordinary devise as this.

Figure 1. The author holding the trap in the set position.

This trap is made entirely of steel with brass solder having been used to fill in the spaces and gaps along and adjacent to the 8 striking jaws, which was then ground down. This was very nicely done and gives the overall trap a nice smooth finish. It measures 44″ in height (Figure 2) and weighs 31 lbs.

Figure 2. The trap shown in the sprung position with a yardstick and 12″ ruler for scale.

This killer fish trap is empowered by a very strong expansile helical spring, which is encased in the trap's central hollow cylinder, with the entire trap being originally? painted a silver/grey color. It has an extremely complicated tripping mechanism, which consists of 3 separate dogs which work in series and are positioned so as to wrap around the upper portion of the trap's central column (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Close-up of the tripping mechanisms.

The distance between the opposing jaws of the trap, which is not marked and whose maker is unknown, when in the set position is approximately 24″ (Figure 4). It is initially activated (sprung) by pulling down 1/2″ on the large, barbed bait hook which is connected to the lowermost dog by an 18″ metal rod which slides inside of a stainless steel tube which runs up the side of the barrel, (it took me a week to figure out this setting mechanism), and has integral to it a heavy steel lock-link chain with a large ring near its center which is slightly offset toward the business end of the trap which appears to be solely for the purpose of carrying it. The trap is nicely balanced for transporting when held by the ring, and since the bait hook hangs in a contrary position with respect to the trap's tripping mechanism when thus suspended, this in practicality is its sole purpose.

Figure 5. Another view of the trap in the set position. The 4″x 8″ piece of wood in the center of the trap was inserted to prevent the trap from accidentally springing shut.

The existence of this trap only came to light in the past 5 years, when it was discovered in the rafters of a barn in Louisiana, where it had lain collecting dust and hidden from the outside world since before World War II. It then changed hands several times before this author became aware of and was able to acquire it for his collection, where it now rests comfortably and is done changing hands

Since this author was unfamiliar with the creature that this trap was designed for, I was quite perplexed as to what unfortunate victim so massive and formidable a metal killer trap as this could possibly have been intended for. Therefore, after dwelling on this matter for quite a while, and not arriving at what I thought was a reasonable target, I decided to consult many of the foremost experts in the field of antique metal traps and fishing tackle.

The nearly unanimous opinion, (which now includes that of the author's), was that this monstrous trap dates to about circa the 1920's and was designed to catch a huge, primitive, predatory fish that can be traced back in the fossil record to the early Cretaceous Age over 100 million years ago to a time when dinosaurs still roamed the earth. This fish is native to and still patrols the coastal and inland waters of the Gulf Coast of the United States and up the Mississippi drainage, and is namely an alligator gar, which can grow to over 10' in length and exceed 350 lbs! (Figure 5).

Figure 5. An alligator caught recently in the southern U.S.

These fish are really quite extraordinary. They can live in both fresh and brackish water, and can breathe both water and to some extent air. Their body is torpedo shaped and they have scales that are unlike those of most other fish, namely ganoid scales, which are enamel-like and very hard, diamond shaped, and often have serrated edges. Due to these unique characteristics, individual scales were sometimes used by early native americans in the south as arrowheads, while their tanned skins, which were nearly impregnable due to these scales, were sometimes used as protective breastplates.

Alligator gar have a long broad snout full of sharp teeth, and unlike other gar, have an upper jaw that exhibits a dual row of such teeth, which are used to impale and hold their prey, which is primarily fish, but also includes waterfowl and small mammals (Figures 6 and 7).

Figure 6. Jaws of an alligator gar

Due to this overall appearance, they quite closely resemble the American alligator (with fins instead of legs), and thus was derived their common name.

Figure 7. Alligator gar with its long snout full of teeth, a voracious predator.

Prior to the 1970's alligator gar were considered a nuisance species, or "trash fish", which were detrimental to sport fisheries and dangerous to humans, and were therefore targeted for elimination by individuals and both state and federal authorities. It was not until after that, with a better understanding of the interactions of living organisms, when it was realized that these fish were important to maintain a healthy balance in the ecosystem, and protections for them began to be put in place. In fact, alligator gar are now considered a very viable solution to controlling the epidemic numbers of asian carp (an invasive species of fish native to southeast Asia) in the upper Mississippi River drainage.

Should anyone have any information on this trap, its inventor or its history, or know of any other odd or unusual devises for grabbing and holding a fish, the author would very much appreciate being contacted. He may be reached by e-mail at bill@blauser.org or by phone at 412-373-8203.

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