

MUSKY LEGEND HOMER LeBLANC

He wrote the book on Lake St. Clair and the propwash trolling technique



By DON MILLER



The late Homer LeBlanc battles a musky on one of his last trips to the fabled Lake St. Claire

It was in the early 1980s when I first met Homer LeBlanc. Over the next decade, he became the best fishing comrade that any fisherman, pro or otherwise, would ever want to have as a mentor: "Mr. Muskie" himself. I was amazed at the thousands of antique lures, many pictures, and other fishing artifacts that gave a mute testimony of a restless, tinkering mind and of many years of fabled musky fishing on Lake St. Clair for big ones that didn't get away. His basement was literally a museum, and all who entered had to sign his visitors' book.

Author of a book entitled, *Muskie Fishing, Fact and Fancy, Lore and Lure* and characterized as Mr. Muskie throughout his career, Homer was constantly inventing and making lures to go musky fishing. He ran the state of Michigan's most successful charter boats and guided on them for over 30 years. He also had his complete, distinct line of tackle that he made and sold.

Homer may never have set the world's record for the largest catch, but no one disputes the fact that he caught the most. When I would ask him how many he caught, he would candidly reply, "Thousands."

Any musky fisherman would acknowledge that there aren't any bad muskies - small or large. On September 11, 1986, Homer was finally inducted into the National Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame. "Fish hard, and think like a musky" were Homer's fishing words of wisdom.

Born in Stoney Pointe, Ontario, along Lake St. Clair's shoreline on August 3, 1901, Homer began catching muskies when he was six years old while fishing with his grandfather. A jack of all trades, Homer worked as a carpenter, ran a laundromat, boxed as a prize fighter, and even sold eggs and butter until 1933 when he retired so he could make being a musky guide his primary profession.

PROPWASH TROLLING PIONEER

Before he made fishing his livelihood, Homer made frequent trips to Florida and noticed how the churning waters of the boat engines would attract fish. He then applied his theory of saltwater fishing to freshwater tactics, placing a bait right behind the boat for Lake St. Clair muskies. His theory was if muskies had no natural enemies that inhabit the water, why would they be afraid of a boat.

Homer set out in his first boat, which was 12 feet in size and had a 2 1/2 horsepower motor, purchased for a sum of \$40, to prove his theory. He hadn't traveled a mile on his first outing when he caught a musky right in the boat's propwash!

Once he was convinced that his theory was correct and muskies were fearless and didn't know what boats were, he perfected the Homer LeBlanc trolling setup on a 26-foot Chriscraft, his first professional boat. His design was such that you could fish eight rods off the boat while trolling. LeBlanc's theory was a stunning success, and he began to conduct seminars across the state of Michigan from sportsmen's clubs to school gymnasiums and marinas, where people would come to be instructed on how, what, when and where to catch muskies. However, his technique and tackle were often considered ridiculous by those uninitiated to the LeBlanc method of fishing.

More naive, yet somewhat more polite, neophytes considered the crusty old-timer's approach to catching musky illogical. In the end, neither group could refute his success. LeBlanc could produce hookups with big fish when everyone else on the lake was producing zeros.

From 1935 to 1940, Percy Haver was claiming sensational catches of muskies, but Homer never gave any credence to him because Haver was always fishing alone, or no one was around to observe him. Personally, LeBlanc never acknowledged Haver's records, which have since been proven to have been falsified.

The word was out in the early 1950s about Homer's success and the type of tackle he manufactured. Several tackle shops wanted his tackle, and nothing else would do. After a day's outing on the lake, Homer would come in and make more tackle and lures to wholesale to the local area tackle shops. It's a fact that because of supply and demand, the LeBlanc setup was often rented to an angler for \$2 (with a \$15 deposit) because Homer couldn't supply the requests fast enough.

Throughout his charter career, Homer taught thousands of people and fished with notables like former Michigan governor G. Mennen Williams, baseball great Ted Williams, Michigan Out-of Doors television host Mort Neff, and almost every major outdoor writer in the country.

TACKLE MANUFACTURING

Homer went into the tackle business in 1952 because he was dissatisfied with the musky lures that were on the market. He wanted a spoon that wouldn't twist the line and had better hooking qualities. He had some dies put together and developed the Swimm Zag spoon.

A couple years later, he developed the 4-B spinner, which was created because of lost muskies that would bite the wire shank and spinner blade, missing the hook with the bucktail on it. His 4-B spinner added an extra hook rolled in the wire with strung beads in front of the spinner blade, as well as the standard hook at the end of the spinner. The result was more fish to the boat and happier clients.

After years of carving his own wooden plugs, all without a metal lip, in 1958 Homer had an idea to produce a hard plastic lure that had the ability to dive deep without much weight. He named the lure the Swimm Whizz. His theory was that when a musky grabbed a Swimm Whizz the bait would slip through the musky's teeth for better hookups.

In 1969 and 1970, the mercury scare came to Lake St. Clair, and keeping fish from the lake was banned. The charter business slowed quite a bit. Having operated a charter fleet from 1940 until 1974, LeBlanc sold his last *Mr. Muskie* boat. However, he still guided by leasing other charter services several times a week. He was slower with his movements at this time but quick with wit and never forgot what it took to produce great catches.

Musky fishing was like a religion to LeBlanc, and one ritual that I recall was that Homer never went on a day's outing without saying the "Homer LeBlanc Musky Prayer." After Homer set the lines, he would make the day's fishing party take off their hats, place their right hands over their hearts, and either face St. Paul's Church in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, or St. Anthony's Church in Stoney Pointe, Ontario (whichever church the vessel was nearest), and repeat after him, "Dear Lord, may we catch a musky so big that when telling about it, we will have no need to lie. Bring us back safely with our limit of muskies each, especially since we are fishing with Homer LeBlanc tackle. Amen."

Homer always knew where he was on the lake and how deep the water was. LeBlanc had a sixth sense about him that never allowed him to be mistaken about his whereabouts on the water, regardless of weather conditions.

One particularly memorable time for me was while fishing with LeBlanc off the mouth of the Belle River and having a fairly fast morning, we boated six muskies. The afternoon was slow with no action. One member of the party spoke and said that we might as well go home - that we wouldn't catch another musky. Homer responded that we would catch another or he would go double or nothing on the day's fee. Homer turned to me and told me to "Get one" because I had watched him enough, and now it was my turn.

Talk about being under pressure. With literally minutes left in the day, I dug through every tackle box until I found my favorite Swimm Whizz lure. I placed it on a prop rod with 12 ounces of in-line weight and about 15 feet behind the boat. We were almost home when the reel began to spew out line and the party landed a 22-pound musky in front of Grosse Pointe! Deep down inside, I knew that if I couldn't get one for him then that I might never live it down or quit hearing about it. As it was, I never heard about it anymore, but there's definitely no pressure like being tested by the world's greatest musky master. I figure I must have passed his test because I never was told that I failed.

Some of Homer's wit will live forever in my memory like, "Old fishermen never die---they just smell that way." "Most fishing guides are bums--they'd rather fish than work." "Anyone can be a fishing guide--all you have to do is look like a bum and smell like a fish." "I never wanted to be a millionaire; I'd rather live like one."

Homer took his last outing on Lake St. Clair in June 1993 when three muskies were caught in about an hour and a half while aboard my boat with my mate Larry Ossenmacher and me. Homer requested to go home and while underway, he stated that this was his last trip.

One last practice that Homer always preached was not to "fish the bottom of the lake." He would say that muskies look up to see what they can eat, and their stomachs don't have eyes. A musky will come up after a bait and usually won't go down for it. So, keep the bait over their heads.

Homer's method, developed over 60 years ago, still outproduces most conventional methods today. His theory that you don't need to fish far behind the boat has never been disproved, and there isn't a musky boat in this part of the country that doesn't employ this method. A true sportsman and angler, Homer promoted catch and release, and his words still remain true: "If you want to catch a musky, you must think like a musky."

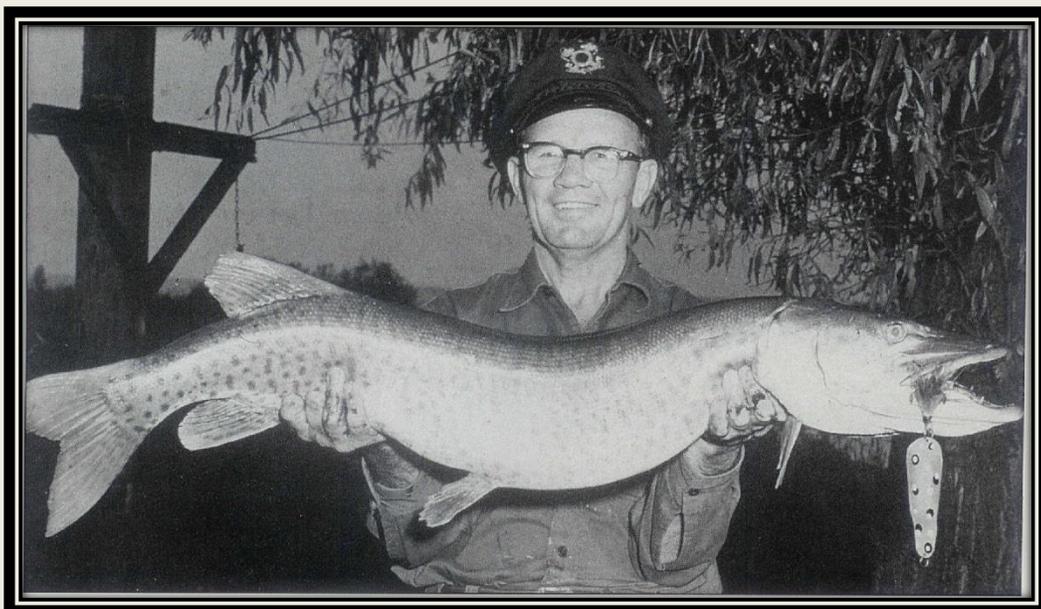
In fact, in 1956, Homer, Detroit News photographer Joe LaPage, and WJBK AM radio personality Tom George founded the Michigan-Ontario Muskie Club (MOMC), which is still active today. The club was formed to help interested anglers become more successful with documented records of caught and released muskies. The MOMC traditionally conducts monthly derbies from June through October.

The June derby is named in honor of LaPage and the July derby is named after LeBlanc. Today, an annual election of officers and board of directors, supported by a strong membership, have followed up on the preservation of muskies in southeastern Michigan. Strong conservation ethics begun by LeBlanc, LaPage, and George are continued by the current group and have helped increase the Lake St. Clair musky minimum size limit from 38 inches up to the present minimum size of 42 inches. Musky anglers who belong to the MOMC have even established a higher standard of 45 inches for all derby entries.

In July 1993, Homer suffered a stroke and recovered in time for a professional tournament named in his honor in September. By November he had a relapse and was released in the Good Lord's landing net on November 19. I'm sure he was judged big (and good) enough to keep!! However, at Lake St. Clair and throughout the musky world, his legend lives on.

Editor's Notes: This article is reproduced with the kind permission of the author, Captain Don Miller. He operates Motor City Muskies by Lake St. Clair, Detroit, Michigan, information on which can be seen on his web site, Miller's Sportsfishing Charters at www.motorcitymuskies.com.

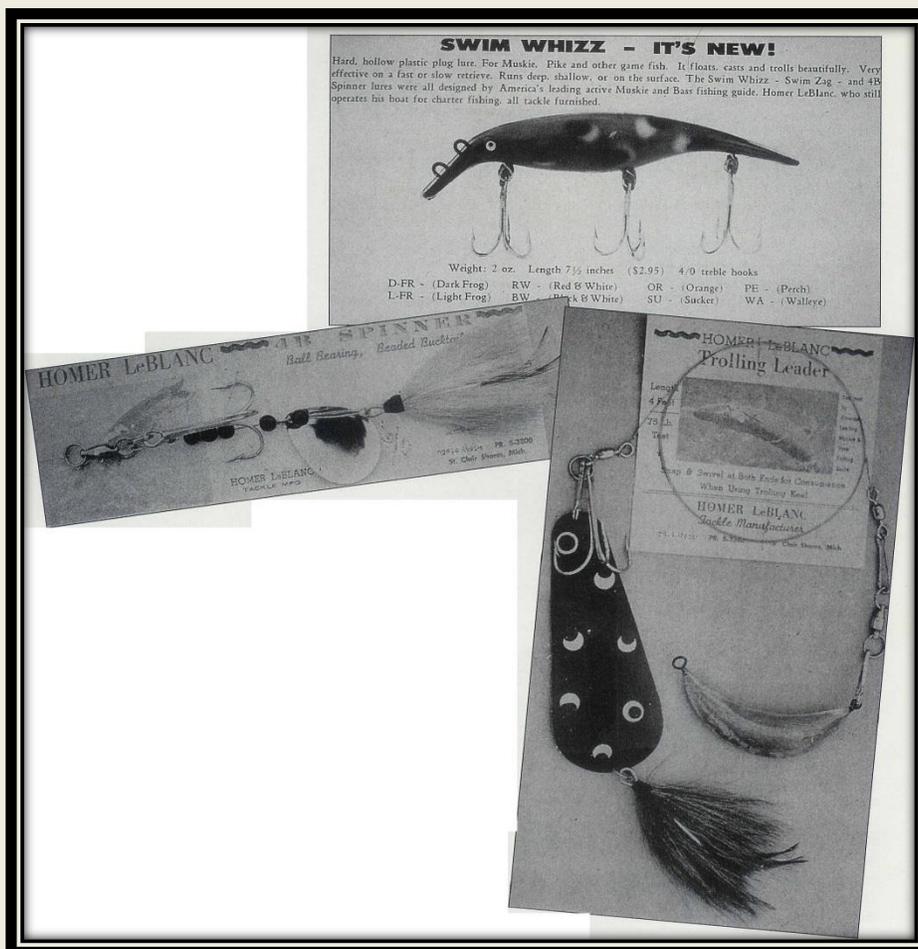
Captain Miller noted in his response to reproduce the article, "I was docked at his house (Homer's) for 10 years before his passing and knew Homer as much more than a fishing comrade. I was the MC at his 50th wedding anniversary, was a pallbearer, and gave the eulogy at his service."



Homer LeBlanc in his younger days, holding a good fish caught on his Swimm Zag spoon.



Homer LeBlanc conducts a seminar about his trolling technique from the back of his ChrisCraft at a marina.



Homer's lures – Swimm Whizz (top); the 4-B Spinner (above) and the Swimm Zag Spoon (right)

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