

ICE-FISHING WITH THE JIG STICK;

A TRADITION OF IMPROVISATION

Paul C. Randall  
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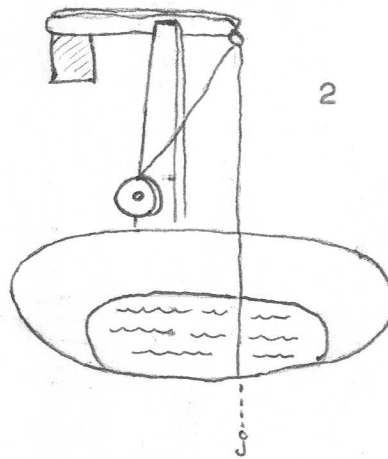
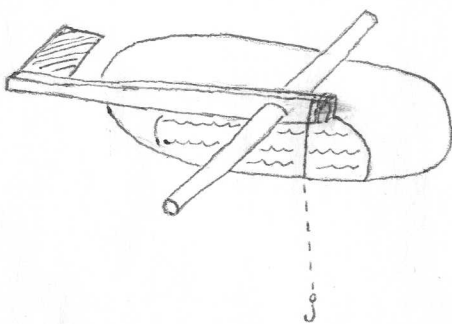
Ice-fishing is a popular winter activity in the colder areas of the country. Interest in fishing is often passed down and generated in a family, from father to son (daughter), just like many other hobbies and interests. Ice-fishing has become a fun sport, often combined with cross-country skiing, skating, skimobiling, and general socializing. However, the sport dates back to when fish was an important supplement to the winter's diet, when fresh foods were not available in the winter. The fishing tackle necessary for angling through the ice is different from that used in the summer, both in design and application. Since the majority of anglers has always tended to put away their rods in the fall to wait until spring, very little ice-fishing tackle has ever been manufactured. The ice-fisherman always had to use his own ingenuity and skill in crafting his tackle.

There are many methods of ice-fishing, some dating quite far back. One of the oldest is catching fish by spearing. George Mead described meeting an ice-fisherman in 1815. While skating on Lake Simcoe, Ontario, he saw, "what appeared to be a mound of earth. As I approached, I thought I perceived it move a little. I stood for some seconds wondering what I should do, and had almost determined to go home for my gun when I saw the hide which caused all my speculation thrown suddenly aside to make way for the head and shoulders of an Indian. He had so completely enveloped himself in a large buffalo skin that no part of his head, body, hands or feet were to be discovered. He sat over a square hole cut in the ice, with a short spear ready to transfix any fish which might be attracted to his bait...an artificial fish of white wood with leaden eyes and tin fins..."<sup>1</sup>

Spearing is still practiced by some anglers, but it is not as common as it once was. In order to spear fish through the ice, one must have a relatively large hole, and it must be covered with a tent to shut out the light, so to be able to see below the ice.

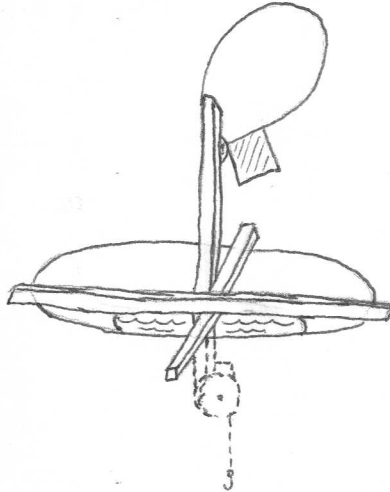
Doubtlessly, George Mead's Indian was not just staying warm under his buffalo skin, but was also using it to block out light around the hole. A decoy, either a live sucker or an artificial one, is used to lure the gamefish into striking range. Coarse fish, such as carp, catfish, or (earlier) sturgeon are most often caught by spearing, but virtually any species of fish can be caught this way.

Because of the nature of ice-fishing, which involves cutting a hole in a stationary ice cap, devices to catch fish may be left in place on the ice relatively unattended. A very popular method of fishing is by using the "tip-up" or "trap". The modern device is neither a fish trap or anything that tips up, but is so named because it originally consisted of a mechanism which would become unbalanced by the tug of a fish on the line and tip a small signal flag upwards. These early inventions tended to freeze in holes, and needed constant attention to keep free from ice.



Modern science has developed a trap which holds the reel underwater, keeping it from freezing. When a fish pulls the line, it turns the reel, which trips a spring-mounted flag above the water. The modern trap has two advantages over the older styles; (1) The line

won't freeze, even if the hole glazes over; (2) The fish can run with the line without feeling any drag until the fisherman decides to set the hook and pull him in. These can be bought in sporting goods stores from about two dollars for cheap wooden models to 15 dollars for all-metal tripod-mounted traps.



Perhaps the most popular and most productive method of ice-fishing is jigging. It is known by different names in different places, but is generally called "jigging," "chugging," or "jacking." According to Henry F. Zeman, "chugging is the verticle manipulation of a pole over deep water and is accomplished by using a sharp twitch-and-settle routine."<sup>4</sup> Jigging is usually thought of in the context of deep-sea ocean fishing, but a frozen lake leaves few options but to fish vertically; one cannot cast a lure out and reel it back in across the surface. Until very recently, commercial manufacturers have not come out with many products for the jig fisherman, and the angler has always had to be creative when assembling his tackle. The basic components needed are the fishing line, something to store it on, and a lure or bait to attract the fish. This very broad base has left a lot of room for personal initiative.

The lure, a jig, is used much like someone would dance a jig,

wobbling up and down. It is designed to attract fish by flash and flutter, and may have hooks on it, or have baited hooks tied off above or below it. The means of storing line, known as a "jig stick," is traditionally made at home. The jig stick can be as complex or as simple as the designer wants. In the months after open-water season ends, before lakes freeze in January, there is plenty of time for the fisherman to design some very intricate jig sticks. It is often made from an old fishing rod, shortened, and fixed to a handle. I made a jig stick from the tip of a cheap solid fiberglass rod, glued to a cork handle, with a summer-type spinning reel mounted on it. Henry F. Zeman describes his homemade stick.

"The handle is a foot-long piece of wood upon which I glued a fly-rod reel seat. On this seat is an enclosed spinning reel with about 100 yards of 15 pound test mono. The pole is a surplus midsection of a bamboo fly-rod, complete with guides; this is glued into the wood handle."<sup>5</sup>

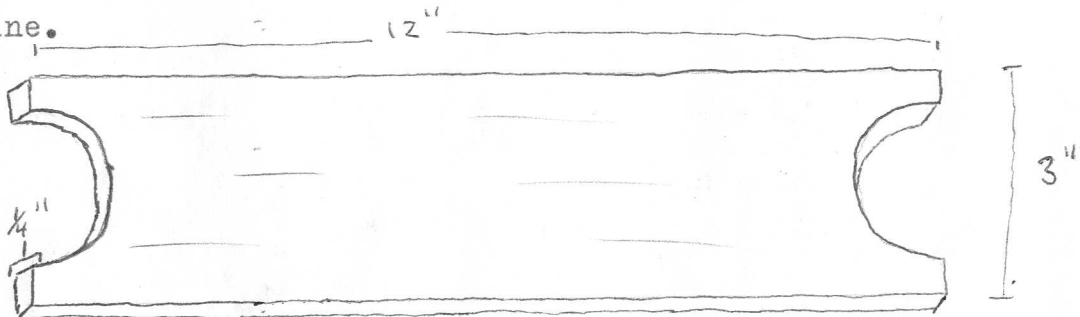
Dwight R. Schuh explains how he made his sticks. "I made ice-fishing rods by gluing spinning rod tips inside old cork grips."<sup>6</sup>

In an article covering the fundamentals of ice-fishing, Ron Schara writes that,

"Tackle may range from a simple spool of monofilament with hook and sinker to a wood or metal 'stick' with pegs for line storage... a favorite among many panfisherman is a rod which consists of a short, 12-inch or so, rod tip with a wooden handle. The glass rod tip provides a little action for jogging or bouncing the bait... a pair of pegs on the wood handle serve to store line. You don't need a reel for panfish since the retrieve is best made in the old-fashioned hand-over-hand method."<sup>7</sup>

The reason that jig sticks are always cut off so short is that it enables the fisherman to stand right next to the hole, thereby giving him better control over his jig. The problem with sticks made of old rods is that they are often too light to be used for heavy jigs in deep water, and reels designed and made for summer use can become gummed with the cold or jammed with ice and snow, rendering

them useless in the winter, and damaging them for their intended summer use. Since most fish caught through the ice are handlined anyway, a reel is not necessary. A much simpler jig stick is therefore often preferred by the ice-fisherman. Almost any simple stick with the line wrapped around it will do, but there are some patterns that are common. I have fished with a certain pattern, and seen others using this same style, with slight variations. The jig stick I used was very simple, about 12 inches long, three inches wide, and 1/4 inch thick. It had very widely notched ends to hold the line.

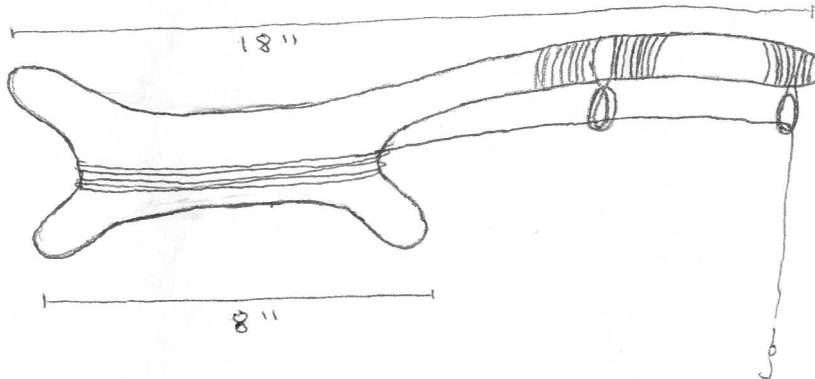


The stick can be made out of any wood, usually scrap from the workshop, but hardwood is preferred because it is more solid and durable. The 12 inch length makes it handy for accurate depth measurements in feet. To work the jig stick, the jig is tied to the end of the line, which is lowered to the desired depth. By holding the end of the stick, the fisherman can jerk the jig up and down, creating the correct action.

Mr. Bob Bearor, who lives in the rural town of Chittenden, Vermont, has developed this basic but effective jig stick into a handcrafted piece of art, sort of combining the simple style of the crude wooden stick with the fancy technology of cut-up fly rods and complicated reels. Mr. Bearor's jig sticks are artistically crafted, and emphasise the beauty of the wood they are made of. The hand-wrapped guides, or "eyes," add to the beauty of the stick,

rather than detract from it.

The jig sticks are 16 to 18 inches long, made of hardwood. They consist of a handle and a rod section. The handle also holds the line, and is about eight inches long, with two deeply notched ends. The stick extends like a rod for another ten inches, upon which the two eyes are wrapped with thread.



To make the stick, the pattern is first drawn out on a board, at least 20 inches long by five inches wide by 3/4 inches thick. It is then cut out with a band saw, and planed down a little thinner. The stick is locked in a wood vice, and the edges rounded with a wood rasp, taking care not to get the wood too rough. It is then worked on with emery cloth or sand paper untill it is smooth. The eyes are made by bending copper wire and attached by winding with thread. Mr. Bearor uses nylon thread designed for rod wrapping. The pattern and color is selected to best suit the shade of wood used. The finished stick is varnished with many coats, to protect the wood and windings from wear and water. The finished product is a masterpiece of balance and art, in which the grain and color of the wood are matched by the attractive windings.

I asked Mr. Bearor if he had ever seen any other jig sticks like his. He responded that he had seen short ones and straight ones,

but none like his, with a similar curve or length. His early sticks were thick and crude, not well balanced, and built purely for function and not for beauty. They were straight and the guides were crudely wrapped. From this pattern, he developed the idea by himself, slowly improving it until he got to his present pattern. He is now trying to make a jig stick from every hardwood available, from all over the world. His sticks are made from butternut, ironwood, padauk, zebrawood, mahogany, black walnut, ash elm, maple, rosewood, and many more. He is also making an attractive laminated stick of several alternating light and dark woods. Mr. Bearor found it very difficult to estimate how long it took to construct each stick. "No two are made the same- the basic wood is there, but it all depends on how hard the wood is!" He could only come up with a rough guess of 25 hours for each piece for the painstaking process. He added that one of the most heartbreaking things that can happen is to get 90% finished, and have the thin neck section break.

Mr. Bearor does not market his jig sticks. Some people have suggested that he take them to the Orvis Co. in Manchester, Vt., a manufacturer and marketer of fine sporting goods, and see if they will sell them. But Bearor says, "the hobby's gone once you start selling them!" He is not interested in producing masses of his craft, but rather wants to maintain the results of careful attention to each individual piece.

However, his jig sticks are not just for show. He actively uses them with success in the winter, and also some of his immediate friends and family use the sticks. Mr. Bearor was born and raised in Vermont, and has ice-fished since he was a little boy. He fishes



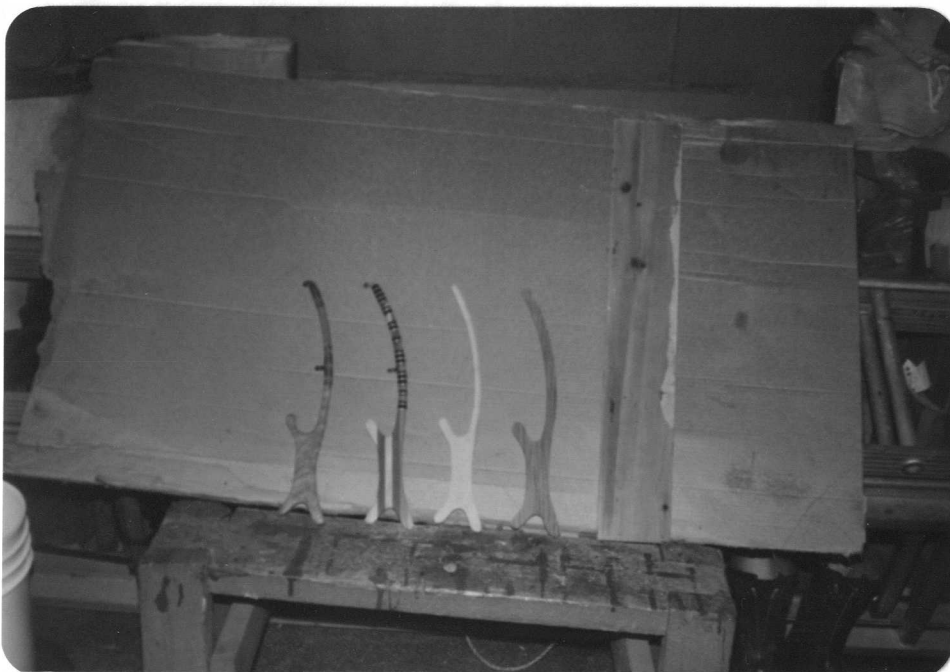
all over Vermont, notably in Kellogg's Bay on Lake Champlain. Although he also uses tip-ups to ice-fish, he says that "jigging is the only real way to fish." Jigging involves a lot of technique and also allot of personal experience and feel for what one is doing. It must be more than "a verticle manipulation of a pole over deep water."<sup>8</sup> The bait or lure and its depth and location must be constantly varied. An experienced jigger will catch more fish than an inexperienced one, even in the same hole. To illustrate this, Mr. Bearor says that he can catch 200 fish to one of his buddie's 20. He does it, he says, by varying the depth at which he is jigging, and by moving often. Since many fish, especially perch, travel in schools, fishing at one hole may be hot for a brief time, untill the small school is fished out. Then one must move on to a new hole.

Ice-fishermen use a variety of lines and terminal tackle with their jig sticks. Mr. Bearor uses nylon monofilament line on his sticks, because a lot of mono can be wound on the handle. One needs at least enough line to hit bottom (over 100 feet in some of the bays on Lake Champlain) plus enough line to play a large fish. Some fishermen use braided nylon or cotton line, which has the advantage of being easier to handle, but it absorbs water and freezes. Mr. Bearor showed me the jig he uses for ice-fishing. It consists of a flashy, heavy metal attractor and two hooks, one attached to the line above the metal jig, and one below. He uses perch eyes

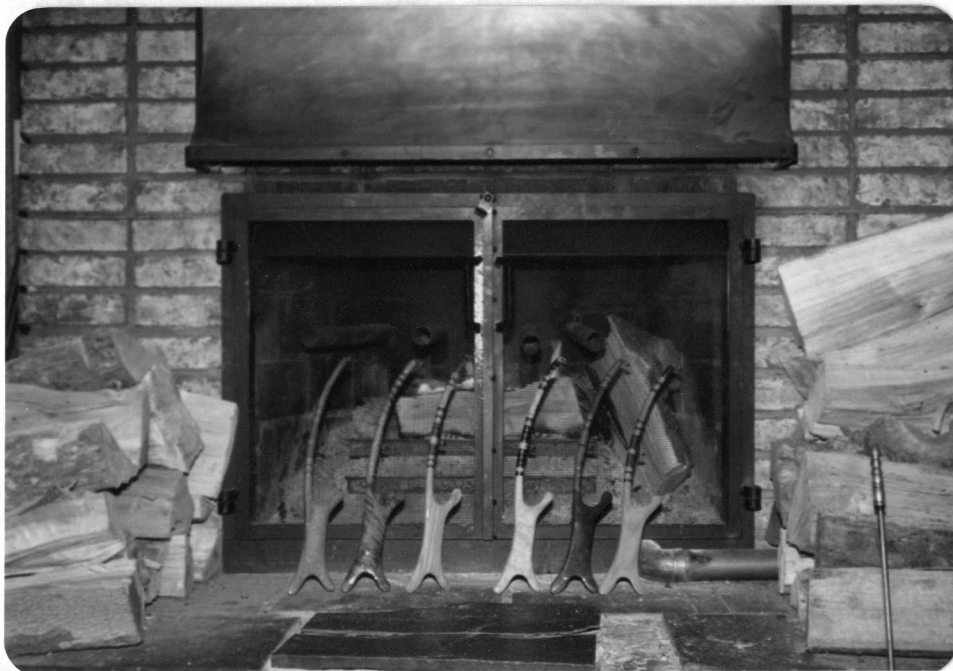
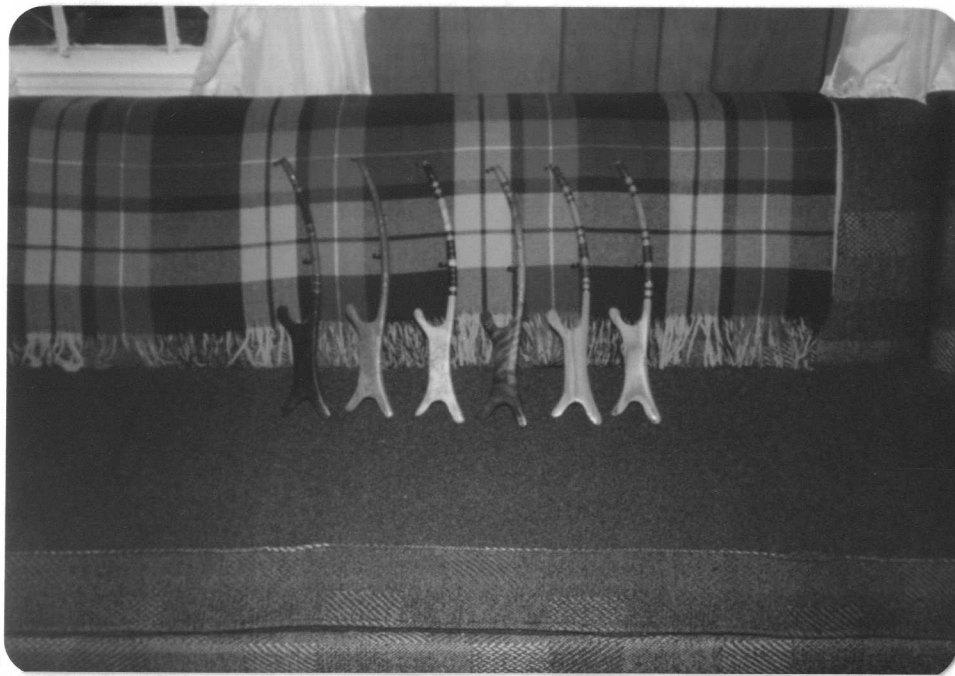


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These two pictures depict the different stages in the construction of the jig stick, from the raw board to the finished product. Second from the left is an unfinished stick made of laminated strips of different hardwoods.



These pictures display a variety of finished jig sticks.  
Note the differences in grain pattern and texture, and in the windings.

1. Jerry Chia  
(Harrisburg:
2. ibid. p. 2
3. ibid. p. 2
4. Henry F. Z  
Field and Str
5. ibid.
6. Dwight R.  
Outdoor Life
7. Ron Schara  
Sports Afiel
8. loc. cit.

Chiappetta, Jerry  
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Zeman, Henry F.  
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Nansen, Charles  
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