

#13 (Towel)
H.

Chuck Cooper's Big Moe

As soon as the first campfire in 1958 when Charles (Chuck) Cooper told his first story he was installed as the master and all others were amateurs. He had only heard some stories about Big Moe so to meet the challenge he told the following version.

One of the first years of Camp Waupaca a camper caught a small snapping turtle. The boy who caught it called it Moe. It was kept in a wash tub with water and fed small fish that the campers caught in the lake. During the summer the turtle grew, but it clearly was not a happy camper. It tried to escape many times and hissed and snapped at anyone who put a stick in the tub. The boy who captured the turtle was proud of it and wanted to take his prize home. Skipper would not allow any camper to take any animal home. The boy was determined that he would find and capture the turtle the next year and carved an "M" into its shell so that he would be able to identify it.

All fall, winter and spring the turtle grew. The next summer before the camp opened the counselors brought the boats out of storage and put them in the water. To make sure that the caulking was still tight they had to test the boats.

Herb Beller put oars in a boat and rowed out to test it. About half way across the lake the right oar struck something. As he looked toward the oar, he saw a large dark round shadow. Then a head as big as his fist emerged from the water. There was a loud crunch and the end of the oar floated away. Moe was now Big Moe and he was out to seek revenge for being kept in captivity. With just one oar Herb could only row in a circle and shout for help.

Berry Shanoff was just getting ready to shove off from shore in another boat. Hearing Herb's shouts he rushed to the aid of his friend. As he approached Herb there was a tough and a loud crunch. One of his oars was snapped in half. Now each of the boats was circling in the lake. They continued to circle until the two boats circled together. Fastening the boats together with a piece of rope that was in one of the boats, they were able to escape and row back to shore.

Few counselors believed their story. They looked at the broken oars and declared that they had rotted over the winter and broke from the strain of use. Many of the counselors laughed and made jokes about a turtle that could break an oar in half.

An afternoon breeze came up and Terry Rifkin decided to test the sail boat. The sail quickly filled and the boat moved silently across the water. Then with the sail still full, the boat stopped. For a moment it stood still. The wind pushing the sail failed to move the boat forward. The rudder moved free. Terry checked the keel board. It was stuck as if it had run aground. It would not move. Terry

looked over the edge to see if he had hit an uncharted sand bar in the middle of the lake. No, the water was at least 20 feet deep there. As he was trying to figure out what was happening the boat began to move backward. It was moving into the wind!

Terrified Terry yelled out for assistance. A couple of the counselors on shore heard him and looked in his direction. They had never seen a sail boat move against the wind before. They stared at this strange sight, not believing what they saw. "It must be some kind of strange current moving that boat" one of them said. As they did not know what to do they stood and watched.

The sail boat made a dip so that it looked as if it would tip over, then righted itself and began to move forward again. As Terry again took control of the boat he saw a dark round shape emerge in the water. It was a huge turtle. Although some doubted him, he swore that there was an "M" on its back.

Nate Metzker was getting his canoes ready for the season. Nate taught canoeing and wanted to practice his "J" stroke a little before the camping season was to begin. He decided to canoe around the lake and then across it. Again near the middle of the lake a strange thing happened. A rope that was tied to the front of the canoe suddenly tightened as if it had caught on something. The canoe stopped moving forward and began to circle. Nate paddled as hard as he could, but it was no use. Something was controlling his canoe. There was nothing he could do except hang on as the canoe circled faster and faster. Then as suddenly as his strange trip began it ended. Rising in front of his canoe was a dark round shape. He saw a huge snapping turtle with an "M" marked on its back.

"Not another turtle story!" the counselors said. "You waterfront men have spent too much time in the sun." Those who had not had a strange experience on the lake could not be convinced that Big Moe existed.

"All counselors to the water front for swim tests at one o'clock today," Dan Martin announced at lunch. "Anyone who fails the test will not be allowed to use the beach and must wear a life jacket at all times when in a boat." All the counselors were on time and the tests began. "The test for deep water swimming is five times to the raft and back," Dan said. The tests began. And all went well until Harry Mendelson shouted, "Something is pulling on my swim suit. " The counselors all laughed until Harry, minus his swim suit climbed onto the raft. As he tried to cover himself, a large dark round shape rose from the water with a swim suit. It was a huge snapping turtle with a red swim suit in its mouth. It raised its head out of the water as if was waving a red flag. The counselors on the dock could clearly see an "M" carved on its back.

Did the turtle know that a red flag means danger?

The turtle circled the raft twice waving the swim trunks as if to tease Harry who was shouting for a towel and a rescue. Finally it dove and disappeared into the water. The shocked counselors refused to continue the testing for the rest of the day.

At a meeting that night it was decided that the water front would have to be closed until something could be done about the turtle. It was decided that a steel net might be used to capture it and get it out of the lake. The next day a steel net was borrowed from the DNR and the counselors in row boats began to drag for Big Moe. It was the kind of net they use to capture bears. There were no doubters anymore. At last there was a tug on the net. The counselors began to pull up the net. The weight was so heavy that the boats nearly capsized as they pulled. Then all at once the weight left the net and those who were pulling the hardest were flung into the water. When the net was pulled up a huge hole had been torn into it. Big Moe had escaped.

What could they do with the terror of Lake Stratton on the loose? Would anyone be safe to use the lake again?

An old Turtle Trapper by the name of Hank Sutter was called in. He listened quietly to the tales he heard. "Boys," he said, "You got yourselves a real corker. This here one is too big ta trap, so you got to live with 'im. Make a peace with him. What he wants is fish ta eat and be left alone. Start with a pit not to far from the lake and put the small fish you catch in it and don't do nothing ta disrupt him an you'll be just fine." So a fish pit was dug to the side of the beach and a number of small fish were caught and put in it. That night they disappeared.

Big Moe is still seen from time to time in the lake. Don't try to catch him. Don't try to hit him or bother him in anyway and he will not bother you. When you catch small fish put them in the pit. That way we can all enjoy the lake.