

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Dempsey E. Wood (Part 4)

Possibly the most passionate sportsman of his generation, Bucklesberrian Dempsey Eugene Wood (1847-1921) enjoyed outdoor recreation. He dabbled in horse racing and hunted frequently, but he may have loved fishing the most.

Many of the more than 175 available news reports published about Dempsey had to do with fishing. Regarded as a champion, veteran fisherman, Dempsey was a seasoned angler by the late-1800s. He drew attention from reporters and the community alike for his big catches:

1898, April 22: "Mess. W. L. Kennedy and Dempsey Wood returned today from a fishing trip to New River, in Onslow County. They had fine sport, catching between fifty and sixty chubs and jacks." (*The Daily Free Press*, Kinston)

1899, May 19: "Fish appear to be biting in great shape at Morehead [City] at present, judging from the reports of big catches made by amateur fishermen there this week....Messrs. Dempsey Wood and W. L. Kennedy on Thursday caught six hundred pounds of bluefish and Spanish mackerel with hooks and lines. The sport must be fine indeed, and fishing parties from all parts of the State to the famous resort will soon be all the go." (*The Morning Post*, Raleigh)

1899, June 28: "Dempsey Wood, of Lenoir County, was here today and says the fishing on the coast is equal to the best in 20 years, and that at Beaufort yesterday two gentlemen caught, with trolling lines, 200 Spanish mackerel." (*The Charlotte Observer*)

Not all of Dempsey's fishing trips resulted in big catches, however. Sometimes he came home empty-handed:

1894, May 31: "Mr. and Mrs. W. L. Kennedy, Mrs. Matthew Wooten, and Messrs. W. S. Herbert and Dempsey Wood of Lenoir County who went down to Morehead [City] for a day's fishing returned home yesterday from an unsuccessful trip—the rain broke up the sport they expected to have...." (*New Berne Weekly Journal*)

Whether all of Dempsey's exorbitant catches really happened is questionable. A couple of reports suggested his big catches may have been nothing more than big fish stories:

1885, August 16: "The biggest chub fish, or the biggest fish story we have heard of this season was the one hung by Dempsey Wood while 'bobbing' in Bear Creek a few days ago. His

companion, Junius [Eli] Sutton, declared his [the fish's] mouth to be large enough to take in his [Junius'] hat. This was told by Dempsey himself." (*The Daily Journal*, New Bern)

1898, May 20: "Mess. W. L. Kennedy, Dempsey Wood, John F. Mewborne and Charles F. Harvey, returned from Morehead [City] this morning. They say they caught between 90 and 100 fish of various kinds. Mess. Mewborne and Harvey brought ten or twelve to Kinston and said a box full was taken to Falling Creek by Mess. Kennedy and Wood. Notwithstanding the small number of fish shown, we accept as true Mess. Mewborne and Harvey's statements about their trip, even though they are fishermen...." (*The Daily Free Press*, Kinston)

Dempsey often fished with others, including State dignitaries. An elected congressman himself, Dempsey joined the Governor on one fishing trip:

1895, July 24: "Mr. Dempsey Wood, of Falling Creek, passed Tuesday en route to Morehead [City] to tackle the fish which are now biting so finely there. He informs us that Mr. W. L. Kennedy and Gov. [Elias] Carr caught seventy sheepshead Monday." (*The Daily Journal*, New Bern)

After the turn of the century, Dempsey continued to haul in big catches. Occasionally, he came across other animals and reptiles while on fishing trips, the focus of next week's Bucklesberry article.