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Review: Fishing Yesterday's Gulf Coast by Legendary Guide Barney Farley

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BOOK REVIEWS

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Fishing Yesterday's Gulf Coast by Legendary Guide Barney Farley. 2002. Introduction by Larry McEachron. Foreword by George S. Hawn. Number Three: Gulf Coast Studies, sponsored by Texas A&M University—Corpus Christi. 168. pp. ISBN 1-58544-165-1. Price: \$22.95.

This book is a compilation of the writings of professional fisherman and fishing guide, Mr. Barney Farley, who lived and fished, one might say fished to live, on the south Texas coast during the first 6 decades of the 20th century. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of this book is the opportunity readers get to share the passion of a man who was able to make a living doing what he loved best, fishing. Farley's prose is straightforward and concise, and although he declares at one point that he is not a writer, the entertaining and insightful narratives in this book belie that claim. The book is artfully illustrated with vintage postcards and snapshots that set the nostalgic mood of this work. Each of the 24 short chapters is a separate story in which Farley masterfully weaves technical fishing advice, observations on the natural world, fishing lore and philosophy. The only criticism I have regarding this collection of stories is the order in which they are presented. The first chapter and, in my opinion one of the best, takes place in 1937, when Farley was the guide for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's tarpon fishing trip off Port Aransas. Chapters 2, 4, and 7 were written in the 1960s, whereas all other chapters cover events that took place in earlier decades. I think a more coherent presentation of Farley's writings would have resulted from a strict chronological order starting with the earliest stories and finishing with his most recent narratives and reflections. Many of the chapters begin with specific details about bait, tackle, and the proper techniques used to catch a particular species and end in a delightful fishing tale. Farley was, if nothing else, a sportsman who truly enjoyed the challenge of catching fish on the lightest tackle possible, including fly-fishing gear. He obviously valued and consulted technical sources as evidenced by the inclusion of scientific data and information on various life history traits in many chapters.

Chapter 2, "The Truth About Fishing and How We Can Improve It," written in 1963, is almost painful to read because this perceptive fisherman, anticipating the demise of a way of life, appeals for regulations not only on fishing practices but also on industrial pollution. Farley correctly recognized many of the causes for declining fish populations, principal among them being human greed and conceded that "nature can't take care of itself" as his contemporaries would say. It is undeniable that even Farley, in his younger years, unwittingly contributed to the problem. This is poignantly demonstrated in Chapter 20, "Other Fish in the Sea," as Farley describes catching all 32 ling (cobia) congregated around a buoy. Four decades later numerous fisheries have collapsed or are collapsing, whereas others have recovered or are recovering. A multitude of state and federal laws have been enacted to conserve and manage marine resources. New fishing regulations are put in place each year in attempts to rebuild decimated fish stocks and protect essential habitats. Yet the need for more complex and creative management measures such as marine protected areas and sanctuaries is being challenged and definitions of overfishing thresholds and stock rebuilding plans are being debated. I wonder what Barney Farley would say now?

There is a certain allure associated with fishing, a mystique, whether the fisher uses a net, a fly rod, or any gear in between. *Fishing Yesterday's Gulf Coast* is an enjoyable yet serious little book that will appeal to both fanatical and casual fishers alike, not only along the Texas coast but throughout the Gulf of Mexico and U.S. eastern seaboard, where many of the same species and habitats can be found. Despite the lingering impression they give you of what has been lost, perhaps irretrievably so, these stories about fishing for the joy of it are the next best thing to a day out on the water. You can almost hear laughing gulls and terns overhead; feel warm Gulf breezes on your cheek; and, most importantly, sense a tug on your line!

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