A Fisherman's Friendship

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"Hey, Kansas!" the old fisherman said after taking the pipe out of his mouth and tapping out some of the ashes. "If you're gonna do much good in this lake, you better throw away that stringer and get one of these buckets."

"Not with what I caught," I laughed. "What are you fishing for?"

My license plate had given away my 500-mile trek from Northern Kansas to Western Oklahoma, back to my Caddo County roots. An avid fisherman, I didn't waste much time discovering the lakes. Both Chickasha Lake and Fort Cobb Lake were just fifteen minutes from my driveway. The lakes were beautiful—flowing with blue, clear water; they almost begged to be fished.

It must have been the last of September or early October when I first met him; I can remember the nippishness in the air and the wind out of the north. My dog and I had fought the Fort Cobb Dam for nearly three hours and had come up with only a half dozen or so small bass and a few perch, none of them keepers. Frustrated, I was calling it a day.


Sandbass. A fish biologist in Kansas had warned me about the regional name for white bass here in Oklahoma, and I had heard that Fort Cobb Lake teemed with "sandies"—an angler's delight. I smiled and moved on down closer. A good fisherman will heed the advice of the oldtimers who line the banks of their fishing holes. Another old codger was fishing a little farther down, oblivious of anyone around as I approached. He too had five-gallon bucket at his side.

"What's wrong with this stringer?" I asked as I held it up.

"Sandbass don't usually bite until about sundown. If you really get into them, you don't want to waste time puttin' 'em on a stringer. Just throw 'em in a bucket and get your jig out again. Wait around. We might get into a few."

"Naw," I said. "I think I'll call it a day."

The old man reached out his hand, and I took it. Shaking my hand vigorously, he introduced himself. "Don Jones," he said. "Most folks 'round here call me 'Jones'. I live down there at the Ski Boy Drive-in. I own the place. You ought to stop in sometime; the food is good."

I introduced myself and bade both fishermen adieu.

Friendships are great, but there's something about a fisherman's friendship. Jones' friendship was special. He taught me all about fishing the Fort Cobb Dam—how to catch the fish, when to get out there, when to give up. He even taught me about life.

"Can you think of a better place to be than here, Kansas?" he would ask after an hour of less than productive fishing. "Best place in the world to unwind. Draws you closer to God."

Of course he was correct, and almost any day when the weather was bad, I could be assured that ol' Jones was out there fighting the wind off the riprap near the east end of the dam, fishing for sandies. It was an unannounced meeting place for us—a place where we could relax and jaw a little. Jones came from Rocky, once the basketball capital of Western Oklahoma, but now he passed his time operating a small ice-cream shop and fishing Fort Cobb Lake.

"Kansas," he would say. "If you ever want to get a reputation as a good fisherman, never tell anybody about the times you were skunked!" Good advice for fishermen and non-fishermen alike, but that's not all he taught me.

With ol' man Jones, fishing wasn't competitive, though often he would act as if it were.

"When you caught that first bass," he would say, "it didn't make me mad—just made me want to fish a little harder. But when you caught that second one, now that hacked me off!"

Fishing on Fort Cobb Lake had a halcyon effect on troubled minds, especially when the fish were biting. One evening I took a fifth grader who was having difficulty accepting his parents' divorce out to the dam to catch a few sandies and forget about the trials of familial turmoil. The fish were biting.

Jones was catching them one after the other, and I was humping it to keep up with him.

Design by Bryce Brimer
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"I keep getting bites, but I can't catch any," the lad complained urgently after fifteen minutes without a fish.

"Just keep your jig out there and you'll catch one pretty soon," I yelled excitedly, not wanting to lose any fishing time by checking the boy's line and letting the old master fisherman put it on my head.

Quickly Jones laid down his rod and took the youngster's out of the water as I kept on fishing.

"Hoss," the old fisherman said loudly as he examined the boy's jig, "you need to go home and tell your momma on Mr. Hill. This jig doesn't have a hook on it. Mr. Hill sure didn't want you to catch many fish when he gave you this reel!" Then he stopped examining the jig and looked at me. "Mr. Hill, you should be ashamed!" I was.

"When you caught that first bass, it didn't make me mad—just made me want to fish a little harder. But when you caught that second one, now that hacked me off!"

Embarrassed and humbled, I took time out to put an artificial bait on my friend's line and waited meekly for him to catch his first fish. Mr. Jones always took out a little time for others, no matter how good the going was or how bad.

One late winter day when the wind was just right, I stopped by to pick him up. O'Jones partially blocked the door and didn't invite me in. I knew something was wrong.

"Ah," he said with a quiver in his voice that was uncharacteristic of his nearly seventy years of fishing. "I just haven't felt like fishing too much since the woman died." He swallowed deeply and bravely fought back the tears.

I was crushed and speechless. I tried to offer him an apology. Stunned, I drove down to the lake and stared at the water lapping against the rocks. It was useless. I had lost any mood to fish. I found myself driving back home without wetting a hook. It just wasn't the same.

Oh, I did see him out there a few times after that and even fished with him some, but things were different. His smile wasn't as ready, and the loss of his mate seemed to have robbed the old fisherman of his wisdom and humor. No, he just wasn't the same.

One spring day nearly a year later, I was doing the school crosswalk when I spotted of man Jones' son. "I gotta get over there and go fishin' with Mr. Jones," I said.

"Well, it'll be a while," his son broke the news to me. "Dad had a stroke. Bad one. It's not likely he'll ever go fishing again."

I was dazed. The cars blurred as my head spun and I fought back tears. I felt like going home—a semi-state of depression set in. Was my ten years of fisherman friendship over? Could I ever fish Fort Cobb Lake again?

It was my honor to serve as a pallbearer at Mr. Jones' funeral not long after I talked with his son. The preacher talked about fishing and being a part of nature as I wiped the tears away. My mind flashed back to bygone fishing experiences; those days were over for good.

But now, when I'm found fishing along the Fort Cobb Dam, most assuredly my thoughts go back to a better time—a time when ol' man Jones and I shared a fisherman's tale and a fisherman's friendship. Yes, those times are gone. But I'm sure as long as that dam beckons fishermen, it will spawn new friendships. After all, fisherman friendships are eternal.