

Record walleye catch commemorated at Rock Island

BY **JASON MILLER & DAMON GRAHAM**
Park rangers

On a bitter cold January morning in 1957, Bennie "Buck" Bryant set a new U.S. record when he landed a massive 21-pound, 4-ounce walleye while fishing with a friend at a little-known sand beach on the upper reaches of Center Hill Lake.

That beach and the 883 acres surrounding it would, a few years later, become the beginnings of an oft-utilized and much-beloved public resource with official establishment of Rock Island State Park in 1969.

For decades, a common skin mount of the famous fish had periodically been loaned to the park by the Bryant family, where visitors from around the country would gawk at its unbelievable size and inquire about the fish and the story behind it.

With the 60th anniversary of the record catch occurring last year, Rock Island park rangers moved to have a durable fiberglass replica of the record fish constructed so the original mount

could be returned to the Bryants. This would allow the public to still be able to learn about Rock Island's unique place in freshwater fishing lore, while protecting the original catch.

"That fish is a big part of Rock Island history," said park manager Damon Graham. "The common skin mount won't last forever, and they also don't do very well when being handled by the general public on a daily basis. We concluded the best option would be to have a museum-quality replica made so we could still educate the public and ensure the epic fish tale lives on. This also would allow us to return the original to Mr. Bryant to ensure his fish doesn't get damaged."

Bryant, a lifelong resident of the area who still resides in Van Buren County, now 84, says he began fishing at age 3. By the time he was a young man, he had begun targeting large fish in the general area where the record walleye was eventually landed.

"In those days there wasn't any park here," Bryant said in talking



Rock Island State Park officials commemorated Bennie "Buck" Bryant's record walleye catch from 1957 with a museum-quality replica of the original mounted fish. The copy will be on permanent display. Pictured, from left, are park manager Damon Graham, Bryant, and park ranger Jason E. Miller, who is holding the replica. The picture was taken by park ranger Nathaniel Garrison just above the location where the fish was caught.

with park rangers on a recent visit to Rock Island to view the replica. "There wasn't even much of a road. We had to have a jeep to get down the old track to the water. You couldn't even do it in a pickup truck."

Bryant and his friend,

Glen Grissom, were fishing from the bank with live creek chubs that memorable Sunday morning.

"It was 20 degrees," Bryant recalled. "The sand here was frozen solid as the floor. We only had two bites the

whole day and only caught one fish. When I set the hook, all hell tore loose. And she probably fought for 15 or 20 minutes."

It took the men multiple attempts to net the behemoth, with the fish spooking to deeper water each time it neared the bank and saw the net. But eventually the pair subdued the fish and resorted to tying it to the bank with two stringers to prevent her from escaping.

The fish was weighed on the scale at Grissom's store just up the road in nearby Quebeck in White County. It measured 37.5 inches long, 23 inches in girth and was later determined to be 11 years old.

The state fish and game commission arrived a few days later to verify the record catch.

"She's the only fish I know of to ever be taken to a funeral home," said Bryant. "They took her Hunter Funeral Home in

Sparta. They skinned her and embalmed her."

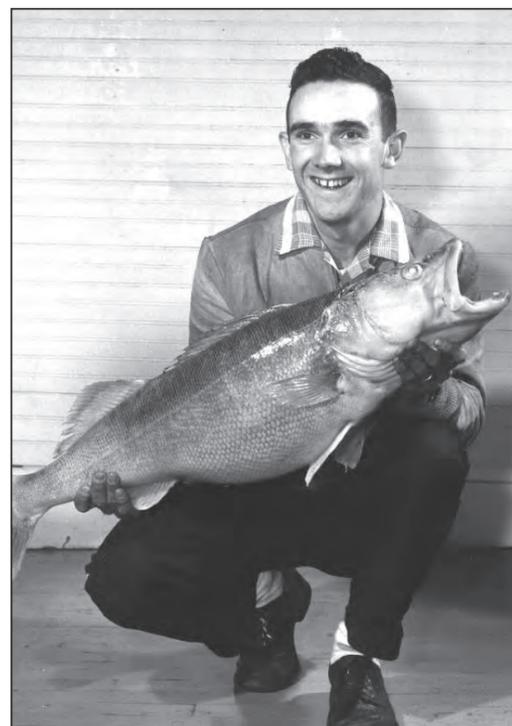
Mr. Bryant's fish stood as the U.S. record for three years, until Mabry Harper landed a 25-pound whopper that still holds the current world record on nearby Old Hickory Reservoir, just outside Nashville.

"It didn't bother me one bit to have the record broken," Bryant said. "I've got my record fish on the wall."

Prior to Mr. Bryant's catch, not many people fished the upper reaches of Center Hill for walleye, but that soon changed after news of Bryant's tremendous fish caught spread.

"It got a little hectic fishing down here after all this got out," Bryant said.

To this day, Rock Island remains one of the premier walleye fishing destinations in the southern United States, drawing visitors from across the country each year.



It was 61 years ago when Bennie "Buck" Bryant landed what would be the largest walleye on record in the United States at 21 pounds, 4 ounces. The feat was accomplished in what would become Rock Island State Park.

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Water thief in hot water

BY **DUANE SHERRILL**
Reporter for the Southern Standard
(McMinnville, Tennessee)

A man has been given probation for stealing a water meter from a neighbor's house and using it to fool the water company.

The man, Stephen Charles Embree Jr., 48, entered a guilty plea before General Sessions Judge Bill Locke to the charge of theft of services. He was given an 11-month, 29-day sentence and must make \$448 restitution to McMinnville Water Department.

Police say Embree cut the lock off the water meter

located at a vacant residence next to his on Gay Street and then placed it at his residence.

"He stated his water had been shut off due to lack of payment," said McMinnville police detective Stuart Whitman of Embree's confession. "He said he needed water and decided to take the meter from next door."

He then put the meter at his own residence in an attempt to fool the water department. He was caught in his deception after stealing \$448 in water he is now required to pay for.