

The Kurtis Katch-All rediscovered

For seven-year old Louis Kurtycz, 1912 was an exciting year. He and his mother, brothers and sisters were finally setting sail for the United States to join his father who was already in Detroit working for Henry Ford on the Ford Motor Company's assembly line.

They were a typical immigrant family desperately trying to leave Eastern Europe for the U.S. They were poor and had little hope for a better life in Krakow, Poland. Schooling rarely went beyond the sixth grade since children went to work to help support the family. Working conditions were bad and war clouds had started gathering on the horizon. But in April 1912, things looked pretty thrilling to a seven-year-old boy as he and his family sailed for New York City on the steamship George Washington.

Very early on Monday, April 15, their fourth day out, the George Washington's radio operator picked up a distress signal from the Titanic, the pride of the White Star Line on

its maiden voyage. The unsinkable Titanic had struck an iceberg at 11:45 PM, Sunday, April 14 and was quickly going under. The first ship to get to the sight of the Titanic disaster was the Carpathia, which picked up the survivors. One of the other ships to quickly answer the SOS call was the George Washington, and they took many shocked survivors off of the Carpathia and eventually brought them into New York - all of this witnessed by Louis and his family.

Finally landing at Ellis Island, the Kurtycz family cleared U.S. Customs' health formalities and their paperwork was quickly approved. The family traveled to Detroit and started their new lives - certainly an exhilarating time for everyone but nothing compared to their recent ocean voyage! (Louis later "Americanized" his last name to Kurtis when he became an American citizen).

Louis grew up in one of Detroit's Westside Polish communities with many of the same sounds and foods

as his native Poland. But he also made many new American friends and enjoyed the open fields, forests and lakes surrounding Detroit.

to now "tried and true" techniques. They ran into a group of anglers from Ohio who were having great luck. They had caught quite a few

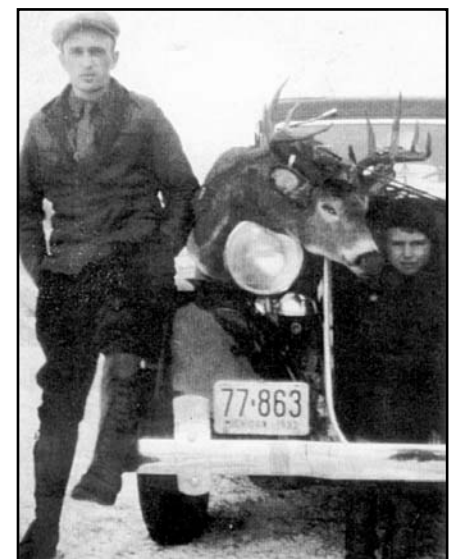


A nice limit of northern pike from the St. Mary's River - all caught on the Kurtis Katch-All in May of 1964.

Eventually he trained as a tool and die maker and went to work for a division of GM. He also found time to meet a pretty brunette named Mary Zwolinski who was from the tiny U.P. community of Goetzville, which is located about fifteen miles northwest of DeTour Village in Chippewa County. Mary was a first generation American whose parents had also immigrated from Poland having come to Goetzville along with many other Poles with the promise of cheap land to farm. The couple married and lived in Detroit but started to spend many wonderful vacations with Louis' in-laws on their farm. He quickly learned to love the outdoors becoming a deer hunter and especially an avid fisherman.

Passing years brought many changes - Louis left GM, and the couple opened up a Westside neighborhood bar named Ludwig's that featured good Polish food and cold beer to go with it. The Kurtis family also grew with the addition of one son who was also named Louis, though the family pronounced his name "Louie" in the French manner to keep from confusing people. One thing remained constant, however, the family's love for the Upper Peninsula.

On one occasion in 1957, father and son were out fishing in the Raber Bay area of the St. Mary's River, a great spot for northern pike. They knew the area well but experienced two days of disappointing fishing using their traditional and up



Louis Kurtis with his first Michigan whitetail and his five-year old son.

pike, including some fish that ran well over forty inches in length. When asked what their secret was, they replied, "frozen smelt". Smelt is one of the favorite Great Lakes forage fish for not only northern pike but for muskies, lake trout and bass.

The Ohio anglers had purchased frozen smelt locally and were hooking the fish to large treble hooks and then suspending the rigged smelt three or four feet below a large round bobber. They lobbed the rigged smelt into "northern-looking" spots and then sat back and waited for the hungry northern to take their baits. The pike were hammering the smelt, and even though they missed many fish, the Buckeyes were still

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Louis was more than impressed and decided right there in the boat to design a rig that would appealingly hold the frozen smelt and at the same time effectively hook the striking fish, cutting down on missed strikes.

Over the next year, Louis created many prototypes, finally developing the basic idea of what would become the 4-1/4 inch long brass Kurtis Katch-All. He started to hand make the rigs and sold them at the bar to his friends, relatives and fishing buddies - strictly through word of mouth advertising. But the "word" quickly spread throughout the Detroit-area pike fishing community, and the Kurtis Katch-All started selling briskly. One angler bought thirty Katch-Alls to use and to give away to his pike-fishing friends.

Louis originally designed the Katch-All as a bait holding rig to still fish for pike below a large bobber. Other anglers started using it to fish for muskies, salmon, lake trout, walleye and even lake perch. They adapted the rig and used it for jigging as well as drift fishing, slow trolling, and careful casting.

Some ice fisherman effectively used it through the ice and even modified it into an "ice decoy" by removing the treble hooks. Remember, it was designed to hold frozen smelt, but soon other anglers were experimenting and using large minnows plus dried, bottled or salted preserved minnows. Some anglers successfully used small minnows hanging individual minnows from each treble hook point, which meant they rigged the Kurtis Katch-All with twelve small minnows since there were four trebles to each rig. It certainly simulated a school of bait-fish, and it must have looked like a delicious smorgasbord as it was being lowered down to the waiting walleyes or perch!

The Katch-All is rigged by inserting the 4-1/4 inch long horizontal bar into the smelt's mouth and then out the smelt's vent near the tail. The shorter vertical bar is then inserted through the smelt's belly, then through the slot in the horizontal bar and then out through the top of the smelt. The angler's leader is then attached through the hole at the top of the vertical bar.

The main advantage to the Katch-All is that it appealingly holds a large smelt or minnow, so that the fish takes the bait without being alarmed. The rig is also very effective at hooking the fish once they go after the bait. The rig comes with four treble hooks on spreaders, and an optional rear double or treble hook can be added after the cross bar has been inserted into the bait.

For several years Louis' son pushed him to get the Katch-All protected by a U.S. Patent, but Louis was always too busy, so the son started that patent process himself. He filed the paperwork on November 9, 1964, and the patent

was issued on November 15, 1966. He gave the patent to his father as a gift, and followed up the next year with new dies to better stamp out the component parts!

Louis never found the time to properly market the Katch-All and the rig languished for a number of years until some fishing tackle collectors began purchasing them for their collections. Some of the collectors tried fishing with the Kurtis Katch-All and were surprised to discover just how effective it was in catching fish. Again "word of mouth" advertising spread the message and soon freshwater anglers and saltwater anglers started buying the Katch-All from Kurtis' son.

My first attempt to use the Katch-All was last month on a trip to Manitoba. I used preserved minnows as well as several different styles and sizes of Berkley's Gulp, and I was successful with both kinds of bait. I drift-fished them slowly across wall-eye flats; jigged them in deeper water; and fished the rig below a large bobber in good northern cover along long stretches of emerging wild rice.

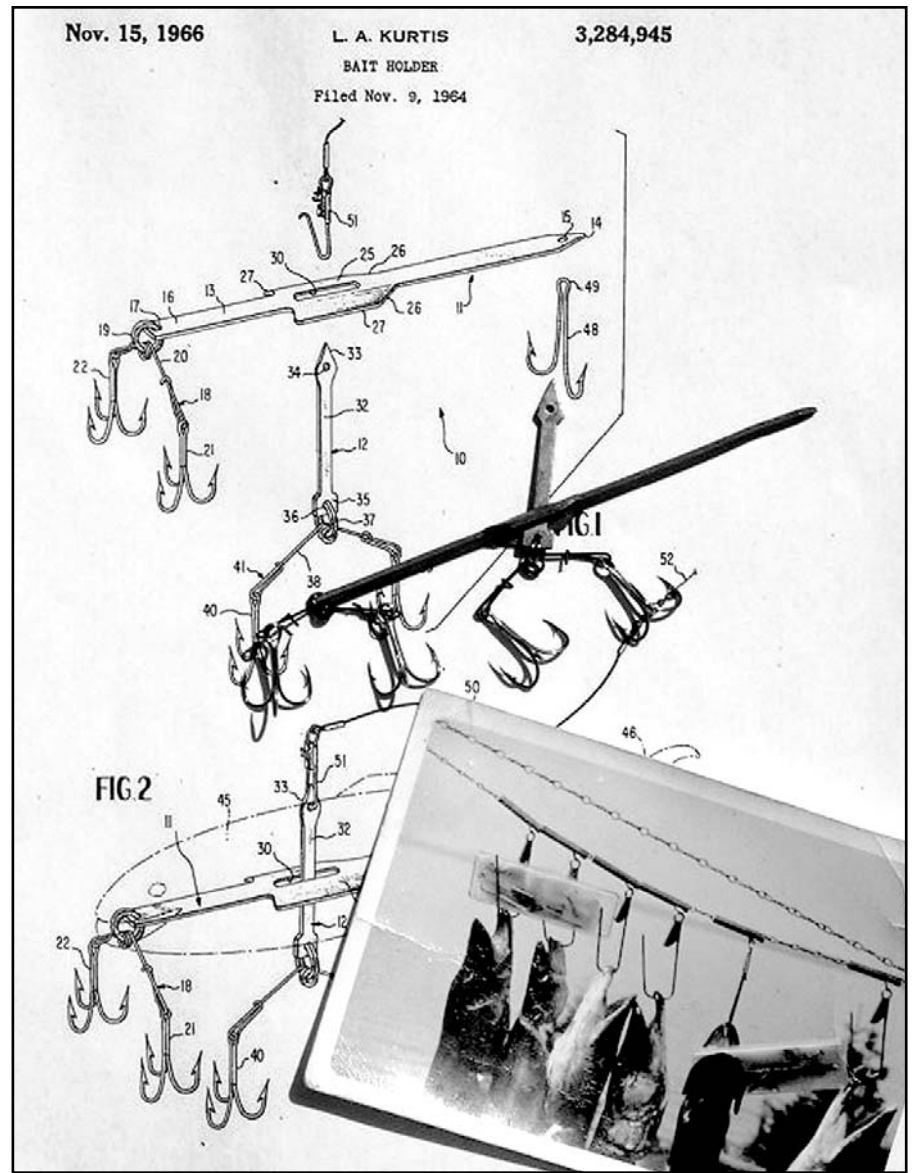
I have also talked to Lake Erie anglers who are successfully using Katch-Alls on walleyes and perch. One of my biggest surprises was talking to Florida anglers who were using them for snook, groupers and other saltwater fish. The versatility of the Kurtis Katch-All is truly remarkable and certainly has earned the high praise - "The rig that will catch them all."

You can order a Kurtis Katch-All for \$6 with free shipping and handling by going to: www.kurtiskatchall.com or by sending a check or money order to Dr. Louis T. Kurtis, 15049 N. Caribou Lake Road, De Tour Village, MI 49725-9520.

I would like to thank Dr. Louis Kurtis and his wife, Catherine, for their kindness and patience in putting together background information and photos for this article on the Kurtis Katch-All. A special thank you also goes to Frank Baron, author of Commercial Fish Decoys (Collector Books) who introduced me to Dr. Kurtis.

NEXT MONTH - some interesting questions from Woods-n-Water News readers as well as my answers.

For questions on vintage sporting collectibles, contact Terry McBurney at antiquefishing@comcast.net or P.O. Box 835, Ada, MI., 49301-0835. Please describe the item as completely as possible - imprinted name, patent dates, length, color, number of hooks or propellers, whether there is a box, overall condition etc., and he will do his best to help with identification. A color photo would be helpful. He is also interested in purchasing many sporting collectibles for his own collection. ■



The Kurtis Katch-All atop its 1966 U.S. Patent

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