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Slim McCubbin

By Mary-Lane Kamberg

Slim McCubbin was only six when he fell in love for life.

Twice.

That was the year he knew he wanted to play the fiddle. And the year he learned to fish. He's been doing both ever since. (He met the third love of his life, his wife, Opal, 15 years later before he left Missouri to serve in World War II.)

Born in Redfield, Kan., in 1919, McCubbin moved with his family to Cross Timbers, Mo. (about 20 miles south of Warsaw), when he was two. "From then until I was drafted into military service, I didn't know there was any other town," says McCubbin, who now lives in Lee's Summit, Mo.

When McCubbin was six, his family took him to a picnic where he saw a man playing a fiddle while riding a horse-drawn merry-go-round. "That's when I fell in love with the fiddle," he says.

But times were hard in rural Missouri. The family lived in a 14-foot long, two-room house with one bed for the parents. In summer, the children slept outside under a shade tree. After the first frost, they slept inside on the floor near the heat stove. A child's fiddle was not high on the family's priority list.

But McCubbin saw an ad from the Lancaster County Seed Co., in Lancaster, Pa. "If you sell 24 packets of seeds for 10 cents each and you send us the \$2.40, we'll send you a tin fiddle," it read.

That's all it took. McCubbin sold seed for lettuce, turnips and other vegetables. He smiles and shrugs at the memory. "The neighbors humored me and bought them," he says. "After I sent in the money, I hounded the mailman until my package arrived."

Inside, as promised, were a tin fiddle and bow, both about half the size of a standard violin and bow. "I was sawin' on it in the house until Mom threw me out," McCubbin says. "So I went outside and sat on the sunny side of the haystack and picked out a tune."

Several townsfolk also played fiddle. The boy watched and listened, then took up his own fiddle and taught himself to play by ear. At 13, he played for his first square dance, one of many held every second and fourth Saturday at the Cross Timbers Community Building. And by 21, he was a staff musician on KDRO ("Kisses Don't Rub Off") radio, sponsored by System Mills Milling Co., in Sedalia, Mo.

He earned \$20 a week playing on the radio – a hefty sum compared to the 50 cents a day he got doing extra jobs in addition to sharecropping on his grandfather's land. In

addition to food, he grew honey dew cane for molasses. He stripped the cane and took it by wagon to the mill, where millers ground out the juice, boiled it, skimmed it, and poured it into wooden barrels for storage.

“We put up 150 gallons every fall and sold it for 50 cents a gallon,” he says.

Learning to fish

About the time McCubbin was pickin’ his new tin fiddle, he also served as “worm caddy” while his father fished along the banks of the Little Niangua River. “I kept worms in a mud ball and carried it in my overalls pocket,” he says.

The first fish he caught was a rock sun perch from Starks Creek. Since then McCubbin has fished for “every fish that swims in Missouri,” often using one of the hundreds of lures he makes himself.

“As a teen-ager, I made my first lure from the blossoms of an ash tree,” he says. He used it to fish for bass, catfish and flatheads.

McCubbin met his future wife in 1940, about a year before the U.S. Army drafted him. He left in May 1941, expecting to spend one year in military training and return to the radio station – and Opal. He had served seven months and was looking forward to resuming his radio gig when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

“They told us we were in for the duration, plus six months,” he says.

After years of stateside training, his company landed at Milney Bay, New Guinea, in January 1943. On the way to the Coral Sea, he fiddled tunes in the engine room of his troop transport from Hawaii to New Guinea. “It was 2:30 a.m., and there I was playing *Turkey in the Straw!*”

During the three-week-long Battle of Lone Tree Hill, McCubbin found himself digging in a position on the bank of the Tor River. The excavation yielded an earthworm about 12 inches long and the diameter of a lead pencil.

“The Red Cross had given us survival kits that included a 20-foot fishing line with a hook attached to one end,” McCubbin says. “I tied the line to a stick about the length of a pool cue, broke off a piece of that worm, put it in the river and kept on digging.”

Before long, he noticed the pole bending toward the water. “I landed a three-pound catfish,” he says. “I kept fishing and caught nine catfish – 3- to 6-pounds each – off that one worm.”

He turned his catch over to the army cook, who “fried it up first class.”

When a superior asked, “McCubbin, how’d you catch those fish? We’re supposed to be at war.”

Another soldier answered, “McCubbin can do anything!”

Making Lures

Today, retired from a nearly 35-year career ("34 years and 10 months") melting glass for Pittsburg Corning Corp., in Sedalia, he spends his time making fishing lures out of metal, roofing tar paper, paintbrush handles, plastic orange juice jugs, yarn, Saran Wrap, nylon trot line, deer tail and raccoon fur. One of his favorites is made from a coon's ear. And he has one for fishing for bass and catfish made from a coon's tail. "There's no end to what you can make a lure out of," he says, "as long as you have good hook exposure."

Fish bite for three reasons, he says: "They're hungry, protecting their spawning nest, or surprised. Lures are most effective with fish that strike when they're surprised. Those that strike for surprise will strike at anything."

Fiddlin' Around

After the war, McCubbin continued to fish and fiddle for square dances when his shift work schedule permitted. What he likes best about playing is "eating," he says. "I'd still play for square dances if I could get a band together," he says.

And fishing?

"Fishing is the most consoling thing you can do," he says. "Give me a fishing pole alongside a creek, and I'm on cloud nine."