

Gone Fishing

Every year, students party along Minnesota rivers to celebrate the smelt's spawning ritual.

BY RICHARD CRETAN

Three young men stand before about 100 people jammed together on a ruddy peninsula at the mouth of the Lester River in Duluth, Minnesota. From their laden net, the men each pick out a stubby, silver-colored fish. The creatures are small, but not small enough to pass as minnows. They are smelt, and their gulping mouths seem to be muttering imprecations against their captors. Their attitude is certainly understandable, given that the men holding them prisoner are about to bite off their heads.

Jamie Mackey, 20, and Bruce Baker, 19, sophomores at the Universities of Minnesota (in Duluth) and Wisconsin, respectively, along with Tim Danger, 16, raise their catch to their lips as the crowd hoots with glee. Cherie Saarela, 20, a UMD sophomore in physical education who has come with the trio, yells, "Jamie! I can't believe you're doing this!"

Too late. The men chomp down. Despite having almost invisible bones, smelt are a tough meal to stomach without the benefit of a sweet beer-batter coating. As appetizers go, raw smelt rates

just behind arch supports. Grimacing as he guesses where to bite, Mackey grinds through the flesh and the soft parts, spits out the head, and flings the body with the zeal of a soldier getting rid of a grenade.

Later, I am invited to try, but the head-biting ritual strikes me as anything but fun. Besides, Mackey tells me all I need to know about it. "I'm still trying to get the scum out of my teeth," he says.

Making a symbolic sacrifice of their first catch is a tradition among smelters, most of whom use the smelly fish's annual spawning migration as an excuse to party. Around the rivers of northern Minnesota, the celebration has evolved into an epic bash known as the Smelt Run. Each spring, a few million smelt swim up the rivers from Lake Superior toward Canada.

Their mission: to find just the right spot for spawning more of themselves. And almost every year since 1946, several hundred people—including lots of students from universities around the area—have flocked to the rivers to intercept the smelt in the middle of their instinctual journey. The revelers' mission: to have as much fun and take home as many smelt as possible.

Since mid-April, hardly a conversation has begun in a Duluth bar or restaurant without someone wondering aloud when the "shibimelt," as they say up here, will run. The statewide media have been waiting, too. And now that the

In keeping with tradition, University of Wisconsin student Bruce Baker, University of Minnesota student Jamie Mackey, and high school student Tim Danger chomp down on smelt from their first catch.

