

# Photo of the Month

## John Boat



David Bland with homemade John Boat, ca. 1957  
(Neg. #015981, Courtesy of Edgar Bland)

This is typical example of a mid-twentieth century john boat used for float fishing on the White River. Long and flat, these boats had shallow drafts enabling them to cross the many shoals between the deeper fishing holes. Intended for smooth currents rather than white water, the boats did not need high sides. This also made them much easier to fish from.

Typically a john boat of the era was built of 20-foot-long pine boards. Three boards formed the bottom, and two boards formed the sides. The bottom seams were tongue and groove and sealed with tar to keep water out. For commercial float fishing trips several variations were used. A john boat for fishing had more rake [upward curve] at the ends than did the commissary boats used for carrying tents and supplies.

There is no way of knowing how the boat got its name. It is quite probable that a man named John built a boat that others liked and they would say they wanted one of John's Boats. However, it was Charlie Barnes of Galena, Missouri, who popularized float fishing on the White River and built over 500 john boats during his career. Many Ozark natives referred to these as "jack boats" due to the burning of jack pine knots in a metal basket for night fishing. This may be another source for the name john boat.

During the early history of Northwest Arkansas, the White River and other lesser streams served as conduits for travel, trade and subsistence. Their waters provided both a way of moving between small isolated settlements prior to the construction of reliable roads and a source of fish for protein.

With the development of a system of roads and more widely available foods from other sources, the

White River in particular became a source of recreation, providing opportunities for sport fishing or just a relaxing float downstream. By the early twentieth century leisure travel was becoming more popular and float fishing was one of the activities that Northwest Arkansas had to offer. Some outfitters carried clients on trips that began in southwest Missouri and ended in north central Arkansas – often a two-week float!

The post-Civil War years saw the first commercial float fishing trips in the Ozarks of southwestern Missouri. Due to the remote nature of the region, these trips were primarily for wealthy sportsmen. The first commercial trips on the White River began around 1899. These trips typically lasted several days and the passengers would have to return to their starting points by either train or horse-drawn wagons.

Prior to the construction of the dams on the White River, float fishing was common along the full length of the river. The dams changed the ecosystem, leading to the decline and outright disappearance of native fish. The cold water released from the dams gave rise to new species such as trout being introduced to the river. Today, below the dams forming Beaver Lake, Table Rock Lake, and Bull Shoals Lake anglers are primarily in search of these introduced species of fish.

Credits: “The Boat Builder From White River” by Jim Auckley