



THE

# IRON

O F T A R P O

By D.L. Thomas

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*Guide Mike Williams' expertise on tarpon was acquired after 3 decades of on-the-water experience.*

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**T**he first time I got invited to go fishing with guide Mike Williams, he was working his booth at the spring fishing show in Houston. As I approached, the first thing that caught my eye was a large sign hanging up near the back of the booth: "If there's a devil in hell, the Gulf of Mexico and the bays of Texas can't be too far from heaven."

Thirty years of guiding in the Gulf have earned Williams his nick name, "Iron Man."

This 44-year-old's knowledge of tarpon fishing didn't come easy and was acquired from on-the-water experience over the last three decades. Williams remembers as a small child back in the '50s, the waters full of tarpon in season. In fact, at one time they were a nuisance to many of the trout fishermen. "My father and I and a few of his friends used to fish for them a lot out around the end of the Galveston jetties and at night off the beachfront piers. In late summer we would travel down to the Brazos River below Freeport. That was where I caught my first tarpon with a whole lot of help from my father.

"I remember seeing a lot of tarpon caught in that time period, but I don't remember catching or seeing any really large fish. Most of the fish ran from 60 to 90 pounds with an occasional fish

Photo by D.L. Thomas

# MAN

## NALLEY

going 130 to 140 pounds. The tarpon fishing that made Texas famous held up pretty good until that doomsday storm in September of 1961, Hurricane Carla."

Carla was one of the largest storms to ever bear down on Texas and brought to a close an era in tarpon fishing which began in the 1900s. The great masses of fish found in our surf, up our rivers, and in our bays from early April through late October, vanished after Carla.

There has been a lot of speculation and many theories over the years as to what happened to that great population of Texas tarpon. Heavy fishing pressure is one.

Williams has his own theories as to what happened. He believes there were two separate schools of tarpon in the Gulf, maybe even different species. Both of them wintered around the Yucatan Peninsula. But as the water began to warm in late winter, one group (the Texas tarpon) migrated in a clockwise direction and, the other, counter clockwise.

"The Texas-bound tarpon that migrated clockwise were most often found near shore, up rivers and in bays — easy targets for Mexican netters back in the '50s," said Williams. These fish averaged 60 to 80 pounds in weight, but many went up to 140 pounds. Williams believes this school made up about 70 percent of the total Texas population. Williams is also convinced that by 1961, this group of fish had practically been eliminated — slaughtered by the tens of thousands — from Mexican nets to fertilizer and pet food.

The counter clockwise migrating school made up fewer but larger individuals, fish approaching 300 pounds or more. Individual fish in this group averaged near 100 pounds, and spent most of their time farther offshore (one to 10 miles)." Continuing in his theory, Williams believes this school traveled across the open Gulf to Cuba in late winter, then worked its way up to the



Photo credit: Mike Williams

**Mike Williams (above, right) and Houston attorney Clarence West admire a tarpon caught by West. "The Iron Man" (opposite) hoists the best catch of his fishing career, a 188-pounder caught last summer.**

Florida Keys by early spring where they fed and mingled with resident tarpon. From there the migration continued northward parallel to the Gulf coast after passing off the coast of Alabama and Mississippi, meeting up with the clockwise group of tarpon off the coast of Louisiana. The destination of both the counter-clockwise and clockwise groups of fish seemed to be the mouth of the Mississippi River; this mutual destination usually was reached in mid-July each year.

Eventually, both schools returned through Texas in late summer and early fall. If Williams is correct in his theory, the larger tarpon found off Galveston now would have been spared from capture during the hey day of beachfront netting along the Mexican coast. Further, and most important to tarpon hunters, those giant fish have been passing through Texas waters every year, even though it seemed as if they had vanished altogether.

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