

OUTDOOR RECREATION

It started with a tub of minnows

Dunhams sold hellgrammites, too

By DON VOGEL

Press Outdoor Editor

Little did Ron Dunham realize what he was creating in 1937 when he set up an old bathtub by the side of Northwestern Highway near Telegraph Road, filled it with minnows and told his wife to try and sell them.

When Dunham returned from his job of cutting grass at local golf courses, he discovered Ethel had made \$18. A new business was born, the forerunner of today's multi-million dollar Dunham's Sporting Goods chain.

Dunham, 80, of White Lake Township, no longer has any connection with the company that bears his name and is headquartered in the Drayton Plains section of Waterford Township. He sold it in 1953. Dunham currently is the retired owner of D & B Blister Pack, a firm that makes plastic covers used in bubble packaging products for retail sale.

"Fishermen had a difficult time back then getting bait," Dunham said. "We would seine our own minnows and pick or dig our own worms. That's how I got started. We got into a lot of minnows, once and I decided to see if we could sell them."

More minnows went into the tub before the Dunhams were able to erect a small building on the property they had on Northwestern, about 600 feet west of Telegraph. While Ethel dispensed bait, her husband continued to manure golf course greens, cut fairways and trim rough.

"The bait business reached a point in 1940 where I finally gave up mowing," Dunham said.

Dunham's Bait and Tackle was in a key location for supplying Detroit and southeast Oakland anglers with bait on their way to the county's 400 lakes and ponds.

"We used to open at 6 a.m.," Dunham recalled, "and it wasn't unusual on a weekend or holiday to have cars and trucks parked all the way back to Telegraph waiting for us to open. There weren't many places back then."

The store was enlarged and eventually was open 24 hours.

The fishing world hasn't changed much in 50 years: when it comes to minnows, worms, nightcrawlers and crawfish which continue to be the bestsellers.

But Leeches, waterdogs, mousies and spikes were not

mentioned. They were baits of the future. Dunhams also carried frogs, hellgrammites, large white June bug grubs, wigglers, corn borers and goldenrod gall grubs — unheard of, except possibly for wigglers, in today's bait shop.

"We did well during the second world war," he said. "People didn't have much time, and what they had, they used fishing."

The bait and tackle business boomed following World War II. One setback for Dunham's came in 1946 when the store burned. They rebuilt with a larger one.

Meanwhile, Ron Dunham was becoming a local fishing celebrity. He was frequently mentioned and pictured on the outdoor pages of the Detroit News. He was an instructor at ice fishing clinics sponsored by WWJ radio.

"I was on the first Mort Neff television show," he said. "All that exposure was a big help for the business."

Nor did it hurt that a short history of the business appeared in the August 1947 edition of Newsweek magazine which carried British Prime Minister Clement Atlee on the cover.

From 2,000 to 3,000 customers a week stopped for bait and tackle that year, said Dunham. A dozen frogs sold for 50 cents, worms at 4 cents for 50 and nightcrawlers for 20 cents a dozen, the same as grubs. Wigglers, corn borers and minnows were the primary winter baits.

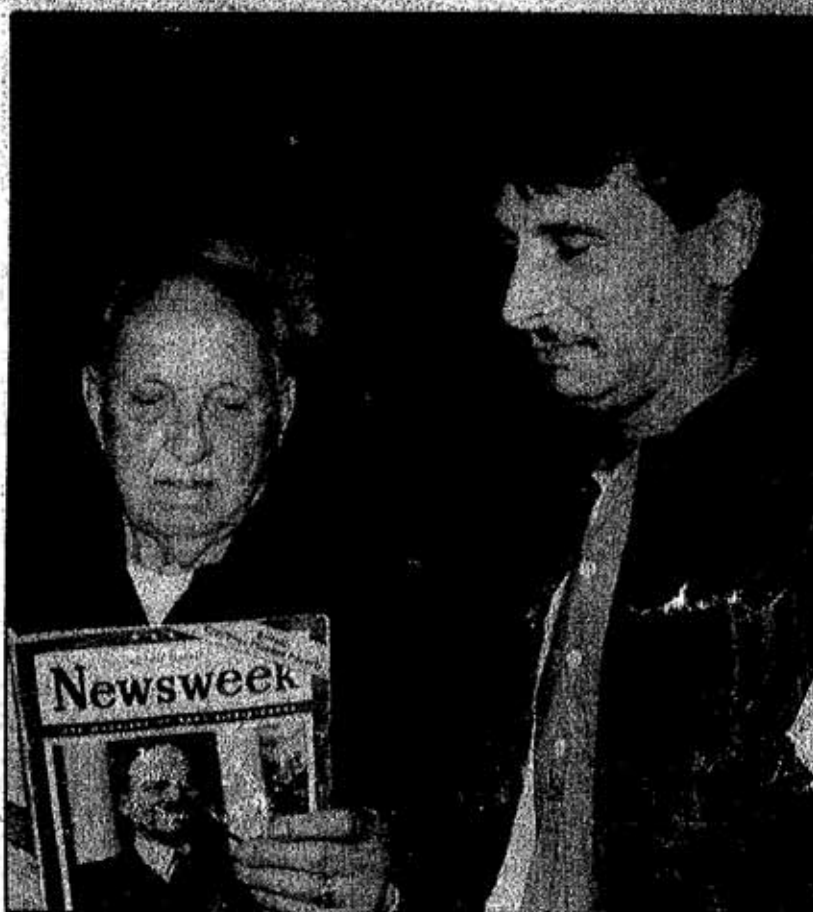
"We sold wigglers by the thousands. We screened them through the ice from the mud flats at Lake Fenton," he said. They also sold the Duke-E-Do ice spoon for pan-fish that Dunham created.

The Dunhams planned to turn the business over to Ronald Dunham Jr. when he returned from the Korean War. He was killed, however, on his second day in battle in early 1953.

"That seemed to take everything out of us as far as the bait business goes," said Dunham. This feeling eventually led to selling the business later that year.

Ben Hardesty, a national casting champion who lived in Oakland County, brought Bob Schmalzreid, a buyer for a sporting goods store, to the Dunhams' home on Inkster Road to see some fish ponds there.

"Bob and I got talking and eventually I took him down to the store," Dunham said. "To make a long story short, he bought it



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Ron Dunham shows grandson Ron Garrett 1947 article in Newsweek

along with two New York men engaged in distributing sporting goods. He insisted that the Dunham name be retained because of its good reputation."

Schmalzreid subsequently bought out the New Yorkers, joined forces with another partner and moved the business to Northwestern and Orchard Lake. He operated the sporting goods departments in the first Michigan K mart stores on a lease arrangement. After K mart took over these departments, he concentrated on improving and expanding Dunham's.

Schmalzreid sold Dunham's a few years ago to America Can and was the force behind establishing the current Kelly's Sports Center chain before his death in 1988.

Dunham's recently was purchased by its management.

Fishing led Ron Dunham into making plastic bubbles for packaging in 1966.

"I patented a bait called the Big-Eyed Duke (a weighted spinning lure) that was sold in K mart, Sears and some other stores," he explained. "We made up our own bubble packages. Pretty soon, someone else wanted us to make

bubbles for them and then another outfit. We decided it was time to retire the Big-Eye and expand the plastics."

In the fall, Ron and Ethel Dunham hook up a travel trailer and head for Oregon where Ron fishes for ocean-run chinook salmon in the Elk and nearby rivers, about 50 miles south of Cous Bay. His largest was a 55-pounder.

Unlike Great Lakes chinook that start to turn dark when entering spawning streams, the ocean fish are still bright and firm, Dunham said.

They winter in Nevada and California, returning to White Lake Township in early spring.

"Fishing around here isn't what it used to be," he said. "We used to get those big slab bluegills, one-pounders out of Walled, Upper Straits and some other lakes around here. All you get now are little ones. Maybe I'll go any way."

Unlike anglers of the 1930s, 1940s, however, he won't have to go far for bait. There are four outlets within five miles, with closest two miles away.

But he just might want to do his own from force of habit.