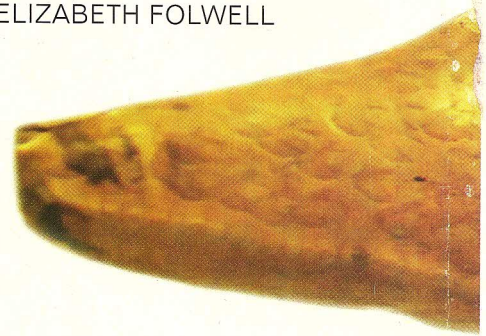




HIGH-CLASS HOOKERS

COLLECTORS CRAVE PETER HEID'S
IRRESISTIBLE LURES BY ELIZABETH FOLWELL



PETER HEID, LIKE MOST 11-YEAR-OLD ADIRONDACK KIDS,

loved to fish. He would ride his bike a couple of miles down the road to Garnet Lake, where the family kept a canoe, and go in search of pickerel and bass. But good fishing lures were expensive.

So he made his own, whittling balsa wood into the streamlined shape of a Rapala. A slice of snowmobile windshield supplied the perfect dive lip that helped the minnow dart convincingly through the water. With window screen he stencilled a pattern that looked like scales, painting his first project fluorescent orange and black.

That was 36 years ago. Every week now, in Johnsbury, Heid patiently makes dozens of lures—"in the evening, on the couch, with the cat in my lap," he says—from mother-of-pearl, brass, wire, seed beads, faceted Czech glass, feathers and rare materials gleaned from cast-off tackle boxes and jewelry cases. He sells his one-of-a-kind works on eBay, with scores of eager collectors bidding for metal crayfish with jointed bodies, colorful beaded frogs, a spoon with a tiny dragonfly incised into gold-lipped oyster shell or lures in classic shapes with elegant, connoisseur touches like an engraved mountain range, a miniature landscape that would fit in the palm of your hand. A simple oval spoon of shell with brass fittings may go for \$20 to \$40.

"Most elaborate lures are 10 or more hours of work," he says. "The best price so far is \$666.99 for a brass 'trigger-tail' minnow with an elaborate mechanism that makes the fin split."

Heid's artistic endeavor began with a twist of fate, one of those opportunities that leads in unexpected directions like a muskie on the prowl. "I found an old tackle box on the road that had fallen out of a truck. In that banged-up box was an antique lure, a Creek Chub, and I didn't think a lot about it. Then one day I was on eBay," he explains. For his job at Heid's Hodaka, the 40-year-old family business that is known across the country for selling and repairing vintage BMW motorcycles, he scrutinizes the site to acquire rare parts. "I saw antique lures were worth a lot of money.

"I sold that lure. And a friend and I started looking through our tackle boxes." Soon he and neighbor Travis Slater were stalking old crank bait, jerk bait, plugs, slabs and streamer flies at yard sales, flea markets and online auctions. When a promising—but broken—lure emerged, Heid patiently restored it using old-style varnish and lacquer and brass hooks, swivel snaps and other authentic parts.

Clockwise from top left:
Peter Heid's Metal Mesh Minnow is made from woven wire and moves like a real fish through the water. A classic spinner design uses an antique feather, a beaded barrel body and mother-of-pearl spoon accented with a scalloped brass rim. This brass decoy mimics a northern pike and measures 20 inches long. Faceted antique glass beads adorn a feathered spoon.



The Britannica of Bait

Peter Heid's attention to the small things shows up in another project, indexing Robert A. Slade's *Encyclopedia of North American Fishing Lures*, to be released this fall. The 15-volume set contains information on thousands of companies in the United States and Canada that date back to the 1860s. According to Slade, who lives in Wisconsin, the first book deals just with the letter A. "These are more than illustrated price guides," he says. "The books cover the real history of companies, inventors, patent papers and lure styles."

Slade, who in the 1990s had one of the largest collections of fishing tackle in the country—more than 32,000 lures, flies, reels, rods, decoys and more—feels that Heid's work is of fine quality. "Pete's lures are every bit as good as those made in the 1800s, and he goes to great lengths to use authentic hardware on the pearl baits. The Metal Mesh Minnow is unique, I've never seen anything like it," the 71-year-old says.

About 19 years ago Slade began divesting his collection, and he felt he had completed the job in 2001. But when he launched the encyclopedia project he bought some rare examples back. Writing and research—which sent him to museums, shows, private homes, small-town newspaper offices and tackle shops in 11 states and three provinces—took nine busy years.

Interest in collecting tackle, like collecting stamps, is declining, according to Slade. "A lure that sold for \$1,000 at auction 10 years ago may not bring 100 bucks now." But his compendium may create new interest as people learn more about the lures lurking in the basement or attic. And modern makers like Heid have their own following, people drawn to the craftsmanship and ingenuity of the designs.

The lure encyclopedia is being printed on demand, with a full set priced at \$450 and each volume at \$30. For more information or to order, contact Robert Slade at (262) 679-0804, tslade3@wi.rr.com or S. 75 W. 18983 Circle Drive, Muskego, Wisconsin 53150.

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Some complex, well-used pieces required fabricating new spinners or spoons, so Heid learned to carve mother-of-pearl to replicate the original ovals, teardrops, barrels and other shapes. Eventually he branched into crafting his own lures using shells of all kinds, including the iridescent abalone with its blue-green to rainbow luster. He gets this material online, at craft shops, Walmart, all sorts of places. "Spoon blades often come from pearl oyster. Gold-lip oyster has a nice orange tone," he says. "But shells are made by the animals in layers and can be difficult to carve. Some are quite scarce, from protected species." For this reason he carefully plots all the lures he may cut from a single large, polished shell, outlining shapes in permanent marker.

Knowing the diets, habitats and life cycles of mollusks is important to Heid, who treats his saltwater-native components with respect. His favorite shells are made of nacre, which is calcium carbonate held together with protein. He explains, "It's assembled in tiny building blocks $\frac{1}{100}$ the thickness of a human hair, stacked like bricks with the protein used as the mortar. The huge number of uneven edges produced by the structure refract light at many angles and give a prismatic shine."

The shells, then, have grain, like wood, which dictates how they're cut. Heid cautions, "Go across the grain and the piece chips." Trouble is, tools for shaping this unforgiving, brittle material are difficult to find. So Heid makes his own from old files and engraving gouges with different blade configurations.

Heid has no formal training in this art form, though his experience in the motorcycle shop provides skills for the exacting work. "My father has great mechanical abilities, machining parts right here," he says. "He encouraged me to try."

There's much more to the lures than trial and error, of course. Heid is a keen observer of insects, crayfish, minnows and other creatures. He takes plenty of pictures, but admits that making something three-dimensional from a photograph is a challenge.

He likes to cast what he makes too, just as any repaired BMW at Heid's Hodaka gets a test drive. He's always developing new ways to catch fish, and in the works is a minnow—harking back to that first Rapala wannabe. He says, "I have an idea for a lure that has a diving lip that automatically adjusts its angle to compensate for the speed it's pulled. The faster you pull it, the less it tries to dive so that it stays at the same depth no matter what speed it is going. The mechanics and framework are all assembled and it will have over 30 parts."

He recommends that customers try the lures "where you can see them to understand their movements and apply this information to your fishing technique. Most lures are best worked in

From top to bottom: Heid's skill with hinges and release clips turns a belt buckle into a fishable crank bait. This frog lure, destined for a national jewelry contest, contains hundreds of seed beads. Heid's very first lure, carved from balsa wood, was made in 1974. This one is not for sale, but others are auctioned on eBay, rather than a dedicated Web site, enabling him to create one-of-a-kind pieces on his own terms.

Facing page, top to bottom: Collectors seek out unusual lures, especially those with intact packaging or display cards. Abalone shell and antique beads combine in an elegant Heid-crafted lure.



short, quick pulls to create a commotion that interests fish, and the pearl will flash as it waves back and forth."

Recently he began sculpting another tackle classic, a favorite among Lake Champlain ice fishermen. For generations they have used decoys suspended on lines underwater to attract other fish, bringing prey in close enough to spear. Heid's northern pike decoy is sheet brass, about 20 inches long. "Every scale is a hammer strike," he says, "on what will be the inside of the decoy." Two identical pieces are annealed to soften the metal, then curved over a form and soldered together to make a hollow body. Perch are about eight inches long and cost around \$80, while the large, dramatic pike can go for \$400 or more.

As Heid puts it, "It's unlikely that most of the lures I have built will see any time fishing, but should one hit the water, it will catch fish." 🍄