

Calendar

Fish Made from Cows

The Grandfather of Contemporary South Pacific Bone-Carving

Master bone-carver Louie the Fish, reached by phone at his home in Pago Pago, American Samoa, admitted he would rather fish than carve any day. "But carving is meditative. That's why I've stuck with it all these years. I can carve, listen to blues, and think anything I want, all day. Or do it without thinking."

This was shortly before he left for San Diego and his appearance at the Oceanside Museum of Art during its current celebration of Samoan arts and culture.

He makes replicas of the hooks once used to catch fish by a variety of South Pacific people. He also carves miniatures of fish;

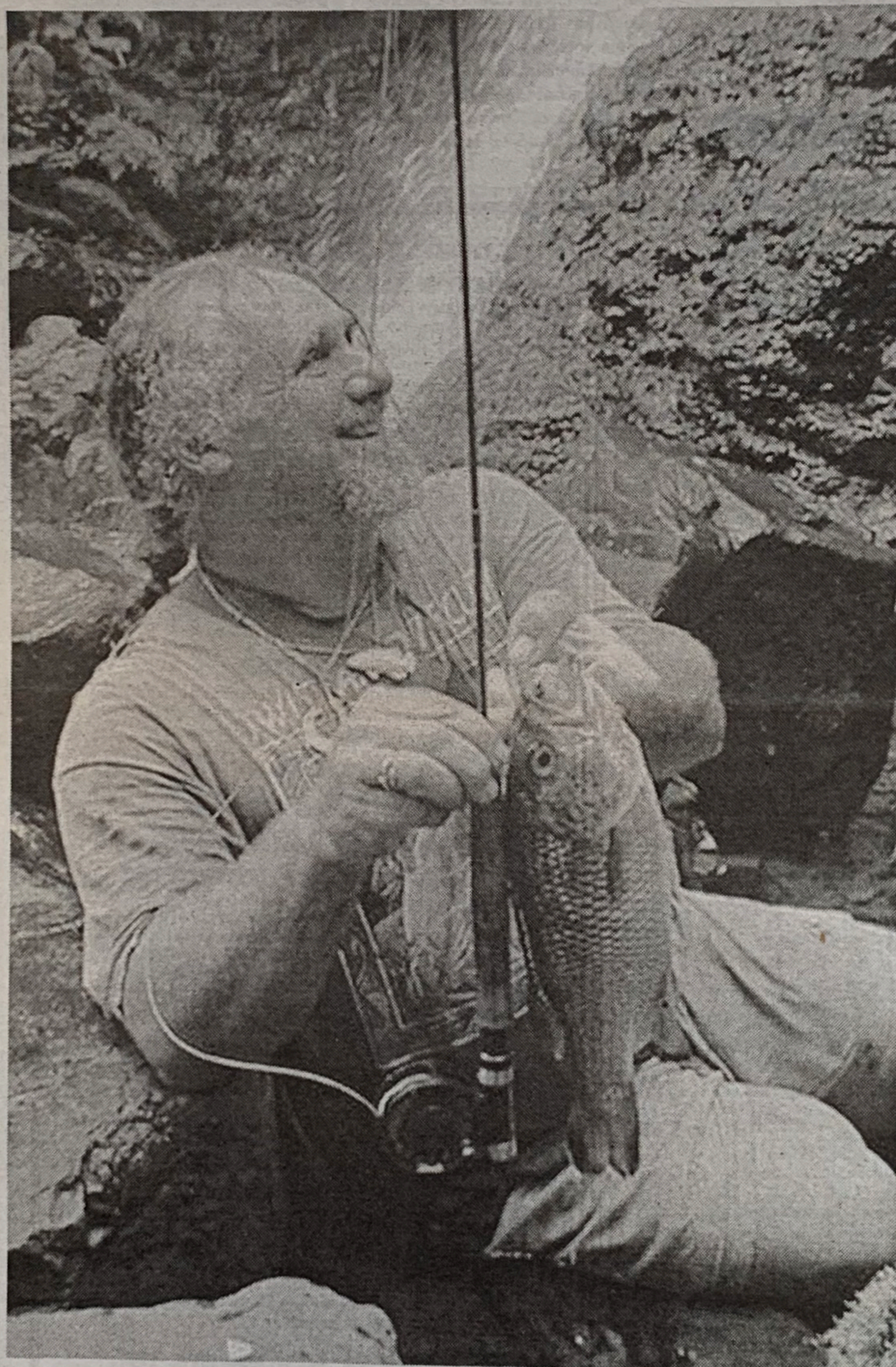
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small enough to fit in the palm, they are noted for their accuracy. "I can do real species-specific fish. I can make a rainbow trout or a brown trout. Most guys couldn't tell them apart except by color. But there are differences in fin shapes. This morning I'm working on a great white shark, and certain characteristics make them unmistakable from other sharks." His finished pieces — both hooks and fish — are meant to be worn as pendants.

He works in beef bone. "Hawaiian hooks were made with human bone, but it's hard to get." He laughed. Beef bone can be had from "any butcher," although "it takes a lot of know-how to prepare it right so it doesn't get brittle."

He uses electric tools and hand tools, including jeweler's gravers, "which look like little chisels." And he works alone. "I have had a hard time employing anybody. There's a whole lot of skill required. Twenty years ago I would have said you can teach anybody anything. Now, I'd say you need talent — the eye. And if you don't have it, you're struggling. Mind you, my work didn't look all that great in the beginning."

His own beginnings were in New London, Connecticut, where he was born Louis DeNolfo in 1944. ("I'm a full Italian. My father was born in Sicily." Still, he has been called the grandfather of contemporary South



Louie the Fish

Pacific bone-carving.) At age ten, he started fly-fishing and working on charter boats on Long Island Sound during summers. When he was 18, his years of wandering began. "I was real good in high school at hanging out at Connecticut College, wearing a Dartmouth sweatshirt, and pretending I was old-money Ivy League. And I met this chick who bought me a Mercedes Benz 190 a week after meeting her. I ended up driving it

across country and meeting her in L.A. We got married and had a child." After they split up, he went to Hawaii and lived in an uninhabited valley in Molokai for two years. "I was like Robinson Crusoe, spearing fish." From there, he went to a hippie commune in Maui.

After earning a BFA in painting at the University of Hawaii in 1970, he happened to see fish hooks in a museum in Hilo. "I just liked the

shapes, and made a copy of one. I put it on my neck, and everybody wanted it. I kept selling them off my neck. I figured that was a pretty good way to make money."

The way he got a series of nicknames, including his present one, is a three-part story, complete with musical accompaniment. "I used to catch these fish called stickfish. I went trolling for them. You know the Steve Miller Band? I played harmonica with them in concert. In fact, I played this song. Are you ready? [Here he played a short blues riff on harmonica.] I took Steve Miller out in a kayak, and we were catching stickfish. He had a helluva time. So first I got the name Stickfish Louie. And when I went to the South Pacific, I was hanging around Fiji, for about ten years, where I sat by the pool at the Trade Winds Hotel and did carvings, played harmonica, and speared fish, and the staff cooked them up for me. And they started calling me Louie Na Ika, which means Louie the Fish in Fijian. And for a long time that's what my business cards said. But I kept going back and forth to American Samoa [where he lives with his second wife and their two children], and they didn't know what it meant, so I changed it to Louie the Fish."

It was suggested to Louie the Fish that his hooks looked so authentic they might confuse the archaeological record if somebody happened upon them unawares. "I was told to put a mark on them. I sign and date everything now."

Asked if he had tried to fish with one of his hook replicas, he replied, "I tried a few times and never caught anything. I think the fish nowadays want steel hooks. They're too smart. They have evolved as well as us."

— Jeanne Schinto

Contemporary Bone-Carving Demonstration
Thursday, July 20,
1:00 to 4:00 p.m.
Oceanside Museum of Art
704 Pier View Way, Oceanside
Free with museum admission;
\$3; \$2, seniors, students, and military
Info: 760-721-2787

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