

**“Plug Builder’s of the Jersey Shore:
Profile of Billy McFadden”**
By DJ Muller

I went to Ocean Grove recently to meet with local plug maker Billy McFadden.

If I told you Chubby, Fatso, Big Bertha, and Robbie, were down in the basement, you would think that either there was a late night game of poker going on, or a modern day meeting of the Little Rascals assembling. In reality these are the names of four of the many plug styles that local plug maker Billy McFadden works on down in his basement, turned woodshop.

McFadden spends the majority of his free time wrestling stripers, in the big surf. His reputation as an accomplished surfcaster foregoes him. His name is recognized amongst the fishing circles and local clubs as one of the best striper fisherman on the coast, an authority on striper fishing. His custom plugs have also earned a lot of respect with many of the local casters. If you went down to a local jetty in November, and went through some casters plug bags, it would not take you long to find one of McFadden’s plugs in one of the slots. At the ripe young age of 62, Billy still most loves finding a pocket full of mullet being corralled by a school of hungry bass. Like most bass hounds, his love for fishing has spilled over into his non-fishing time. During the cold months and during lulls in the action throughout the season, he will retreat to his basement where he does the magic of turning 2 X 2 cedar spindles into beautiful swimming plugs, plugs that big stripers find most irresistible.

McFadden began making his plugs, not because he felt the need to create, but rather out of necessity. In the early 70’s when sand eels were plentiful, there were few needlefish lures to be found. The only needlefish lures on the market at the time were made by Boone, and with high demand they were very difficult to get. So McFadden came up with the idea to try to make some. He called a woodworker friend of his and asked if he could make some for him and his friends. “How many do you want?” his friend asked. “Oh, how about 100?” answered McFadden. His woodworking friend cut them in no time on a metal lathe that McFadden would later purchase for himself. Billy and his friends were in business. McFadden then started cutting his own needlefish and then after buying his first wood lathe, a Grizzly, he graduated to making plugs. He has been doing it on and off ever since. He converted a dusty basement to a spotless work center. He now has 8 machines, an air brush system for painting, and a complete ventilation system. All necessary for what he enjoys doing.

McFadden credits his learning about plug building to the age old master Bob Hahn, who many know, made another line of simply outstanding plugs. Billy implied that even his work was no match for that of Bob Hahn, who taught him much of what he now knows. Billy also gives a huge amount of credit to the both “Lefty” and Wade Carr, a father-son duo that are both, each, well reputed plug builders in their own right.

Most of the plugs he makes he sells to help raise money for his club, the Asbury Park Fishing Club. Every March the club has a huge flea market at The Convention Hall in Asbury Park, where some of Jersey’s best custom plug builders gather to sell their handy work. This year it will be Saturday, March 13th. Local fishermen flock to this flea market to get their hands on some of these rare wooden beauties. For this years show McFadden

is working on four different styles: a 6" Danny, a 5" Chubby, a 5" slanted-head Danny, and by special request, due to the presence of the big bunker that we have had on the beach, a 7" Atom 40 copy, which Billy has nicknamed the B-29. He paints his plugs the basic colors: yellow, white, chartreuse, and black. You can't go wrong with those colors. From an onlooker's perspective, the hobby of plug building is a huge undertaking and it takes serious commitment and determination.

On a personal note, I finally met Billy McFadden for the first time this past year. After hearing about him for ages, I had the chance to fish with him a time or two. We enjoyed a real good blitz condition one afternoon at Island Beach. I was also able to spend some time with him talking about fishing spots that we both visited on the Rhode Island coast. I have always ascertained that I want a fisherman giving me fishing reports and giving me instruction and advice. When it comes to my wood swimmers, it is no different. McFadden's swimmers are test and tweaked by a man that can catch bass with the best of them. A man who knows what to look for in the way a plug swims. That is someone that I want to buy a plug from. His lures have been proven to take bass, and big bass. Frank Petillo put a 50 pounder on the sand from the Hook in the mid-70's on one of McFadden's swimmers. Mike Comune, Billy's fishing partner for several years also tells of how a 40 pound striper that he caught had only an inch of the plug sticking out of its mouth when he beached it on a white, Big Bertha, the 9" McFadden swimmer. These wood swimmers are the proven bass catchers and can really upgrade your plug arsenal for the upcoming spring run. So go to the show, buy a couple, and may a cow swim your way this spring.