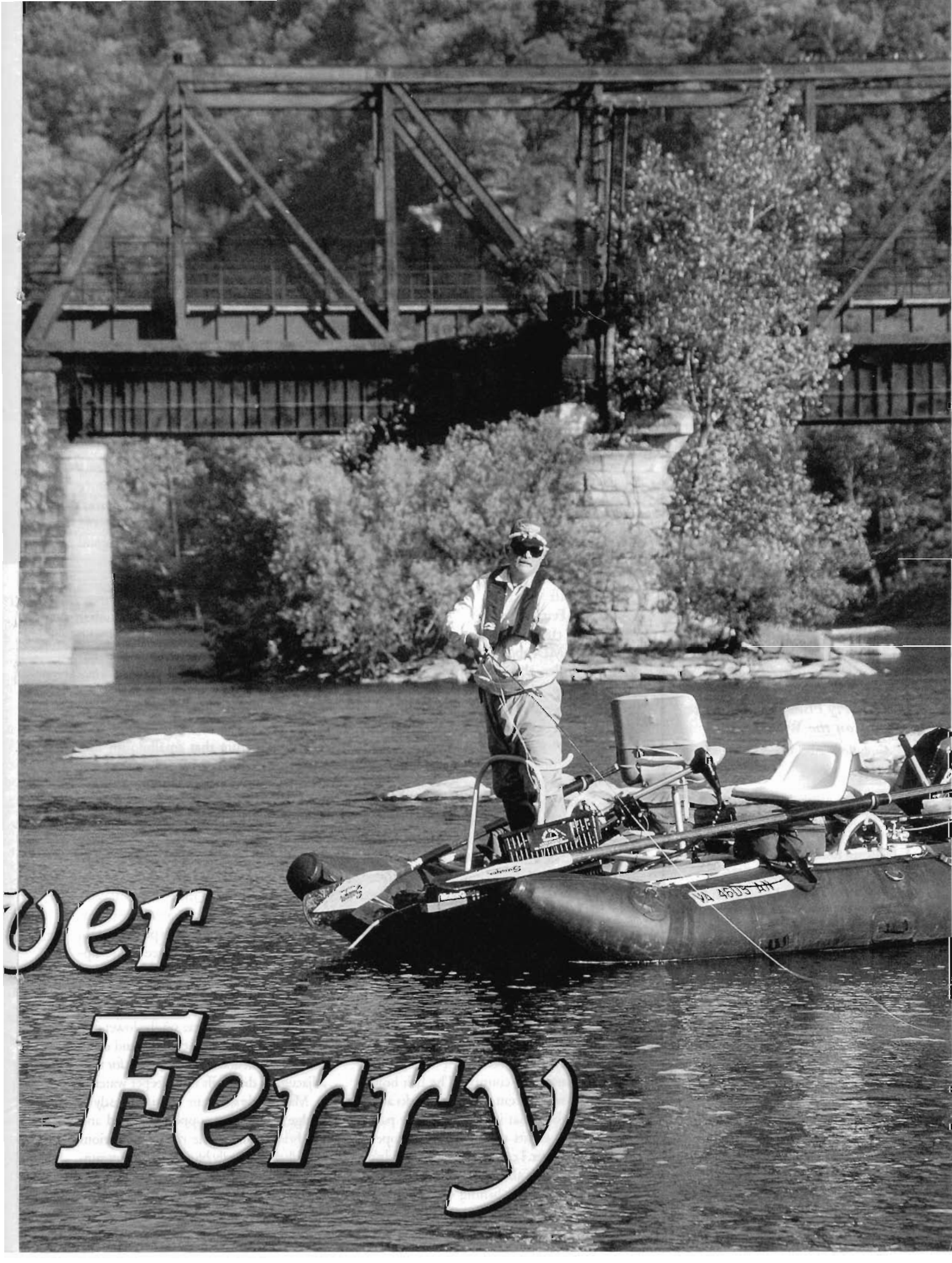




From its source in the Appalachian Mountains of West Virginia, the Potomac River flows almost 400 miles to its destination at the Chesapeake Bay. The upper part of the river—the 275 mile stretch above Great Falls near McLean, Virginia—is primarily a smallmouth bass fishery, supplemented by various sunfishes, channel catfish, and carp. The upper Potomac will give you good fishing, beautiful scenery, and flashbacks into American history. Anglers who find themselves in the Washington, DC area would do well to make its acquaintance.

The Upper
Potomac River
At **Harpers**
Written & Photographed by King Montgomery



ver

Ferry

Flowing Through History

I PEERED INTO THE EARLY morning fog as a dark shape moved across the water toward me. The jet outboard hummed, then was throttled back, and died as the black apparition broke through the haze and ground against the river bank. The rubber craft would be my fishing platform for the day. I looked around. The raft, the river, the fog, and the flicker of the rising sun reminded me of a training assault across Georgia's Chattahoochie River near Fort Benning many years ago. But today I'd be carrying a graphite fly rod instead of an M-16 rifle, and this time, hopefully, I'd stay dry. John Hayes pulled the raft to shore and we loaded it with enough gear to open a fly shop. That done, we cast off and began a slow drift toward Harpers Ferry.

The run from Dargan, MD, about three miles above Harper's Ferry, to Brunswick, MD, another six miles to the east, is a good half day float, longer if you stop along the way and wade or fish from mid-river boulders. John's boat, a demerec inflatable boat (DIB) originally designed for the Special Operations Forces, sported a 25 horsepower jet outboard on the transom, an electric trolling motor on the bow, and 11-foot oars amidships. John had all the locomotion options covered except for sail. The boat was comfortable, maneuverable, and seaworthy, three things I like in a water craft.

"That's known on the river as 'Lefty's Hole,'" said John over the rush of the current. He pointed to the West Virginia side and the fishy-looking spot between two sets of rock ledges that protruded from the water and continued down, staircase-like, into the depths. I could see why Lefty Kreh liked it; it was prime smallmouth bass country. The fish hold on the down current side of the rocks and ambush food that is swept by. It's a pattern that persists throughout the upper Potomac River. I called Lefty and he didn't know anything about "Lefty's Hole," but he does remember fishing such places in

this area. We suspect someone saw him fishing there years ago and the word got around so much it became gospel. Gradually the rail bridge that connected Maryland with West Virginia at Harpers Ferry loomed out of the mist, glazed with orange from the new sun.

Harpers Ferry, WV sits on a prominent point where the Shenandoah River merges with the Potomac River. Famed for being the location of John Brown's uprising before the Civil War, Harpers Ferry now presides over a quieter scene. Anglers fish the waters, and tourists walk the peaceful streets thinking of more turbulent times. Both the fishing and the history are good reasons to visit.

Habitat

THE UPPER Potomac River is strewn with large rocks and ter-

raced with rock ledges. This geological factor severely hindered the digging of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal in colonial times, but today it constitutes the main natural structure that smallmouth bass seek. Find the rocks, preferably with deeper water nearby, and you've found the fish.

Water stargrass and other aquatic vegetation is another fish attractor on the river, particularly where it grows near rocks or ledges. The heavy floods a few years ago scoured the bottom clean of most vegetation, but the last several years of low rainfall and clear water have stimulated a resurgence of aquatic plant growth.

The floods also deposited some uprooted trees in the river and dropped hundreds along the banks. The tangled branches in the water provide food and cover for many creatures on the lower end of the food chain, and the bass and other sunfishes hunt and hide here. Look for trees adjacent to drop offs into deeper water.

Man-made structure consists mostly of bridge pilings that support the road and rail bridges across the river. The various sunfishes, primarily bluegill, redbreast sunfish, and crappie congregate along the pilings on the down current side. Trees in-



While this is primarily a smallmouth bass fishery, don't overlook the other resident gamefish species such as carp (above), sunfish and channel catfish.

variably hang up on the abutments during high water and this marriage of natural and man-made structure makes an unbeatable combination for holding fish.

Tackle Tips

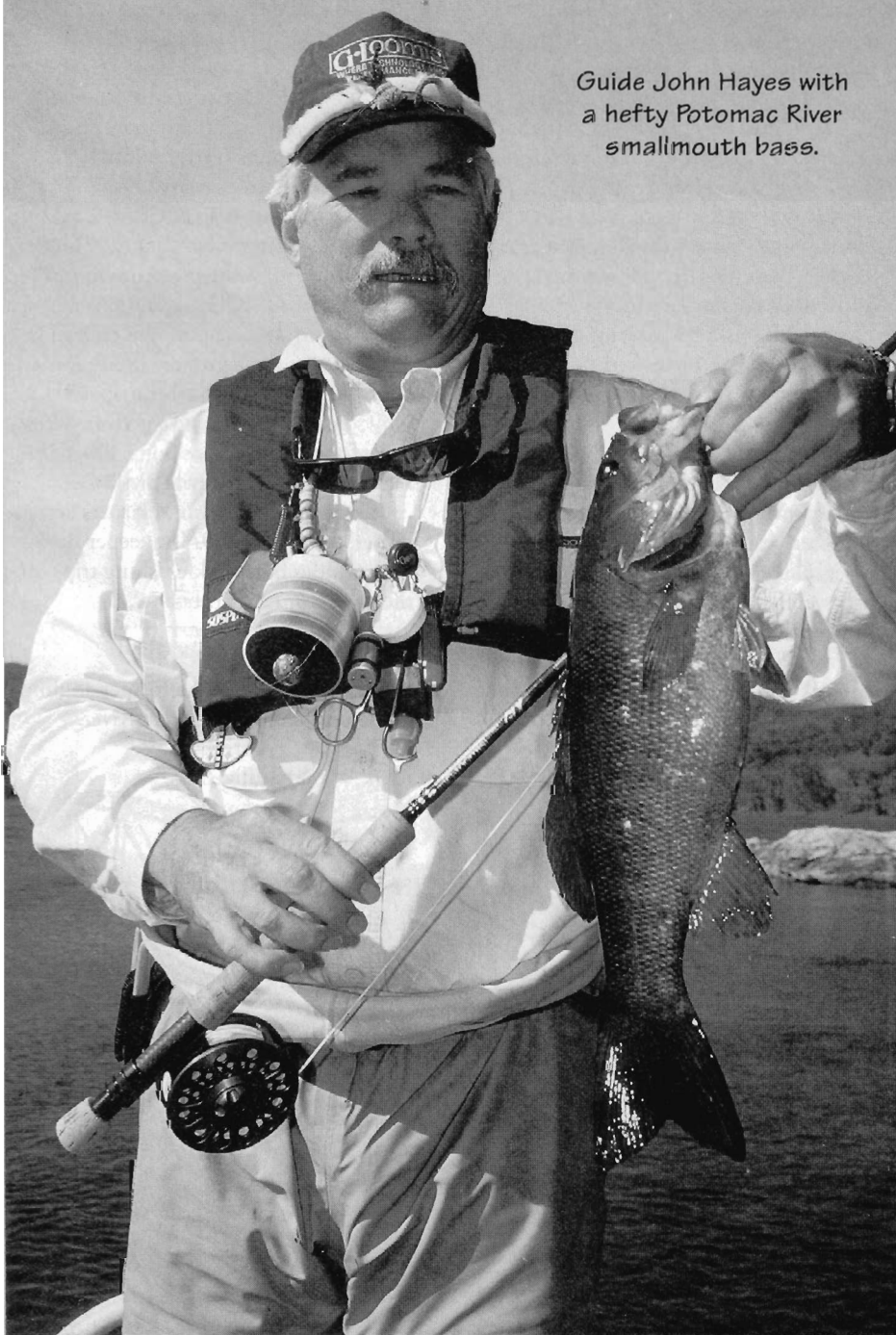
WHEN WADING, I usually use a 9-foot, 6-weight rod. The smallmouth bass average about a foot or so and the plentiful sunfish seldom exceed hand size, so that's plenty of rod for the majority of fish. But there are some hogs in the river, and more seem to show up each year since the floods. According to Hayes and the other guides at Mark Kovach Fishing Services, 1999 was the best year in re-

cent memory for numbers of large, healthy fish. And most year-groups of bass were well represented.

When fishing from a boat, I carry two rods: a 7- or 8-weight, and a 4- or 5-weight. The former handles any fish in the river, including the huge carp that cruise the grassy shallows, and the lighter rod is fun for catching sunfishes and small bass.

In early spring and late fall, sink-tip lines get streamers or nymphs down to the fish, but from late spring into fall a floating line handles most situations. Sometimes, particularly in the summer on overcast or drizzly days, the fish are active on top almost all day, and a good floating, weight-for-

Guide John Hayes with a hefty Potomac River smallmouth bass.



ward, bass-taper line is all you need.

Leaders need not be fancy. For poppers and other surface flies, use a 9-foot knotless leader that tapers to a 6- or 8-pound tippet. As the leader wears down, tie on some new tippet material and keep plugging along. A 7-foot knotless leader tapering to a 6- to 10-pound tippet is a good streamer and nymph choice. Again, add tippet material as the leader shortens.

Flies and Presentation

THE OLD STANDARD smallmouth bass flies—Clousers, Lefty's Deceivers, woolly buggers, muddlers, Dahlberg divers, and assorted poppers and sliders—all work well on the upper Potomac River. But it's always good to check out the local fly patterns by visiting nearby fly shops and speaking with guides and other river old-timers. John Hayes swears by the white C. K. Baitfish, originated by noted Virginia guide Chuck Kraft. Fished on a floating or sinking line, it looks like the many smaller prey species of fish that inhabit the river. John's fellow guide, Butch Murphy, ties a deer hair concoction he calls a "Butch Minnow." It is similar in action to the Sluggo-type plastic lures that spin-fishers use, and works best in white with some sparkle tied in.

For a top-water fly, the Lefty's Potomac Popper (or bug) is hard to beat. This simple fly pre-dates Lefty Kreh's famous deceiver style of fly, and it still catches smallmouth bass; my favorite colors are sky blue, white, and black. The sky blue version seems to imitate the numerous species of blue damselflies and dragonflies that hunt and breed over the river in late spring to fall. White in any fly is effective on the upper Potomac.

Cast Dahlberg divers on floating or sink-tip lines into the branches of fallen

trees, near clumps of water stargrass, and over and around rock ledges. Fish often hold tight to this structure, and a properly presented floater-diver fly will pull them out. Tie them with a sturdy monofilament weedguard. Swim a size-4 or -6 Clouser minnow in chartreuse/white or blue/white in and around submerged vegetation, over and around rocks and ledges, in current breaks and eddies, and into deadfalls along the shore. The up-riding hook of the Clouser makes it relatively weedless.

Bob Clouser and Harry Murray, both smallmouth bass specialists, developed bottom-bouncing flies that work extremely well on the upper river. Clouser's crayfish and Murray's hellgrammite are two excellent flies that mimic the favorite foods of smallmouth bass everywhere. They can be fished upstream and dead-drifted back; or presented across and upstream and worked downstream and across; or cast quartering downstream and worked back against the current. Experiment with presentations and retrieves until you find what's working.

When you fish the upper Potomac River, pause now and then. Take in the sights and sounds of nature in its glory, and see the story of America written on the river. Picture the barges along the C&O Canal which closely follows the river, and hear the muskets of Washington's troops

as they fired on the British. Listen for the sounds of the cannon, the beating hooves of horses, and the cries of men from both sides as they fought and died along the river during the American Civil War. This is the Nation's River, and the songs of nature mingle with the echoes of history as it flows along its course.

Information

Guide John Hayes works for Mark Kovach Fishing Services, Silver Spring, MD. (301) 588-8742.

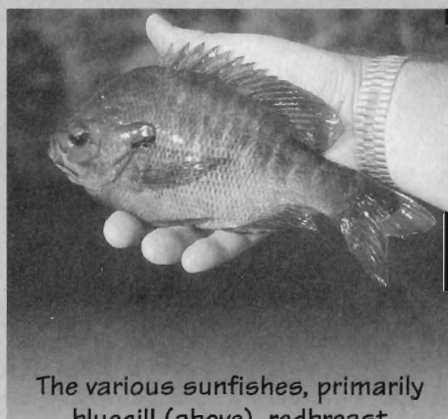
Lee Baihly's River & Trail Outfitters in Knoxville, MD, rents canoes and arranges shuttles for rafters/boaters, (301) 695-5177.

Maps: DeLorme's Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia Atlas & Gazetteer show the Harpers Ferry area. Call (207) 846-7000, or see www.delorme.com for more information. GMCO (1-800-420-6277) has a waterproof map of the river. The Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin has a five-sheet map set that shows historic sites along the river. Write them for information at Suite 300, 6110 Executive Blvd., Rockville, MD 20852.

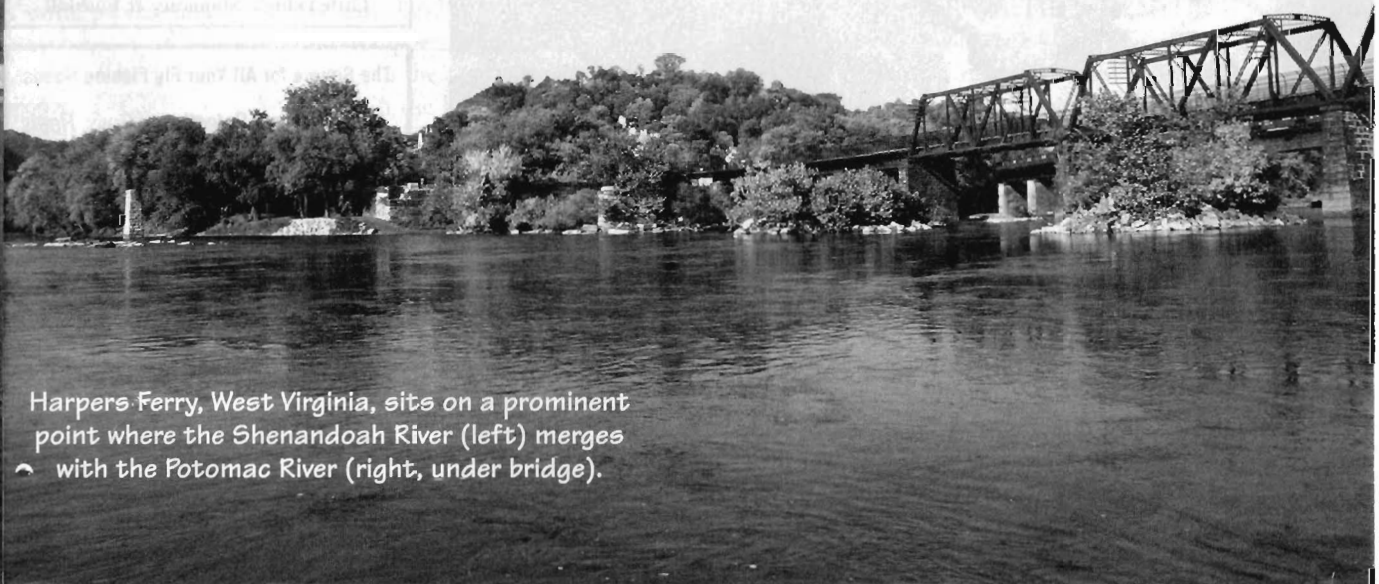
Lodging: Angler's Inn, Harpers Ferry, WV, (304) 535-1239. Innkeeper Bryan Kelly guides light tackle fishing trips on the river from a drift boat.



KING MONTGOMERY is a former angling guide on the tidal Potomac River.



The various sunfishes, primarily bluegill (above), redbreast sunfish, and crappie often congregate around bridge pilings on the down current side.



Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, sits on a prominent point where the Shenandoah River (left) merges with the Potomac River (right, under bridge).