



# **Yankin' and Liftin' Their Whole Lives: A Mississippi River Commercial Fisherman (Shawnee Books)**

*Mr. Richard Younker*

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Using narrative, monologues, and seventy black-and-white photographs, photojournalist Richard Younker examines the life and culture of what is perhaps the last generation of people to make their living as commercial fishermen on the Mississippi River, Junnie Putman and his family and friends.

Younker delves into and illustrates every aspect of Putman's life: how he works, what he does to relax, how he interacts with family and friends. He shows how Putman fished, divulging some of the secrets of the professional fisherman. Examining this fisherman's life—as well as the lives of his relatives and friends—Younker demonstrates Putman's skill as colorful storyteller with a rich vocabulary. Putman proved forthright when expressing his views about life, river lore, and the changing ecology.

These fishermen (who supplement their incomes by hunting and trapping) have various and vigorous encounters with the law, some confrontational, some clever. They also live dangerous lives, working hard, playing hard. And they are quick to fight. Younker photographs and writes about this side of their lives, too.

In each chapter, Younker narrates an aspect of the life and work of Junnie Putman and his family and friends followed by Younker's own black-and-white photographs that help tell the story. Introducing each photograph is a monologue in which Putman or one of his relatives either recounts the history of the family that settled in Bellevue, Iowa, in 1862 or explains the methods and dangers of a specific job.

Although he spent parts of nine years documenting Junnie Putman and his family, Younker condenses his observations into a single year. He shows, for example, how fishing techniques change with the seasons. Putman uses hoop nets in the spring, trotlines in the summer, trammel nets in the fall, seines in the open water in late fall, and seines under the water in winter.

In *Yankin' and Liftin' Their Whole Lives*, Younker presents the richness of a vanishing way of life and the intricacies of its labors. He gives Junnie Putman and his friends the opportunity to speak for themselves. And he shows a culture in decline, demonstrating that descent through Putman's failing health, his death, and the townspeople's reminiscences of his life following the funeral.

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