

THE MAKING OF A FISHERMAN

...By Pat Scouten

I got my first rod and reel sometime around age six. It was a three-section steel telescope pole, to which was attached a cheap single-action bait-casting reel. The line was a hand-me-down silk fly line, which had been dressed so many times it was practically rigid. There were no fancy tapered leaders. I simply tied a six-inch snelled hook to the end of the fly line and went fishing.

At that age, and at that stage of my fishing career, I didn't know that the trout in my native state of Idaho were finicky feeders and that they were leader shy. I knew nothing about matching hatches or delicate presentations. I just used what I had and I caught fish. Actually, I probably caught more large trout per hour fished, during the next three or four years, than I have since I've acquired more experience and more refined tackle.

My first trout, however, were small stream-bred brookies from the Island Park area of Idaho. They were overpopulated and overeager to attack the garden hackle wadded onto my large hook. I don't remember how many I caught, on my first solo fishing jaunts, but I was forever hooked on fishing from that point on.

My home, in Idaho Falls, was only a short distance from Willow Creek. This stream wandered down from the hills to the east, flowed through the northern outskirts of town and emptied into the Snake River. It was full of chubs and suckers, but also held a few rainbows and the occasional cutthroat that had lost its way either downstream from the mountains or upstream from the river.

This creek has long since been relegated to flowing through concrete channels and culverts, whenever there is actually water in it. It was dammed, upstream, many years ago, to provide another irrigation reservoir. While this reservoir now provides good fishing, the stream below the dam is sterile, controlled and covered over all the way through town.

In the days of my youth, however, there were fish to be pursued by a young newly emerging fishing fanatic. The alley that ran behind our house crossed the creek only a half block away. I spent hours laying on the wooden planks of the seldom-used bridge, watching hordes of minnows cavorting in the clear waters. Sometimes there were big bluish suckers feeding along the bottom.

Once I had fishing tackle, and learned how to impale worms on the hook, a good part of most summer days were spent fishing under that bridge. Nothing fancy. I simply stripped some line off the reel and laid the rod down on the bridge's planks. I hand lined the baited hook back to the waiting chubs and sucker minnows and watched them attack the worms.

I'm guessing my hook was probably about a size 4. I was not able to catch very many of the little tykes on that large hook. These hooks came six to a pack and I was still using the first one I had tied on. My inaugural brookies had managed to impale themselves on it, but the little chubs didn't have a mouth much bigger than the point of the hook. No matter. I was fishing.

On a couple of occasions large rainbow trout shattered my equilibrium. They cruised up into the shade beneath the bridge and set up station in full view of my bulging eyes. I tried adding extra worms and guiding the bait right to them, but they would casually just move far enough to one side to allow the unsophisticated offering to drift by them. At this point, I had never seen a spool of leader material and I had no idea of what it might take to entice one of them to bite.

Late one midsummer morning, I was on an exploratory romp with one of my neighborhood chums. We were patrolling the banks of the creek, looking for unwary frogs, garter snakes or anything else worthy of a young boy's attention. On the way back home for lunch, we stopped momentarily at one of the creek's bridges.

Wherever a city street crossed the stream, there was a heavy concrete bridge, with two round culverts carrying the split stream. As we walked down to the upstream end of one of these culverts a grasshopper leaped from the streamside growth and lit in the water. The slow current pulled the hapless hopper back into the culvert.

The event was commonplace and would normally not have even been noticed. That is until there was a large angry splash a few feet back into the tunnel. My young fisherman's brain leaped into hyper mode. That was a fish. I wondered if there would be a repeat if I threw another hopper into the water. I did, and there was.

Leaving my friend wondering what was wrong with me, I scrambled up the bank of the creek and began sprinting toward my house, a couple of blocks away. When I reached the front door, my anxious mother was waiting for me, anticipating that I needed some kind of motherly attention.

I had a tough time fending my mother off as I rounded up my fishing gear. Over her protestations that it was lunchtime and that lunch was almost ready, I dodged around her, promising to be home in a half hour. Though already winded, I fairly flew back to the bridge. I passed my bewildered buddy on the way back and he kept going toward home and lunch.

In the last few feet before I reached the water, I snatched a couple of grasshoppers off the green weeds near the stream. I stripped a few feet of line off my reel, impaled one of the hoppers on my hook and kind of lob-casted the heavy line into the water in front of the culvert.

My tired old over-used fly line still floated, until it became waterlogged during extended use. Having been unused for a couple of days, it was dry and floated back into the dark culvert behind the hopper. I hadn't really formulated a game plan, and wasn't prepared to deal with the consequences if the fish actually took the bait. When I heard the splash, I froze.

Probably more by instinct than intellect I swept the long whippy steel telescope rod back, and made a solid connection with the fish. When I had done this with little brookies, they were unceremoniously lifted out onto the bank, for hook removal and creeling. The big rainbow now at the end of my line was another matter. The tip of the rod didn't move backward. It throbbed in place for a moment and then surged toward the mouth of the culvert.

I had no experience in playing a large fish. I would not have a reel with a drag system for many years into the future. All I knew, at that moment, was that I was attached to the biggest fish of my young life, and that fish was trying to wrest my cherished fishing pole from my grasp. Reverting to my plank bridge fishing technique, I grabbed the line and dropped the rod.

It was pure hand-to-fin combat for several seconds, which seemed like hours. However, the large hook was well lodged, deep in the trout's throat, and nothing short of a salmon could have broken that heavy snelled leader. I got the upper hand and pulled the flopping fish out of its lair and up onto the bank.

It was a beautiful example of a rainbow trout, with classic coloration, a small head and a deep body. It was about 18" and three pounds or so. I was so stunned by the size and the beauty of the fish that I stopped breathing for a moment. I couldn't recall ever seeing my dad or my uncles catching one any bigger. I would never again be the same.

My fumbling fingers and inexperience would not allow me to remove the hook from the fish's throat. My watch told me that I was already late, in keeping my promise to my mother. So, I grabbed my rod, and big loops of line in one hand and hugged the still flopping trout in the other and ran back toward my house. I was a few minutes late for lunch, but my proud mother didn't exact any measure of punishment. She recognized a life moment when she saw one.

For the remainder of that magic summer, and for the next few years until my family moved to California, I floated a lot of grasshoppers into a lot of bridge culverts. I caught a lot of trout and stopped more than a few cars as I walked back home with two or three hefty rainbows on a forked willow stringer. More than once I heard incredulous drivers exclaim, "I drive for hours and don't catch fish like that."

At some point, I acquired a spool of leader material and some loose hooks of different sizes. My presentations became more sophisticated and I was able to take trout in places other than from within darkened culverts. On my lighter leader, however, I lost several very large fish. These were the seeds of my future big fish stories. The sizes of the fish have no doubt grown considerably over the years.

Perhaps one of my most important personal lessons was that all fishing is fun. As I learned to use different baits, presented in different ways, in different types of waters, I discovered that each species of fish offered unique challenges. I freely admit that I have experienced great satisfaction in outwitting some surprisingly small fish, just to prove I could do it.

When I am asked to name my favorite fish, or my favorite kind of fishing, there is no automatic answer. The simplest answer is likely to be “Whatever type I happen to be doing at the time.”

If I were offered the opportunity to go back in time and to recreate any specific angling experience, what would I choose? I’ve thought about that on a few occasions of wistful reminiscence. All blarney aside, I really think I’d like to have the chance to go back to that stream of my youth...even with the same old antiquated tackle...and once again anticipate the splash of a big trout engulfing my floating hopper.

I’ve had the privilege of enjoying some fantastic fishing, for a whole lot of fish, of a whole lot of species. But...I have never had any fishing experience touch me so profoundly and so permanently as that first big rainbow.

They say, “You can never go back”. Well, “they” are both right and wrong. I have been back to my childhood stream, but it’s not the same stream. In fact, it is no longer even a flowing stream any more. As previously mentioned, it’s now covered over as it passes through Idaho Falls. No more young boys will ever again discover trout in it.

I’m what most people would consider to be a “macho” guy. I’m well over six feet tall and too well over two hundred pounds. I’m a lot different than the kid who wrested that first rainbow from Willow Creek so many years ago. But, you know what? You would have thought I was a baby the last time I stood upon the spot where that bridge used to be. My unchecked tears were still not enough to refill the stream of my youth.