

Chapter 35

Transcendental Fly Fishing for Trout

Allah does not deduct from the allotted time of man those hours spent in fishing.

Babylonian Proverb

Years ago, Jim Plafkin, then one of my graduate students, commented, after watching me fly fish for trout, that I was just practicing another form of transcendental meditation. True – my mind was so concentrated on fishing that no other thoughts intruded. I had to decide where in the stream the fish were located, where to cast the fly upstream so that it would float past the trout convincingly, when to pick up the fly and recast, and if the cast should be a repeat or if I should try a new location. After each fishing trip, I felt refreshed and at peace. Trout fishing small brush streams is a solitary adventure, but I achieved nearly the same peace of mind while folk dancing or hiking when I had Jeannie as a companion and partner and numerous friends were always around.

Early Fishing Experiences

During my early childhood, my family rented a cottage at Somers Point, New Jersey. From there we drove to nearby Ocean City for ocean bathing. In the 1920s and 1930s, summer vacations were typically two weeks. The owners of the modest, wooden frame cottage that we rented each summer lived in an identical cottage just a few feet away. The access road to the cottages was unpaved, and a few, somewhat similar, modest cottages were a short distance away. A number of hotels stand in Somers Point at present and much private housing. This growth is not surprising since the population has increased in both numbers and affluence over the past 80 years. I have mentioned before in this autobiography that, during the years while I was in good health and could still easily travel, I have never returned to the haunts of my youth. Places for enjoying solitude were much easier to find during those days; such places became increasingly more difficult to find.

Behind the cottage was a path leading through what then seemed miles of cattails and marsh vegetation to an old rickety wooden pier on a salt water inlet from the bay. My mother always accompanied me in this adventure because the pier was not a safe place for a very young boy. Despite lack of experience with fishing, I actually managed to catch a few fish – they usually came around a dock or pier.

For me, the high point of each summer was a fishing trip on the bay, which I am nearly certain was the Great Egg Harbor Bay. Outboard motors were rare in those days, but the rowboat rental place had one. Would-be fishers in the wooden rowboat they had rented were towed by the single outboard motorboat to various points in the bay at well spaced locations. My mother, father, and I fished with hand lines with a sinker, hooks, and bait (clams and squid), which were all included in the boat rental fee. Each boat was provided with a burlap bag to hold any caught fish. Naturally, we took our own food and beverages – no drive-through in those days. Also, we had no styrofoam cooler for food and beverages. We carried peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, hard boiled eggs, and fried chicken, all of which kept fairly well. Water (not chilled) was the beverage de jour, with coffee in thermos bottles for the adults. Today's teenagers have trouble visualizing such a comfortless life, but it seemed great to me. I probably enjoyed only five or six trips to Great Egg Harbor Bay since I went to work after graduation from high school in 1940 when I turned 17.

I have reflected on why the fishing trips on Great Egg Harbor Bay made such a big impression on me. In retrospect, I believe my perception was that our rowboat was a tiny island in a big bay. Other boats were visible but not intrusive. We could hear the water lapping against the side of the wooden boat and the cries of gulls. Portable radios were not common in those days and would have ruined the ambiance. The ever-alert gulls flocked around a rowboat when an oar was raised to request a tow back to the dock. They knew that leftover bait might be thrown into the water for them. Outboard motors were rare, and water skiing was not yet common. Sometimes, a few large sailboats could be seen. In short, the sounds of nature were not drowned out by technology.

In summer 1941, I had a summer job that took all my time and energy. Then came World War II, three college/university degrees, marriage, and finally a full-time professional job on a field survey team that was very active during summers. I did not even have time to take the children fishing. I am sure this span of time was

very difficult for Jeannie and the children. Most individuals have probably had similar experiences at the beginning of a research career.

This retrospective makes me remember my first date with Jeannie. We talked about the books we had read as children (e.g., *Till Eulenspiegel*), all of which required a vivid imagination. I sometimes wonder if this sharing is part of the compatibility tests that persons seeking a companion take. We both enjoyed the outdoors and the organisms we found there. I had never had a similar conversation with any date during my freshman year (although Jeannie and I were both born in 1923, I started college a year earlier). By the end of our third date, we each had a synopsis of the other's life. Jeannie's mother was somewhat concerned that I came from a mill town, but it did not bother Jeannie. Neither of us pretended to be something or someone that we were not. I was a mediocre student and Jeannie was a regular on the dean's list. In retrospect, the difference in our academic performances was the most surprising aspect of our relationship. Fishing never entered our conversations since I didn't know when, if ever, I would get an opportunity for serious fishing again. In a sense, I was fishing on the field crew at the outset of my research career when I used hoop nets, seines, etc. However, these activities were a far cry from fly fishing for trout. I did a bit of surf casting for blue fish at Surf City and actually caught a few fish, but I was never very adept at it.

Later, at age 38, I was at Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory (RMBL) – with a stream “running through it.” I dusted off my old fly fishing gear and bought a one-piece, 6-foot fly rod that was awkward to transport but perfect for short, precise casting. The East River was teeming with rainbow and brook trout and even a few browns and cutthroats. The dreams of my youth came true. Moreover, I could be fly fishing in a short amount of time – I just put on my waders, walked a short distance, and I was ready. The children got tired of trout for breakfast.

University of Michigan Biological Station

I did research and taught at the University of Michigan Biological Station (UMBS) during summers from 1964 until 1983; then I returned for summers at RMBL. The trout streams of the upper part of the lower peninsula of Michigan were vastly different from the trout streams of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. The stream bed was sand, not rocks, and the streams were lined with trees instead of the arid vegetation of Colorado. I did not fish in the middle of the day but in the evening when my research did not occupy all my time. After all, I was a faculty member and a research investigator at UMBS whose primary duties were to teach and do research, not fish or recreate in other ways. I could not relax and fish if my research program had to be put on hold. I spent two full days each week teaching, plus meeting with students outside of the class day (I had 24 students in my class most years). By careful allocation of my time and the ordering of my priorities, I managed 16 hours/week of lectures in direct teaching, continuous field trips, and publication of results over a multi-year period. I still spent time with my family and on personal recreation about 2-3 times each week.

Carrying out research on perishable materials, such as freshwater protozoan communities, is a fairly demanding process. Once the sample is collected, it must be completely analyzed before it deteriorates. A complex sample cannot be preserved in any acceptable way with so many low density species. On the plus side, protozoans have a cosmopolitan distribution – once an investigator has mastered identification, (s)he can work with them anywhere in the world in freshwater (my experience) or in saltwater (I lacked training in identification of marine species). Protozoans readily colonize polyurethane substrates and are easily removed from them – a blessing when studying colonization dynamics (e.g., Cairns et al. 1969).

Little Stony Creek

When I arrived at Virginia Tech in 1968, I was prepared to confine trout fishing to summers at field stations, even though I had hiked the beautiful nature trail along Little Stony Creek a number of times. However, Jay Stauffer, then one of my graduate students, would drop by my office on Saturday mornings and ask, “Why are you here when you could be trout fishing?” I had no good answer to this question, so we went trout fishing. Our favorite streams were Little Stony Creek, John's Creek, and Big Stony Creek. Little Stony Creek became my favorite because it became restricted to artificial lures and barbless hooks only a few years after I arrived at Virginia Tech. John's Creek was a backup for Little Stony Creek – small, brushy, very lightly fished, and, naturally, a brook trout stream. The upper reaches of Big Stony Creek had both rainbow trout and brook trout, as did Little Stony Creek. I probably went trout fishing only 9-10 times during the academic year, which was enough for me to learn the creeks fairly well. I always returned all the fish I caught after wetting my hand to avoid damaging the mucus coat of the trout. Barbless hooks made releasing the fish uncomplicated. I could easily have gone fishing more often, but I enjoyed the activities Jeannie and I shared (hiking, folboting, swimming, concerts, folk dancing, etc.), which I gave the highest priority.

Tying My Own Trout Flies

I felt that I would never experience the full ambiance of trout fishing unless I tied my own flies. So, I purchased a wooden fly-tying box with all the needed compartments and stocked it with all the hackle, vises, hooks, and so on. I also purchased a pair of fly-tying magnifying glasses and three instruction books. One piece of good luck was the opportunity to watch a skilled fly-tier at work.

I would never have been able to support myself by tying flies, but I caught trout with mine, and the flies held together almost half as long as the ones I purchased from a professional in North Carolina, which is good for an amateur. A major benefit was that I never thought the flies I purchased from the professional were overpriced. However, the primary satisfaction was my knowing that the ones I tied fooled the trout.

LITERATURE CITED

Cairns, J., Jr., M. L. Dahlberg, K. L. Dickson, N. Smith and W. T. Waller. 1969. The relationship of fresh-water protozoan communities to the MacArthur-Wilson equilibrium model. *American Naturalist* 103(933):439-454.