

Young Man's Fancy

A short fly fishing story by Samuel Smith Webster Jr,
Gregg Wrisley's Grandfather



The Fisherman - SSW at Amos Elliott's Ranch
at Cloverdale, Calif. Year ? 1938-39

(Elliott ranch is currently The Old Crocker Inn, <https://www.oldcrockerinn.com/crocker-ranch-history/>)

Forward



About 6 months before the accident, Gregg at age 1 ½

I recently received a copy of my Grandfather's diary from my Aunt who found it in her basement. Sam Webster, the author, is my maternal Grandfather. He grew up poor on Chesapeake Bay. His father was a Waterman (harvested oysters etc. from a boat). The other part of his diary describes his time in the Navy during WWI. With the skills acquired in the Navy, he became a successful CPA and moved to Pasadena, CA (a nice bootstrap story). He was an outdoorsman and loved fishing - both saltwater and freshwater. I remember seeing his wooden boxes of bamboo rods in my parents' attic. About two years after I was born, he and my Grandmother were coming back from a trip to Oregon when their car was hit by an out of control semi-truck near Dunsmuir, CA. My Grandmother had injuries that stayed with her the rest of her life. Although my Grandfather was not badly injured, a doctor's assistant gave him a spinal injection to check for damage, which resulted in him being paralyzed from the waist down.

So all my memories are of him in bed or occasionally in a wheelchair, not a happy man. He died in 1969 at age 76. I've often thought of what our relationship might have been like if he hadn't lost the use of his legs.

I hope that you enjoy this look back into time as much as I did. There is no date on this story, but my best guess is that it took place during the 1930's.

Gregg

"IN THE SPRING A YOUNG MAN'S FANCY **

lightly turns to thoughts of love". The poet was undoubtedly right when he penned these immortal words, but he didn't go far enough. There are other things towards which a young man's fancy, or, for that matter, any man's fancy, turns during these marvelous spring days when the sap begins to run. For example, the golf bug drags forth from the dark recesses of the basement his bag of "trusty" clubs and shines them up in anticipation of chasing the elusive ball over the rolling greensward. Your baseball fan anxiously awaits the throwing out of the first ball by the president or lesser local dignitary and the sweet music of the crack of ash against horsehide. The lovers of nature think of hieing themselves forth to the desert to feast their eyes upon the profusion of wild flowers. And last, but not least, the devotees of Isaak Walton bring out the creel, rod and reel in hopeful expectation of piscatorial triumphs to come. Ah, there, my friends, is the sport of kings. To paraphrase the words of another illustrious poet, "Lives there a man with soul so dead, that never to himself hath said ** " this time I'll catch that big steelhead, or words to that effect.

~~1~~

What true sportsman does not thrill in anticipation as he oils up the old reel, tests the whip of his rod and sorts out his various flies? In fact, many months before the advent of spring, and while yet the memory of that last hopeful trip in pursuit of the elusive trout is fresh in his mind, your real fisherman is lining up his friends and cronies of the same persuasion, and making plans for the "kill" on the opening day of the season. Sleeping bags are brought forth and aired, that bent leg on the gasoline stove is mended, and the rest of the camping gear inspected. If the fisherman's wife and family discover him in his den with a stack of old maps out before him that to the uninitiated eye appear as material interesting only to the elementary student in forestry, the symptoms are readily understandable and the wisest thing to do is to tiptoe silently from the august presence.

In the nature of things, the results of all this preparation and anticipation will have to be recounted before the blazing logs of winter fires, but lest the reader be in doubt as to the outcome of such an expedition it is the intention of the writer to give a first-hand account of a similar trip during the late lamented season,

for after all a fishing excursion to be made this year is much like one made last year, both in execution and results.

The trip that I am about to describe occurred the latter part of May last year. It was deliberately planned for this time to avoid the rush of neophytes who infest the banks of all available streams on the opening day, and who are just as likely to cast their flies - did I say "flies"? - but more of this later on - into the eyes of their neighbors as into the mouths of the hungry trout. For, be it known, that this fishing party consisted of real fishermen, or to be more specific, three real fishermen, as the writer lays no claim to piscatorial prowess.

First, there was Fred, who is a real dyed in the wool fisherman, and who would never, never - well, almost never - stoop so low as to attempt to fool an unsuspecting trout with a salmon egg. In fact, we have all heard Fred expatiate on the thesis that the use of such bait is the one cardinal sin, and anathema to all true fishermen. His forte is a consummate skill in fly-casting. Give him barely enough room to whip back his rod and he will cast his fly into a pool thirty or forty feet away, be it ever

so small. The thought of using salmon eggs is so distasteful to him that he steadfastly refuses to include a jar of them in his fishing kit, lest in a moment of temporary weakness, when the blasted fish seem disinclined to have flies for breakfast, lunch or dinner, he might be tempted to use them.

As might be expected, Fred is also an ardent exponent of the out-of-doors life, and delights in hiking and tramping the mountain and forest trails, not alone in the search for elusive trout and game, but for the pure love of the thing itself. He is big and hard and perfectly at home on the upper deck of a horse. He has, by long experience, learned the hideout of the trout that "infest", so it is said, the many streams of the high Sierras, and knows all the trails that lead to the spot or spots where they are wont to banquet. This being so, what is more natural than that Fred should, by common consent, be accorded the leadership of this particular fishing expedition?

Next there was Hal, who aside from his sterling qualities as a good fellow, is about the handiest man imaginable on a trip like this. He is a good cook, and can mend the camp gear or cast a fly with equal skill.

Whenever there is any work to be done about camp, Hal will be found in the forefront doing more than his share. He is a strong hiker, a good horseman, and experienced in tracking down the fish to their lair. Now, Hal has no aversion to the use of salmon eggs, and has on several occasions been observed stooping so low as to use grasshoppers and helgimites. He appears, however, to be partial to live grasshoppers, and if, shortly after the fishing begins, he is seen diving in the grass with his battered felt hat in his hand, we all know that the fish are not rising to the fly as per expectations, and that Hal is laying in a supply of his favorite bait. To give the devil his due, though, Hal always gives the fish a chance to take the conventional flies, and, while perhaps not so skilled as Fred, he is a good fly-caster. Hal is an engineer by profession, and knows all the answers, or professes to know them. He can rattle off the names of all the villages, roads and streams, and is rarely stumped on any question. All in all, one could hardly find a better friend or companion on a fishing trip than Hal.

Then there was Doc, the old cock-roach, who, when he is not chasing the errant trout, is a surgeon of no

mean ability. Doc is something of an expert at fly-casting, and, like Fred, disdains to fool the poor trout with salmon eggs or any other form of bait. He has, however, on rare occasions been known to use bait, for he was once observed on a similar trip assiduously lifting rocks and stones from the edge of the stream in search of helgimites. When such a thing happens, though, one may well conclude that the fishing for that day has reached a low ebb, and amateur fishermen like the writer might just as well save themselves further trouble and effort by packing up the fishing things and hieing themselves back to the camp to bask in the sunshine and invigorating mountain air. In fact, Doc is such a devotee of fly-fishing that he makes his own flies, and has attained quite a degree of proficiency in the art.

The fourth member of the party was none other than your humble servant, who lays no claim to piscatorial prowess so far as fresh water fishing is concerned, although he does take pardonable pride in the results of his efforts with the denizens of the briny deep. This, however, is a fresh water fishing story, and the fly-fishing reader need not fear being bored with accounts of the writer's successful jousts with yellowtail, bonita,

halibut and the like, than which there is in our humble opinion no better sport. As for trout fishing, it is a curious coincidence, that on every trip thus far taken the writer, as well as his companions, have been the unfortunate victims of weather conditions, and have been compelled to return home empty-handed.

This distressing condition has been variously attributed by fishing experts to the fact that either (a) the water was too high, (b) the water was too low, (c) the moon was too full, (d) the moon was not full enough, (e) the water was too cold, (f) the water was too warm, and so on, ad infinitum. Judged solely by results, I cannot even testify of a certainty that there were any trout at all in the streams visited, although it is rumored each year that many thousands of fish have been planted by the State Fish and Game Commission.

The term "poor fish" has been commonly used to describe human beings who exhibit great mental ineptitude, but this constitutes nothing less than gross slander when applied to the wily trout, who, with diabolical cunning, manages to elude the most expert fisherman and make him look like thirty cents.

Purely out of deference for the beliefs of my

companions, I generally start fishing with flies, although this is not an invariable rule. After a few unsuccessful "casts", including time out spent in un- tangling the line from trees and bushes, I unhesitatingly and without shame switch to salmon eggs, worms, helgimites or what have you, feeling that the end justifies the means.

On this particular trip we had planned to get away immediately after work on a Friday afternoon. So, on the appointed day we loaded all the fishing gear and other dunnage into Fred's Cadillac and started on our way to the high Sierras, where the trout were expected to be ravenously awaiting our coming. A stop was made at Mo- have for dinner, and at about sunset we made our way through Red Rock Canyon. This is a sight long to be re- membered, with the last rays of the setting sun casting purple shadows about the turrets and temples carved by nature out of these strange rock formations. It reminds one of a miniature Grand Canyon of the Colorado.

Our scheduled destination was the north fork of the Kern River, where the boys had heard that the fishing was good, and we were to stop at the roadside place operated by one Billy Ball, who was, we thought, expect- ing us and would arrange pack horses for our trip in to

the river the next morning. By the time we arrived at Ball's place it was quite dark, and we found Billy out in front of his service station hiding behind a growth of whiskers and beard that would have been the envy of Man Mountain Dean. Much to our surprise, it developed that Billy had never heard of our projected trip, and had therefore made no arrangements for us. He furthermore informed us that the water was very low on the north fork of the Kern, and we might have to do considerable searching around for pools deep enough to hide a lurking trout.

Feeling quite put out by Mr. Ball's evident lack of interest in such an important trip as ours, we left him to his whiskers and departed on our way. Somewhat farther on we stopped at a service station for gas - incidentally, we were doing this with alarming frequency - and inquired about the fishing in those parts. We were informed that good catches were being made in the Owens River, so we decided to push on to Bishop and get some sleep so that we might be in readiness for the slaughter of the morrow. Fred, however, was not enthusiastic, as he detests fishing in the Owens River. He claims that the water is too warm, and that if we caught any fish it would be no sport, and they would not be fit to eat. As

it was getting close to midnight, we stopped at a hotel in Bishop, and, after taking a good healthy dose of snake-bite, retired for the night.

At the break of dawn we were up and getting dressed and were soon on our way to the Owens River, which by the way was only a short distance from Bishop. Arriving there we unlimbered the fishing rods and proceeded to set the banquet table for the finny tribe. The invited guests were, however, slow to appear, and we worked our way up and down the river, all the while casting tempting flies on the swiftly moving stream. I soon learned that if the trout doesn't take one fly, the thing to do is to keep changing flies until one is found that suits the taste of Mr. Trout. The theory seems to be that if the fish will not take a brown hackle, it is perhaps because they had brown hackle for dinner the previous night and are tired of it, whereas if they were fed a nice dish of royal coachmen they would go for it in a big way. There must be something wrong with the theory, though, for Fred and Hal and Doc tried nearly every fly in their kit without the least semblance of success. As for me, after casting a few flies around without a strike, I switched to salmon eggs, and finally to my surprise an eight-inch trout

grabbed the hook and was promptly yanked twenty-feet up on the bank of the river. Things began to look more hopeful, but alas, the rest of the trout, if such there were, must have taken warning from the dire fate that had overtaken their brother, and nary another strike was had.

By this time the other boys were disgusted and wanted to get away from there as soon as possible and get to a new place that they had thought of, where the fishing might be better. I proudly exhibited my catch as proof that there were fish in the Owens River, but could not arouse any enthusiasm. We therefore piled into the car, returned to the hotel in Bishop for our things, and were soon on our way. The filling station proprietor in Bishop told us that fishing in the Walker River was good, so we thought we could do no worse than try it. Before we got there, however, we stopped at another roadside gas station, and were informed that the Walker River fishing was no good, but that the lakes around Rock Creek were yielding some nice catches. It is a curious thing how much misinformation one can secure about fishing conditions from the inhabitants along the roads into the high Sierras. One will go into detail telling how good the fishing is in Whoozis Lake, while the next man will

flatly contradict him and assert with apparent authority that fishing conditions were never worse. The only sensible thing to do is for the angler to pick his spot before starting, and refuse to be diverted by roadside advice, much of which it is strongly suspected is of an interested nature.

Well, after driving around a bit, during which the writer took a well-earned snooze, we finally turned around and headed for Rock Creek, arriving there in the late afternoon. We were soon settled in a nice cabin, and decided to try out the lakes that were nearby, from which we were told that good catches were being taken. The lakes were beautiful, but none of us had any luck except Hal, who caught two small trout. We therefore returned to the Lodge, devoured a nice dinner, and after arranging for horses for the next morning, retired early. Fred had told us that Tamarack Lake was only a few hours' ride on horseback from the camp, and he would undertake to lead us to it the next day, where he felt sure we would all be well rewarded for our efforts.

Bright and early next morning we were up, had breakfast at the Lodge and by seven o'clock were mounted on our horses ready to begin what ultimately turned out

to be a long and arduous trip. This was Fred's party and he led the way, as he was the only one who "knew" where Tamarack Lake was located and how to get to it. The elevation at the Lodge was about 7,000 feet and Tamarack Lake was said to be about 12,500 feet high, which is no mean climb. The horses labored up the mountain trails, and one never ceases to marvel at their ability to negotiate a trail that seems to go straight up. On and on we went until we finally reached a grassy meadow, where at our slightest inattention the horses would stop to eat grass. After about an hour we came to a fork in the trail, and Fred, upon considering the matter, finally decided that the trail leading to the right was the correct one. We continued on this trail for perhaps an hour, when it began to give out and we ran smack into a mountain apparently made out of loose stones and boulders. Doc and I felt that we had lost the way, but Fred thought otherwise and we started climbing on up over the rocks, until at last fearing that the horses would stumble and break their legs, we dismounted and began leading them by their bridles. After a half hour of this Doc became winded and had to sit down to rest, and I followed suit shortly after, both of us being quite soft and unused to

the hard going. Hal and Fred continued on, leading their horses over the boulders, on which there was nothing remotely resembling a trail. Doc and I decided we would sit down and rest until they had reached the crest of the mountain, when, if they continued on, we would follow. They plodded on for perhaps an hour, until finally they reached the top, tied their horses to a boulder and disappeared into an opening in the hills. While we didn't wish them any hard luck, we surely hoped they were wrong and would have to return, as the prospect of dragging our horses over two or three miles more of rocks was very uninviting. Soon Fred and Hal reappeared, untied their horses and began the long return. Boy, what a grand and glorious feeling we experienced, and we began congratulating ourselves on our good judgment in not following.

They soon joined us, and we retraced our course to the spot where the trail divided. By this time I had had quite enough, and did not care if I never saw another horse, much less riding one; even the fine edge of our enthusiasm for the fishing was worn somewhat thin. Fred, however, was determined to go on, for he had agreed to take us to Tamarack Lake and he was going to do so or bust. If you knew Fred, you would realize that this was

not only a matter of personal pride with him but was due to his grim determination to accomplish what he had set out to do. Hal, not to be outdone, seconded the motion, and if not raring to go, seemed at least eager enough. I didn't think Doc would go on, as he seemed quite winded from the climb over the rocks, but apparently he had recovered and also voted to continue. Although not lacking in determination myself - some call it stubbornness - I had had enough, and as I was not leading the party and had no personal pride to uphold, I would have been just as well satisfied to return to camp. Being outvoted, three to one, however, we decided to go on.

We had by this time been in the saddle for approximately five hours, as it was then about noon. Soon the trail began to go up again, and we continued to climb the mountains for another two hours. The trail finally became so steep that the horses had to stop every few yards, until at last we found it necessary to dismount and lead them the rest of the way. A clearing soon appeared, and topping the crest of a hill, there lay Tamarack Lake, flanked by two smaller lakes. I was so tired that my sense of appreciation of the beauties of nature were dulled, and I didn't care whether there were any fish in

the lake or not. We tied our horses, unpacked our fishing gear, and each selected an appropriate spot on the bank of the lake. We had brought along our lunches, and now proceeded to devour them. Doc and Fred went around the farther side of the lake, while Hal and I picked out a spot nearer at hand. After eating our lunches, Hal rigged up his fishing tackle, but I had completely lost interest in the fish and looked around for a soft spot to take a well-earned nap. Hal seemed to consider my action something of a sacrilege, and after failing to interest me in the fish, fixed up my tackle and urged me to have a go at it. It finally decided to try my hand, and in less than five minutes I had hooked a big rainbow trout and landed him. This put a different complexion on the matter, and true to the instincts of a fisherman, even if not a fresh water one, I began to fish in earnest. I caught one more trout, but that was all. Hal had in the meantime snared two or three, but Fred and Doc on the other side of the lake had not had a strike.

Having reached the lake so much later than we intended, there was not much time left for fishing, so after a couple of hours we decided it was time to begin

the return journey. Riding down the trail, while not as hard on the horse, seems much harder on the rider, though in this case it may have been due to the previous long hours in the saddle. I rode in first one position, then another, but none of them seemed comfortable, until I finally got off and led the horse. Walking, even in my state of exhaustion, was preferable to spending another minute in that confounded saddle. We made the trip back to the camp, in record time, but the precipitous drop of some 5,000 feet in such a short period affected my heart so that I almost dropped out of the saddle when we reached the corral. After washing up a bit, we had dinner at the Lodge, but I had no appetite, and my heart began pounding so that I had to return to the cabin and go to bed. Fortunately, good old Doc had his kit along, and he gave me some medicine or something, so that the next morning I was all right again.

All of us had apparently had enough, and it was decided to start home right after breakfast. The things were packed, the car made ready, and we were soon rolling on our way home, having had a very enjoyable trip. Lest this last statement be not understood by the uninitiated, it should be pointed out that, while a limit of trout is

the ostensible object of the journey, the lack of it does not serve to dim the pleasure to be derived from such a trip when congenial fellows get together.

After seven or eight hours of brisk driving, we were home again with our families, weary, but happy, until the vague symptoms of restlessness indicate that another "fishing" trip is in the offing.