

The Last Fishing Trip

Before my father passed away three years ago at age 100, I called him in Sequim and proposed that we take a nostalgic trip to Idaho and visit some of the places we had fished over a half century earlier. He enthusiastically agreed and we planned to include the Henry's Fork of the Snake River and Williams Lake in our trip out, and stop at Silver Creek and the Wood River on our return.

I picked him up from a shuttle van to stay overnight before a long drive the next day. He was eager and had his fly rod and suitcase ready to travel. We set forth on I-90 and as we crossed the narrow panhandle of Idaho Dad confessed to me that a couple of days earlier he had fallen and cracked his tailbone. This explained why he brought an inflatable doughnut to sit on. We arrived the next day at Last Chance, Idaho where I had reserved a motel and fishing guide service.

In the morning we set out to drift the Box Canyon stretch, a branch of the Henry's Fork that originates at the dam-controlled outlet of Henry's Lake. Sitting on the doughnut in the guide's drift boat he could still skillfully cast the dry, hopper fly with a bead-head, prince nymph plying the bottom beneath it. Unfortunately the keepers of the dam reduced the flow right after we launched and the trout we were seeking dived under their moss beds.

The guide got out of the boat and held on to it to keep dad fishing in promising water. Finally success. Dad hooked and brought to net a nice rainbow trout after a struggle through which he grimaced, alternating expressions between excitement and butt pain. I admired the trout as he released it and heard him say, "When you get really big I'll come back for you." The guide looked at me over his sunglasses and I could hear his thoughts muttering, "That fish had better grow fast because this guy is 97 years old." The next day we departed and drove to Salmon, Idaho.



Virgil Cross catching his last trout on Henry's Fork

As a youth I looked forward every August to our fly fishing and camping trip at Williams Lake, near Salmon. Dad and I especially wanted to re-visit the lake because of the memories of fishing there with his father, my brother, and uncle, all now deceased.

Then the best way to get to the lake was by ferrying people, supplies and gear across the Salmon River on an overhead cable car. The owners of a ranch near the outlet creek to the lake would meet us and load our gear on pack horses. We would all mount horses and it took the rest of the morning to trail our caravan up some-thousand feet of altitude to the lake.

An ancient landslide created a dam across the canyon and Williams Lake is backed up behind it. Amazingly the ranchers had horse-packed several row boats up to the lake shore. There we loaded ourselves, a bird dog and all the gear into two of them. It was a long row, with regular stops for bailing, to a campground at the upper end of the lake. We made camp and caught lively, fat rainbow trout mostly on flies that imitate the abundant fresh water shrimp in the lake.

Knowing that a road had since been built to the lake and that there were boats for rent at the marina, I called the Williams Lake Resort and was told the entire complex had been recently purchased and made part of an expensive guest ranch. Their boats were now only available for use by guests. After I explained the purpose of our request the manager relented. He offered a boat in the morning with a warmed up engine at no charge to a couple of old guys fishing more for memories than trout.

Motoring slowly we cruised the shoreline remembering fish caught, nearly sinking in a storm and a trout grandfather hooked that jumped completely over the boat. We beached at our old campground and pleasantly found that it was relatively unchanged. The slanting boulder where many pans and coffee cups had fallen off was still there. We

quietly sat on a log looking at the dark cliffs meeting the water where the first sign of feeding fish had brought cries of, "They are jumping," initiating a rush to the boats. Those were good times with happy memories.



Dallas at Williams Lake Campground

Around the rest of the lake there were now many summer cabins and the residents had lowered the lake level to reduce winter ice damage to their buildings. At the upper end a muddy lake bottom was now exposed. Before it had been a shallow bay sheltering tadpoles, juvenile trout and their food sources.

On the way back to the dock I caught only one trout. After I released it dad said, "That's it." I knew he was disheartened with the changes and was hurting. It was time to head directly for home forgoing fishing in Silver Creek and Wood River. Dad never fished again. The image of him catching his last trout in Henry's Fork is not only in my photograph album, but also graphic in my remembrance of our family's many good times with fish.



Virgil and Dallas (shadow) heading home on Williams Lake

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