2. Wenatchee Steelhead and Montana Trout

Paul Ford

*Western Washington University, paulmaryannford@charter.net*

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Cover photo is Bill Barnett—fly fisher extrodinaire

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paulmaryannford@charter.net
October is here. Sage and turpentine brush scent is on the cool morning air and our little quail pals are calling and puttering around early today. We have seen the season’s red cherries, orange peaches and apricots and purple plums and green-yellow or russet pears. Now the whole valley is enriched with a harvest of gold and red Delicious apples framed in green leaves. Our valley is an emerald inset with glistening hues. It rests amidst towering brown desert hills that reach high above Saddle Rock and Castle Rock to fir caps and enchanted snow fields.

All this color is enlivened by a cobble-bottomed, crystalline river born of cascading icicle creeks and a deep lake set midst soaring forested, ice-crusted peaks--Mastiff and Dirtyface and all the rest with their sometimes colorful but mostly plain names. The Wenatchee plunges turquoise and white through Tumwater canyon to rush and meander among green willows and brightly burning yellow aspen. The river carries a special harvest for me and that harvest is called the summer run steelhead--a fish to astound and confuse even the most patient of fly fishers. Bless this chuckling Wenatchee and all its creatures.

Fishing this week has been good. My fishing partner, Bill Barnett, affectionately known as the Major, is out of town and so I have been plying the waters alone and making some interesting discoveries. Most important, because the water temperature is quite warm, in the sixties, with stream flow of only 450 CPS, the summer runs are holding in faster water than where you might normally expect to find them. This water is well-flushed with oxygen and probably a little cooler than the slower stretches. Black is a very good fly color this week. My black marabou with silver rib attracts lots of strikes—though most come from foot-long fish that look like overgrown steelhead smolts; could these be fish that have forgotten to go to sea? But the best fly is a weighted Kaufmann Black Stonefly Nymph. Bend down the barb and sling that baby into those faster water grooves with a sink-tip line. Fish it just like bait—bump, bump, bump along the bottom and every now and then silver magic engulfs it. Wait ‘til I report this to the Major—though perhaps not all of it!
He and his talking Brittany Spaniel, Misty, are waiting for me in their front yard. We load up the fly tackle and the old rug Misty will rest on as we pursue our travels today and we’re off. No, not to the river, but to Cashmere and that grand establishment on Elberta Street called Barney’s Tavern. Don’t get the wrong idea—no eye openers for us. Barney’s serves the best crisp bacon or sausage patties, eggs and hash browns imaginable. One of their plate-overlapping pancakes will hold you all day. But they also serve up some pretty interesting conversation and this morning Bill is the object of that conversation.

Leaving Misty in the wagon to wait for us, we enter the tavern. The Major is in his neoprene waders because he doesn’t like to take time to put them on once we get to the river. The regular gang of orchardists is at its table, gabbing and finishing coffee before heading out to their fieldwork. They all know Bill and give him the big hello. Then one wag says to him, “Hey, you’re suited up pretty tight in them waders. What do you do if you have an urgent call? Seems like you need a trap door or a button-up rear panel.” We all have a good laugh. After a while the lady who has been cooking Bill’s breakfasts here for years sidles up to him and whisper’s, “Say big boy, what do you do in an emergency?”

Misty is waiting patiently for her treat. We always bring her toast bites. She is especially glad that I have become Bill’s fishing partner because he orders his toast burned and I order mine normal. She has pointed out to me on previous occasions that the Major’s odd eating habits result in poor snacks for her. Who ever heard of a dog eating carrot stick butts or apple cores or lettuce leaves? Misty has her cross to bear. No doubt about that.

Today we are fishing the Monitor park drift and upon our arrival the Major eyes my fly tackle with suspicion and then disdain. It’s not the ten foot seven weight rod that bothers him. It’s the sink-tip line I’ll cast. Bill fishes a floating line with his fly sunk just under the surface. He’s kind of snobby about people who use a sink-tip line. Misty is on her leash and we proceed across the park’s verdant lawns and then plow through ankle-deep yellow sand past clumps of thistle and thorn, crab and quack and scrubbby poison oak. Bleached, rounded, boot-sized river run rocks along the waterline make our every step an adventure. Bill’s blue-wader-clad buttocks bounce over the landscape like those of some bird-dog in hot pursuit of a sneaky chukar. I think to myself that he and Misty show about the same rear profile. I’ll remind him about this over lunch—tough old buzzard.

The river is low and a bit warm at almost sixty degrees. The fish will be in faster water enriched with oxygen. That’s not a guess, it’s a fact based on my earlier experience here this week. I have not been exactly direct in communicating this knowledge to my partner.

At water’s edge we pause and Bill gives me a questioning look and his typical shoulder shrug, “Where do you want to start? After all. I was here first,” he
utters giving me the steely-eyed stare and then the big grin. What can I say? Misty glances anxiously from Bill to me and back again to Bill as if to say, “Come on you two birds. Make up your minds. I have fish to fry.”

“Pick your spot Bill, I’ve caught some fish this week.” So he wades into position at the head of the drift—just a bit above the marker tree on the opposite bank. I am to fish behind him. He has fished this place a zillion times.

“You see that drift over there across the river and under those trashy-looking aspen?” says Bill. “Last year when Russell Chatham was over here from Livingston peddling his books and paintings, he stayed with Jo and me thanks to your introduction. Would you believe he caught three fish under that tree on a dry fly! Can you believe it? Not only that, Russell must have the constitution of a goat. He drank my last three bottles of cabernet that night. Good thing there wasn’t any more for him to sniff out. I should charge you for his lodging and booze.” This is about the tenth time Bill has proudly retold me his experience with one of the country’s greatest all-round artist, writer, fly fishers.

“Well,” intones the reverend Bill in his radio announcer voice, “this floating line won’t bother the fish for you.” His implication is clear. He thinks that my sinking line will bother the fish for him. Off he hops across the cobbles as perky as Misty on a rooster. Released from bondage, Misty lifts her muzzle, scents a sweet something, thinks about it for a moment and “woofs” into the crackly sage and bramble.

My target is a long but only two foot deep run fifty yards above Bill who looks at me as if I have gone bonkers. His shrug tells me that no sane person would trouble that water; it is too shallow, too exposed. He edges carefully into casting position—the ever faithful Silver Hilton at the ready. My wading staff and aluminum ribbed rubbers, worn over wader shoes, give some assurance against a tumble. Still, these rounded foot-in-diameter cobbles are a challenge. The river bottom is not so much slippery as it is uneven. One boot foot is always above the other or it is squeezed and stuck between two conveniently spaced and solidly implanted rocks. I practice the steelheader’s stagger.

This morning’s offering is my own black marabou spey, tied very sparse over a silver ribbed body on one of Alec Jackson’s classic blue spey hooks. Alec taught me to tie this simple fly at a lesson he gave at Wenatchee’s Blue Dun Fly shop. That was the day when Alec, a world class steelhead angler and fly tier, told our class how he had invented the fly fishing vest and that a certain bast--d had stolen the idea from him and taken credit for the invention.

On the second cast I am playing a pink ballerina as she dances the green-white riffle way down in front of Bill. Then she is gone. Lightly hooked maybe. Who knows? Then two more fish are lost at the strike. Bill comes up to try and has the same luck— one fish lost at the strike and then the action is over. We fish down
the long wonderful drift through its deep end pockets and to the long tail. Nothing.

After a quick stop at the highway drift which is too low to fish we take a “secret” lane through an apple orchard near Sleepy Hollow. The water is about three hundred yards of swift three foot deep riffle. But along the drift’s bottom are occasional depressions and boulders that provide rest stops for traveling fish. The Major continues to chide me about my sink-tip line as he enters the drift’s middle water. Misty looks like she may be digging worms in the field above us.

Lunch time and the Major’s pickings are no surprise to me. Lettuce, chopped carrots and tomato on wheat bread; raw whole carrots and an apple on the side. Misty looks on with little interest. The Major is smiling, now he is giggling and his eyes tear up as he heaves great laughs. He removes his glasses to wipe his eyes with a red and white neckerchief I loaned him last year. Has he been in the sauce?

“What a trip that was last spring to the Sol Duc. I was just thinking about that poor man at the lodge and how he could have put up with us,” says Bill.

How well I remember.

Our long trip from Wenatchee was punctuated by stops at several bakeries and the ultimate breakfast at lunch time in Sequim’s Oak Table restaurant, where fluffy German pancakes that overflow a twelve inch plate are dusted with powdered sugar and served with lemon and warm true Vermont maple syrup; and where cherry blintzes seduce even the chaste.

Early evening Peninsula gloom found us in the parking lot of Forks’ Smokehouse Restaurant. Our destination was a fine lodge operated by a German gentleman with whom the Major had made arrangements for our needs during this steelhead fly fishing expedition. In full command now, the Major set a dead-reckoning course for the lodge. Three times our route carried us back to the Smokehouse with no sign of the lodge. So I suggested that the Major might inquire within as to the location of our target. With a pleasant snarl, he conceded the need for consultation and returned to my pickup’s cab smelling of deep fried chicken. “Just as I thought,” he muttered. “There’s an invisible road two miles after that first right turn we took. See if you can get it right this time.”

I failed to follow the Major’s logic, but nevertheless complied with his orders. Soon we arrived at the invisible gravel road. It twisted through a tunnel of towering fir and cedar ending in a soggy, puddled pine needled parking area next to a large impressive log A-frame.

In the cab’s darkness, the Major turned to me and said, “Now look, I know this guy. I’ve spoken to him. He’s a German. So when we get in there, let me do the talking. I speak German and maybe I can get a better deal than we’ve already got. Anyway, you can’t talk.” We entered the A-frame’s enormous log-wall lounge to find a gently burning fire in its grand river stone fireplace, large flags from many countries hanging along the room’s oak paneled balcony. Lots of big, handsome furniture adorned the room.
As we moved across the lobby, the Major strode like some field marshal stomping the waiting staff Bill Marts had carved for him. A middle-aged man of Latin-appearing complexion and greased down short black hair walked from behind a closed door and took his place at the greeter’s knotty pine podium-desk. No doubt this was the proprietor. Halfway to his target, Major Bill began belting out a sonorous German greeting. At the podium proper his verbal assault continued with no time out for a breath. The proprietor stood wide-eyed as if beholding some primordial apparition.

At that moment, with the proprietor probably considering flight the best expedient to facing this stern escapee from a German mental hospital, I glimpsed the proprietor’s picture and name on the knotty pine wall. “Renee Decourte,” it read. In alarm I gave the Major my best stiff elbow in the ribs and screeched, “He’s not German for heaven’s sake, he’s French.” Whereupon the proprietor, having heard my broken, cracked voice, remained stock still for a moment. His well-greased short hair stood straight on end as if energized by some unplugged electric current and he bellowed, “I am not German, I am not French. I am an American, born and raised in Massachusetts. Who the hell are you two?”

Whereupon the Major, on the verge of rout, stammered that somehow he had made an error. After we were shown to our room next to the kitchen, the Major removed his cap, scratched behind his right ear and eyed ME as if I were a worm dipper. In his sternest voice he announced, “Well, I didn’t think he looked like a German, but who’s to know these days?”

Back in Wenatchee this tale was told and retold. It was never revealed, however, that we never saw a steelhead during the great Sol Duc river campaign.

We are back in the river and first thing, my black marabou snags a rock. By yanking hard I manage to break the fifteen pound tippet where it is tied to the short leader butt section. Drat it anyway! I don’t even bother to tie in another tippet. Instead I bend another black marabou on the two foot butt and continue slinging the sink-tip. I am mostly asleep, enjoying the subtle wash of river wind over this quiet orchard country when there is a grand take. The river boils as a fish porpoises down river hauling a good share of backing. All this before I can raise my rod to hold the fish.

The steelhead sizzles down toward Bill and around him and then back toward me. A marvelous tangle of lines and shouts and laughs mix at the edge of despair. This fish will be lost if we don’t shape up. We stumble among the river cobbles like two punch-drunk wrestlers. But luck is with us. After three powerful runs for the Columbia, the big bright red-sided native buck is tailed, picture taken by Bill and the barbless hook removed. With a swipe of its great tail, the buck is gone—headed for important business we hope. “I’ll include this picture with my next column in the WORLD,” brags the Major as his camera slides into the river. I reach—no luck!

Fate caught the Major once more and he had no picture for his Wenatchee World column. Just this—a water soaked remnant of today’s shared debacle. And roars of laughter as we blame each for a flummoxing the works.
"Why," I wonder to myself, "Would a fish have fallen for my fly. It was tied to a two-foot long butt section of twenty-five pound Maxima. In this clear water, fish are not supposed to take flies presented on thick leader remnants. The fly, itself, has leader looped around its body, the result of my poor casting, and failure to inspect it. The loop’s effect is to jam the marabou into a ball of ragged feathers up close upon the hook’s eye. Why would a fish hit such a mess? “Humph. Looks like balled-up black leech or night crawler to me,” says the Major. “Yep, Yep. You finally got it right. You gotta’ give ‘um some meat,” from Misty. I slip her a piece of pastrami and Swiss on rye with sweet mustard and no lettuce. She is grinning from chop to chop.

Bill is studying a thick copse of green briar and brown bramble just up river of where the fish struck. He beckons and we walk into it on a fisherman’s path—a path that shows heavy deer sign. Misty is “birdy” at once, looks over her shoulder at Bill and takes off into the bush. “Whirrr.” Quail are on the move.

Bill searches the heavens, raises his arms in supplication and implores, “Oh, dear Lord, how lucky can a man be to have all this? Thank you, Lord, thank you.” Then with a conspiratorial grin he says, “I know the guy who owns this. There’s five acres of waste here that’s no good for him to plant orchard. He’d sell cheap. We could build a fishing and hunting camp. Wouldn’t that be something?
Fish at the front door; birds out back.” So we bushwhack around for a while, giving the layout a good going over, talking about where the cabin would go and how it would face. Bill loves this place more than any other on the river.
Montana trout—Snippets from the distant past

Ennis is morose. Cold, leaden April cloud cover is a pall across the Madison River Valley. The town's forever-hopeful metal-sculpted fisher greets folks from the west. But young, sinewy, rosy-cheeked guides slouch glumly along sidewalks that pass deserted antique and novelty shops, the Ennis Cafe, and BJ's restaurant. Cheerless conversations lapse to silence in the Orvis Shop and the Madison River Fly Fishing Company. Two dejected geezers, sitting on bar stools, stare into their sudsy beer glasses and cast brief bleary glares at those passing by the Long Branch. A guide gazes wistfully back at them, perhaps with a yen to push through the chest high spring loaded door, hang up his hat and end this dreadful late morning.

He, like most guides, is turned out in the greasy-brown, well-worn, traditional Stetson-cowboy-style hat. I have never seen a guide with a new hat and have wondered if perhaps some company makes old hats. Once, I asked guide Eric Troth, son of the internationally known Dillon fly-tier and guide, Al, where he got his hat and how he aged it. The talented and ever-articulate Eric gesticulated
in silence like some minister warming up for a fast pitch. He seemed embarrassed and short of words, mumbling something about people inheriting them. To which I responded that at some point every old hat had been a new hat and surely I should see a new one on someone’s head. Eric shrugged his skinny but rugged shoulders, tugged at his ponytail and stalked off in silence. I still wonder if part of guide lore includes a special aging process for hats.

Anyway, the guides are unhappy. Their “clients”—New Yawkas, New Jerseys, and maybe even some Conneticoots in Orvis’s and L.L. Bean’s are cheerfully asking when they will get out on the river. “Major” Bill and I, filled with breakfast from the Ennis Cafe which has a sign painted on its window reading, “The Best Pies in Town,” walk into the Madison River Outfitters. Bill is pouting because his toast was not sufficiently burned. In his deep radio-announcer baritone, he asks about the fly fishing.

The counterman is sullen. The river is too high, too cold and it has too much color. (So how do you like that for apples Mr. Macintosh? Besides we are losing $250.00 per day per angler for every one who does not go out on the river. Take that you interloper.) “Of course they are getting a few on this special nymph. I’ve got just a couple dozen left if you want them.” Meanwhile I am at the back of the store studying the multi-tiered bookshelf that contains fly fishing books being sold off, from time to time, by a local collector—probably fishing writer Tom McNally. Next stop is Keith Perault’s place just off Main Street in what appears to be an abandoned horse-barn.

Keith’s shop is polluted with deep, cloying, noxious cigarette smoke. A non-filter tip hangs by magical wrapper paper from the codger’s lower lip. He is in deep conversation about fly tying with an elderly gent and gives us a nod as we pass to the back room to look at his “for sale” fly rods. They are a motley collection—including ancient Montague’s—all with magnificent “sets” and none worth their asking price. But heck, they’re good fodder for visiting New Yawkas. Keith is author-publisher of a book containing 16,000 fly recipes. I purchase the book for $27.50 even though its copy is printed on cheap onionskin paper and the book smells of tobacco smoke. As we study open shelves of locally tied flies, the Major picks one up, sniffs it and wonders in a whisper what kind of cigarettes the browns around here smoke. So we traipse the afternoon away and return to our digs to prepare for tomorrow’s fishing below Bear Trap on the Madison.

Wet snow pelts the windshield with great heavy splotches this morning as we pass through Norris with its old school house, now a cowboy haven advertising the best booze and Mexican food in Montana from its tired brick and faded and cracking gray adobe facing. Up the hill we go with Bear Trap Hot Springs on one side and several bands of ghostly grazing antelope across the way on mesas that roll off into snowy obscurity. We launch Bill’s Avon guide boat at the bridge just below Bear Trap and will drift five miles to Blacksford where our beloved wives have left a pickup for us on their way to the finer things in Bozeman.
The river is wide and no more than three or four feet deep, flowing over small cobbles and rough gravel and curling across a broad, almost treeless bunch grass plain overlooked in the distance by high hills of gentle incline. Everywhere the river's surface is pebbled with snow. But we are well protected, I in waders and Gore-Tex parka, Bill in his favorite black and red plaid lumber jacket, waders and his Blue Dun Fly Shop hat. We are bundled for action. To the devil with what the guides say. We are two geezers drifting down heaven in the snow.

Ever faithful to his cherished #14 Royal Wulff, the Major casts to shore indents, along seams and into dead spots among protruding boulders. Desperation drives him to his favorite streamer, the Spruce. All the while I am belting out a big black Woolly Bugger. No luck for either of us. Perhaps the boat is moving too fast for our streamers to sink deep enough to draw a strike from logy trout in cold water.
So we pull the raft aground above likely looking shoreline pocket water. Our tactic is to wade out into the river thirty feet and cast back into the bank allowing our offering to move slowly and close to the bottom. But watch the Major!

Success! The Major howls a strike on his Spruce and I begin to hit them on a gray-backed, yellow/orange-bellied nymph. The fish are small flashy feisty rainbows and browns. The morning blesses us with warm sunshine. Lifting both
arms to the heavens on high, the Major utters his famous, “Thank you dear Lord. Oh thank you. I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve this, but I’ll take some!”

After lunch we drift the great river riffle joking about “Redskins” up in “them thar ‘hills. A mile above take-out at Blacksford, we find many deep channels cut among huge mid-river boulders. Big fish water. Maybe. Warm sunshine for sure. Slashing browns lambaste our weighted, gold-tinseled muddlers. There is no one else on the river. Not one soul. We are completely alone but in good company. We have our own world here in the vastness and simplicity of a forever river valley. We are alone, yet we are together. Friends.

Next morning a blinding snowstorm brawls into Ennis and we escape to Bozeman where we’ll fish the fly shops and concoct big lies to spread around Wenatchee’s Blue Dun Shop. I’ll say the one pictured here was twenty inches long!
Sometimes the best part of fishing is not the fishing. That’s the case this morning on a “for-pay” section of the Ruby River not far from home base at the Stardust Motel in Twin Bridges. The sun is burning, the humidity is soaking and hungry mosquitoes hunt in black swarms. My guide, Eric Troth, has decided to take the day off. He’s probably over at Scott Waldie’s Four Rivers Outfitters in Twin Bridges laughing like hell about my dunking yesterday in the Beaverhead and wondering if I’ll fall into a Ruby sink-hole. Here he is in a “guide” hat skulking his Ruby.
The Ruby is a meandering fifteen foot wide “meadow” brook with deep undercut banks and shallow, sandy riffles. I have read magazine descriptions of what a beautiful place it is. Maybe some parts are but not this “beat” on the Barnosky Ranch Eric has “leased” for me for the day. What impresses me most is the heavy foot-deep muck that sucks at my boots as it causes me to stagger and scramble for balance. Wading kicks up stinking sulfurous gas that has been enriched by huge cattle grazing the bank. There are browns here, but few are rising because there is no hatch on the river. The hatch is up an overgrazed meadow, but browns don’t swim in sand and thistle. Nymphing bring some foolish “piddlers.”

A huge Hereford cow glances down at me from the bank and lumbers off into denuded willows. Just below her a splendid bull hauls his hulk from a muddy meander scar and stumbles up onto the flat, dripping muck and dumping prodigious loads of crap and piss. He stops, turns to me, glares, snorts, shakes his great head and kicks chunks of hardened cow dung back into the river as if to say, “Okay, jerk, I’ll make your day.” My assigned “beat” smells like a sewer—a $100.00 dollar a day sewer and I’m out of here.

Mary Ann is waiting in the truck cab. Her face is crimson, dappled with perspiration and sporting a rash of rising welts. Having abandoned work on her cross-stitch, she is swatting mosquitoes that have zipped in through windows opened in the non-air conditioned vehicle—after all she needs to avoid heat stroke and get an occasional breath of fresh air! All is not well in Ruby River City this Sunday morning! Oh, for a cold beer and sandwich. We head for Sheridan, a cow town near Twin Bridges.

Good luck, we hope! The Ruby Hotel with its old stone and crumbling brick face looks to have suffered many a raucous cowboy’s beer bottle. We climb the front steps but a sign directs around a corner and into a basement saloon called the Sump Room. The bar area is long, narrow, cool and dark with a good assortment of whiskey bottles fronting a bar-long mirror. A chubby, cheerful young barmaid is working the Bud tap to serve two red-faced young cowboys sitting under straw-woven Stetsons at half cock over shaggy, stringy hair. She is teasing them about their rambunctious behavior at last night’s dance. We sit on barstools and sip cold, sweet, amber brew despite our elbows sticking to a beer-washed bar top. Life is improving fast. The barmaid suggests steak sandwiches and that’s our order.

Someone is tugging at the door to the bar. The knob jiggles and stops, jiggles and stops and is yanked open by a kid about four feet tall bedecked in a white straw Stetson, maroon and blue plaid shirt, blue jeans tucked into high heeled, pink leather, spurred boots. There is something odd about this kid. As he marches purposefully through the bar into the dance area with spurs clacking and rattling on the brick floor, he looks up and his face appears aged, almost wizened.
We sip our beer and hear loud popping from the dance area. The bar lady tells us that the little cowboy is busting up balloons left over from last night's dance. The little cowboy reappears behind us and leaves in silence. Since he entered the bar no one has spoken to him and he has not uttered a word.

Steak sandwiches with thick chunks of toasted garlic bread arrive. As we savor this delightful lunch, we wonder about the little cowboy, but say nothing to any of the locals. His identity remains a mystery and that strange interlude with the little cowboy seems the best part of our fishing day.

I am sitting in a ramshackle, sun-blanced, maroon painted wood outhouse just up stream of the Beaverhead County fairgrounds at Twin Bridges. Its hard roof is shattered green plastic. Cherrystone hail rattles the roof and pelts a bewildered buckskin pony watching me from the other side of a barbed-wire fence. The confused horse stares at me for a few seconds, shuddering under the white deluge. Perhaps it wonders what I am doing in an outhouse with the toilet seat down and my waders up! Then with the first close lightning strike followed by its rumbling, shuddering thunder, the pony skitters up the fence line searching for shelter among willow thickets. Growling weather is crawling up the Ruby Valley to my Beaverhead haunt just as it has every day this week. I feel compassion for the folks camped at the fair grounds in an aluminum Air Stream. Hail-rattle must be as bad for them as Chinese water torture.

Last spring when we drove here from Ennis, the expectation among ranchers, meteorologists and guides was that the valley would suffer severe summer drought. There was no water in Wisconsin, California, Ramshorn or Indian Creeks and the Beaverhead was low. Now, in late August, flow in the little creeks is at full run. The Ruby is colored for good worming. The Beaverhead is over its boat launch at Twin Bridges. It is so high that you couldn’t get a guide boat under the bridge even with the guide stooping to pick his client's pocket again! So nature unfolds and the prognosticators flunk. Still, I am in luck this evening because the Beaverhead is fishable and leaden storm-threat sails off toward the Madison River Valley. It’s safe to alight from my perch in the outhouse.

There is a seam where the Ruby enters the Beaverhead. A grimy foam line travels the seam. A rise—then another from the same fish on the Ruby side of the seam and away from me. I can’t tell what the fish is taking. There is no hatch. Anyway, I cannot cast a fly from here to there and get a decent drift. The physics don’t work and I’m not that great a caster. So there will have to be another approach. I wade through soft muck to a gravel bar upstream of the seam. The river grabs at my legs and hips as I shuffle-step into deeper water. Far enough. Let’s try a weighted sculpin in the seam. This is a very long cast, but luck is with me.
The big brown sculpin is cast cross-stream with as much upstream mend as I can throw so as to get the fly to sink deep. It passes through the target area with nary a tug and is flushed down stream where it stops on a mid-river sand shallow. I see a shadow over the sand. My line tightens with river flow. Strength against strength in fast water. The brown trout is up and jumps just at the pools tail, surface-skating. She comes up six times. And we struggle together. Finally she is in the beach weeds and I kneel to her. She is a healthy old-timer of burnished olive-brown flanks. Amber tipped fins. Red-purple body sparks and creamy yellow belly—all that glistening under meddlesome thunderheads returning to shut down the world. Even the mosquitoes are hiding out as a riotous vibrance of hail and rain and hard wind and darkness sweep up the Ruby Valley. Madame Brown swirls to safe waters.

How I love to fish the lower Beaverhead at night during August low water when days are hot and nights are crazy with caddis and mosquitoes and unmentionables that eat the most pungent repellants. To be on the water before dusk is a waste. But about then, fish go on the hunt and you have decisions to make. Either wade the river’s hard gravel belly and cast big wets on OX tippets to willow protected shoreline pockets or pick good riffle water and put your tan Elk Hair Caddis on a brown before platoons of whitefish ambush it.

Either approach is a blast made more exciting by intimidating darkness. Fishing here alone at night in isolating blackness is a jumpy business. But with whirling, whirring bug clouds, an occasional beaver-tail splat is unnerving. Tantalizing, this place is not for the timid. It is where one shivers in the heat. And the choices. Fish wet or dry? What about the brown sculpin or Brown Bear or Sandy Mite or an Elk Hair Caddis? There is uncertainty and choice. Uncertainty and choice are at the heart of the fishing life—or any well lived life.

If I have to choose, and I do, then mostly it’s those big streamers for me. Wade the river’s center and slap a #2 or #4 bugger into a willow-pocket—make three fast strips and recast. Wham! The splash is headed off toward the Jefferson. Oh how I love night fishing. “SPLAT!” two feet behind me and I about jump out of my waders. Fish? Beaver? Who knows?

I wade the river’s middle midst bug storms and bites, splashes in darkness—alone, except for blue neon glow and shards of cowboy music from the town’s rotgut bar a block away in town. Slopity slop, splash-splash, slap a mosquito and “You ain’t myin eny moor an it makes me oh sooo sayd,” echoing up river from the bar. Time to quit for a late dinner.

The Major and our ladies await me in a red leatherette booth at the Blue Anchor Café. He is chewing on a Jim Beam straight double and extolling the virtues of seeking the hard-to come-by big singleton brown. This evening he prowled and sneaked through brush and was almost sucked into a quicksand trap stalking his wary prey. But alas, the big one fell sucker to the immortal #14 Royal Wulff.
Major Bill expounds and gesticulates with increasing gusto as he nuzzles the dregs of his magical elixir, while our wives wait patiently for FOOD! From across the street come sweet strains of "And I hain't sayid eny moor."

Twin Bridges is changing. Scott Waldie, fisherman-writer and proprietor of the Four Rivers Outfitters, has sold his business. According to one local, the new owner is "some rich guy from Seattle" who is bringing in all his own guides. "What the hell do them Washington guides know about our rivers?" he wants to know. Joyce and John have sold the Stardust. They've tired of being on duty twenty- four hours a day for most of the year. Tom Morgan, illustrious rod designer and maker, has sold his Winston Rod Company to a Californian. BUT the food is still good at the Blue Anchor! And there are fish in the river.

For Mary Ann and me, Twin Bridges will forever be where the dogs always smile and wag their tails. It is where television always shows three different baseball games at the same hour on last summer afternoons. It is where the ice cream stand offers a flavor called "firecracker." Sure enough that will give you a snappy wake-up call! It is where the quilt shop sells clothespin dolls and life-
sized giggling, black-eyed, cheery-cheeked clown boys who sit beside demure, golden ringletted, blue-eyed girls in blue with yellow-flowered dresses. It is where local folks stop on the sidewalk to visit with us—complete strangers—who soon enough become acquaintances. Above all it is the red-capped water tower whose sight inspires me with hope—hope that something extraordinary will happen on the river. And you know, it does every time I let it.