2013

5. Moccasin Lake: A Gem Preserved

Paul Ford

*Western Washington University, paulmaryannford@charter.net*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://cedar.wwu.edu/ford_fishing](https://cedar.wwu.edu/ford_fishing)

Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](https://cedar.wwu.edu/ford_fishing)

Recommended Citation

[https://cedar.wwu.edu/ford_fishing/5](https://cedar.wwu.edu/ford_fishing/5)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Books and Monographs at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in *A Wenatchee Fly Fisher's Notebook* by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.
Moccasin Lake -- a gem preserved

Paul Ford
A Wenatchee Fly Fisher
Number 5 in a series
Limited edition of two lettered copies
Edited by Mary Ann Ford

Copyright 2013 by Paul Ford

All rights reserved

Published by Angler's Hope Books
Wenatchee, Washington 98801

paulmaryannford@charter.net
509-667-0922
Moccasin Lake

Moccasin is a thirty-five acre Indian slipper couched in high valley cattle grazing country at the northeast gateway to the Cascade mountains. A grand white-collared bald eagle is guardian here—presiding over all comings and goings from a heaven high pine spar at the tannic lake's south end. Moccasin has become the love of my angling life because serenity marks waters where few are permitted to fish and most are agreeable people. Giant rainbows and browns come to Chironomids in early spring and when the weather warms, they belt big dries. But what do I treasure most? It is a sense of loneness—on water where I can spend a twelve-hour day without having to face "chatter."

Fishing is split into just two seasons—spring and fall.

Spring is tempestuous. There is sun and rain, snow and hail, dead calm and blasting wind. Wise fishers come prepared for the worst while praying for the best. In past years some fly fishers trolled a streamer on full sink line over fifteen to thirty foot drop-offs and caught and released very large fish—twenty to
thirty inchers. Others fished a bright yellow version of the Woolley Booger called “The Killer” on a sunk line they cast and stripped. Those were the styles. But those styles began to change. For example I remember a middling warm spring in my early fishing life at Moccasin, when our genial guide, Bret, bemoaned the

fact that one angler had no sinking line and that’s why he was catching no fish, while others of us using the sunk line either to cast and retrieve or troll did quite well. On one such day, however, I noticed an angler fishing Chironomids on a floating line under an indicator. He caught the biggest rainbow I’d ever seen. That was fifteen years ago or more and it changed my approach to Moccasin. No more sinking lines or darned little use of them for me. This day proved to be the beginning of a long learning experience.

Here is an early snippet. It was mid-May and I had drifted to the lake’s south end—to a barbed wire fenced area where cattle watered. This was called Cattle Pen 2. Just outside the cattle pen in open water I saw a silver flash just under the surface and so I switched from a sinking line to a floating line—what I have always called a “dry” line. My cast of two Chironomids was true, for a change, and landed just above where the fish had moved. Sure enough my bright orange indicator sunk and silver lightning streaked off across the surface bound for deep water. I did not know at that time that an ancient tree spine was no more than
ten feet from where the fish had taken my fly. What luck! The large fish bounded and jumped, peeling my fly line into its backing. But, by golly, I had the fish and was determined to beach it where I could get a picture. The problem was to tire the fish sufficiently to beach it without tiring it beyond its survival level. If there was one thing I didn’t want to do, it was to kill that wonderful fish. Luck was with us. We both survived!

So what did I learn that bright spring morning? I learned that this cattle pen area could harbor good numbers of large fish and that it always made sense to test it with Chironomids of various colors—sometimes red worked best, but sometimes black and even chartreuse were most effective. I learned, too, that Chironomid fishing was almost always effective in one part of the lake or another during the spring season. But what I had to do was to explore the lake sufficiently so that I knew where the fish hung out—and when and where the fish moved.

These conclusions seem simple-minded to me, now, many years later. Who, but an idiot, would not explore a new lake using different techniques to find fish? Who, but an idiot would just follow the “old” drudgery of dragging a sunk line up and down the lake’s shoreline drop-offs? Well, for a couple of years, I had been that idiot and the guys from Wenatchee with whom I fished were no better. To this day, there are many anglers who come to Moccasin with # four to # eight
full sink lines and spend a whole day "dragging the lake." Often, they have success. But I would hardly call this fishing. Too, there are those who do not cast well and Bret advises them on what fly to drag behind their float tube or his boat if he is rowing a client around the lake. And, anyway, who am I to criticize these folks. If they enjoy what they are doing, including plenty of day-dreaming, then what business is it of mine?

But then my style evolved as I fished Moccasin frequently, and mostly alone. I began to apply common sense search tactics. As a matter of fact, though he might not admit it, friend and Moccasin guide Bret learned a bit from me and changed his "cast and strip" or "drag the bug" approaches. Sometimes when he and I fished together out of his boat, I sensed him watching me carefully when it came to fly selection. He developed a sneaky habit of sticking his nose in my Chironomid box!

Spring Chironomid fishing at the lake's southwest end was hazardous duty—tough on flies. That was because, over time, the lake had been developed as an irrigation source for neighboring fields where cattle grazed. Years ago piping had been laid into the lake from a nearby creek and so the lake's level had risen, drowning trees growing at the south end. The trees remained as rotting logs as far as thirty feet out from shore. Fishing here could be exceptionally good but catching was not so hot. Big trout had an uncanny aptitude for getting into the logs—whether I fished from between shore and the log field or on the deepwater side of the logs. In either case, chances were excellent that a powerful fish would dive into a log bed or twist around a sunken tree spar. But at least I knew the fish were there and self-torture was my choice! The lake's south end log pool must have become Christmas tree bright—festooned with Chironomids, leeches and streamers. The point of what I report here is that the southwest corner became nicknamed "suicide alley" after a shotgun like "crack" was heard one morning when famed winemaker, Bob Jankelson, broke a new Orvis rod there!

I found several other superb Moccasin trout hangouts for spring fishing. Here's an example. It was a warm June morning in 2004 when I drifted my well used Abel travel craft float tube into what is called the pipe water. That particular name derives from an irrigation water flow pipe that drained water into Moccasin just below the lake's west side dike. This was an unusually fine place to fish because the inflow was often slightly cooler than the lake and because inflow "wash" turned up "stuff" that big trout liked to eat. On this morning the oddest thing happened.

I was alone at the pipe drift. The bank there was very steep and covered with briars, brambles and wild rose bushes. God help the angler who cast a fly too far—for either your fly would be lost in briars or if you were fool enough to row in to retrieve the miscast, then you would frighten out lunkers on station below the pipe's outflow. Conversely, if you wanted a chance at Mr. or Mrs. BIG BROWN or giant rainbows that fed on the mud bottom you had to cast precisely under the briars—so, now, on to the story.
As I slipped my float tube forty feet from the pipe, I saw bedlam on the bank. What looked like hoards of big fish were, quite literally, trying to climb up into bank bushes in pursuit of what appeared to be shiny little bugs—most likely beetles, I thought. There was no other angler within shouting distance, including the guide. Call to action—big orange floater or what the fish were eating? I tied on a #10 black foam beetle and a number #12 sinking black ant as my dropper fly. By the time my trembling fingers had set things in order, the bank shone with cascading bugs.

Big fish tumbled onto both my flies, indiscriminately. Fortunately, two fish never took at the same time. Thank heavens! To try to land two twenty-five inch or larger fish at the same time would be an incredible feat—especially on a 6-weight rod. And I was truly proud of myself because I used my brain, for a change, to “match the hatch.” I mean that I fished a fly that the fish were eating rather than one that looked attractive to me! Eventually the fish got the point and so with one last “nice fish” I left the pipe and dike that abutted it only to find Bret waiting behind me in his aluminum wreck of a so-called guide boat. Good ole “Cast and Bail” I named it! Bret developed the habit of sneaking up, out of my line of sight to watch what I was doing. Sometimes I wondered if he thought I was using bait or if he was just trying to figure out what flies I was using.
Another cold spring day Bret decided to row me cross-lake to Cattle Pen 1. He said he had a premonition that a big brown was there. Of course I scoffed. I had a # 8 Orange Foamulator dry as my "stimulator" and a # 10 Green Back Pheasant Chironomid as dropper. A cast to the bushes: water churned near the flies and a giant, or so it seemed, leaped and crashed on one of the flies. I couldn't tell whether this fish took the big dry or the dropper. The battle was on as the fish bottomed. I wondered. Why this bottom "dogging"? I was lucky to clear line away from a submerged tree spine that some wise old trout must have planted just to the north of the cattle pen. And finally the fine fish was at hand. Bret had the long-handled guide’s net ready. Stupidly, I had my hand and forceps in that net with the fish to remove the hook from a thrashing, dazzling torpedo that lashed the dropper's hook into my right hand forefinger. My finger dripped blood. Good thing I'm a quick healer! Released, the big bejeweled brown was gone in a fluorescent glow of dazzling gold, red and purple. The next minutes were filled with big rainbows. Not a one took the dry fly. Onlookers shook their heads in disbelief. They did not realize that my big orange floater was an "attractor" that stimulated territorial fish to come to my Chironomid. Bret and I giggled a bit about this deception.
And there is much to be said for the use of a big stimulator pattern—maybe a #4 or #6 with a Chironomid or nymph such as a Pheasant tail as dropper. This was true especially in the spring when I landed many more fish on the small dropper than on the big floater. Yet fished alone, for example, two Chironomids would not be as effective as the stimulator/dropper combination.

There is no hubris worse for this fly fisher then that of being certain—certain that big fish will be in a certain place at a certain time. There is nothing quite so humbling as being made to look to yourself as if you were a nitwit. No one else need know. It is enough to know that you know. Here are a couple of examples.

It was late May and I had not been on the water for a week—maybe more. To head for the pipe drift was natural. For the fish always lurked below its bubbling head, gobbling up bugs flushed from bank and bottom—and the big fish were territorial and would attack surface intruders, natural or not. That had been my past experience. I knew! Yet every morning this spring that I had pitched my float tube at the pipe had been an abject failure. A few good fish would come from behind a long-dead calamity of a pole log laid across the drift’s bank and all along the pipe’s outflow—a rainbow or brown would bulge under my orange dries each time I appeared there, but spring fishing at the pipe was a bust. No one else did any better. What could the problem be? Maybe “Baldy” the eagle had found this happy hunting ground and cleaned out the joint!
But *hubris* works the other way, too. Bret and I were fishing together one cold, gray morning in early June. We diddled around casting dries at the pipe which was running white—fast as a strong brooklet. Surely big fish would be resting at its sides and tail. No luck or not much. Bret announced that there would be no fish at Moccasin's southwest “big toe” beneath where “Baldy” lived, but we might as well row there “just to see.” We knew there would be no fish there but they were there.

![A nice fish from under wild roses at the “suicide” water](image)

Most of those “Water Walker” seekers came from under a bank heavily overgrown with wild roses. The best cast was that lucky one that bounced March Brown once and then under groping, greedy tawny thorns. Then the trick was to strip just a bit—movement drew fish. A still fly was a dead fly and dead flies did not interest our fish. Bret and I chattered at length about why fish would be here at mid-day in quite shallow water and respond to a striped dry fly. We reached no conclusions. I had to supply him with Water Walkers. Turned out that the hooks on our Water Walkers bent easily and more fish were lost than caught. I'd not order flies again from the famous Montana fly shop from which they had flown! There are lessons here—maybe related to *hubris* and as well to *nemesis*! Lessons.
There is yet another major case of *hubris* to which I must confess. Bret and I were alone. His other clients had cancelled their fishing and so we were fishing together from his wretched boat I had nicknamed “Cast and Bail.” We were no more than a hundred yards off the launch site and a hundred feet or so beyond a raft planted years ago by the lake’s owners. Youngsters had played on it. Now the youngsters were gone and the raft was a rotting refuge for ducks and other creatures to use as a “poop pad” and “dump” site. Anchored there, we were about to quit for the morning so that I could take Mary Ann to lunch as I did every fishing day at Moccasin. Bret’s advice, “So, make a couple of casts toward the raft, out along that bar. Use a Chironomid the fish have never seen.” My reaction was, “Oh hell, let’s give this little fluorescent green-bodied, red-ribbed bug I’d concocted a try, even though the lake’s gone dead. Not a chance for a fish.” And you see the result below. I had known no fish swam there. *Hubris*—and the uncertainty of certainty!

Learning continues! It seems that the longer I live and fly fish, the more there is to learn. And so this short tale of the damselfly. No, not the usual damsel nymph, but rather the big blue-bodied adult with its translucent gossamer webbed...
wings—dancing and darting above the lake with a punctuation point surface-dot here and there. Here is the snippet.

It was early June and the weather had finally turned warm. There were no fish to be found at Cattle Pen 1 and so I dawdled the shoreline to Scott’s point. Bright sun illuminated waters off the point and I saw scores of dark cruising shapes—some swimming under my fins. The mix was complete when adult damsels appeared. I had seldom used an adult damsel. What a surprise! So many fish rose—some to be hooked and many others either missed the fly or I missed the fish. Later in June I had much the same experience under “Baldy’s” spar at Moccasin’s southwest corner—where huge browns climbed the lake’s shallow bank chasing damsels. Such fun and such an education.

Spring at Sun Mountain! Mary Ann and I saw snow and sleet; slush and rain; wind and dead calm; cutting cold and warmth. Always warmth despite weather,
because our cabin--#616-- was filled with laughter, getting ready to fish, stitching a new counted cross stitch pattern, doing puzzles and reading. And we had the peacefulness of no radio, television, internet or phone. Beyond the cabin was the trip to Twisp each lunchtime—for Home Town pizza or Twisp Pub Reubens or Thai Peanut Noodles. What a ball!

An important afterthought that should be a forethought! The lovely rainbow trout named “Beauty” shown above took one of the esoteric flies Mary Ann found among her collection of fly fishing catalogs. No such catalog comes to our house addressed to me. They come to my lady who has an uncanny knack for picking out strange little creatures that attract big fish! Many important fly fishing merchants consider Mary Ann a distinguished client though she does not fish. Am I lucky or what!
and the fish have been rested during hot summer months. On a sun-bright September opening day morning, we found a new lake guardian I named "Old Woody." He would assist "Baldy" the eagle as another Moccasin guardian. No one would admit to having created "Woody." It would not be long, however, until "Woody" had a family of little "Woodies" carved by some imaginative soul. But before we move on to the water, though, let's share a little humor.

Fall
The story goes this way. I was slow wising up to Moccasin’s great autumn fishing. But as luck would have it, Mary Ann and I arrived here, well not exactly here, because there was no vacancy at our Lake Patterson Cabin 116, so we stayed at another cabin on the Chewich River. Our neighbors were Bill and Megan Gilbert, two little sons and two nice Goldens. Bill loved to fish the nearby Methow River. A really good guy, he erected a tent outside the family’s cabin adjacent to ours, installed a soft air mattress and settled for peaceful sleep—alone. Alas, he awoke almost drowned or thought so because the facility’s lawn sprinkler system erupted and he felt himself “sunk.” Everyone—well almost everyone—thought the event was pretty funny! The Goldens yipped and smiled!

Day Fishing. Years ago I fished the lake on a particularly cold, breezy October day—the season’s last day. Twilight had arrived and it was just about time to pull for the far shore, the shelter and then the trip to Wenatchee. I was at what we have come to call Cattle Pen 1 and I decided to make one last cast with a fly I’d never fished before—a #4 Orange Caddis. Indeed, I’d never fished dries on Moccasin—it was that long ago.

The cast was to water resting against briars next to the cattle pen. Mr. Caddis landed atop an extended bush-tip and dropped with a “splat.” Water burst around the fly and above it. “Oh my gosh!” Tighten up the fly line and hold on. That
was the largest rainbow I had ever seen in still water and I released it after dusk with a wrist twist. The lesson was learned—that great trout could be taken at twilight. No one I knew or knew about in those days fished large dry flies on Moccasin. Almost no one fished at dusk. And no one knew of the Foamulator!

After my fall experience with the giant rainbow taken at dark on a large Orange Caddis and similar spring adventures here, I formulated the simple-minded theory that Moccasin rainbows must be territorial predators! If a big bright fly such as a Kaufmann Foamulator invaded their space, they would attack it for its very presence, its movement and its color as well as food value. The Foamulator represented nothing I had seen on Moccasin or in Montana or anywhere else. But it was deadly for several years and then the fish seemed to have wised up.

Fall fishing was predictable, but tough. Morning fishing was good for an hour until sun blazed across the entire lake valley. So it was that one year the pipe was gushing inflow and Bret warned me that scores of big trout hung just below the fast water. Sure enough large fish tracked and attacked my Foamulator and when they tired of that they took nymphs under an indicator. Naturally, Bret was standing on the dike above me ostensibly to guide my casts, but secretly, I thought, to be sure I didn’t lie to him about how many big fish I had wrenched
out from under the groping wild rose bush bedded bank! We loved to tease each other about how many fish we hooked without ever missing a take. For to miss a take or lose a fish was the cardinal sin of which neither of us wished to be accused.

After landing a clutch of big rainbows, I saw that Dick, a very pleasant, mannerly fisher from Marysville had drifted toward me, though staying well back to watch and not jam himself into this small water. I welcomed him and slid down stream on the pipe’s flow. In a flash he was into fish on a nymph he stripped very slowly. For years now I have shared flies with this casual friend as we opened the fall season at Moccasin. His well-wrought and ingenious flies have caught me many the Moccasin fish.

Having ceded pipe water to my new friend I watched as he fought trout that snapped his too-light tippet on snags and remnants of trees that once stood above and below the pipe. Dick was having a ball! But he was beginning to talk to himself—an ominous sign for a high school counselor. I shouted that he’d better change to a 2x tippet—and he did that with resounding success.
Drifting slowly below Dick on water over a fanlike shallows no more than two feet deep, I cast a # 14 Callibaetis Cripple against the briar laden bank where I'd seen a small dimple. “There couldn’t be a fish there,” I thought. The fly disappeared as it touched surface and I set the hook into what must have been a log—a moving log. The tug and haul went on as my float tube was dragged thirty feet from bank side. Thank God for the 2x tippet. Alas, MR. BROWN—all twenty-eight inches of him as measured against my rod was nailed through the anal fin. Guess what? No guide to take a picture or better yet to snicker at this “snagger.” Yes, one had to be thankful for such gifts!

Cattle Pen 1, cross lake from the shelter, was usually good until the sun lit it. Rainbows always hung in weed over-grown shallows. But not this day. I cast to the bank and was dumb-founded that not a fish would come to my green back pheasant tail—that is until I dumped an errant back cast onto much deeper water and was surprised to be lifting a heavy weight from behind. Yes, a fish. For some reason fish were feeding just below surface in twenty feet of water. Why? I don’t know! And I never did figure out this occasional phenomenon.

There is another why for which I have no answer after all these years at Cattle Pen 1. Almost always, at least one big fish there would take a nymph or big floater in early morning. But sometimes not—and what the fish would take was
a big black leech. I have wondered if leeches swim in schools and perhaps an occasional school of leeches had interrupted the orderly logic I followed! I mean it. Maybe there is such a thing as a school of leeches!

During hot September days, I came off the water by late morning. I had little faith that big fish would be surface feeding or even swimming deep-edged shallows. So, this day, I headed for the cabin to take Mary Ann to lunch. As I paddled by the pipe I was proved wrong again. For kicks I was casting a #14 red-throated Pheasant tail above the pipe onto ten foot deep dead water—certainly not water moving from the pipe. At the same time I caught sight of “Baldy” in a screaming dive that ended with a literal “blast” as he hit something on shore’s edge a hundred yards below me to the south and out of sight. What the hell could he have been after—a duckling, a fish? What? Well I never found out because my slow-stripped Pheasant tail stopped and I thought—another damned log. Not so. The PT started to swim off of its own volition and here was the reason. Mr. or Mrs. Rainbow. Why would this big fish be here? Why?

No more than six anglers were allowed on the lake. Catch and release fly fishing only. Most anglers were genteel quiet folk who didn’t know a lot about fly
fishing. But, they did know a lot about their professions or businesses. Some were a bit "snooty" with "lovely" lunches and superb wines. Of course they could afford the daily angling fee. I remember one group in particular who liked to spread a white tablecloth across an old plank picnic table near the shelter. Other folks were guests of businesses that entertained them here. Once visitors saw the size and eruptive power of fish to be hooked, most all wanted to learn.

Among the anglers, there were a few entertainers. There were ladies who drank too much while aboard the guide's boat, fell into the drink, and peed their pants over each other's foibles and follies. There was a chap who towed a huge red and white fishing rounded bobber across the lake. The bobber's hollow inside was filled with beer cans and bottles to keep his angler group hydrated throughout the day. Best of all was Damon, Bret's son, who was filled with joy at the chance to fish. Shy at first, it took Damon just one good fish to enliven him to cast his light across the lake. He announced his activities to all who came near him as his dad rowed him to the right places. There was no one quite like him. He was everyone's friend! Damon.

Dusk Fishing. Long ago as a little boy I learned about wisdom of fishing into the darkness, when my dad hooked a giant black bass on a plug. The fish broke
the tip of dad’s South Bend bamboo rod but, nevertheless, after a string of perfect expletives issued by dad and punctuated by advice from my beer-soaked uncle, Slim, that monster was landed subdued and several “belts” of cheap whisky went down in celebration.

In my early days at Moccasin, hardly anyone fished into dusk and darkness. But my 2006 autumn experience at dusk outside Cattle Pen 1 on that wickedly cold last day of the season brought to mind fishing late with my dad. And I remembered the territoriality of spring season giant rainbows and the occasional big brown. Dusk to darkness became my favorite time to be on the water. I faced the treachery of stubborn giant fish, clutching shoreline brush and nerve-wracking line and leader tangles—all in stillness and impending darkness as daylight died over the west hill.

Any big floater that caused surface commotion worked, although foam-based flies like the Chernobyl Ant were most convenient since they did not require constant drying out and treatment with floatant. Madam X, Orange Caddis Foamulator and the Mouse—all were worthy candidates to elicit strikes. Often casts would be to subtle dimples that betrayed no sign of fish size. All of the fish were large—in the twenty to thirty inch class. And 2x tippet was right. So now to some brief snippets and the story is told.

Bret and I liked fishing together toward the dark. No trolling. Just watching and casting to a dimple here or likely “hide” there. He’d row that misery of a leaky aluminum scow to the pipe and we’d “blind” cast to the flow if there was one or to where fish might hold if there had been a flow. Almost always we took a fish or three there. But usually, the location was worked hard during the morning and by guys whipping the water with small dries and nymphs during the day. Some idiots, who landed their flies in the brush overhung water were stupid enough to paddle their float tubes over fish feeding at the pipe outflow and you know what that meant. But—that’s often where we started. Then on to the southwest Moccasin “toe” to cast just above it under the wild roses now turning brown of old age. The whole water stretch was referred to as the “suicide” water as mentioned in these tales after Bob Jankelson’s Orvis 5-weight Helios mysteriously exploded one fine spring day. Here are our snippets.

The “toe” is big fish water. There are reasons. Flat water near the northwest bank falls very quickly from five feet depth to thirty-five feet. Fish have the protections of water temperature and water-color density. Shallow beach water into the southwest “toe” corner is where all manner of bugs hatch for fish feeding. These conditions satisfy natural and not learned fish needs. It may be too, though I hesitate to utter it, that big fish get big by figuring out that busting anglers’ leaders comes natural when a cloud of rotten old tree spines and fallen trees clutter lake bottom. Anyway, this is a fine place to test the angler who is immodest. For it is here that myth becomes reality—in that the “big one” exists and most often the big one destroys your tackle and your ego unless you have Walton’s blessing!
Dimples, executed by feeding fish, bear no significant indication of fish size. We saw a "spot" here and there, but nothing under the dying wild roses—quiet night water. Something had to happen. Then the fishing turned on a bit as Bret's big Chernobyl Ant accounted for a nice fish. I thought to myself, "Man, how this guy literally reefs in any fish he hooks. He's done that for as long as I've fished with him and some day he's going to pay." Actually I was hoping he'd have to pay soon! But that is not a kind thing to say about your friend and guide. The fish were not really turned on at "suicide." Before moving though I had to make just one more cast. You know how that goes—just one cast. My homely Madam X lit on a rose-bush twig a foot above its watery target. "Damnit," I uttered, and miraculously, Madam X fluttered down to be greeted with an explosive blast. And here you see the result! And off we go for a shot at Cattle Pen 1 before darkness closes us down. Bret hit the oars with his usual vigor.

We knew that toward evening fish near Cattle Pen 1 moved from fairly deep water up onto the three foot deep shelf abutting bank side. They cruised along the bank in search of whatever food it was they sought. Certainly it must have been something close to the surface but I never did figure out what they were feeding on—certainly nothing that I could see. And the feeding behavior was usually subtle. Dimples. So it was difficult to imagine the size of the fish to which one cast.
The behavior of "striking" fish varied. There were soft, sipping takes where I could barely feel the fish. There were explosions that would make Vesuvius blush in timidity. And most intimidating, that "following" behavior where a great fish would travel just behind a twitching Mouse or Ant, apparently tantalized by the fly's action, perhaps deciding whether to make the final mistake or not. This last behavior would drive me to distraction, because, watching the bow wave of a big snout or the surface slicing dorsal fin, I was always tempted to set the hook before the fish had taken its last step—to strike or to refuse the fly. And, of course, there were those fish that came as a result of a "blind cast"—a cast over water where no fish activity could be observed—a cast into a brushy pocket, for example, where the fly barely touched surface only to be enveloped in a gapping maw and then the fish catapulting in white froth toward the safety of the depths. Or to wrap around a sunken dead tree spine.

As we arrived at the cattle pen darkness had fallen and I struggled with my confounded headlamp which had entwined itself with useless sunglasses. What a mess. Bret cast his 6/9/0 Sage TCX and an extra large Chernobyl Ant far to the left of the tree you see above as we drifted ten feet from shore. Oh my how that guy could cast! His Ant was engulfed by leviathan, jumping and thrashing splashes we could hear but not see. The fish ran for deep water and jumped countless times—careening cartwheels past us. This was Bret's night all right.
But he was not reefing in this critter that turned sharply and returned abow of us headed for the shoreline brush pile.

Bret, of course, was sitting at the oars and my only source to hold the boat away from shore was our long-handled black rubber mesh landing net. The fish was out of control. Bret was out of control and I was paddling the landing net as the giant continued on toward the brush—and into the brush. Our boat was but a few feet from floating into the brush. Disaster pending! And then the fish turned. Something about the brush had spooked it—perhaps a thorn. We will never know. I sat stunned with landing net half submerged. That devil of a fish made a lunging jump just over the landing net’s exposed lip and into its black bag. We had it! But we had no camera. For once I saw the imperturbable Bret unnerved. And I thought, “Well next time you come fishing with me at night maybe you’ll have learned that a 7-weight rod works a little better than a 6 weight.”

So we moved back toward the shelter through benighted world—two friends on the season’s last day, its last hour and minutes. We would not fish together again for almost six months. But this night would be etched with memories and especially of this one—of the fish that didn’t get away. And we would fish together again.
MOCCASIN LAKE — OKANOGAN COUNTY

T 34 N — R 21 E — Sec 27

27 Surface Acres
Surv. 10 Jan. 1947—State Dept of Game
Volume—877 Acre Feet