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6. Rocky Ford Creek: Miracle in the Desert

Paul Ford

*Western Washington University, paulmaryannford@charter.net*

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Rocky Ford Creek -- miracle in the desert

Paul Ford
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paulmaryannford@charter.net
Rocky Ford Creek

The "Ford" bubbles and gurgles from beneath the most unlikely surroundings of desert scree, sage and thorn scabland. It emerges at a temperature of 52 degrees and was born of forces other than the great Grand Coulee Dam project and its Columbia Basin seep lake gifts. Anglers were taking rainbow trout year-round from this miracle water in the early 1900s. I have never known the Ford to freeze as it winds through a grand marsh to a choke-point where it narrows among boulders and wends its way through coulee country south seven miles to Moses Lake.

Winter brought snow, billowing ice fog, bone-chilling northwest wind and sometimes-- elegantly bright blue sky. But, too, the year's biggest fish came to our scuds at that time. And I do mean scuds. For the creek's fish preferred scuds to any other food. Black or white streamers or very small brownish green leeches worked, but it was gray or dark green # 12-16 scuds that drew the most fish. For
some years the fish liked egg-flies. And then, of course, there were "secret" flies of which I'll speak later. But oddly, Chironomids that did so well elsewhere on eastern Washington and British Columbia waters were not the choice here.

During my early years of winter fishing the Ford, I'd leave my truck adjacent a huge basalt boulder overlooking the creek's north end and walk across a snow-crusted field that must once have fenced cattle. I knew about the cattle because ancient snarled barbed wire lay beneath the snow—ready to tangle an unwary angler's boot feet and set him on his backside. And speaking of boots, I learned soon never to wear felt soled boots in the snow because the soles absorbed huge amounts of snow that added inches to my height and pounds to lift with every boot step.
Nice fish fed close to the bank and a soft cast of thirty feet either to the left or right with a #12 gray scud and a #14 green-gray scud dropper would often elicit a strike—always on a floating line. Sometimes I used an indicator that would inform me of a strike and sometimes I cast without the indicator and stripped slowly and used the "feel" of fly line across my half frozen finger to know a fish was active. It seemed like there always were fish here and few other anglers. Mostly, this world was mine and mine alone—except for the fish, and, of course "Cigar Man."

“Cigar Man” was an old codger who fished from the peninsula just north of the basalt rock. He parked close by and dragged a cheap aluminum frame summer beach chair to a place in the weeds where he could cast into deep water on each side of where he sat. He waited and waited with great smoke clouds enveloping his shoulders and head as if he were some forlorn spirit. No one ever intruded on
his territory and he was quick in conversation to announce that the SOBs were not biting this morning or that he had already caught and released a dozen and was getting out of here "purty" soon. Heavens how his cigar stunk up the environs! And then one day he was gone—never to return.

Too, there was "Ladder man." I would see him clear on the other side of the creek's big pond water. He became famous for his stance. He wanted to be able to see fish far out in mid-stream and so he carried a tall ladder across one of the creek's two bridges and through unimaginable amounts of swamp brush to get to his "spot." Occasionally some wag would wish, "Maybe that clown will fall in the drink. Wouldn't that be a show!"

The winter water I liked best was where the creek narrowed at what we called the "chokepoint." From big pond-like water the creek-flow changed at the chokepoint to a rushing boulder-strewn run and then to smooth-surfaced forty-
foot wide “slick” water. Here I found the really big rainbows. And, most often, the fish hugged near bank-sides unless some hack had blundered in and frightened them to mid-stream. Occasionally, too, a jerk would install his cheap aluminum beach chair over a great fishing spot and spend the day there.

Downstream a hundred yards, bulrushes eight feet tall protected a swampy peninsula that led to a narrow rocky outcropping in the creek with shallows above the rock and deeper water below it—a magnificent location for big fish if I could get the right drift to my flies. The #16 green-brown leeches my friend Jeremy Kendall had invented worked well especially with a small scud dropper. However, casting here could be problematic.
Throw upstream too close to shore and you're hung up in the thorns; cast upstream too wide and your flies bottom out. Cast just right into a mid-stream slot and you might have a chance at the big one. And the big one might decide to head for brushy shore and you're dead. Half the fun of this place was never being certain about how "things" would work out. This place that I called the "peninsula water" was not a location that I mentioned to my fishing friends, not even to my best friend of those years, Scott. Selfish of me I suppose.

I noticed early on in winter while fishing at the Ford that most fish did not jump. The action was bulling runs or just sloshing about the surface with no run at all, especially in water below the chokepoint. These fish, even though some measured well over twenty inches did not put up much of a fight. What seemed especially odd was that the McCleary Hatchery that grew these fish and was located just at the creek’s springs not only stocked the Ford, but also Moccasin Lake where the trout jumped like enraged dervishes. What, I have always wondered, accounted for the difference in behavior between fish hooked at the Ford and those at Moccasin.
Played too long and especially on a light rod, the Ford fish would come in belly up and with the need to be revived for an overly long time. And so, very often, I used a seven-weight rod and "reefed" the fish in as quickly as possible. Not very sporting I suppose but better than killing a fish.

Despite the cold there were advantages to winter fishing. Summer's flood of fish eating pelicans and cormorants had left for warmer climes; the dense creek bottom weed growth had died and so it was possible to drift scuds along the bottom; there were no ticks or rattlesnakes; marsh edges were frozen solid so that I did not have to worry quite so much about stepping into a nutria hole. The nutria is akin to an overgrown water rat. It lives in marshes and creates tunnels and holes that will swallow you hip deep or beyond. The smell emanating from a misstep into one of these holes is worse than sulfurous. It is no exaggeration to say that it is beyond belief and therefore one must be wary. Indeed, my best friend from the "old days," Bill Barnett, an ardent gentleman fly fisher and also a founder of the Wenatchee Valley Fly Fisher's Club, used to say, "I wouldn't fish that place if it 'wuz' the only place left on the face of the earth. It stinks!"

Here is a humorous snippet before my winter fades to spring. The tale starts as it should with New Year's Day morning. Mary Ann and I had just returned home after spending the night at Lake Chelan. Snow was pouring from a cold, wind-torn sky. The phone rang and Irv Conner announced that he and "Bobber" John Cunningham were headed for the creek but would pick me up in ten minutes. I protested, but not loudly enough and these two reprobates arrived on our front steps laughing and stomping their boots.

Off we went in John's ancient red Ford Explorer. Visibility on Route 28 was practically nil. The Explorer's defroster barely worked and so John peered through a five inch in diameter circle on his windshield just above the steering wheel. The circle kept clouding and Bobber man kept inching his nose closer to the windshield. But we made it to Ephrata and stopped for refreshments which included a six pack of Alaska Amber ale, and John's beloved Hostess Twinkies.

A pleasant young lady waited on Bobber John and said, "Are you guys just passing through?" "No," replied John. "We're going fishing." To which the lady said, "Oh, you're going ice fishing." "No," giggled John. "We're going fly fishing." The lady glanced up from counting back change and with no sign of a smile said, "Fly fishing. You nut cases shouldn't be on the road, you should be locked up at Medical Lake." (Medical Lake was a facility for treatment of the mentally impaired.) And off we went into the storm chortling over the young lady's misunderstanding of the fly fisher's life—"Bobber John" munching on his Hostess Twinkie.

We arrived at the Ford's middle parking space to find deep drifts blown across it by cutting, unceasing winds. We found too that we were not the only nut cases on the Ford. Our friends Shane and Scott had arrived before us and were sitting
in Scott's comfortably heated truck cab. But that was all right because they had their own supply of ale.

In some places there was hardly any snow. But in others, drifts were thigh high. The major problem we encountered was that the nutria holes were well-concealed by drifted snow and so our progress to the closest fishing point involved a perilous walk and potentially stinking outcome. Nevertheless we plied our way safely to a point where Irv, John and I could fish—and fish we did.

The fishing that snowy first day of the new year was nothing short of fabulous. It turned out that fortune had smiled on the three nutcases. Viewing our success from Scott's truck cab, two more nut cases and the fish dog named Lucy soon joined us. When we had started out this blustery morning, I was certain that our travel would lead to no good end. But I was wrong. The fates were with us. And who could have known or predicted this joyful outcome?
Spring arrived officially when my friend Scott Smith "unbuttoned" his camper for the new year, stocked its supplies and we arrived at the Ford to spend a day or two fishing, telling stories and eating his wonderfully Jack
Daniels' seasoned and barbequed steaks with microwave baked potatoes doused with butter and sour cream all accompanied by heaps of Caesar salad and Red Hook ESB—though Scott liked a cabernet and a pre-dinner mixture of vodka and cranberry juice. Shane Alto would join in and after dinner we'd play Texas Hold 'Em accompanied by raucous shouts. But good food and good fellowship are but small parts of summer fishing on the Ford.

The real story centered in Shane's ability to concoct variations of our conventional scud patterns. Most Ford anglers used #12 or 14 gray or gray green or olive-green dubbing and a shellback to create their flies. Some of us made scuds with no shellbacks and others used commercial scuds made from plastic. But no one, at least no one I knew ever went to a #18 hook and a simple pattern of mixed olive and orange dubbing or olive and gray dubbing. This little fly, usually employed as the dropper, was a sensational success for us. But Shane was the real master of its use. He would sneak to the bank, spot a fish and drop the fly over its snout. When Shane saw the fish's white lips open, he would set the hook. What was remarkable here was that Shane could see those white lips open. I couldn't. My eyesight wasn't that good. Nevertheless, I learned the secrets of "stealth" and "watchfulness."
Too, I learned from Shane that tiny flies caught big fish. So I began to use patterns such as a #18 re-throated Pheasant tail—and my how they worked—especially as a dropper.

I have always liked to fish alone. This was a matter of having quiet time to think about whatever was important at a given time in my life. Usually, I have not been observing nature—or at least not very carefully. I may have been studying fish forms to the degree that they would influence how I fished. But more often, I looked into the sky to see my father’s face, to hear his voice, to smell his camp cooking. Or to see him with his great landing net at Goose Pond on Cape Cod ready to net my big trout. Or I see the face of a great scholar or friend or other person I have known and ponder over his or her pronouncements. In a sense, “I think because I think.” And that pleases me. But it can only be done in the quiet of loneness. For that reason I do not like the chatter of chatter. And so I tend to time my spring fishing carefully as the following snippet implies.

Various fly fishing clubs, including my own Wenatchee Valley Fly Fishers, held spring outings on the creek. Prior experience taught me to avoid these gatherings, as I would the plague. It was not just that the banks were crowded, it
was the unmanaged dogs that accompanied their "masters." I have mentioned above that Rocky Ford fish tended to hang close to the creek's banks and the fish tended to be very wary of bank vibration. The dogs, mostly rag-bag Brittany spaniels, cavorted along the creek's banks in playful pursuit of each other. When I first observed this, I noted, too, that this rumpus caused bank-hanging trout to scurry for heaven knows where.

The dogs' owners, with rare exception, had no control over their pets. How the hell these hunting dogs could have been handled in the field was a mystery to me. I learned it was common practice to take the dogs to almost all outings. And I was told that it was quite a sight to see a pack run through one group of campsites up at Okanogan's Blue Lake scattering cooking and angling gear and then to be confronted by a rival pack from another club. Anyway I stayed away from the Ford during clubs' spring outings. And, if I topped a hill to see a crowd of hounds on my water—whether the Ford or one of the Ephrata's Ancient lakes, I hurried off to seek quiet.
Another Ford snippet is in order here. One fine late spring morning Scott and I sat in his camper testing his black coffee and healthy bran muffins. We were discussing why rainbows, such as the one shown above and landed yesterday afternoon, liked big bright orange dry flies. Why did a fish come to the #6 Caddis or a Foamulator when there was no sign of such a hatch? I suggested that "just for the heck of it" we scatter some broken up Lance's Orange Toast Cheese peanut butter crackers off the dock built for use by handicapped anglers. After all we had seen trout swimming near and under the dock. This might be a good test of the theory that rainbows just plain liked orange—orange anything. I bet Scott a bottle of ESB that we could lure a trout or two to a cracker. At that point I had no idea I would soon suggest that one of us "break the law!" But such would be in good fun—and a test of "scientific" theory!

We drove back to the first parking lot and the handicapped fishing access and hurried out on the wood deck. Sure enough—we could see big trout dimpling shallow water within an easy toss of fragmented crackers. I could not resist temptation and ran back to the truck to return with two packs of crackers. Each of us threw out bits of his pack. Then the wait. Nothing happened—and then
nothing more. But now a fish rose to a cracker and then another fish. Soon we faced a churning cauldron of boiling, thrashing fish. And we were faced with temptation so great it overcame us. We ran back to the truck to retrieve our rods. Then we tied on big orange flies. Dared we cast them? And if one of us hooked a fish, how could it be landed as we stood ten feet above water's surface? Was this experiment illegal?

One cast and Scott had his fish—a dark fish that ran! I urged him to bring the fish to me as I manipulated a long-handled net through wooden railings and fell to the deck, extending my net arm as far as I could stretch. By damn! We had the fish. A quick picture and the fish was released. Neither parking lot nor approach road showed any sign of spectators. No cracker crumbs remained in sight. We were home free.

Our next move was to the truck's cab where we toasted each other's "wisdom" with great chugs of ESB. Two eminent scientists had proved their theory.

When Jeremy heard of this exploit, he presented me with a fly made in the shape of half an orange cracker! It did not work!
Summer on the Ford subtly edged away at spring and in my early years I learned waters from marshes just below the first parking lot and handicapped dock on the big water to the chokepoint and "No Trespassing" sign below the aluminum bridge. It was said that a grouchy, grizzled watchman with shotgun under arm patrolled the no trespassing area. I never ventured far enough downstream to be accosted by this storied apparition. Anyway, it was rumored that wild grasses below the bridge harbored lots of rattlesnakes. I stayed away.

Upstream on the big water below the basalt rock, schools of large rainbows hung forty feet offshore, suspended like dark clouds. They looked to be only a foot below surface and could be reached easily with a floating line and tiny scud or leech or both. I never used an "indicator." Rather, I cast and stripped very
slowly. The fish were usually active because the water temperature remained year around between 52 and 57 degrees—typical of a spring creek. In those days, scarcely anyone fished this water. The fish were almost too easy to catch!

But too, there were some fish on this very same water that held fast against the bank feeding on tiny red-eyed damsels. What a challenge to make the “right” cast into brush-overgrown lairs. Light tippets were a necessity—but the cast was everything and more than once my casting inabilities led to strong words on my part as a fish, badly frightened by a flopped cast, fled in terror—pushing bow waves before it.

During one summer’s fishing, I ran across a character of impressive intellect and fishing ability. His name was Warren Gandy, who I nicknamed “the Oracle of Rocky Ford Creek.” Our acquaintance started this way. I was sitting on a boulder retying my tippet for the tenth time and uttering, “yes,” you got it—bad words again. As I looked down at some cormorants I’d like to shoot, I saw bulrushes moving gently against a southwest breeze. Surely this couldn’t be. Had I lost my senses? And so I made my way around booby-trap nutria holes and to a point where I stood several yards behind a chap dressed in well worn “tans.” His
heron-like stick figure poised over shallows and then he moved again—no more than five feet—and like the stealthy stalker he resembled, he stopped—waited, watched and cast. Then he spied me and with a slinky kind of suspicion, “How long yer bin follerin’ me young feller?” (I was seventy at the time.) So we talked a bit and liked each other. That’s the way life goes. Some people you like upon meeting and others you don’t.

Warren was a retired military engineer who’d gone back to work in Wenatchee and then retired again. His passions and talents were photography and fishing Rocky Ford. Despite his sometimes military imperiousness, he created for himself a character known as “Snorkel.” M.P.O.S.O.P.—“Professional Loafer Specializing in: Fly Fishing and Foto Foolery.” His Ford flies were originals—damsels, scuds, nymphs, duns and midges. Occasionally, I’d take a bottle of cabernet over to his retirement condo. You know that old tightwad never offered me so much as a teaspoon of that wine. His greatest gift to me was that I could never tell for sure whether he was lying or telling the truth! What a man!
As summers grew warmer—unimaginably hot in that desert, Scott and I gave up on the Ford except for some evening fishing. But we were darned careful where we stepped, for fear of tangling up with a rattler. So it was that we turned our attention to wading the great Columbia River near a Desert Aire Resort. What we found was a fish that easily challenged the guile and strength of bonefish I had caught in the Pacific. The problem was river flow controlled by the Columbia's dams. If river flow was of the right flow speed and height, then there was a chance to lure one of these wise devils to a crawfish imitation or something like it with an inverted hook as in bone fishing.

But on this day we were to have no such luck. We had stopped at a slough and seen a dead or sleeping figure under a spare bush tree. That figure wore work clothes and boots and we could see a red slash at his throat. "Dead God," we thought, "Could this be a dead Mexican with his throat cut?" Exchanging baleful glances Scott and I got the hell out of there as fast as his rig would take us. We labeled this slough water the "dead Mexican hole" and were very careful in future trips to approach this place with care.

But on this eventful day our snippet continued. Arriving at the Desert Aire water, we found water flow too fast, water level too high. It was too early to quit
fishing for the day and so we decided to run back up to the Ford, even though our 8-weight rods were a bit much for any Rocky Ford fish. But at least we had scuds.

The Ford’s canyon was scalding and I was certain that no fish could be hooked. Indeed, I was sufficiently convinced so as to tie on just one scud, instead of two under an indicator. We fished just below the chokepoint, walking over bare ground, to avoid any unexpected rattler encounter. On my second or third drift the indicator bobbed along for a few feet and disappeared. I struck the fish. The big fish was where no big fish should be on this oven-like day. So once again I learned the uncertainty of certainty.

And, it was the best of luck that I was using a “big” 8-weight rod, because that meant the fish could be landed quickly and released before it was harmed.

Another brief snippet. One summer morning, as I was shaving and getting ready for the trek out Route 28 to the Ford, I heard some alarming news on our local radio station. The news was that a massive fire, started at someone’s trash pile on Route 17, was sweeping the scabland plateau bordering Rocky Ford Creek and moving toward the town of Soap Lake. Fire officials hoped to stop the fire at Trout Lodge Road—a dirt track road that ran from Route 17 to the creek. That
dirt track was what we all used to access the Ford. Too, the road led to the McCleary Hatchery from which many of the state’s lakes were stocked with rainbow trout. What would happen if fire jumped Trout Lodge Road and reached Soap Lake? What would be the consequences of the McCleary Hatchery’s destruction? Fortunately fire never jumped Trout Lodge Road. So the town of Soap Lake escaped damage as did the hatchery. And though I worried that wildlife destruction would take a toll on the hatchery and its outflow, I never saw evidence to support these concerns. It was quite remarkable how quickly the scarred scabland restored itself.

Fall on the Ford in the early 2000s was quiet. Other anglers were drawn away from thoughts about the Ford to thoughts about cooling lake waters closer
to home. More especially, though, before the State of Washington imposed its “plan” to manage Columbia tributaries’ steelhead fishing, many of us were on the Wenatchee River or Methow for fall steelhead to the fly and so stayed away from the creek. Moreover, it was almost as if big fish had decided to gorge themselves after summer doldrums or in anticipation of lean winter pickings. And so the numbers of anglers was limited while the numbers of big rainbows increased. Too, I know from my catch records that lots of smaller—12-16 inch fish showed up in the creek. Probably the result of plants by the hatchery of “excess” fish—fish left unsold to external purchasing agencies such as the State or “for pay” facilities such as Moccasin Ranch Lake.

My favorite water was at the chokepoint where one could cast forty to sixty feet above the “choke” and allow the scud or some combination of leech and scud to drift into swift water. That swift water quickly became its own rush among jutting rocks that provided all manner of “hides” for feeding fish. Heaven knows how many fish I hooked there and landed or lost—my score was about even. But this was heaven—that whole experience and without a soul in view—nothing but the vastness of snow-fog drifting to its confluence with warm earth and creating “spirits” walking along paths Salish peoples have spoken about. Not in
their unwritten languages but in their enlivened arts. Yes, this is the place of “spirits.”

A snippet here. I have referred above to the large fish that came to the fly at this time of year. But I did not make sufficient reference to fly size. The fish, bunched up at the near edge of the chokepoint were at the twenty-five inch level as measured against my rod. One would expect them to want something big to eat. Not so. If anything, they wanted something smaller than the #16 or so I’ve mentioned above. So what did we have here? We had this—these great big fish hunkering after #18 Pheasant tails. Should I have been surprised? Nope. Because
Shane, my friend and expert at the Ford, had tied me a box of tiny sunk #20s just for this time of year. What I liked best, because it gave pleasure to the eye was a red-throated Pheasant tail my all knowing Mary Ann had discovered and bought for me. But then, that’s just me! Every serious angler should have his Mary Ann! At any rate the picture below is that of a sample big fish that wanted one of Mary Ann’s tiny Pheasant tails. “Big fly; big fish. Not necessarily so.”
Another thing I noticed about late fall fishing was the characteristics of some of the fish that showed up at the end of my tippet. The fish shown below is an example of a real oddity. I had never seen a rainbow shaped like this one and marveled at its head size as related to its body size and the strange red coloring. Perhaps this fish represented some mutation of what it should have been. But I have thought about that fish and further mutations from its base. Who could know?

Years pass, seasons pass and the fishing changes. So it was with the Ford as we entered the twenty first century's second decade. As spring came upon the creek, what appeared to be a new weed formation grew and enveloped the Ford's bottom. This weed was peculiar for its long greenish-gray tendrils that hung in quiet or moving water like a woman's streaming hair.

Sometimes it grew from creek bottom to creek surface making it just about impossible to fish a scud or any other sunk fly without gathering the weed. It
was almost as difficult to fish the creek’s surface, except in those places that were weed free. Where the weed had come from, I didn’t know, though it looked suspiciously like the plague that had infested many of our lakes and even the Columbia River—said to have been brought in from the Pacific Northwest coast on the bottoms of boats or angler’s boot footed waders. As soon as late spring sun and the summer came on, angling became questionable and remained so until late fall.

Another new phenomenon occurred that adversely affected the creek’s angling. Cormorants, those black fishing-eating bandits, had been a minor summer nuisance for years. A dozen or so roosted on rocks protruding from the big water. But now another severe threat was upon the creek. First, four or five big white pelicans showed up and then it was eight pairs and then at least ten pairs. We surmised that these fish eaters had come up from Moses Lake or the Columbia River.

The worst part of the pelicans’ presence was their ability to fathom an effective way to fish. Simply put, they learned to fish in pairs below the chokepoint with one bird four feet or so from one bankside and a partner four feet from the other bankside. Thus they were swimming against the current and of course trout were faced upstream feeding in that way as scuds or leeches drifted to them. A trout would never know that an adversary was behind it and ready for another meal!! The pelicans were crafty enough to know or learn that fish tended to stay close to bankside protection. That white menace arrived in spring and left in early autumn.

Angling pressure on the creek grew. There were time periods during the past when the creek was deserted. That was no longer the case as local, regional and national publications pictured this “undiscovered” spring creek—this miracle in the desert. Huge world class corporations, dependent on cheap electric power to support their computer server farms, built facilities that required technicians who’d never previously lived here. Multi-modal transportation availability, including easy access to rail and interstate highway travel opportunities, attracted corporate growth that underpinned the region’s immense agricultural growth potential. The once small towns of Quincy, Ephrata and Moses Lake grew in response to the new aforementioned potentials. Spokane, now the state’s second largest city contributed its interested anglers. How much actual damage anglers from these areas contributed is unknown, since fishing was “catch and release.” The problem was with the “crowding.” Too many camping rigs, too many anglers cluttered the “good” water.

Worse of all for me were the two-way radios by which anglers “jammed” peacefulness. Be damned if those radio anglers didn’t have to talk to each other—constantly—and with code names floating across the Ford! “Brown one” to “cutthroat.” Unimaginable in a place where only red-winged blackbirds or the occasional rooster pheasant called. Unimaginable!
So the Ford has changed as all things in nature change. But that is not to say that all change is for the better. Nevertheless, my fond memories of the Ford remain and that is for the best.