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4. Baseline Lake: George, Washington

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Baseline Lake

George, Washington

Paul Ford
A Wenatchee Fly Fisher
Number 4 in a series
Baseline Lake—snippets from a past well-remembered past

Chance, better known as dumb luck, can be the mother of opportunity. And it was by chance that I “discovered” Baseline Lake.

I’d sworn off guides in the late “90s” after a couple of “educational experiences.” There was a twentyish horse’s ass at Campbell River whose prize attribute was to keep his “sports” as far away as possible from crowds limiting out on Coho off the river mouth. Then came the unforgettable Beaverhead boy with the famous last name—so immersed in personal introspection that he forgot the point of the drift trip. Call me a sorehead. I was damned sore after those two slugs.

Nevertheless, common sense occasionally overcomes prejudice—and in my case a combination of generosity and frustration. I’d sold a SUV to a guy who paid top dollar and liked to fly fish. I’d fished Rocky Ford Creek over near Ephrata a few times with zero results, although this spring creek was rumored to have great fishing. So why not hire a guide to take my benefactor and me to the creek? Maybe I could learn to catch these canny rainbows.

The deal was arranged with me as host. We arrived on the banks of this spring creek child of the desert to shudder before April winds in the thirty-knot range. Hell, we spent more time fishing our flies out of the eight-foot tall bulrushes than we did plying the water. Not good. So our guide, Jeremy Kendall, suggested an alternative. “You guys want to try a little lake with big fish?” I’d taken a chance on Jeremy and he was taking a chance on there being less wind to fight on his secret water.

We arrived at a link fence gated area about four hundred yards east of and parallel to US Route I-90 near George, Washington. Jeremy unlocked the gate and drove to a new pump house sitting on elegantly kept lawns. A two-acre, finger-shaped lake used for irrigation and during the summer for water skiing was the alleged big fish water. Somehow the permanently anchored ski buoys did not inspire my confidence.

This layout seemed to be too good to be true. The lake was surrounded by well-kept lawns with few trees to interfere with casting. A large gravel parking area provided space and hook-ups for campers. A skiers’ bathhouse was open and had a sit-down toilet. And the lake was alleged by Jeremy to hold triploid rainbows in the “double digits” and perhaps a giant brown or two. Sound artificial? Yup! Looked like it to me, too. What the hell? You only live once.
The lake was flat calm. No wind. Quite relieved, cheerful young Jeremy announced he would prove the existence of big trout immediately if we would follow him to the pump house. He would show us "Walter." And he did!

We stared down into the now quiet outflow channel to see a darn big triploid hanging just above weed cover—white lips opening and closing as he fed. Shushing us. Jeremy dropped a slightly weighted bug into the channel and stripped it gently toward the big boy. Whammo! Walter was on and jumping wildly—easily an eight pound fish—but not to be caught this day as Jeremy’s 5x tippet snapped back at us with sling-shot ferocity. "I told you so," he said and I was hooked for the next five years, until the untimely demise of Baseline fishing.

Wading up the shoreline, our boot-feet stuck in mud-sucking clay. Noses and tails in shallows along the banks told us of fish. Jeremy, who we soon learned had very little experience here, suggested a variety of nymphs and emergers. And even
dries. So we caught a dozen good fish among the three of us. Although pleased to have gotten out of howling desert wind and caught a few fish, I sensed that there was more potential here if I could figure out what the fish ate in this little man-made sliver of a lake. Jeremy, with a new three hundred bucks tucked in his pocket, was happy as hell. And I thought, "Well screwed again. This was worth one-fifty because Jeremy knew as little as we, his "clients," did about fishing the lake." Yet as I think about this, years later I chuckle to myself, "Well, that's Jeremy. Sometimes he's on and sometimes he's not. But he's got a 'line' of bull that is forever optimistic. And by choice or chance he's gotten me and my friend Scott into some terrific fishing."

Fast forward now through the summer to late autumn. Water skiers are long gone and mild weather has given me half a dozen trips to Baseline—and at reduced prices. As Jeremy has grown to know me, his foibles have emerged. He is a congenial, middle twentyish, chubby short guy of good looks and obvious talent as a caster and fly tier. Through conservation work, he earned a two-year America-Corps scholarship to any higher education institution that will admit him. He loves to study fish—and was influenced by his Wenatchee high school biology teacher and genius fly fisher and tier, Gary Anderson, to pursue a career in marine biology. But try as I do, now and over the next couple of years of constant contact, I cannot get him to enroll at the local community college and get on with a serious career. He wants to be a guide. But he doesn't know what a guide's life is like. And so....

Scott and I are to meet Jeremy at East Wenatchee's Blue Dun Fly Shop at 8 AM for a trip to Baseline. The assigned time comes and goes. No Jeremy until he shows up forty minutes late and with a crushing hangover. He has chased after his girlfriend from one bar to another throughout the night and early morning—finally finding her, having a difference of opinions and getting into bed, alone, at 4 AM. So here he is, candidate for the homeless society pleading our forgiveness. Hell no forgiveness here! We're older guys. Scott utters, "Jeremy ought to get his shit in order." But who could not like Jeremy. "Do you guys mind if we stop for a minute so I can get takeout breakfast burrito?" And my stomach churns.

Scott and I have waded Baseline several times through the fall and caught lots of rainbows, mostly on brown-olive leeches. As we proceed, Jeremy, now full of grease, puffing a butt, thoroughly energized and about to open a Fat Tire beer bottle says, "You guys think you know how to catch fish here, but I'll show you something." And so he unfolds and drags a plastic picnic chair to where skiers dismount the lake's dock. His easy forty-foot cast is marked by an orange indicator that bobs slightly on the still lake. Scott and I are already wading well down the shoreline. "Jeremy, what a piece of work," I think. But he's a hoot!

We look back to see Jeremy land fish after fish after fish. And we give up. What does this scurrilous wretch know that we don't? Worse yet, he's supposed to be our guide. We're paying him to fish? What the hell! Thus did we learn about
Chironomid fishing at Baseline. A Jim Beam worked just fine. Jeremy’s response to our criticism of his personal behavior was. “I told you to watch me, which meant you were supposed to stick close and see if you could learn something. While you’re at it, could you get me one more of your beers?”

You might ask, “What is a Jim Beam? It certainly is not a fly dipped in whisky, is it?” No, a Jim Beam is a Chironomid invented by Darc Knobel when he worked in the Blue Dun Fly Shop at East Wenatchee. It was tied with a white tungsten bead head and red Mylar body over thread with a coat of clear fingernail polish or the like to protect the body. That’s all—and what a rainbow fly it turned out to be.

Long ago, my doctoral dissertation advisor at Harvard said, “Simplicity is not profanity.” He reminded us that the logic behind “Occam’s Razor” makes clear that often the simplest solution is the best solution. Well this turned out to be true with the Jim Beam—named for Darc’s’s friend, a retired financial officer at the daily WENATCHEE WORLD. Everywhere Chironomids live, Jim Beam lures fish to the net.

When I think back about the Jim Beam and flies I have used over the last sixty years, I am bewildered and then enlightened by the fact that simple flies work best for fish and complex patterns work best for fly fishers and especially the commercial outfits that sell flies. Perhaps the same can be said for life. Make it simple and take your chances or make it complex and experience the consequences.

Scott and I set out for the lake’s opposite side where we had seen fish tailing since our arrival. Big devils were in two-foot shallows just outside bulrushes that gave them protection from the occasional sky-walking hawk or eagle. The lead fly was a big #8 Jim Beam. The dropper was a little gold beaded, bright green-bodied, silver ribbed Chironomid. What we were to learn here at Baseline was that whatever fly we used, it should have some “flash” to it. This was a stunning contradiction to what we knew from the fishing at Rocky Ford where fish would almost always turn away from a fly with flash in it.

Three things happened early on that changed the way Scott, Jeremy and I succeeded at Baseline. First, because the three of us were inherently lazy and grew tired of wading the lake’s mucky clay shoreline, we decided to use float tubes. That meant that we could coast forty feet out from bank sides and sight-fish the trout without disturbing them with clumsy boot steps along the banks or in the water. Next, experimentation with leech patterns led us to develop a size 12 sculpin colored leech with gold ribbing—and better yet, a #12 gold-ribbed brown-olive leech. And float tubing allowed us to cast dry flies onto the varying currents that emerged whimsically from the little lake’s inflow. Larger fish congregated at the inflow and a #8 floater on the right seam brought breathtaking results.
Rumors, secrets, mysteries, lies—they all comprise the fly angler’s dictionary and vocabulary. Presented artfully, they seduce even the most wary—just as does the right fly presented in the right fashion guile the big, wise old brown. Curiosity mixed with the yen for adventure is probably at the heart of the angler’s fall, and yes, perhaps a bit of greed-like pride the ancient Greeks called hubris. We strive for stimulation and we strive for bragging rights—even if those bragging rights are harbored behind smiles as others tell of their conquests. But Scott and I share secrets—*hell, we know of....* And it’s important to know this among anglers. It’s not really a secret unless at least one other friend knows it, too. That is in the nature of secrets.

This cloudless May morning, Jeremy has unlocked the gate for us and driven off to visit the nearby McDonald’s. Scott and I are in our tubes. Our “guide” appears, pulls a lawn chair from his wreck and sets up camp on the outermost point of the lake’s ski dock. He munches a grease-dripping breakfast burrito, smokes his favorite Kools cigarette and “enjoys nature.” He slugs from a can of Coke since no Fat Tire has been offered. Scott and I cast to triploids sliding over yellow clay bare spots among thick weed beds. Grass carp have been introduced here to “guess
what?”—eat the weeds that soon will reach surface level and destroy the water-ski course. We kick over to Jeremy to bitch about the encroaching weeds and then kick off to enjoy damsel fishing to triploids that jump to heaven!

Jeremy is smirking in a way that signals he has a secret. Or as Jeremy so often would say, “You guys want to know somethin’ interesting? I’ve got another secret up my sleeve.” Well, he tells more about the grass carp—notably that they are world class fighters that are so crafty only world class anglers can catch them on a fly. More important, he claims, “Some huge browns have been planted here. But they can be caught only at night. They will not ‘fish’ during daylight.” Shortly after Jeremy’s two pronouncements, a grass carp is hooked and landed on one of Jeremy’s famous Rocky Ford leeches. But Jeremy is not author of the catch!
Scott is beside himself as we leave George on the way home to Wenatchee. Could it be true? Could lunker browns be lurking in weeds and darkness—just waiting for us? Since we have caught a few sixteen inch browns during daylight and are enticed by what may lay ahead. So the decision is made. He and I will return next Tuesday with his large camper, set it up during late afternoon, have a few beers and then venture forth into dusk riding our tubes. This could be a monstrous find or fraud.

Blasting heat waves greet me in Baseline’s camping area. Scott has been here a while, hooked up the camper’s electricity, set up his barbeque, chairs especially equipped for holding a beer can or bottle, had a Red Hook ESB and managed to catch a fair-sized rainbow. He’s anxious. What time will the big browns start hitting?

We kick off from the beach at dusk. I-90 is buzzing with racing traffic. We rig 2X tippets and knot on BIG black woolly buggers—well known for their attractive silhouette. Slowly, very slowly we move toward the ever-encroaching weed beds that will soon disappear with the cool fall weather and freezing winter. We glide over the weed beds and around them. Our headlamps cast light streaks into the night sky and we roar with laughter—spiked by a few ESBs. What the heck must occupants of the highway traffic think of lazar lights emerging from an apparently
deserted field—aliens have landed! Of course drivers cannot see us because a gentle bank with trees along it hide us.

But not all is well on the lake. Early on our weighted buggers are entrapped in clutching weeds. We switch to unweighted streamers. Nothing. Nothing at all and as our headlamps glare at each other we begin to giggle. That confounded Jeremy has dreamed up the big browns and here we are caught in the dream. So by eleven PM or so we call it quits and retire to the luxury of lawn chairs, an ESB and the aroma of Jack Daniels marinated steaks on the barbeque. "You got us, Jeremy," we utter in absolute admiration.

A year later, in late spring, we fish Baseline for the last time. Jeremy has lost fishing rights to the lake. There has been a dispute between him and its owner. Gossip is that Jeremy and the lake’s owner had a financial disagreement. I stop at Darc Knoble’s shop, the Desert Angler in Ephrata, and learn that Baseline’s owner gave Baseline’s fishing rights to Darc after the Jeremy fiasco. My question is, "Are there any fish there and if so can Scott and I fish it?" Turns out that there are some big triploids left but that the lake will be closed to fishing next week and not stocked again We are welcome to take our chances at $105.00 apiece for a day. So I accept, provided we can camp overnight. No problem.

Late that next Tuesday afternoon, I arrive at the beautifully sculpted grass and gravel camper area to find Scott sitting in his beer chair with an ESB, waiting for me. The temperature at George must be in the low 90s. I insist on one "cold" one" and we imagine the great fish we are about to find. This could be the night of a lifetime.

We’re on the water with but two hours or so of daylight. Scott goes north and I to the intake just across from the pump house. Each of us knows the water and has his little secrets.

I am trolling a sculpin feathered leech, gold wire wraps, on a floating line with thirteen feet of leader. It always works here. It does not this afternoon. Which goes to prove my theory of the uncertainty of certainty! As I round the corner to enter the small intake pool, I see a fish, or maybe two, and they are “big boys” rising in tiny channels that disappear in the pool. “My gosh, and they’re on the surface.” So I change flies.

The big fluorescent orange October Caddis lands short. Still a fish nips at it and is gone. That was one rotten cast! The next cast lands in the slot, so to speak, and a huge head pops surface and inhales dinner. The big one neither runs off a long way nor jumps. Instead, it bulldogs and circles. I wonder how many fine tippets it has snapped. But it should not break this 3x unless I exercise unusual stupidity. In past days I have had big fish here run two hundred feet to wrap around a dock support post—as if they knew it was there. But not this big tough thug. It circles
round and round the pool. Anxious not to harm it, I fin close and slip a steelhead net under it. That is my day and night. I am done.

Scott caught nothing before dinner and was disgusted. He mixed his special vodka and tonic followed by a good Cabernet, while I drank ESB; we barbequed Jack Daniels marinated T-bones and we ate baked potatoes soaked in butter and sour cream complemented by Scott's famous Caesar salad. We dined as kings and plotted the downfall of a certain triploid that lived at that the lake's far end. Tomorrow would be different and it was.

Big fish of twenty inches or more ghosted along the lake’s yellow bottom now cleared of weeds by the grass carp. Sight fishing was superb as we tossed gold ribbed sculpin feathered leeches shoreward from our tubes and stripped slowly to a target fish. It was the best sight fishing either of had ever experienced. Best of all, Scott got his huge triploid at the ski course’s far end.

Now, as I write in late 2010, it is sad to think about a sliver of heaven where Jeremy, Scott and I shared so many laughs and where one could still find solitude. Good "ole" Baseline—a snapshot not to be replicated.
An addendum here. Let us call this the character of Wenatchee fly fishers—and others as well. Most will not pay for a day's fishing rights on local waters—perhaps any waters. Irv Conner and Jim Bailey came out to Baseline once or twice. Occasionally, these and folks like John Cunningham will pay to fish Issac's lake in Douglas County or Moccasin, with its world class fishery, over in Winthrop. But mostly the local fly fishers visit only public lakes. Why? Because, most claim, they can't afford the "pay to play" fees or are taken aback at fishing stocked waters.

The odd thing about this is that most of the really expert fly fisher/fly tiers hereabouts have invested thousands or tens of thousand of dollars in campers and powerful trucks to haul all the gear that goes with their trips. My guess is that there is snobbishness about these folks and there is social character that draws them together.

The first issue is my theory of snobbishness. These guys, if you get a few drinks in them, will assert that fishing these two hundred dollar a day "pay for play" lakes is really not sport fishing. That is because the waters are heavily stocked with triploids or the like and the canny "ole native" fish aren't there. There's no challenge to this kind of fishing, they might argue. Only rich folk and stupid fish populate these waters, they might say. The fact is that there are very few Northwest waters that offer only native fish. Almost all have been stocked by public or private agencies. And the argument that stocked fish, at least some types are stupid, can be successfully disputed by anyone who has had to learn to fish Rocky Ford Creek—where the 'bows learn fast. Now, let's move on.

The next issue is social character. Get this straight! These Wenatchee guys fish a lot and they are first class fishers and tiers. By March each year they are on the water and in the water. They "follow the hatch," in their campers, from Grant County's lakes north to Blue and Chopoka and up into southern British Columbia. Their travels last several months with sufficient trips home to reassure a spouse. Occasionally a wife travels with this ever-changing caravan. But what seems to be the major requisite travelling companion is an over-bred, undertrained Brittany spaniel. This is a critter that scrambles along the shoreline of Rocky Ford Creek to scare out always leery, bank-hugging rainbows. It is a group of "fishing dogs" that form up as a happy pack that runs rampant through campers' layouts, heedless to masters' screamed commands. We, of Wenatchee, have a Wenatchee Valley Fly Fisher's Club—and I am a longtime dues paying member who no longer attends its functions. I call it the Wenatchee Valley "Kennel Club."

My guess is that the social character of these anglers is framed in what I call the "circle of campers." They love to be together as much as they cherish the fishing. After a day of fishing they gather outdoors each night within the geography of their closely situated campers. There are drinks, jokes, new information about this particular water, fly tying instruction and a meal together. Dogs fly hither and yon oblivious to their shouting masters. A Wenatchee Fly Fisher never has to be alone.
"The camaraderie is as important as the fishing," so I am told. Always there is noise.

But this is not all pleasantness. Can you imagine an angler who seeks peace and quiet surviving in such a maelstrom? This spring I heard a "dog story" that came down from Chopaka where the "Kennel Club" was plying the waters and their dogs were raging through camping outfits set up by "others." Well the "others" got together and let a dozen "Kennel Club" members know that there would be some jaw breaking if the dogs were not kenneled. Scott Smith reported to me that he had arrived at Chopoka just after the "Kennel Club" moved north following their confrontation with the dogless anglers. He set up his camper on the allotted campsite and his Golden Retriever, Tippet, was wandering at the campsite's edge. Suddenly a giant's roar bellowed across the campsite. "If I see that "SOB" anywhere near my camp, he's dead meat and so are you." Neither Scott nor Tippet barked back, but they, non-offensive victims" of the "Kennel Club's sins, were careful where they trod!

The other point I am getting to here is that good people, "gentlemen fly fishers," are becoming thoughtless of others when it comes to fishing public waters. Fistfights break out over who has first rights to a good campsite. Shouting matches occur on the lake over who is crowding who over some especially productive water. A steelhead angler will take control of the Monitor drift on the Wenatchee for a whole afternoon rather than making his way through the drift so that others can fish it. Along Rocky Ford Creek, it has become normal for a fly fisher to cut in fifteen feet below you as you are fishing a scud downstream. What we have come to is a fishing society in which anglers feel a sense entitlement.

What I mean is that civility or common politeness is disappearing on public waters. It's almost as if the offending angler is thinking (let's give him/her credit for thinking): "I'm here. This is my water. I can fish as I like. I don't owe anything to any other angler here. I HAVE MY RIGHTS! And no one else exists."

This sense of ill-mannered behavior has even begun to contaminate "pay to play" private water that I treasure. For example during fall 2010 at Moccasin Lake, I was parked behind the guide's truck as we prepared to drive up to the lake and twice, Seattle people cut in between my vehicle and the guide's instead of getting into line behind other vehicles. These same people were quick to dismount from their vehicle at the launch site and array their float boats across the front of the launch area so that no one else could launch a float tube. I was quick to ask the guys to move their boats so that I could launch and they grudgingly did. At lunchtime near the lake's shelter, these guys again left their boats so that no one else could launch. And again I asked that the boats be moved. This time the guys grumbled and mumbled, but complied. I mentioned all this behavior to the guide, Bret, who has become my good friend over the years and his response was, "Oh yeah, I guess those guys are like that." It was as if this kind of behavior was to be expected, let alone tolerated. My question is: why do good people behave this
way? What is this sense of entitlement that trumps civility? I don’t know the answer, although the question appears in almost a multitude of 21st century activities.

Still, most anglers on private waters are thoughtful of others and the number of anglers fishing each day is limited. So one has peace and quiet with plenty of open water. The poetry of place enlarges my spirit.