

On the Road Again

By Ken Giesser

There's just something special about getting up early, hitting the road and heading out on a fishing trip. If you give into the urge and let it, Montana can pull on you like a powerful magnet. Science may claim the North and South Poles to be the earth's axis points, but as a fisherman who also believes in luck, I think it's entirely possible we're spinning on a line running right through the heart of Montana and coming out maybe somewhere in New Zealand. The exact coordinates being somewhat difficult to determine, because in Montana it varies with each angler. Remember this, if a Montana fly fisher reveals to you the "secret spot", then be sure and jump over to the next drainage if you want to find the "real spot". That's the beauty of Montana, there are so many miles of magical water to fish and perfect little towns to visit, you'll never be disappointed. They call it the Treasure State for a reason. You can explore it for a lifetime and never discover all of what it has to offer.

I was drawn to Montana back in the 1970's after reading a booklet put out by Bud Lilly's Trout Shop in West Yellowstone. It read like an open invitation, heralding the excitement and adventure of fly fishing in Southwestern Montana and the surrounding region. My dad's cousin, former CFFU member Wally Giesser, had given me the booklet after fishing the area himself. He thought I might be interested and I was! Curiously, a strange sense of compulsion would come over me each time I picked it up, never realizing the hook had already been set by the lure of the Madison and its famous Salmonfly hatch. I only knew I needed to go someday and it was Wally's fault.

For the next several months I couldn't get Montana out of my head. I was 21 years old at the time and having trouble figuring it all out. On the one hand I had a decent paying job and on the other hand I was just 21. Not surprisingly, as the fishing season approached and my focus sharpened, it became easier to tell my boss I had somewhere to go. Soon after, I loaded up the old Ford pickup truck and lit out for Montana. It was early June of 1975 and I brought along my one and only rod, a Fenwick FF807 and a 1494 ½ Pflueger Medalist Reel. Attached was a Scientific Anglers Air Cell fly line with an extra spool of Wet Cell. Flies would end up being accumulated along the way. I was willing to travel and very eager to learn more about the sport of fly fishing. I'd already been casting for a couple of years by then, catching the occasional trout, but the catching wasn't keeping up with the scratching for the itch I had! The road to Montana beckoned, I went, and it's all been forever etched in my heart and mind. I eventually came "limping" home in late August with what has turned out to be a lifelong addiction to the "drug of tug".

Along the way I fished the Henry's Fork, Teton, Yellowstone, Madison (from inside the park, all the way to Ennis and on down the Beartrap), the Beaverhead, Big Hole, Odell Creek, Poindexter Slough, Cliff and Wade Lakes, Yellowstone Lake and all the way up to the Flathead country of the north. I spent almost an entire summer of my life in what could be considered a self-taught apprenticeship. To a small degree

I was able to experience the feeling of being a bum without actually becoming one (a true fish bum typically masters his craft like few others because it's all he does). I wasn't able to master anything, but came to a realization that time on the water is the greatest teacher. I'm older now and have endeavored to behave like an adult with responsibilities, but I must admit I still actively seek out any and all advice I can get from a bum on his home water . . .

It was July 1975 and for the better part of a week I'd been fishing the Madison River in the midst of tremendous Salmonfly hatch. The fishing was great, but I was having trouble keeping up with the action. For that reason I would often find myself traipsing on over to Bud Lilly's for advice. I'd go into his shop feeling somewhat frustrated, but after talking with him for a short while, would always leave feeling encouraged. He might offer a suggestion like, "Try to keep your backcast stop a little higher and that should help solve some of your casting problems", or he might provide information like, "The Salmonflies have migrated upstream above Burnt Tree and are now halfway to Varney Bridge. Use a Dick's Pillow or Sofa Pillow in that section and when they get to McAtee Bridge and above, switch to a Bird's Stone".

Day after day I would fish and then return to one of the fly shops in "West" or Ennis and gather more information. Unfortunately, I didn't have an unlimited budget and wasn't able to employ the services of a guide. The fly shop folks knew this and took care of me anyway. The Tackle Shop in Ennis had a smoker out back and upon request, the traveling fly fisher could have a couple of his trout smoked up. Creels were for sale inside the store and hooks still had working barbs. God bless local fly shops everywhere! May they always thrive and flourish!

I'm 64 years old now and this coming July, Lord willing, I'll be taking my 16 year old grandson Matthew on a road trip to Montana. Even though we'll be traveling together, I'm hopeful he'll be able to create a little magic of his own while at the same time do some of the driving. I've been back to Montana quite a few times over the years and have never lost that familiar feeling of anticipation. This will be Matthew's first fishing trip to the Big Sky and I know he loves small towns as much as I do. Our trip will probably go something like this . . .

Driving across Nevada is always a challenge. We'll undoubtedly spend most of our first day equally bored and fascinated at the same time. Questions will arise. Why is it most streams in Nevada don't empty into the ocean? Could it be Nevada at one

time was an ocean? Pyramid Lake sort of feels like the ocean, doesn't it? What if we're actually in the Twilight Zone? Nevada!

Crossing into Idaho will bring us to within a couple of good long double hauls from West Yellowstone, but a bed in Idaho Falls for the night sounds pretty good. Chicken fajitas at Jalisco's will really hit the spot this evening and after a stack of sourdough pancakes at Smitty's in the morning, we'll be back on the road. It'll be an easy drive from here. We'll enjoy both the people and places along the way as much as the fabulous fishing. Montana is also referred to as Big Sky Country because the sky really does seem bigger. The vistas have a much more pronounced sweep as they stretch to the horizon. It is noticeable.

At some point along the way, I'm sure I'll attempt to inject a little of my own philosophy and perspective into the mix. I'll probably go further than I really should, but for some reason Matthew seems to get it, or maybe I just hope he gets it. I don't know? Anyway, I'll begin by suggesting to him that most fly fishers like ourselves don't bother to question or even think about where our water comes from or where it's going. I'll explain, as water gathers itself and moves downstream it takes something from every single spot it touches, whether it be the physical properties of rock and forest or soil itself. As it moves along it also pulls with it some of the sweat and dreams of those who work the land. On those years when water suffers, the ranches suffer and the fish suffer. We sometimes take water for granted, but in our sport it's almost everything and we need to be good stewards of it. I'll also suggest to Matthew, when stepping into moving water a fisherman has figuratively, if not literally, entered the earth's bloodstream and should endeavor to learn about and respect the fish, biodiversity and mood of each river or end up being a disappointed intruder.

Montana has a unique heritage of offering the best trout fishing in America. It has more miles of "blue ribbon water" than anywhere else in the country. The towns, people, culture and scenery are very much a part of the experience and it's within reasonable driving distance from Sacramento. It's a wonderful destination for the traveling fly fisher and I highly recommend it. In fact, I'm always a little bit disappointed when it's time to leave and come back home. That is, until I see the wagging tail of our dog and feel the loving embrace of my understanding wife. Go there if you get the chance. The lawn can wait.