



A sort of love story . . .

Shad but True

RUSSELL CHATHAM

IN SPITE OF A BADLY DETERIORATED MEMORY, I can recall very clearly the first fish I ever caught on a fly. It was a shad. The month was May, the year was — let's call it 1953.

There is no faith quite like blind faith. I hadn't the remotest notion what I was doing when that fish intercepted its fate. Not that there was any mortality involved: At the time, if you wished to remain on morally stable ground you released all your shad. But what I'm getting at is that even a blind hog finds an acorn once in a while.

I don't want to suggest there were no clues at all; that would be completely misleading. I was fishing that day, a Saturday, on the Russian River at a pool called Summer Home Park. This hole was one already known along the river as a good place for shad fishing. Shad had been caught there since the last years of the war.

Carl Ludeman, who developed the basic red, white and silver fly that today bears his name, had a cabin at Summer Home Park. He fished the pool regularly. So did Jules Cuenin, a fine angler who for years did the outdoor column for the *San Francisco Examiner*. He once wrote, ". . . the lower end of the Summer Home Park hole is good for shad in the evening just before dark. Make a long cast, and as it swings release some line so the fly goes deep into the pool. The shad hit at the end of the swing."

You could only get to the pool during spring months by approaching it from the other side. You had to drive to Hilton, the next pool downstream, then walk up. The summer footbridge was never put up until Memorial Day at the earliest. Hilton had a certain

reputation as a shad hole, so I tried it first that morning, but without luck.

Arriving later at the head of Summer Home beach, I was surprised and excited to see shad scales on the ground. Someone had recently landed a shad there. The fish have very large scales that are easily disturbed when you beach the shad. I felt a surge of confidence. Too, the night before I had seen shad knifing around the surface of the pool, something they do as part of their spawning behavior.

I began casting and working down through the riffle. At a point I encountered the inevitable back eddy that caused line nearest the rod to swing upstream while the fly moved down, eventually to rest in the dividing line between opposing currents. This was hardly ideal, but in my complete naivete I went on with it, and this is exactly where the hog found his nut. Heart pounding like a drum, my virginity was gone like flecks of foam around a bend in the stream.

From that moment on I was obliged to view the shad with a special fondness. And for the next ten years I never failed to put in a reasonably vigorous season, not only on the Russian River, but on streams in the Sacramento Valley as well.

IT WAS STEELHEAD FISHERMEN who first found out what a treat catching shad could be. Whether by accident or design doesn't much matter. You could extend the type of fishing you liked, which involved long casts and a fish with enough weight to be interesting, clear into July. Steelhead season is over in March.

Early on, shad were wholly enigmatic to Western fishermen. For one thing they appear out of place when found in the same water as salmon and steelhead. Shad are distinctly salt water in appearance, resembling both the tarpon and herring, to which they are closely related. When you see them in a stream fifty or a hundred miles from the coast, you think for a moment there's been some mistake.

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Shad are not native to the West Coast. Like striped bass, they were brought from the East and planted in the San Francisco Bay delta. From there they extended their own range, according to most sources, from "San Diego to Alaska." What rivers they might enter south of the Russian I have no idea. They are not common in Alaska either, although runs are reported from the Kodiak Island region and as far west as Asia.

When the adults run into rivers to spawn they are totally noncompetitive with any other species for food or spawning territory. Their normal food, which is said to be plankton, is not present, and so, like many other anadromous species, they simply cease feeding during the spawning journey.

Again in common with so many other migratory fish, they strike readily at a variety of lures and have been otherwise caught on every imaginable type of bait. However, they seem most fatally attracted to something that glitters and shines.

Like striped bass, shad are broadcast spawners. This is generally done at night, near the surface, and most often it seems, in water that is relatively slow moving. Watching the water at night is, incidentally, a very handy way of determining if there are shad present, and if so, how many.

The Russian River, where shad fishing in the West began, is never a clear stream. It is naturally slow moving and silty, winding out of the wine country. In the extreme, during fall months just before the rains and after the hordes of summer swimmers have gone home, you might be able to see down six or seven feet. In the springtime its waters are running high, and the best you ever get is a milky green, something along the lines of the way glacial rivers appear.

In the years before the great runs of the Sacramento were fully appreciated, the Russian was the main river for shad fishing. Because it hid its runs of fish beneath turbid flows, few people knew much about how shad were behaving down there. This gave rise to any number of absurd theories and suppositions.

The earliest of these was the myth of the glass bead. Shad most certainly strike well at glass beads, but they strike just as well at diamond rings, pop tops and bare silver hooks. To this day some anglers staunchly believe the beads are magic, going so far as to carry a supply of them in various shades. Some fly fishermen do the same with flies. I don't know. A change from silver-and-orange to silver-and-blue definitely gets a rise out of steelhead or salmon that have been watching the orange go by for awhile.

It seems the main thing the beads did, and this was and is most certainly important in heavy water, was to get the lure, or fly if you will, deeper. During the 1940s all you had was silk lines, which didn't sink very fast. Glass beads go down like sinkers.

The Ludeman Shad Fly has a red tail, silver body, white hackle, and red chenille head. When fluorescent colors came in, some people used these colors in the chenille. Carl used to carry one other fly he would

sometimes switch to if he felt the shad were ignoring his standard pattern. This alternate fly has a gold body, brown hackle, and brown chenille head. I think he called it a Brown Cow or something like that.

In all the years I've fished for shad, the basic pattern tied in #4 down through #12 has done the job nicely. The exception to this happens during very low-water years or very late in the season. At these times any number of buggy-looking trout flies often work better.

In common with steelhead, not all shad die after spawning. In fact, the majority do not. The situation may vary from river to river, but a twenty percent mortality rate would probably be about right. Again, as with steelhead, after spawning the spent fish work their way slowly downstream, gathering strength. At this time they begin to seek food deliberately. They don't find much, especially in the case of shad, where the schools contain hundreds of fish, but when something edible comes within range, it is eaten.

When shad are from four to seven months old, or from three to six inches, they surface-feed steadily on various hatching insects. On a late-summer evening, when you get what trout fishermen know of as a spinner fall, sometimes thousands of shad fry can be seen dimpling the surface for the inert, drifting flies.

In light of this, then, it should not be entirely surprising that, given the right conditions, shad respond to nymphs and even dry flies. With regard to the latter, I've never had a shad take a free-floating dry; it had to be skated or moved. This is not a necessary evil, for I rarely fish a free-floating dry for trout, or even an upstream dry, for that matter. The takes are more lively and aggressive on the moving fly.

When fishermen started going over to the Valley streams — the Sacramento, American, Feather and Yuba rivers — it was a revelation. To someone who had known only the Russian River, the numbers of shad in those other rivers were nearly incomprehensible. A good day on the Russian might be a dozen fish, a great day, twenty-five or thirty. A good day in the Valley was at least fifty, and if you had the desire and the stamina you could triple that figure.

With respect to fishing of any kind, most advances in knowledge happen when the fishing is very good. You begin to experiment with this or that because you actually tire of the repetition that occurs if you stick to one method. Fishing the Valley rivers you always knew if something didn't work you could come back to what would, and thus always be able to bail yourself out of what ordinarily would be frustrating circumstances.

Fishing the Yuba, for instance, you might find yourself walking away from masses of fish just to see if some other very unlikely water was any good. And more than one angler found himself changing flies to something seemingly preposterous just to find out what would happen.

Once on the Feather River when fishing was awfully good, we started reducing the size of our flies until they were down as small as #22. The water was very

clear, but it was also moving right along. Strikes were plentiful, proving that shad are extraordinarily keen eyed, something you'd never have known if you were still fishing the Russian. Later, having in mind that knowledge learned on the Feather, we caught shad on the Russian when it was low and clear by using tiny flies.

Shad fishermen experience what they call "bumps." This is not a skin disease. When your line is swinging, shad often tap the fly, and this is telegraphed up the line. Usually there is not one tap, but two or three or four. We used to think it was a shad following the fly.

The clear water of the Valley streams revealed the truth: Four bumps was four different fish. As the fly passed by a group of shad, each of the four — or five, or three, or two — bumped it without breaking rank, thus maintaining the specific hierarchy and arrangement of the school. Sometimes one of these fish was hooked. More often, though, a hooked shad was one that broke a bit away from the ranks and bit with true determination.

AT FIRST WE TURNED ALL OUR SHAD BACK, partly because we imagined ourselves to be sporting types, partly because it was a very clean solution to the problem of what to do with them, and partly because they just didn't look or smell right. Their nickname was "halitosis herring."

We did all this in the face of the hard fact that "planked shad" was considered a gourmet's treat in Eastern restaurants, and shad roe commanded a stiff price everywhere. I killed a few females in deference to my father's pleading but personally found the sauteed results unpleasing. But then, teenagers are seldom much interested in the esoteric.

Those who had kept some shad and cooked them were universal in their denouncement of the fish as edible fare. The reason always turned out to be the million or so bones that crisscross the flesh.

There were, though, those quasi-country types who see fields and streams as supermarkets without checkout counters. These fellows would keep a foul-hooked flounder, planning to fry it with zucchini for lunch. Such fishermen did two things with shad: smoked them, or pressure-cooked them long enough to disintegrate the bones. The former was not half bad. The latter, well, it would have been simpler and cheaper just to have bought oatmeal in the first place.

I read somewhere that to prepare a shad for the dish known as planked shad, essentially a boneless filet with skin attached, a professional had to work for fifteen to twenty minutes on one fish. That meant a klutz like me was looking at an hour and fifteen minutes.

Once, in zoology class, one of the students complained to the teacher that a certain frog artery wasn't where it was supposed to be. The teacher, a pretty mellow old gent, smiled and said, "The frog is always right." I liked that. So when it came down to

cases, I killed a shad and took it home, determined to dissect it completely, in the interest of first-hand information.

The talk of bones was not exaggerated. These things were a nightmare. Still, as with everything in nature, you could find a pattern.

As to the odor, I concluded it was in the skin, as it is with most fish, so I determined to find a way to make something to eat out of the shad that was both skinless and boneless.

The system I finally settled on might seem a bit on the wasteful side to some, but it's the best I can do. You start by fileting a large shad into two halves. Females are best because they are the biggest and also because of the roe they provide. This roe is absolutely exquisite when fresh, in spite of what teenagers think. Laying them skin down, you find the bone structure with your fingertips, and using a very sharp, small knife, trim boneless pieces of meat out of this slab.

The meat itself is easily on a par with pompano. It's moist and succulent; very pale, almost white after cooking. Once you have the boneless strips you're ready for a variety of recipes from simple sauteeing with wine, garlic, a lemon and butter, to tempura, to any of a dozen dishes eaten with reduced hollandaise-type sauces.

The meat is so exquisitely delicate you must force yourself not to overcook it. In fact, it's perfect as *sashimi*, or raw fish. Care must be taken, however, to see that the shad is handled properly, which is to say, put on ice immediately after it is caught. It should be eaten very shortly thereafter.

IF YOU THINK I'M now going to close by suggesting a person's first fly-caught fish stands on anywhere near equal footing with his or her first lover, you're only half right. I can be corny but not that corny. My first lover changed my life a good deal more than my first fish on a fly. Let's leave it at that.

But as I said at the beginning, I maintain a special fondness for shad and shad fishing, and that will never change. We thought of them in the early days as having been tailored to the whims and hopes of fly fishermen. They were, you know, because they took so well, and also because they filled the rivers during spring when it is appropriate to be full of hope.

Some things are missing from shad fishing that are essential elements otherwise. Shad are more or less all the same size, so there is little or no trophy angle. And fly selection, so much a part of trout fishing, is insignificant here. Even with regard to the kitchen, most people remain confused or indifferent.

Altogether, shad fishing at its best implies a lack of motives, excepting those having to do with the seeking of simple pleasure. I have personal reasons for adoring the whole business as I do, reasons merely touched upon here. I'm indebted to the damn smelly things, I guess, but when I think it through I wonder if it really was a favor.

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