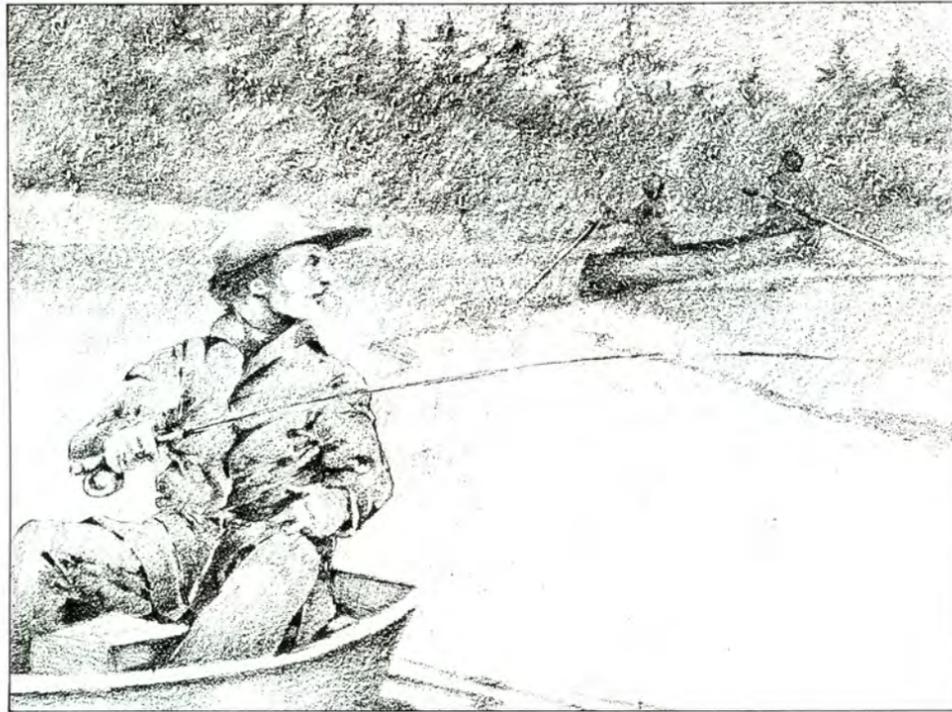


SEASONABLE ANGLER

Cutthroat Slough

STEVE RAYMOND



Winter was hanging on like an old overcoat. It was the Eve of April, but there was still no sign of spring. Day after day the skies and the rivers were cold and gray. No flies hatched, no trout rose.

Faced with a restless urge to fish, I surveyed the gloomy prospects and decided to go in search of cutthroat. The cutthroat is a good fall-back fish; no matter what the season or weather, it seems there always are a few of them around. If you can find them, you can nearly always catch them.

I'd heard of a slough where cutthroat were sometimes plentiful early in the spring. Following a map, I drove to the spot, across a bridge and along a dirt road through a farmer's still-frozen field until I came to the remains of an old camp at the edge of the slough.

The camp was next to a grove of bare-limbed maples and alders that hung like skeletons over the water. It was quiet there, and cold. The field was deserted and beyond it, there was not even a house in sight. I looked around and decided that since others had used the spot to camp, it would be all right if I did so, too.

I was chilled by the time I had finished setting up camp and manhandled my little aluminum pram down to the water. An icy wind scrawled strange messages on the surface of the slough. It was wide near my camp, narrowing farther upstream until it disappeared among the trees. From the map I knew it was several miles long and I was

near the lower end of it. It was actually the side channel of a great river, forming a giant arc from its upstream source until it emptied back into its parent river. Within the arc was the large island where I had made my camp.

The water was cold and dark with a slow current running through. The bottom, carpeted with the rotting remains of last year's leaves, sloped away quickly toward the far shore. It looked deep there, with a steep, moss-covered cliff dropping down to the water's edge.

I began probing with a sinking line and a bright fly that seemed the only spot of color in the dark day. Everything remained quiet. No birds sang, no insects hatched, no trout moved. After a while thin tubes of ice began to form around my line, and I realized it was growing even colder. The ice broke off and jammed in the guides so that after each few casts it was necessary to thrust the rod down into the water—only slightly warmer than the air—to melt the stuff. Then a few flakes of snow began to fall.

I was thinking about quitting when a trout suddenly took hold. My numb fingers struggled for a grip upon the line as the graphite rod bent and bowed in cadence with the fish. It was a bright cutthroat of a pound or better, and when it surrendered I twisted the fly free and slipped it back into the dark water.

Please Backcast to Page 103

Continued from Page 104

By then it was snowing harder, but my interest had revived and I went on fishing. Soon I took another trout, a twin of the first, and then a third, smaller than the others. Then came a pair of feisty mountain whitefish—an unexpected bonus for what had started out as such an unpromising day.

I had grown so intent on fishing that I didn't see the canoe approach. It was less than 100 feet away when I finally noticed it, looming like a ghost through the gathering snow. It held two stern-looking Indians, their solemn eyes fixed steadily on me. Then I remembered from the map that the island where I was camped was part of an Indian reservation—and I had not asked anyone's permission to camp there, or to fish. The Indians did not look friendly, and I wondered if there was going to be trouble.

The Indian in the bow of the canoe was short and stocky with a round face. His companion was tall and powerfully built, with long hair. Neither spoke nor changed expression as they drove the canoe closer with powerful paddle strokes. They came alongside, close enough to touch my boat, and then the short Indian grinned broadly.

"You shouldn't be out fishing on a day like this," he said. "It's too damn cold. Come ashore and we'll get you warm." Without waiting for a reply, he and his companion turned the canoe toward shore and beached it. Within moments they had gathered wood and had a fire blazing.

I beached my boat alongside the canoe and joined them at the fire. The smaller Indian reached inside his jacket

and produced a bottle of whiskey. "Here," he said, "this'll warm you up on the inside."

The fire was good and we passed the bottle back and forth while the smoke spiraled up into the thickening snow. The tall Indian said nothing, and I never did learn whether he could speak. Perhaps he was one who followed the Old Ways and chose to speak only in a tongue I could not understand. But the other Indian—his name was Joey—more than made up for the silence of his friend. He was voluble and friendly and talked freely of fish and fishermen, of salmon and trout and their mysterious ways.

"The cutthroat is such a small fish, he is not worth your time," Joey said. "You should come here later, in November, when the cohos are in and try to take them with your flies. I bet you could. I'd like to see you try." He made me promise that I would.

We talked on until the fields grew white and the nearby mountains disappeared behind a moving mist of snow. Soon the roads would become difficult and might remain so for days to come, so I began to think better of my plan to spend the night.

Finally I said goodbye to Joey and his silent friend and left them by the fire, then broke my short-lived camp and drove away across the snowy field. Outside was an arctic scene, but inside the car it was warm and I felt good. I had caught some fish, and that was fine; but better yet, I felt I'd made a friend.

And I'd forgotten all about the long-delinquent spring. I was already looking forward to November.

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