



New Life for Spring Creek

Whether or not you've fished this storied Montana stream, you've probably dreamed about it. If you haven't fished it, you probably will some day . . . thanks to Trout Unlimited, some leading members of the tackle industry, and many old Spring Creek hands who have been given a chance to pay up their dues.

By Tom Wendelburg

IF ARCHIVES HAD BEEN KEPT over the past century on little Armstrong Spring Creek near Livingston, Montana, the margins would be scribbled full of anglers' encounters with hefty brownies, rainbows and cutthroat. But the most important chapter in such a history would have been written just last year. It would recount how quick action by the Yellowstone Chapter of Trout Unlimited, with cooperation of a landowner, sportsmen and industry, saved Spring Creek's great fly fishing for the public.

For many years a favorite with anglers across the country, the creek is a mere shoe lace on the wide floor of Paradise Valley. Only a little more than two miles long, it flows into the big Yellowstone River. To the east, the Absaroka mountains cut the horizon like shark teeth 11,000 feet high, and to the west roll the foothills of the Gallatins. And the creek's unique ecology supports wild trout which feed almost solely on tiny mayflies.

Edged with watercress and backed by cottonwoods, alder and wild rose bushes, the stream cuts through meadow and pasture. It is the combined, nearly constant flow of hundreds of upwelling springs. In early season there's no heavy runoff to scour the stream bed, and in late summer the crystal waters never drop so low as to endanger aquatic life. A mile downstream from the source, several big springs bubble up out of the ground and bounce down a bank into the creek, widening its brief journey to the Yellowstone.

The thick weeds all along Spring Creek are saturated with mayfly nymphs, and since the spring waters stay in the low fifties all year, duns hatch every day. Mayflies are their staple food in the creek, so trout dimpling the surface might run any size. The average is a pound, but expect to tangle with a four-pounder once in awhile. Some days the selective trout reject any offering on a "coarse" 5x tippet. Even casting slack in a 6x tippet so a tiny hook bobs on the vagrant, limpid currents as if unattached won't assure you a rise. That's the challenge of Spring Creek after you've matched a hatch with a #16 or #18 fly like Light Cahill, Pale Evening Dun, Light Olive Dun, Mosquito or Black Quill.

Although Spring Creek hasn't been stocked for more than ten years, it is nevertheless a veritable trout factory. Last summer biologists, using electroshocking gear, censused nearly 2,000 more fish per mile in Spring Creek than in any of Montana's larger publicized streams. They estimate that Spring Creek has a whopping population of 5,700 legal-size, wild trout per mile.

The creek's fishing has been featured in magazine articles and more recently on television shows. Dan Bailey, the Livingston fly tier, who has fished here since 1938, says the stream offers "some of the best dry fly fishing in America."

Angling for the asking on Spring Creek goes back to sometime after 1886, when O. T. Armstrong bought a ranch along the banks. His son Paul was born there, grew up fishing the creek and took over the ranch. As he encouraged anglers to try their luck, the stream became known as Armstrong Spring Creek. Large trout rising to miniscule nymphs and duns on a transparent meadow stream attracted fly fishermen who usually released their catch and didn't litter.

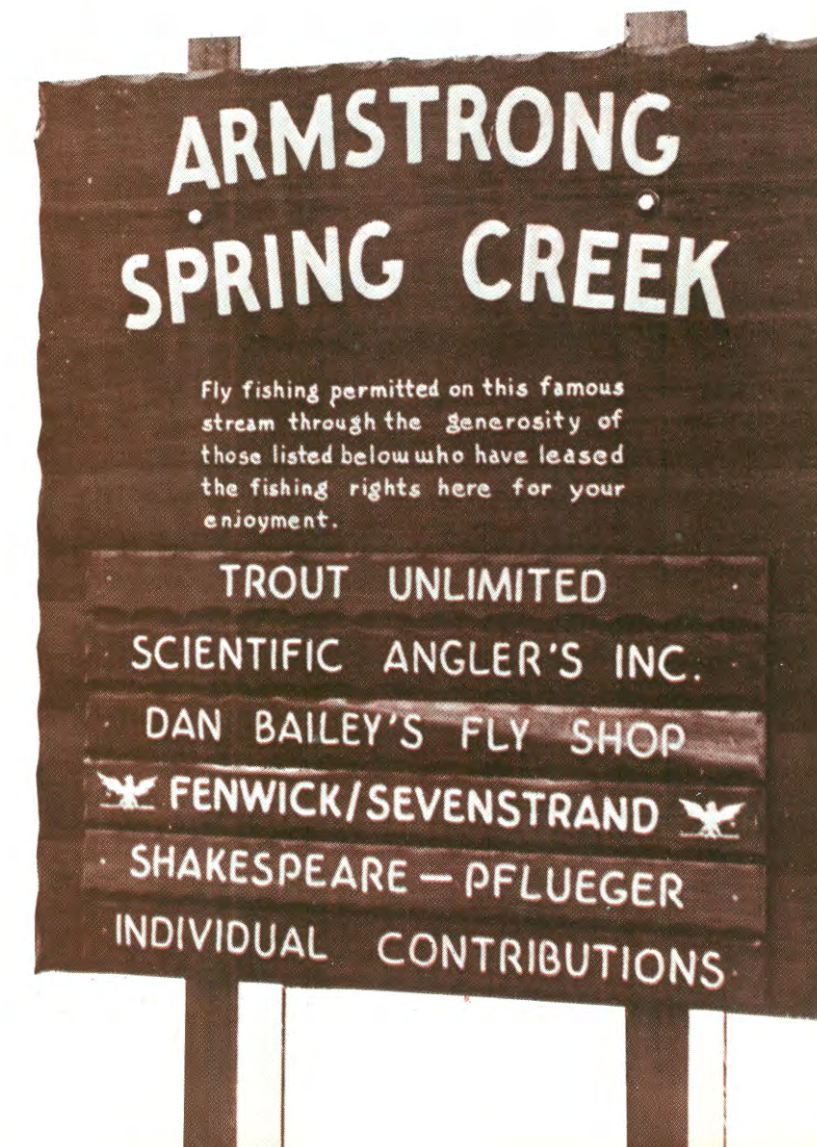
Paradise Valley winds ruffle the waters of Armstrong Spring Creek in Montana as angler floats a dry fly near lush weed growth. Photo by Charles Waterman. March • 1971

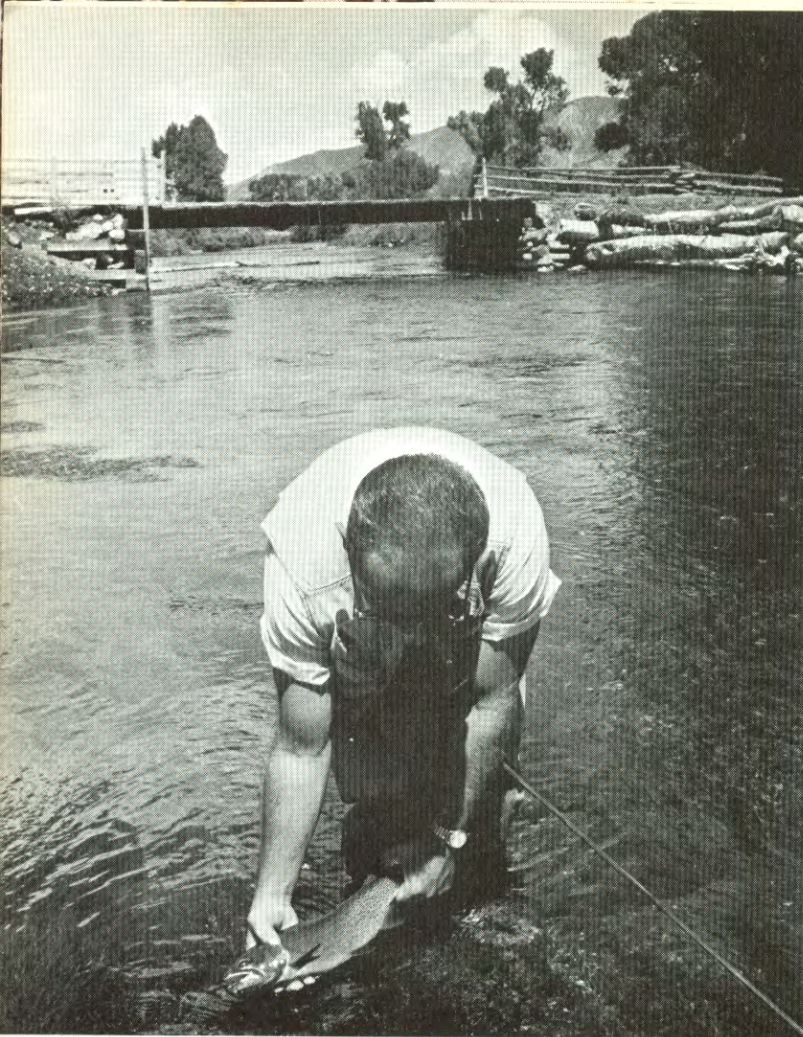
Those angling courtesies continued to be the law of Spring Creek when Paul later managed the ranch with his son-in-law, Allyn O'Hair. Paul died in 1969, though for years O'Hair had been running the ranch expanded over thousands of acres. O'Hair welcomed anglers who stopped at the ranch house and asked permission to fish.

Recently another landowner at the mouth of Spring Creek diverted his short part of the stream to make a longer channel and a series of ponds. In 1969 he leased out fishing rights on those waters to a private club. Sportsmen naturally feared that the O'Hair water, the next mile upstream, would be leased out to private fishing, too.

So last March Warren Shepard, a past president of the Yellowstone Chapter of Trout Unlimited in Livingston, sent letters to the National Office of TU and to some well-known angling writers. Shepard asked for an "attempt to save the public fishing."

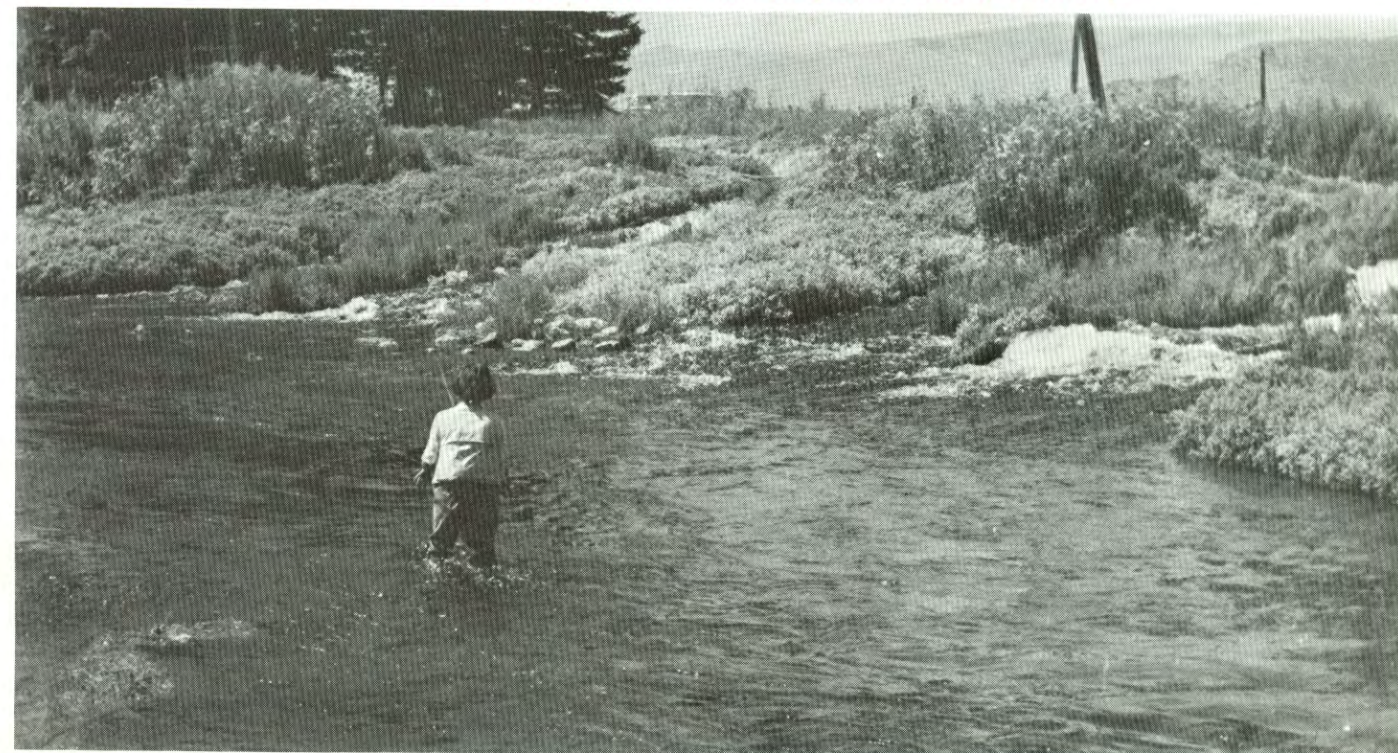
The Yellowstone Chapter, guided by President Ben Williams and National TU Director Dan Bailey, discussed the problem with O'Hair, who wanted to see public angling





An Armstrong Creek cutthroat about to be released just upstream from bridge which leads to nearby Yellowstone River access. Photo by Charles Waterman.

Mrs. Warren Shepard tests her skill at large spring which tumbles into Spring Creek. Photo by Dan Bailey.



continued. In June, O'Hair made a verbal agreement to lease fishing rights to TU for five years at \$6,000 a year. The Yellowstone Chapter's newsletter later reported that O'Hair's "cooperation was deserving of the highest tribute, for without his willingness to participate all efforts by the local chapter would have been to no avail."

TU established Spring Creek as fly fishing only, with a two-fish limit. Keeping the creek open to the public was a worthy gesture by the Yellowstone group, which now had the responsibility of raising the lease money and managing the stream.

Even more fishing water than the mile from the lower landowner's property upstream to the big springs was gained. Through the lease, and for the first time last season, anglers could fish from the springs upstream a mile to the head of the creek, water that O'Hair had previously kept posted. The lease also granted nearly three miles of access along the west bank of the Yellowstone River bordering the O'Hair ranch. Today you can drive on a bridge across Spring Creek below the big springs and on a half-mile to the Yellowstone.

Meeting the \$6,000 quota was, of course, the immediate problem. The original plan, to raise the money through individual contributions, was going well. But TU soon realized that this method could not be expected to come up with the full amount.

Then Bailey, chairman of the Spring Creek project, suggested that TU seek \$1,000 contributions from businesses. The Chapter had already decided to post a sign telling the Spring Creek story at an access. The names of the contributors would be listed, too.

The National TU had already sent over \$1,000. Bailey's own fly shop responded to the call with a check, as did Scientific Anglers, Fenwick-Sevenstrand, and Shakespeare-Pflueger.

The idea was, and is for upcoming years, to raise the lease money through six business contributors. But more than \$2,000 had been collected through personal contacts and letters from TU members to sportsmen. For 1970, the first

year, \$1,000 of this money was apportioned to reach the needed \$6,000. Yellowstone TU plans to earmark the remaining \$1,000 and future contributions from individuals for stream improvement.

The lease was officially signed in the fall of the first year of Spring Creek under TU management.

One cold, blustery afternoon last December, a time you might think about trout fishing, but not about *going* trout fishing, Dan Bailey and I drove 7½ miles out of Livingston on U. S. 89 toward Yellowstone Park. Dan wheeled his Bronco left onto a gravel road, past Allyn O'Hair's house, and in less than a mile we reached the TU sign at the creek. A large drum for refuse had also been put at this popular access. We drove another half-mile upstream and got out at the big springs.

As we walked to the bank where the springs tumble into the creek, Dan said, "The fishing season on Spring Creek is from mid-May through November. Those first and last months are good, and there are few anglers around. In May the hatches are sparse, but nymphs catch trout. In summer and fall, duns are thick over the water during the best rise of fish in mid-day from 10 to 2."

Then we looked out over the springs and saw dozens of trout making slashing rises out on the stream. "I've seen them coming up on 23-below-zero days," Dan said. "Some anglers have suggested that we open up Spring Creek all year, like the Yellowstone is. TU is studying the idea, but right now we're mainly involved in stream improvement.

"We have already built rock jetties in the stream, and more current deflectors need to be installed along the newly opened upper mile above the springs to wash holes in the flat water there. We might also consider digging out springs to bring higher flows and increase Spring Creek's carrying capacity. And in the past few years the Yellowstone has eroded back toward Spring Creek. A project might be needed to control that erosion."

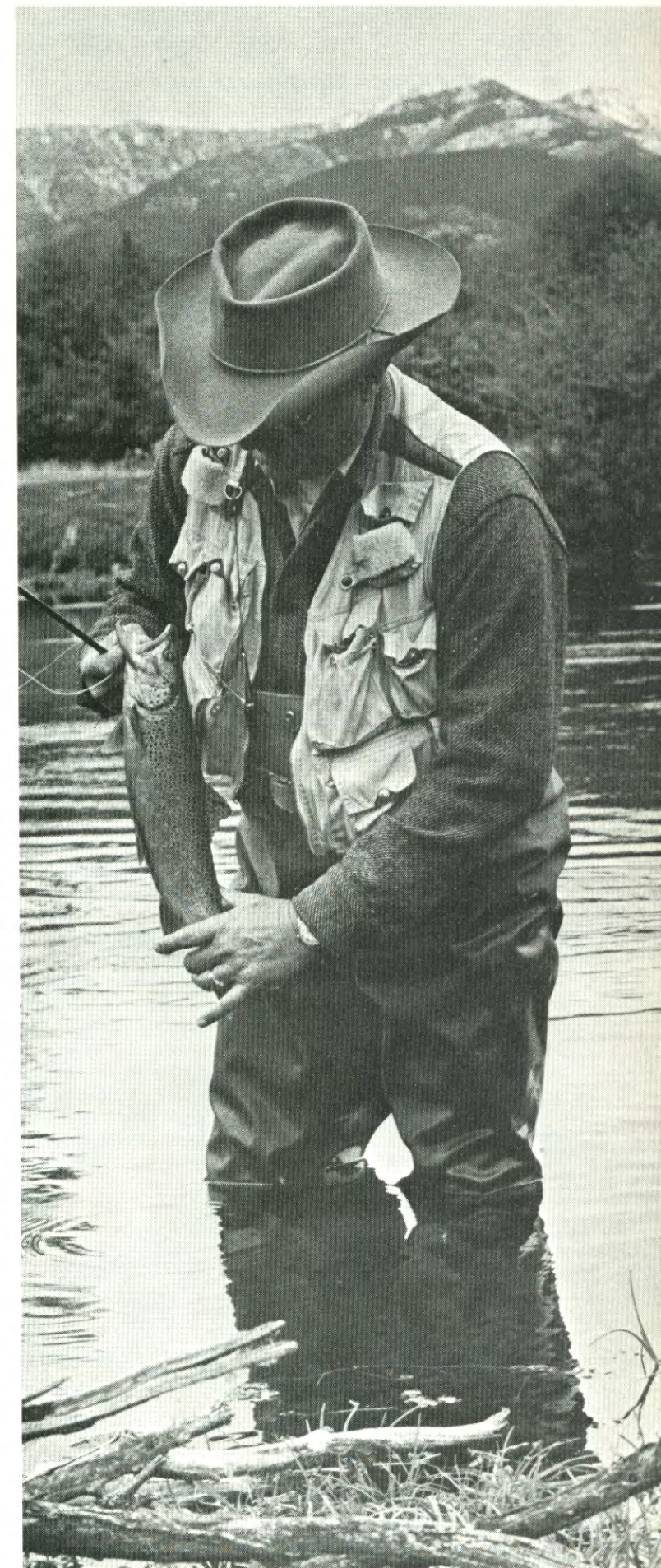
Dan noted that efforts guided by fisheries workers can improve habitat on Spring Creek, one productive little dry fly water that TU found a way to save. As we left Spring Creek, I wondered how long it would be until I could come back and drop a fly out to the trout, perhaps glimpse a white-tail deer in a clearing and maybe explore shorter sloughs and tributaries with their own trout.

TU is not sitting back on its initial success. The group expects to have to go out and raise the lease money each year. Lucky Lager Co. has already pledged the first \$1,000 toward the 1971 quota. And brochures telling this story are being sent to anglers around the nation, announcing the need for funds to keep the program going.

Geologists say that Armstrong Spring Creek has existed in its present form for less than a hundred years. Before that, the Yellowstone flowed there, covering the many springs in its stream bed. Over many years a river meanders naturally back and forth across its floodplain, cutting new channels one year, filling an old channel the next. As the Yellowstone moved eastward, the springs formed their own channel, looking like many other spring creeks that lace western meadows.

But this one was special. Thanks to TU, sportsmen and industry, one of the West's best short fly streams should be on the map for a long time. The way Armstrong Spring Creek was saved in less than one year sounds like a dream come true. But the reality of this project born of ideas, work and cooperation can mean even better management of public fishing on the creek from now on.

One of the reasons outdoor writer-angler Charlie Waterman winters in Florida but summers in Montana—especially at Spring Creek. Photo by Charles Waterman.



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Early season decision—whether or not to change flies in mid-stream

