

We must all have compassion for this man, already beatified by his angling peers as their poet laureate, as we read this compulsive confession of earlier days when, to him, "worm" was not yet a four-letter word.



Sins my father taught me

(with apologies to him and Dvorak)

by Robert Traver



TO PARAPHRASE A DECEASED PATRIOT, I regret that I have but one life to give to my fly fishing. I also regret all the years I wasted bait fishing as well as all the trout I thereby unwittingly maimed or killed by these cruel methods. For this is the "sin" my father taught me which I now wish to bewail — the wrong way to fish — though I suppose the way one learns to fish is just as chancy as the color of one's eyes or indeed that one was ever born at all.

In my father's favor I should add that he in turn probably learned his way of fishing from his own father, as I suspect most young fishermen do, and that this tends to happen for a variety of reasons: juvenile hero worship ("My old man's a better fisherman than your old man"); plain simian imitation; a lack of opportunity to learn any other way; and, more practically, the availability of his equipment when the old boy's off at work. . . .

In any case my youthful corruption began early and soon became total, and by the time I was ten I could wind up and heave a writhing gob of angleworms or whatnot almost as far as my father could. My first fishing pole was an incredibly long one-piece bamboo number with an askew pig-tail tip, of the kind one used to pick out of bristling stacks that stood in front of hardware stores — your choice, fifteen cents. For I had bait fished many years before I graduated to the decadent luxury of having one of the new steel rods that magically telescoped; the kind my early fly-fishing hero Tommy Cole scornfully called a "collapsible girder."

In a canny effort to make myself indispensable so I'd never be left behind on fishing trips, I also contrived to become something of a neighborhood authority on the collection, preservation and transportation of all manner of live baits, a dark art in which my father early schooled me. Though I haven't fished any kind of live bait in many years, I still remember most of those I gathered for my father and his fishing pals: chiefly angleworms and nightcrawlers, of course, and then a more esoteric and sometimes seasonal variety that included bloodsuckers, minnows, snail-like whitish things

"I stuck to worms and crawlers but my father played the field."

called grubs, and let's see, oh yes, grasshoppers and helgramites, to name the main ones.

I also learned that each species called for a special stalking and storing technique: nightcrawlers, as their name suggests, came much faster at night after a shower, especially when stalked like a footpad with a hooded beam kerosene lantern with a sliding door (before flashlights became common) of the kind refined ladies would today doubtless give their eye teeth to get hold of to the plant ivy in. My father also taught me that these crawlers, usually kept in a tub of rich black earth, became so python lively they would even avidly grab a reluctant trout if, the night before your next fishing trip, you easily transferred the trip's supply into a container of damp caribou moss. . . .

Grasshoppers were best gathered before sun-up, I soon learned, when the lively devils were still numb from the chill of night. These were clapped into a wooden bait box with a screen at one end and a sliding door at the other which my father fashioned out of old cigar boxes from his saloon. Then there were home-made minnow traps that one transferred to tricky buckets one was forever changing the water in. Then there were the jars within jars for luring bloodsuckers, baited with liver, both a procedure and prey which gave me the creeps. . . .

I pretty well stuck to garden worms and crawlers in my own fishing but my father played the field, using all the baits I've mentioned and others I've doubtless forgotten. He also had a macabre passion for all kinds of "boughten" dead baits, which I also failed to share (probably for economic as well as esthetic reasons), and he was a monthly pushover for the startling variety of pickled and embalmed baits that used to adorn the outdoor magazines, and still may.



A FEW YEARS AGO while I was rummaging through some of this old fishing gear I came up with a nostalgic prize: a bottle of what looked like the coveted remains of somebody's operation for tape worms. Closer inspection of the faded label revealed that I was the proud inheritor of a virginal jar of pickled pork rind peddled by one of the early folk heroes of preserved baits, Al Foss. If any museum of ancient fishing tackle is interested I'll cheerfully entertain bids. . . .

My father had one hell of a time trying to switch from bait-fishing to fly-fishing, and he never made it. His youngest son also had one hell of a time making the switch, and he barely made it. My father's first discernible attempt to switch occurred when one of the earliest fly fishermen I can remember moved to our town from the East. His name was August Ludington and he managed the local Singer Sewing Machine store; that is, when he managed to resist going out fishing with my father. I tagged along on their very first trip to our South

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Camp and there witnessed another fisherman fishing rings around my father. It was a rare spectacle.

To make it all the more humiliating, this feat took place on Blair Pond, one of my father's and my very favorite brook trout waters (also the setting of one of my earliest fishing stories, "Fishermen at Night," in case anybody gives a damn), while it was Mr. Ludington's first visit. I suppose what happened was that an evening fly hatch had come along and the trout were feeding far above my father's inert and ignored gob of worms. It was a lesson I never forgot and in later years I used to wince when I saw the trout start "jumping" (as we crude bait heavers called it) because this told me they would henceforth pretty much ignore any bottom-fished bait, whether dead or alive.

Later back up at camp I went into my lantern-lit fish-cleaning act, and I still recall my father's look of pained incredulity when, after he had dug a few wizened fish out of his giant wicker creel, Mr. Ludington calmly poured out an av-



"Where can a fella get hold of one of them there fly outfits?"

alanche of glistening trout. My father's eyes bugged and his jaw fell and his lower lip trembled.

"Well I'll be goddamned," he said when he could speak. "You mean you caught all *them* with a measly little fly that ain't even fit to eat?"

"That's right, George," Mr. Ludington said. "They were really on the prod tonight."

"My, my. Let's go have a drink — I guess I sorta need one."

When my fish-cleaning chores were done I got back in camp in time to make their third round of whiskey sours. I was also just in time to witness the event I'd all along been waiting for.

"Look, Lud," my father said as they clinked drinks, "where can a fella get hold of one of them there fly outfits?"

"Oh, Chicago or Milwaukee or almost any town back East."

"How much do they run?"

"Oh, twenty or thirty dollars should put you right in business, George."

"You mean the whole works — pole, reel, line — and some of them fake flies?"

"That's right, George, except we fly fishermen call them *rods*, not poles."

"Hm . . . Do you think you could get hold of an outfit for me?"

"Sure thing, George," Mr. Ludington said, glancing my way. "How about the youngster?"

"Nope, 'way too young for that there fancy new-fangled fishing. How long will it take?"

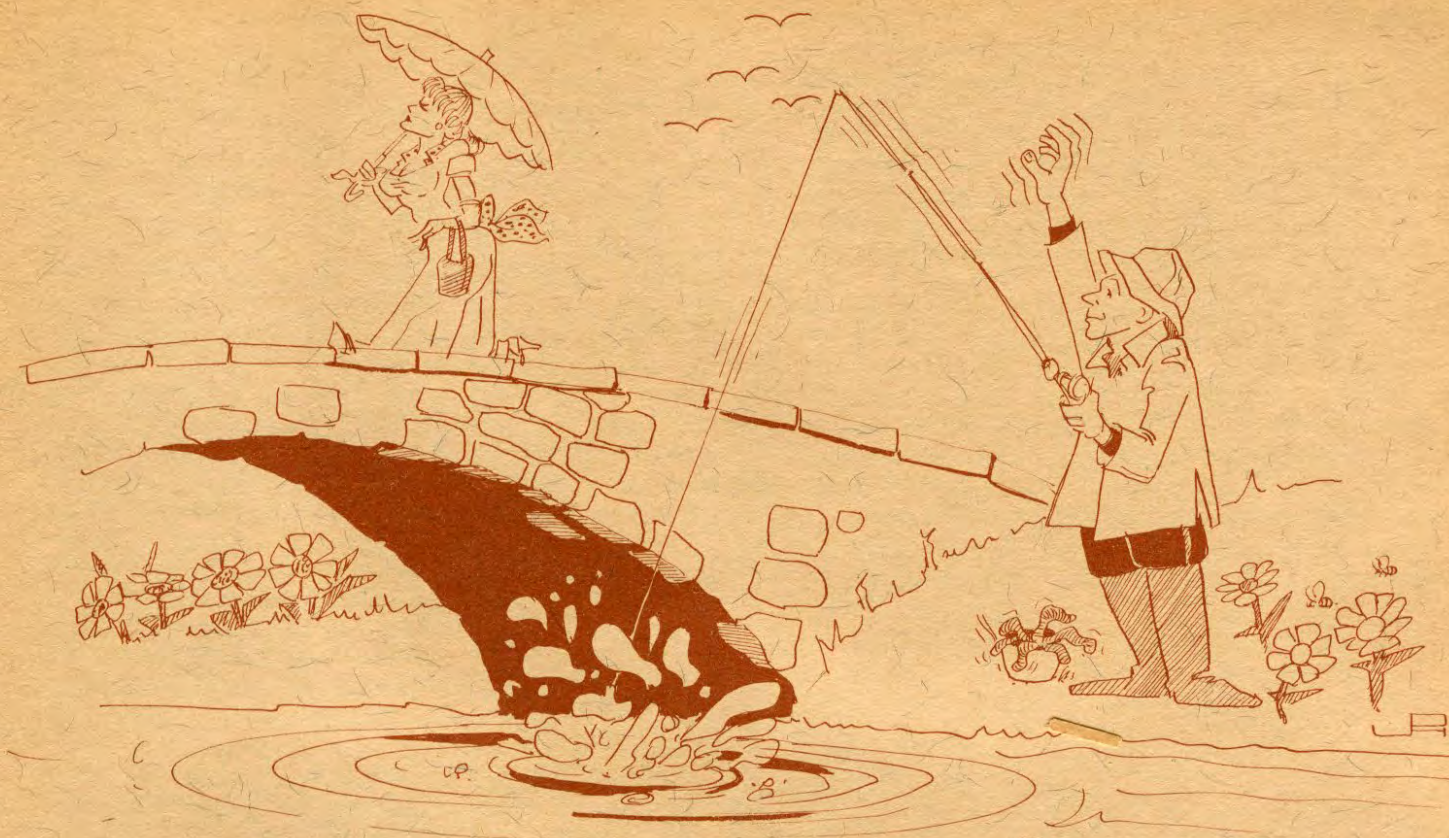
"Should be here in a week, ten days," Mr. Ludington said, rising. "Here's bumps to the world's latest convert to fly fishing."

"Thanks, Lud," my father said, glancing at me. "Step lively and take the man's glass, son — can't you see it's empty? Might so well freshen mine up, too."

But the world's newest fly fisherman never quite made the grade, as I've said. In fact, his grotesque attempts were a disaster from the start, perhaps because his main motivation was wounded pride rather than any genuine feel for fly fishing. I still have his antique fly outfit: an awesomely long and heavy rod made of ash, I believe; an old level silk line virtually time-glued to the corroded reel; and, the richest prize of the lot, a fat leather wallet full of snelled English flies of unfamiliar patterns, most of them never used, some of them still curled away in their parched soaking pads.

I recently went over these ancient treasures and, as I did, recalled some of the highlights of his gallant efforts to make the switch. Mr. Ludington tried valiantly to show him how to cast but my father could not seem to get it through his head that fly casting was not a matter of brute strength but rather of rhythmic purposeful timing. And since he was a big powerful man with a magnificently short fuse, sometimes he looked like a man trying to beat up the water into a lathered vat of his brewer-father's choicest beer. . . .

When Mr. Ludington was with us, out of pride my father pretty well stuck with his flies, but when we two were alone he'd often come sidling over and sheepishly mooch some worms off his youngest son. When the sad day finally came that Mr. Ludington had to move away all pretense fled: the fly outfit was reverently laid to rest, without prayers or flowers, and the collapsible girder permanently reappeared.



MY OWN CONVERSION TO FLY FISHING, if not quite so dramatic or traumatic, was in some ways even more prolonged and uncertain. One advantage I had over my father was that I was much younger when I tried to switch. By this I do not imply that all older bait fishermen are too soaked in sin ever to switch to fly fishing; in fact, I know two notable proofs that it can be done if one really wants to. One is my old friend, the late L. P. "Busky" Barrett, who was past seventy when we taught him fly casting; the other, a younger fishing pal, Anthony "Gigs" Galiardi, was in his mid-forties when he made the switch last summer, further reddening our bourbon-flushed faces by catching the largest brookie of the lot.

"Chasing girls was almost as much fun as chasing trout."

Another advantage I had over my father was that by my mid-teens I began to feel a vague but growing disillusion with the way I was taking my trout. For one thing I was getting weary of all the fuss and bother and uncertainty of gathering, preserving and fishing with live bait. But mostly I felt an increasing distaste for the inert, plunking, *tethered* quality of the way I was fishing compared with that of the dash and singing grace of men like Mr. Ludington.

But still I did not forsake bait fishing, and after Mr. Ludington left town I kept doggedly plunking away, more out of inertia and lack of guidance than anything, I suspect. By the time I was ready for college my fishing went into a sort of an eclipse, my summers being largely devoted to selling everything under the sun — the "Good day, Madam. May I please demonstrate the wondrous new housewife-emancipating Mother Goose self-wringing mop?" — and also celebrating my belated discovery that chasing girls was almost as much

fun as chasing trout. But one day my schooling was over and I was back home again clutching my diploma and looking around for my old fishing gear.

I found it and shortly after that had the good fortune to meet Tommy Cole on a trout stream. I'd known about little old Tommy for years, of course, as one casually knows just about everyone in a small town. I knew him as one of the town's few dedicated native fly fishermen as well as a bit of a choosy and aloof loner. Anyway, that day we fell to talking and discovered that both of us fished just about every day, so we made a date to go out together. We did, and hit it off from the start, and soon were fishing together almost daily.

As I look back on it it seems both fitting and fateful that a chance meeting with a spunky fisherman on a remote trout stream not only changed my mode of fishing but in many ways, I suspect, my whole way of life. I'd now like to try to tell a little about this change and about the remarkable little man who inspired it.

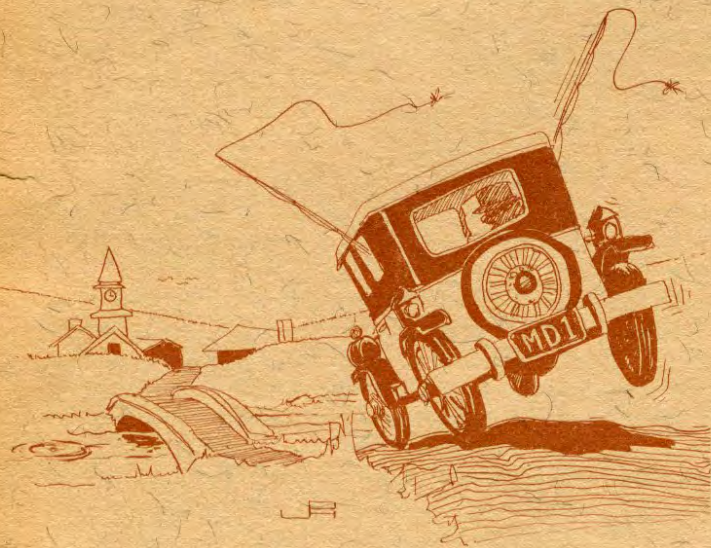
THOMAS WELLINGTON COLE was a dark slender little man of Cornish ancestry who had all the natural grace and gentility that as a boy I dreamed only dukes possessed. Though his formal education was both sketchy and brief, when he was not fishing or prowling the woods Tommy was an omnivorous reader and one of the most widely informed people I ever knew. Though I scarcely equate proficiency at word games with the highest cerebral flights, one of Tommy's more baffling feats was his ability regularly to solve the tough *New York Times* Sunday crossword without a dictionary — though I knew a fellow fishing buddy of his who couldn't even work the northwest corner of same with the help of five feet of encyclopedia.

As a young man Tommy also had a natural aptitude for mechanics and, like many Upper Peninsula of Michigan natives of that World War I era, was lured to the Detroit area to

work on Henry Ford's budding assembly line. Though he liked his job and the high wages, he keenly missed his Lake Superior bush country. When finally we got into the war to make the world safe for democracy (which world, ironically, steadily became more and more totalitarian), Tommy promptly enlisted and was sent to the front in France where, after much harrowing action, the Germans gassed him and he was ultimately shipped home. Since with his ravaged lungs he could no longer do hard labor, he finally found a job in a nearby town chauffeuring a country doctor.

This chance job opened up whole new fishing horizons for Tommy, for it seemed that when Doctor Moll wasn't delivering babies he was out in the brambles delivering flies over trout. This was a daily ritual, in fact, and since the old doctor took quite a fancy to little Tommy, he soon initiated his new chauffeur into the art of fly fishing and even taught him to tie his flies, including the Doctor Trude fly, whose creator Tommy's doctor long knew and had often fished with.

By the time I got to know Tommy the good doctor had transferred his trout fishing to some pastoral celestial stream



and Tommy had returned home resolved never again to bear arms other than a fly rod. This resolve included shunning all steady work and living on his modest disability pension and going trout fishing every day. By then I too was fishing almost daily so we soon joined forces and started going steady. And from the very first day Tommy began a subtle campaign to wean me away from bait fishing and win me over to the fly — a rather large and uncertain undertaking as it finally turned out.

Tommy was that rare combination, a gentle man as well as a gentleman, and so he sensibly proceeded not by ridiculing and running down the way I fished but by trying to make me see that fly fishing was simply a vastly more exciting, artful and humane way of wooing a trout. From the outset he conceded that in its way bait fishing responded as much to patience and skill as did other forms of fishing — something I already ruefully knew from years of fishing with such wily bait foxes as Edward "Bud" Harrington and, later, Bill Gray, a real wizard with bait.

At the same time he kept pointing out that, since the whole strategy of bait fishing was to let the fish swallow the bait while the fly fisherman, upon pain of instant rejection, had to strike his fish at once, in practice this meant that the mortality rate of

"When Doc Moll wasn't delivering babies he was delivering flies over trout."

returned bait-caught trout was virtually total while that of fly-caught trout was virtually nil. The accuracy of Tommy's shrewd observation was borne out later by the field studies of my old fisheries friend, Al Hazzard (with whom I had much exciting fishing while he was still stationed in Michigan), and many others.

Tommy also quietly reminded me — as well as demonstrated almost daily — that the fly fisherman was rarely plagued by catching such non-game fish as suckers and chubs and the like, while these ~~fish~~ fish were often the annoying bane of the bait fisherman's existence. One evening after I'd run clean out of worms and had to quit, Tommy squinted over my way for a spell, rubbing his chin, and finally spoke. "Look, pal," he said, "if you play your cards right and also promise to clean out my trout I'll be glad to rent you the fly I'm using for only a-half a buck."

"Go to hell, Cole," I said, folding my girder and sitting there morosely battling mosquitoes while Tommy played and deftly netted still another trout.

During these propaganda sessions, which ran the gamut from the needle to the bludgeon, Tommy also pointed out that, while the common angleworm could often be a savage killer when the trout were bottom feeding, there were frequent periods during a fishing day, especially during a good fly hatch, when virtually all the trout were cruising and feeding at or near the top.

"During these periods," he once said, "a plunking bait fisherman might just as well heave out a Stillson wrench."

"Yes, I know," I said, remembering.

He also gently kept harping, and finally made me see, that for a fisherman to restrict himself to fishing the same lure all day — which is essentially what the bait fisherman does — is as dull and boring and foolishly self-confining as an eccentric fly fisherman who would regularly go fishing with but a single fly.

"Unless you're a commercial fisherman," he ran on, driving home his point, "the main aim and fun of going fishing at all is the action a guy gets, not the goddam fish — which, like as not, he'll either throw back or give away."

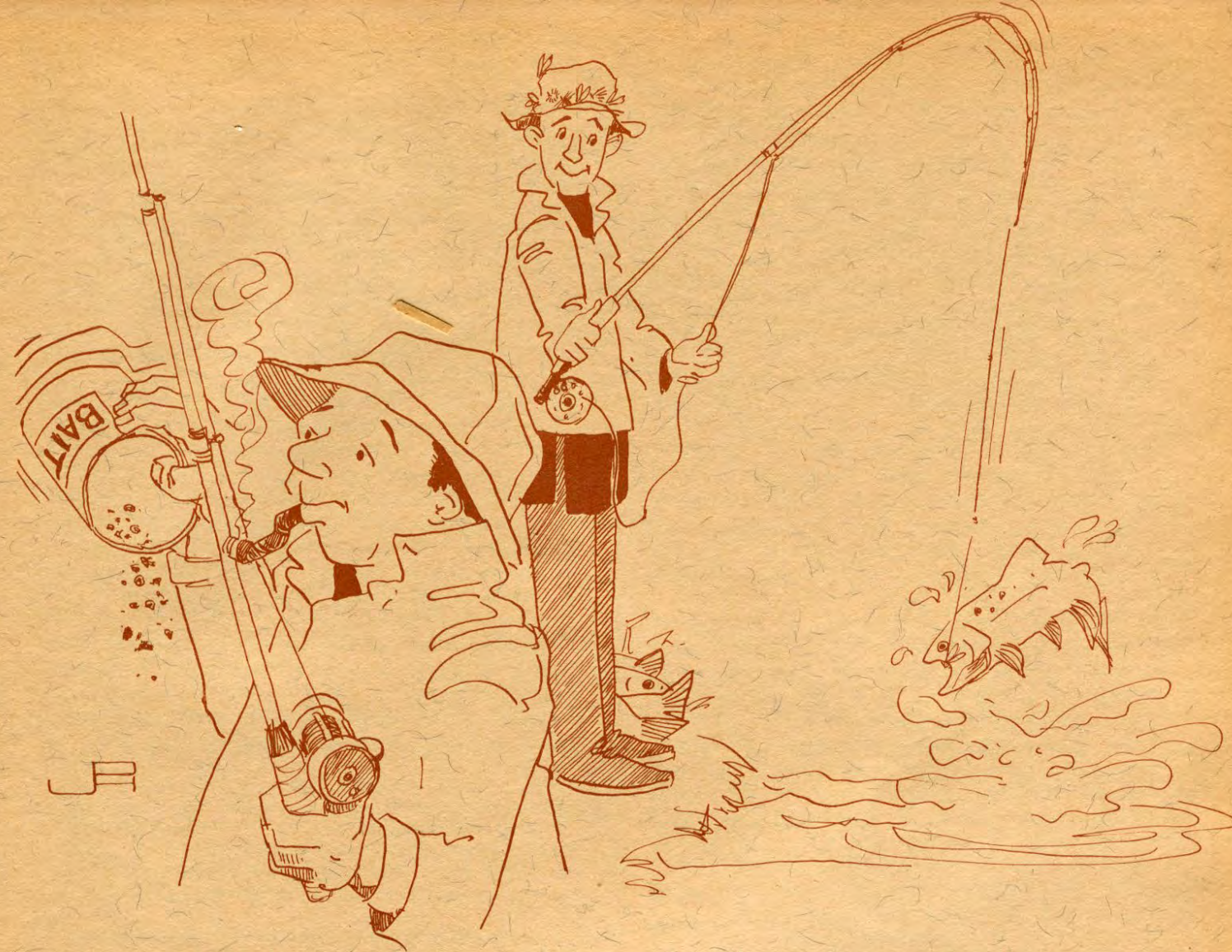
"Yes?" I said, listening closely.

"And as I think I've already shown you, chum, the best way to get action trout fishing is to carry a varied assortment of flies — types, size, patterns — so that, if you're lucky, you might finally toss out something they really want." He widened his hands. "It's as simple as that, pard — or can't you see it?"

"I do see it, Tommy," I once all but wailed, probably while threading on still another worm, "but I can't seem to convince myself that a hungry trout will continue to spurn something that's really good to eat in preference for grabbing a bare hook adorned with assorted fluff that's fake and no good." I sighed, groping for words. "It seems you're making me a fly fisherman in my head, Tommy, but not yet in my heart."

"That will come," Tommy solemnly promised.

A whole season passed this way, and part of the next, with Tommy eloquently preaching the gospel of fly fishing while I kept doggedly pelting out my "pork chops" — Tommy's



scornful generic term for all live bait. Along about mid-season of the second year Tommy seemed to take a new tack: he talked less about the joys and advantages of fly fishing and instead seemed bent on demonstrating them. Meanwhile I wondered whether he'd given up on me or was instead trying to shame me into the paths of virtue. Whatever he had in mind, one thing rapidly became clear: almost daily he monotonously beat hell out of me fishing.

It must have been some time around mid-August (this was before I started keeping daily fishing notes) when Tommy got a tip from a retired fishing pal that there used to be some fabulous late-summer brown fishing on a certain remote stretch of the upper reaches of the Bogdan River, somewhere above the third wooden bridge, and that maybe the place was still worth a shot. . . .

"Tommy made his first business cast as I was disimpaling my latest sucker."

Our own fishing was in a bit of a late-season slump, so the next afternoon we threw my little cedar boat on top of the old Model A (which the tipster had said was needed to reach the place), and headed for the third wooden bridge to have a look. Once there we quickly unloaded the boat and hid the Model A (against the prying eyes of rival fishermen) and were soon pushing our way upstream, using canoe paddles for oars.

We swiftly saw that Tommy's informant was at least part right: the place was indeed isolated and hard to reach and, after

a half-mile or so of maneuvering our way between the lush growth of overhanging tag alders, I was about ready to drown Tommy's tipster, having already accumulated quite enough material to write two books about all the phony fishing tips I'd followed.

Then came a spell of faster and more shallow water, during which we several times had to get out and pull the boat, then a long stretch of more depressing tag alders. Then, rounding a slow bend, we came upon a wide, deep open stretch, really an enormous pool, bounded on both sides by grassy natural meadows — "My friend says the Finnish farm kids used to swim here," Tommy explained — and suddenly we were beholding one of the most spectacular rises of big trout I've seen anywhere, before or since.

"Head her in shore," Tommy tensely whispered, and, once beached, we grabbed our gear and began rigging up with trembling hands. This was back in the gut leader and silk line days so, amidst all the plashing of big rising trout, meticulous Tommy had to go through the daily ritual of dressing out his line and scrubbing his leader and all the rest while all I had to do was uncollapse my girder and impale a crawler on my harpoon and quick plop it in. . . .

At least bait fishing has one small advantage, I thought as I made my first plop, but this advantage rapidly waned: by the time Tommy was rigged up and ready I had caught several wriggling chubs and one gasping sucker and was towing in another.

Tommy moved upstream a decent distance and made his first business cast as I was disimpaling my latest sucker.

Almost instantly he was on to a tail-thwacking, rod-bending brown, which he quickly creeled. By the time my harpoon was freed and rebaited he had caught and returned two more lovely browns and was fast to another.

Doggedly I arose and flung a writhing new gob of crawlers far out into the steadily dimpling pool. Something grabbed it before my hook had settled and almost wrenched the girder out of my hands as it roared off and away and I found myself engaged to a threshing tiger.

"It's a real dandy!" I hollered, bringing all my bait lore to the playing of my prize, my straining girder almost bent double, while Tommy held his fire and watched me land my epic fish.

"Boy oh boy!" I hollered, deftly thrusting my net under him (my sole concession to Tommy's way of fishing) and straining to hold high, for all the world to see, the slobbiest, yawpiest, most repellent sucker either of us had ever beheld. "Oh," I said in a small voice, abruptly sitting down. "Oh," I repeated, and then I just sat there dully watching the crazily rising browns.

"If you'd only thought to bring your water colors," Tommy said after a bit, "you could paint some mighty purty trout spots on it."

"Go to hell, Wellington," I murmured, on the verge of tears, heaving the mammoth sucker back in the meadow.

Tommy reeled in and moved down my way and thrust out a supple tanned hand. "Here," he said sharply, motioning with his fingers, "hand over that goddam girder."

"Yessir," I said, surrendering my treasure and watching him collapse and toss it clattering in the bottom of the boat.

"Take this," Tommy said, thrusting his precious fly rod out at me, "and go sit your ass in the front of the scow."

"Yessir," I said, automatically obeying.

"Tonight I'm going to make a fly fisherman out of you," Tommy quietly vowed as he squatted in the stern and grabbed up a paddle, "or you'll never in hell ever make it."

"What d'you mean?" I said, bristling.

"Just what I said. Now shut up and pitch out that fly — and

without my good eye on it, if you'll please kindly try and manage that."

Before we left the pool I had busted off on two beauties and finally landed a third. Then in the gathering dusk Tommy slowly paddled me down through the narrow lane of tag alders,

"I was not only a fly fisherman in my head but at last in my heart."

which by now seemed a boiling cauldron of threshing fish, during which I caught four more browns and lost some more of Tommy's flies, one last brown seeming almost as large as an overfed water spaniel.

By the time we reached the third wooden bridge the little cedar boat carried a dedicated new convert to fly fishing. "Tommy," I said, grabbing and pumping his hand when we landed, "thank you for turning your back on one of the most sensational trout rises we've ever seen just to turn a stubborn bait fisherman into a fly fisherman. Tonight, my friend, you really made it and I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"Cut out the corny sentiment," Tommy said gruffly, "and hold that bloody flashlight steady so a man can see to clean out these trout. Quit shaking, will you?"

"Yessir," I said, watching the kneeling, blurred figure of Tommy through the dancing columns of insects and trying to hold back my convulsive sobs of joy that tonight, thanks to this gallant little man, I was not only a fly fisherman in my head but at last in my heart, the only place I guess it really matters. ■

Angler **John Voelker**, who writes under the name of **Robert Traver** off-season, lives somewhere on his beloved Upper Peninsula of Michigan, which is about as much of an address as he wants anyone to have. When invited to appear at the opening of the Mackinac bridge joining the Upper Peninsula with Lower Michigan, Voelker informed the Governor that he was already chairman of the "Bomb the Bridge Committee."

Artist **Joe Halbherr**, who fishes under his own name in season and various aliases out-of-season, has fished with Voelker and lived to tell the tale.



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Fly Fisherman

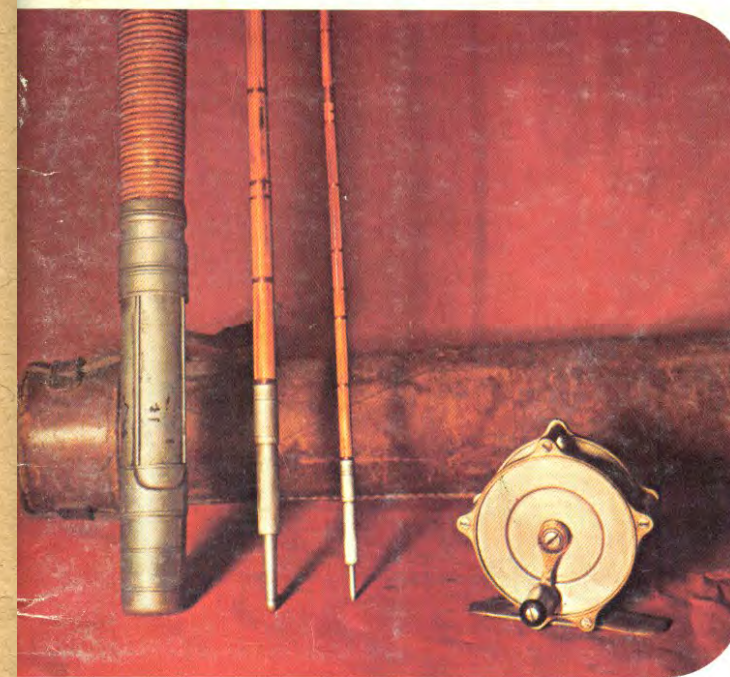
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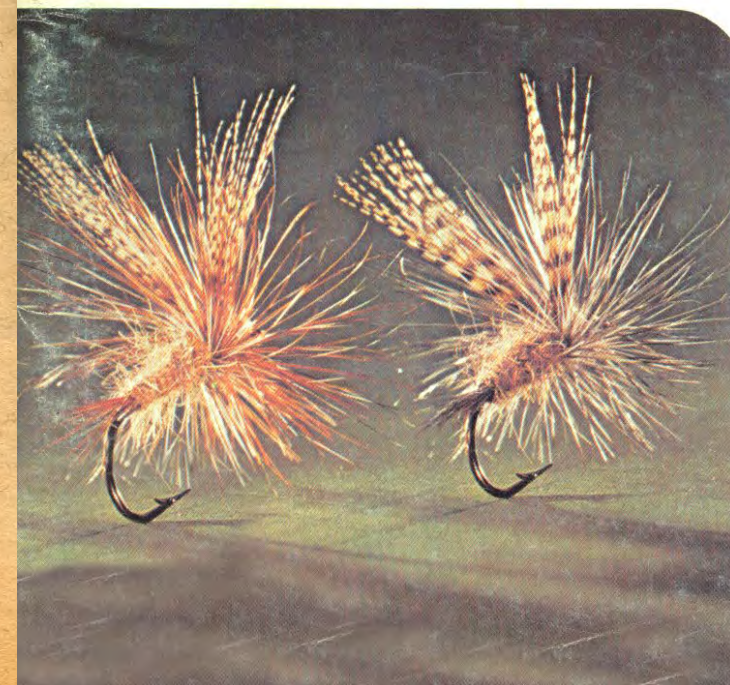
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