

Harry Darbee—legend he is . . . but saint he ain't!

Those Catskill Days

HARRY DARBEE

I GREW UP FISHING. It never occurred to me to study the theories or how-to books that tell you where the fish are, how to cast or what fly to use. I just did what I hoped would catch them. We called it "cut and try." Sometimes we were outright disrespectful of dry-fly doctrines and other accepted fly-fishing preachments.

I still remember a "fly" we used for night fishing in the deep pools of the Beaverkill. It was frog-shaped, cut from the sidewall of an automobile tire, hooked through the head and fished wet. The trout could see its shape against the sky from below. My friends and I took a lot of fish with this "imitation."

It didn't take long for me to become a skeptic about fish. They *are* fickle. I saw a kid sit in a niche on the rocks up under the covered bridge at Beaverkill and lower a gob of nightwalkers down in front of a big brown trout that had a lie back in the stones where the water was cool. The trout liked it there, but he was in full view of everybody. That kid came there every afternoon, sat down and dropped this gob of worms down there. I was there when he hooked the fish after a week or ten days of fishing. He let out a yell and yanked the damned fish out. Now why didn't that fish make up his mind to take the same gob of worms ear-

HARRY DARBEE was born with all the advantages—at the confluence of the Beaverkill and the Willowemoc in the Catskill Mountains of New York State, and back in those days that most of us "shoulda fished 'em in." He and his wife, Elsie, are among the world's premiere fly tiers, and their house on the Willowemoc in Livingston Manor has for nearly half a century been the gathering place for Catskill fly fishers in search of sustenance, solace or just plain solid advice. Harry once confessed to us that he almost went into newspaper work back in the 30's, but, Lord be praised, he kept to his bench and became confidante and confessor to several generations of anglers. Accessible though he is, he is yet a legend, and has just recorded his recollections of those Catskill years in his new book, *Catskill Flytier* (Lippincott), to be published this October.

lier? It was 15 or 16 inches long and old enough to know better.

I saw another kid over at the old mill pond on the way to Tennenah Lake. We were walking along a secondary channel and there lay a big brown. The kid said, "Look at that!" He flopped his damn gob of worms over and *bam!* Just like that, that trout took the worms. He could see us, was even hugging the bottom acting scared. But he grabbed that bunch of worms the minute they showed. Nobody else would have even thrown anything to that fish.

Now how are you going to judge what's going to happen and why? Well, the answer is this—when you see a fish and you think you can catch him, *try*. I don't care how clumsily you try, but try. You can't catch him with your hook out of the water.

I think it pays to be skeptical in fly-fishing. Sometimes you can get your fly so natural-looking you can't tell it apart from the real thing, and when that happens I think it's a mistake because neither can the fish. You can often do better by putting a contrasting fly out there. I've had trout take a Royal Coachman in a heavy hatch too many times to neglect the technique. If I can't raise them with a matching pattern I put on a contrasting fly. Sometimes it's good to fish with the odd fly, or a fly of your own design, such as Allie Huppman's Brown Bucktail.

"Hup" was from Windsor, New York. He was a born woodsman who hunted and trapped for a living. He also fished and tied flies. His Brown Bucktail was a great night fly, a killer of large brown trout. Hup would come in off the river late at night with several big fish and head for the nearest bar. Always well supplied with his flies, he traded them for drinks. The bar owners would then sell them to customers, who were always envious as hell of Hup and his catch. It was a good arrangement all the way around. After a while, the Brown Bucktail became a standard pattern



Harry Darbee on the Willowemoc River in the Catskill Mountains of New York. Photos by Pat Washburn.

in most fly boxes from Margaretville and Roscoe to Callicoon.

Strangely enough, there was no bucktail in Hup's Brown Bucktail. The fly contained only the darkest brown hackle, palmered as thickly as possible on a #4 3XL model-perfect hook. Then it was immersed in a heated solution of mineral oil and paraffin. When taken out of the oil, it was squeezed in cloth to remove all surplus oil. The fly was fished down and across with a slow, steady retrieve, causing a V-shaped wake on the surface of the pool. Large trout went for the Brown Bucktail like crazy and Hup became famous among local anglers.

Excerpted from the book, *Catskill Flytier: My Life, Times and Techniques* by Austin Francis and Harry Darbee. Introduction by Sparse Grey Hackle. Copyright ©1977 by Austin Francis and Harry Darbee. Published by J.B. Lippincott Company, New York.

Days of Wets and Greenheart

THE LARGEST BROOK TROUT I ever took from the Beaverkill was a very special fish, because I watched him grow up. Just upstream from Junction Pool, behind the Rockland flats, there is still a secondary channel that was probably part of the old river. I used to trap mink there as a teenager. One December, when the ice was near solid in the slower sections of the river, I was out checking my trap line. I went over to the river just for the hell of it and was staring down through a hole in the ice where spring water came up at the head of this channel. As I watched, a 14-inch fish slid into view. It was a brookie, and a damn sweet one.

I watched this fish all winter long. I guess we got to be friends, more or less, because he wasn't much afraid of me. When he got to be about 16 inches long,

I thought, "Well, somebody's going to catch him. It might as well be me."

Those were my greenheart rod and wet fly days, and not long after the new season opened I hauled the old rig out and headed for the flats. Standing in the willows to keep from being seen, I tied on a 6-foot leader with a Royal Coachman with a Dark Cahill as a dropper fly and cast the whole mess over the tops of the willows, sort of up-channel from the spring hole where I hoped my old friend would be. Everything went fine and the brookie obliged me on an early cast, but when I hooked him, there was a little brown about 8 or 9 inches long that decided he wanted the dropper fly. I was having to play the bigger fish. He was plenty strong, and to make matters worse, the brown started going around in tight little circles. I thought, "Well, this can't last long. He'll twist that leader off." So I hauled the whole business right out on the beach!

There is only one thing about brookies, and that is that they're pretty easy to take out of the stream. They go for the bright stuff. The Royal Coachman is one of the best damn brook-trout flies of all.

Poaching Days

IN THE DAYS WHEN I GUIDED VISITING FISHERMEN, I occasionally got asked to do some poaching for the visiting "sports." Like the morning when I was going over to fish off the bridge in Roscoe, and Billy Keener, owner of the old Roscoe House, came out on the porch and called me over. He wanted me to take a couple of fellows up to Huggins Pond. Now my brothers and I and Walt Dette had been camping up there for several years, sometimes as much as a month at a time. The owners told us where their oars were hidden and let us have the run of the place as long as we left things the way we found them. It got to be pretty well known that we extracted a few fish from the pond, so a couple of Billy's sports had asked if they could go fishing with us.

I didn't particularly want to take these men to our "private" fishing preserve, and I told Billy so. He told me that they were nice fellows, that they paid well, that they'd be coming up here quite often, and that we could both use the business. Finally I agreed, but half-way up to the pond I got cold feet. I discussed it with them, explaining that I didn't think it was right for me to help them catch someone else's fish. We hit on a compromise where I said I would only row the boat while they fished, and if they caught fish, okay, and if they didn't, that was okay, too. They said fine, and it was fine with me because I figured they weren't likely to catch anything without help.

We got in there and I rowed the boat all day. They were fishing dry flies and got plenty of rises, but they never once felt a fish. They couldn't understand what they were doing wrong. I could, but I wouldn't tell them. We had our agreement.

The thing that most fishermen do wrong when fishing a pond, whether dry or wet, is to strike at the sign of a rise. My two sports would almost go out of the

boat backwards when a big fish came after their fly.

In a pond, a fish will come up, take your fly, turn around and dive at the same time. He doesn't close his mouth until he is headed down. Then the fly will be drawn into the corner of his mouth and he will be hooked. You have to give him lots of time. As much or more as you'd give a salmon. That's the secret to hooking a trout on a dry fly in a pond.

After that trip to Huggins Pond, I quit guiding people into private water. The big river was plenty big enough, with lots of water and lots of fish. When somebody asked about a place where I had permission to fish, I had a little question that usually worked. I'd say, "What do you want to do? Go upstream where you'll catch your limit of little fish? Or, would you like to go downstream where you will have a crack at a big one?" Of course, everyone wanted a big fish, so we usually ended up somewhere on the lower Beaverkill between Junction Pool and the East Branch.

In fact, I was slowly becoming a big-fish fisherman myself, and when I went out alone I frequently fished down the river for about six miles and walked back home. I fished dry most of the time. Even now I fish dry flies downstream almost as much as I do up. There's a special technique, and if you do it properly, you can consistently get fish much farther away than you can ever cast.

What you do is cast well-across the main current of the stream with a light, high-floating line. In the days of silk lines, this required a well-dressed line. Keep the tension off by mending and drifting the fly until you don't have any more line. When you come to the backing, feed some of it out. And when the fish takes, you strike to one side or the other. You can hook these fish a long, long way out from you by striking against the current and the belly of your line. You strike one way and the fly goes the other. The fish feels the resistance and does the rest for you. Striking straight up won't do anything. It just takes up slack. When you get the slack out of the line, give him a couple of little jolts to see if he's firmly hooked. The heavier the river, the more apt I would be to fish it downstream this way.

This technique also works where both banks are overgrown or quaky, and where the water is so low and clear you would spook your quarry by any closer type of cast. I use an 8½-foot or longer rod and a fly such as an Irresistible, Rat-Faced MacDougall, Humpy, or a large hair spider. I have taken fish over 20 inches where the entire casting line and over half of the backing were out before the strike.

Poaching Nights

SOME OF THE BIGGEST FISH taken from the Beaverkill have been taken by poachers. And one of the biggest poachers I knew was Jack Hammer, a name I will use to spare the innocent.

Jack had lots of tricks. I think he enjoyed putting one over on the fishing clubs more than he did actually catching their fish. He went up and fished a famous club's home pool one night, right in front of the club-

house, just to prove he could do it. In bright moonlight. He said, "They'll all be too drunk to see me." If he hooked a big one, he calmly stuck his reel under water as the fish tore down the pool. He played the fish that way and never made a sound.

There is a story about the day Jack came around the bend, in broad daylight, and ran head-on into a club member. Jack saw him first, on the opposite side of the stream, and he started to thrash in the water with his line like a madman. Everytime he'd cast he'd take a couple of steps, and he fished down right opposite this guy, really beating the water to a froth. He got directly across from him and yelled in a little screechy voice, "You catchin' any, mister?" And the guy said, "No, no, I'm not, how about you?"

"Nope! They don't seem to be biting today." And Jack went on around the bend thrashing the water to beat hell. The club member hurried into the club to tell his friends about what he had seen.

The next day the caretaker stopped in to see Jack, and asked if he had been up fishing at the club. Jack said, "Yeah, why?" The caretaker said, "Well, one of the members came in and told me he met a crazy man fishing like the devil, and I just knew damned well it had to be you."

Jack came in to see me one night and slapped a 21-inch trout on my kitchen table and said, "There, god-damnit, do you suppose any of those club members had anything like that out of their water this year?"

"I'm sure they haven't."

"There's a bigger one there and I'm going to get that too!"

He didn't though. But he continued his escapades, living to an advanced age. The club seems to have survived very well, too.

Hatch-Matching Days

WHEN YOU LIVE NEAR a river you have the tremendous advantage of enough time to find and stalk big fish. The visiting fishermen, even those who come up every weekend during the season, usually feel their time is too valuable to be on the river with no rod.

I used to go out during the middle of the winter along the river to locate spring holes. They'd show up where the ice wouldn't form because of a constant seep of 47° water. It's good to know these spots during the hot summer weeks when the rest of the river is 78° instead of 33° and that same seep of cool spring water is harboring a nice big fish.

Another thing I do when I go into the woods, especially along feeder streams and smaller rivers is to break the heads off wooden kitchen matches and flip them into the pools. The heads are heavy enough to be flipped for quite a distance, but buoyant enough to float. Good-size trout lying under stones and beneath undercut banks are often attracted when these match-heads hit the water. I have had them rise, take the match-head down a few inches, release it, follow it down and take it a second time. I never had one swallow it.

I have learned a lot about big fish by just watching them. Once I found their lies, I would go back and watch until they revealed their feeding grounds. If a fish is big enough, he's worth watching. The best way to catch a really big one is to stalk him and learn his habits first. But don't let yourself be seen and don't scare him unnecessarily. And never poke him out to show him to someone. I've done that and he doesn't come back. Once he finds he's vulnerable, he's out of there. I showed a fish to my wife Elsie, up near Turnwood on the upper Beaverkill, that weighed three to four pounds. I took a switch and poked him right out from under his rock. That was the last time I ever saw him. He was a dandy, oh yes.

Days of Discovery

WHEN YOU FISH ON YOUR OWN AS I DID, without the benefit of expert coaching, it is a great thrill to make an unaided discovery which leads to a fine catch of trout. Take, for example, the day I was fishing on the East Branch of the Delaware (many years before it was blessed with a dam and a reservoir). I had fished most of the day with no success at all. I had not seen a fish. As I left the river, I noticed that the tall grass and willows were loaded with newly emerged stoneflies. The nymphs had crawled ashore to hatch before there was anything going. So, the following morning, I was on the same stretch at daybreak. I didn't have a good stonefly pattern, so I took an Edson Dark Tiger bucktail, clipped the hair off even with the hook bend, and pulled the tail out. The brown and yellow result must have looked good, because the two trout, one 17½ inches and one 21 inches, that I caught in less than an hour were gorged with stonefly nymphs.

On hot, humid mornings, just at daybreak, the stonefly hatch on the lower Beaverkill and the Delaware from the East Branch down was a high spot of our season. The peak of the hatch lasted only two or three days. Few of my friends fished it, but whenever I went I always got some very nice fish. One 19-incher that I caught had just eaten several hundred stoneflies, so you can get some idea of the greed these fish displayed. I always watched for the Green Drake flies and their spinner falls, because the stones came just at the close of that hatch. As much as I liked to sleep in, I got up for early-morning stoneflies.

The East Branch produced some beautiful trout in its day. Charlie Wetzel, who had come up to visit us, was there with me one time when the big browns were taking streamers. It was early season, the Beaverkill was running high, clear and cold, and the East Branch was running muddy from dam work. It was right where the two streams merged where all the action was. I was fishing a Black Ghost, one of my favorite streamers. Charlie had a 10-foot hollow Winston that he could whale right across the doggone river. He started with a dry fly. The first time I went down ahead of him, and got a 19-incher. The next time Charlie wanted me to go first again. I lost three fish in a row that would all have gone over five pounds. They were showy fish,

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like salmon, and Charlie saw every one of them. He was so excited he couldn't believe it. He didn't like streamers much, but I had kind of wiped his eye with big fish, so he switched. He ended up with five browns between 14 and 17 inches. I got two more, one 17 and one 21 inches. Charlie would have done the same thing if he had passed up the small fish, but he went after every rise in sight. It didn't matter. We both went home in a very good mood, and as I recall, we got a little soused that evening.

When I fish streamers, the most effective method I have used is to imitate the swimming motion of whatever food fish are present in the waters. So if it's a sculpin motion I want, I work the fly in short darts. If it's a dace, I cast upstream and pull the streamer down in jerks. I like the darker, more natural-colored streamers, and fish them with lifelike motion, because they look like these small food fish.

Bargain Days on the Beaverkill


THERE ARE TWO LAST FISH I'D LIKE TO TELL YOU ABOUT. This happened early in July of 1931. Walt and Winnie Dette drove down and dropped me off at the roadside next to Wagon Tracks pool. I had the first decent tackle I ever owned, and it was the first time I ever had backing on my reel.

There was a little brook that came in at the head of the pool. Opposite the brook in the center of the river was a big square-cut rock, with a seep of spring water behind it, where the fish used to line up in hot weather. The river was low, there was quite a breeze blowing, and it was very, very bright. Dark flies were hatching. I put on a Fanwing Royal Coachman and cast it over

this big rock. It drifted by and I saw a big bronze shadow come up under it and then sink. Usually I would have cast again, but I thought, "He's seen enough of that fly," and I put on a Hendrickson Spider.

On the first cast this big thing inhaled it and started out. I had to go down the pool as far as I could on my side of the road until it got too deep, and the fish went out of the pool. Then I pulled one of Ed Hewitt's stunts. I stripped off line and threw it in. The current pulled the line below the fish, so he thought I was below him and he swam back into the pool. Then he came back by me, and I saw he was a real big fish. He came all the way up the edge of the pool with his back almost out of the water. There was a willow lying out in the water. I pointed the rod at him and I steered him around it. The leader held, though I didn't think it would. And then the fish went up and tried to go out the head of the pool. It was pretty shallow. He didn't like that. Finally he came down and we had it out. When I got him at last into the landing net, the leader broke.

I stood there shaking, admiring this fish, which was over 20 inches and weighed over three pounds, when a gust of wind came up, and riffled the water. A whole damn bunch of minnows came at me. I stood still until the wind died down a little bit and then I saw it. There at my feet lay a great, big brown that had chased the minnows in. He could almost have swallowed the 20-incher I just caught. He was ten pounds easy. I was paralyzed. He looked at me and I looked at him. Gradually the current drifted him down a ways, he turned, glided into the deeper water and I never saw him again.

It wasn't unusual to see a big fish like that in the Beaverkill in those days. We didn't catch them, though. I don't know of anybody that ever caught any of the really big ones — on a fly. 

Below left: Darbee at his fly-tying desk; below right: Darbee's home in Livingston Manor, N.Y. — a well-known landmark for many Eastern fly tiers and fly fishermen.



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