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Al Baker [00:00:10] In this story I don't want to be long but let me try to get through it. A friend of mine, Bill Ritter, that I've taught to fish in recent years, and I were fishing Dugger Creek, it's a wild stream, catch and release stream. And I got to a pool and, Bill gets up on the hillside, and he's watching the fish and he tells me where to put the fly, literally, and when the fly is floating just very briefly, here comes a big brown trout, comes out from nowhere, hits that fly. That's a 13 inch brown and this is a small remote stream that's normally brook trout, but there is a few holdover browns here and there in the larger pools. Well, my story is, that a year later we go back into the same stream. We get to the same pool and Bill wants to see if I can catch the same fish again. So he's up on the hill. I make the cast. Believe it or not, the brown trout comes out, noses the fly and goes back. But what, what fly fishing is all about to me is the enthusiasm that Bill had in that memory, going back and relating to the fish, the actual, same fish and everything. That to me is just wonderful stuff in fly fishing.

Al Baker [00:01:36] My advice would be find a mentor, and enjoy every moment with that person you can.

Al Baker [00:01:47] I like, I like someone that appreciates the relationship, and you might say, the journey as much as catching fish, because you're going to go fishing sometimes and not do well, maybe not at all in terms of catch. That's why they call it fishing.

Al Baker [00:02:11] Well. I guess from a, from a [unintelligible] standpoint, Pat Weese. I grew up with the stories about Pat Weese. And he was the head of school, Patterson School for Boys, and there's just, he's a legend. But someone from a personal standpoint I would say, have to say Joe Summer. Joe Summer taught me to tie flies with some others, taught me to be stealthy on a remote wild stream, taught me to nymph fish which is a little more difficult than other, other types of fly fishing.

Al Baker [00:02:52] Well from, I guess from an opportunity standpoint, the, the, the sport or recreation right now is probably in its best form ever. A lot of people enjoy it, more people seem to join in every day. There seems to be a lot more women enjoying fly fishing now. But I guess the threat side is we lose miles of water every day to, to private development. Everyone wants a piece of the mountains and the views and things like that. And even I, you know, did that back in the 80s. I built a place in the mountains that got me into fly fishing. But soon after that, I realized the damage that comes from being part of development. So that, and the, I guess the threat of just not having public access. The greatest threat of all is getting the next generations involved, so that continues.

Al Baker [00:04:01] I think we probably go a little overboard in trying to take a park and make it the natural that it was. What we have to realize is man is part of the intervention too. For example, if we do an impoundment and that impoundment remains there, you know, we made it. So whatever it became, you might say in a natural sense, probably ought to be left alone like that. On the other hand, a lot of the, the damage that we've done in the past is probably worthwhile to try to, you know eradicate some of the problems of the past and move forward and try to get some of it back natural. So restoring brook trout in the Smokies has been real important but not every stream was brook trout.

Jim Thull [00:04:46] Sure.

Al Baker [00:04:46] And I know like in Yellowstone trying to get the lake back to just Yellowstone cutthroat. I support the, the work to, to takeout lake trout. But. I'm not sure it'll ever go back to totally natural. It's something to manage and we should manage parks not let them go to nothing. You know, like the fires, if you let it go too long, it probably will burn down.

Jim Thull [00:05:14] Yeah, yeah. Yeah, and one of the questions I always have is when does something become native if it's been breeding there and sustaining for 200 years?

Al Baker [00:05:24] Well for a long time we called our rainbows and Browns natives because they've been here since the end of the 1800s, turn of the century. So that's, you know, over a hundred years.

Jim Thull [00:05:36] Sure.

Al Baker [00:05:37] But I guess we got a little wiser and started calling them wild as they're naturally reproducing. But the true native are the fish that have been here much longer. Which is brooks and the small mouth, red breast things like that.

Jim Thull [00:05:52] Yeah.

Al Baker [00:05:52] So I thought the, the, the state agencies had reached a real point of wisdom when, when they moved to the designation of wild and distinguish between wild and native.

Al Baker [00:06:11] Well, Trout Unlimited is you might say, the reservoir, of good anglers. Most are fly fishermen, but not all in Trout Unlimited are like that. So the big asset is, you know, just the core of members and that includes members that don't stay members. They are better educated in being exposed with others and sharing streams with others. I think their future though is, I mean it's still advocacy for cold water, but their future really lies in getting the youth involved. There's a strong effort right now to get more females involved to the point of free membership which is a great idea. So, but, but if Trout Unlimited is to endure, and have the general influence it needs to be diverse and they're starting to work on that.

Al Baker [00:07:11] Well the gain's definitely tailrace fisheries. In the southeast, in the southern Appalachians, we have marginal mountain trout water, and it's the most unenjoyable. But the manmade cold water fisheries below, our, our dams have become big recreational places for the angler. And, and it's a big economic boom for those that want to make a living in the sport of fly fishing. So that's a big game. Another game in recent times, at least in this state in North Carolina, is the delayed harvest. The approach of using marginal water, water that gets too hot in the summertime for trout. But it's perfectly well suited for trout maybe nine months out of the year. So you can have a put and take type of fishery where you delay the harvest until. The stress, stressful summer and the hot, temperatures. I mean, this literally opens up roadside streams everywhere. So our state's put in probably 60, 70 miles of that in the last few years. And it makes it real easy for someone with a handicap, someone that don't have a lot of time, the busy people that need to run out and fish for a day, including myself. I sometimes don't have the time that I'd love to have. So you go out for a day or a morning and fish and harvest. So those to me are the gains, there are maybe a few gains in terms of the technology and management of fisheries. The losses definitely are milage of stream and development.

Al Baker [00:09:08] Don't want to make this a long story but a few years ago, like, mid 2004. I had some surgery and I was laid up and nothing you might say real interesting to do. I pulled out the old newsletters from our Trout Unlimited chapter and started writing all that up as kind of a handout for the group. So we have a whole generation that doesn't have an appreciation for the early years of the chapter and the chapter awards them awards and things like that. So I write this handout and then I have people encourage me to write a book and Jim Cassidy, another author and writer, a good friend of mine, encouraged me to put in some where to, how to, some history, and things like that. So I actually wrote a chapter on the history of fly fishing in North Carolina, for trout fishing, and, I had access to old documents including Pat Weese that this club, a small club had, and so I could get firsthand what these guys thought about and talked about. And, and so, I wrote a chapter. So I wasn't a history buff, didn't really enjoy history in school. First thing and so, you know, growing up with these stories about Pat Weese and these other people, I'm not seeing anyone do anything to preserve them. You know, it's just, when someone passes away, their relatives may or may not remember all those things or even known about it. I go to Nova Scotia with a friend, Atlantic salmon fishing, and there in the valley, is a little Atlantic salmon museum, and it's the whole story of that place, and, I could relate to that valley, and Wilson Creek. You can go up in the Wilson Creek, you know, it's like going back in time, and that's the trout stream I kind of grew up on. And so that inspired me as much as anything and then, then I kid around say, the friend he buys this old antique bamboo fly rod in Nova Scotia when we're out to eat. And he's kidding me, he says you've got to create a museum because I'm not going to be around a whole lot longer, this, this bamboo rod really needs to be kept somewhere. And you know I always say, be careful what you ask. The long and short of it, you look around and you find no one else doing it, and so I started, talking it up at fly fishing shows and, and with friends and I went through a couple of no's. No, we don't have a place for this, I don't know how you can make money at this. I don't know how you keep it going, things like that. Jim Cassidy had recommended that I talk to the Cherokee, as they have a casino, they have money, they really like tourism there. He had all the right formulas for a good place for a museum because gateway to the Smokies is the heart of fly fishing in Southern Appalachia. So one, one e-mail to the Cherokee Chamber of Commerce and instantly, they want to do something. And I'm up there meeting, and it took about two years to work everything in place. But you know, we, we've been able, to, make it happen, and a lot of, lot of people have, joined in that time. There's probably 400 people on my e-mail list, early followers that have really joined in and helped. So, now where I see it going, I would love to see Cherokee become the Mecca of fly fishing in the Southeast. People come to fish Cherokee waters themselves because the tribe really does a great job with catch and release water and catch and keep water. And a lot of people go there because of the large fish stories and everything, but they have a world-class hatchery. We plan to have aquariums in the museum with southern strain brook trout, browns, rainbow and so forth, for people to come in and see. And, do a hatchery tour, so I could see Cherokee becoming a mecca of fly fishing, where you come for the, they have tournaments there now, raise money for different causes like Casting for Hope, Cast for Recovery, Project Healing Waters all those. They, you know, we've, we've made a place in the museum because the culture of fly fishing is much bigger than just a guy going out and fishing for a fish.

Jim Thull [00:13:55] Certainly, yeah.

Al Baker [00:14:02] Well. You know. I think I've gained a little bit of appreciation for history that I didn't have before, for sure. The story needs to be told so that someone later has an appreciation to think that they are interested in it. That they have an appreciation for what happened, back then. We should learn from our mistakes. We don't always do, but, if

nothing else, we know what they were. So, you know, I see preserving these things being useful particularly for, for people that have that interest, to look back, but also for people that look forward and try to learn from something from the past. I think the museum also kind of preserves the timeline of things so, you know, right now, I've been researching fly rods and how they've changed over time. Well, you know, it's not just this linear progression. All kinds of things happen, And to get the story where someone can understand it takes a lot of work and that's what museums do. They do the research and get it organized where somebody can come in and be educated and entertained, With something in a short period of time.

Al Baker [00:15:22] Well I have to claim two, I think. Brook trout are precious in this area. You know, they're not considered the same way out west, but when you get to a small remote stream, and it's a foot wide and there's actually trout making a living there, you know, finding food and surviving, they're precious. Now, my favorite trout to go after is brown. As we said earlier, you only get one shot, but they are, they're the type of fish that teach you to be a better angler.

Al Baker [00:16:00] Survival of trout Is a real challenge for the species itself. So we may have a lot of miles of water, But they could literally get flooded and cleaned out every year, so there's not the nutrition, in a lot of out streams that you would find in Spring Creek or elsewhere, so that makes it special. The temperatures we have, to be able to go to the cool mountains and get away from the heat's great. And now with the artificial cold water fisheries, you know, you got this great boat trip down the river or wade fish, are very cold water, in the hottest days of the month, because it's your own fishing. And in fact, year-round maybe the most special part of all, because even in the worst time of winter there's great sunny days breaking through. That's probably a little bit harder to come by in New England and probably a little tougher out west where, I know the winds and things like that make it tough.

Al Baker [00:17:12] Well, I did, I didn't set out, and plan to do things in organizations. In fact, I was, when I first went to work, I was kind of the opposite, I wasn't, wasn't a joiner of anything but, Trout Unlimited pulled me in, I had the skills from management training at Duke. And what I found was that, organizations, nonprofit organizations, struggle, to have good leadership people. The skills just aren't there a lot of the time, people are very willing, very passionate, but just wasn't trained. And so, one of the things I did with Trout Unlimited National when I was on the board, was run the Leadership Organizational Effectiveness Committee. And as I did that, It was geared to chapter and council leaders. I mean, how do you, how do you motivate a group of people to go in the same direction, and, and do a straight improvement project, or a letter campaign, or, or raise money, or any of those things without the leadership skills? Or the way to be organized enough to do that? So we started a program like that from National. It was working well but we also found the National Board wasn't working like it should. It was based on the model of government where everybody comes as a representative, and you work hard to take something back home, and the nonprofit didn't work good that way at all because there's not enough to go around to start with. So I was in the Restructuring Committee as a co-chair. And we, we redid Trout Unlimited. The proof in the pudding is, is the organization was sixty thousand members before we did the change. The organization tripled in size the budget was like, I think it was four million when we started, it's 20, 25 million now. They've got a large fund to go after conservation work, so it'll effectively do the mission of cold water advocacy, cold water conservation, those things. You've got to be at the right size, you've got to be at the right capability to recruit scientists, cooperate with agencies, all those things. So I think the organization at least from what I see so far, is a premiere organization to get the job done.

It wasn't that way before, it was, it was a group with a lot of passionate people that were struggling to get some things done.

Al Baker [00:19:56] Well I'll put in a plug for the fly fishing museum.

Jim Thull [00:19:59] Excellent, excellent.

Al Baker [00:20:00] Anyone, that feels they need to go to the Mecca out west, totally agree with them, you need to do that. You need to do that often. Likewise, a lot of people want to visit the Catskills, and I've been there. It's great, it's unique, and you really need to go see Theodore Gordon's footsteps and things there but we now have the equivalent in the southeast. So if you come to Cherokee you'll learn about the, the old timers in the southern Appalachians. They were innovative. When they couldn't get the materials to tie flies that they saw in the catalog, they went out and found stuff that they could substitute. For example, calf's hair that you'd think is readily available. Well a lot of farmers didn't like the idea of you coming along and taking the tail off a calf or something like that. A lot of these guys would take the belly of a muskrat, worked just as good. Or the story that like the best is, why did they use the Golden Pheasant tippets for tails? Because there was a lot of fly patterns that use that, you know, has the little, coloration where it looks like there's something moving. The story is that they couldn't buy the material, but they could get it off women's hats. So to me, the, a lot of the story of the Southern Appalachians is about the innovation to make things work. They certainly cut their own saplings for flyrods in the early days. A lot of them become builders, and again, they're very innovative with how they do that. So hopefully, people will come see the museum in the, in the, in the southern Appalachians at Cherokee, come to the Smokies and fish wild streams, come to one of the tailraces and fish, fish the Cherokee waters. So hopefully we have, the third Mecca, in the United States.