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James Thull [00:00:10] Do you have a story that sums up what fishing means to you?

Don Lieb [00:00:10] I have a story that I used to fish with my good friend Buz Buszek as most of you know. When we used to backpack up on the Kings River and we always hear you still go there in the fall and when the river reached 400 feet down to 400 feet then we could cross the river at a certain location and we'd go into what we call the Gorge which is about Garnet Dike on the Kings River and it's an area where it used to not be catch and release but now it's catch and release.

Don Lieb [00:00:45] And we used to backpack into there and stay for three or four days and stay what we called the Gauger's cabin and it was on. There was a flume from up in the mountains at Hume Lake. It transported log all the way down to Sanger which is down here in the valley and there was a flume along Kings River and they had a pure act that they would have cabins on the flume and he would call them Gauger's cabins and they would watch over the flume and so forth. So we would stay on this old gaugers cabin and in we would trade off food to be canned food in the old cabin and we'd bring canned food leave someone we'd eat some whatever and so there was even a community bed roll that we could use. So it was quite a deal. So I like to tell that story because it brings back memories of the fishing how it used to be and what it is today and also now it's in an area where they've made it catch and release. So it's wonderful fishing but it's hard to access because of the high water and during the spring of the year and so forth. But this area it brings back fond memories to Buz Buszek. (unintelligible) which is an old near friend of mine. So we all fished on the Kings River at that time. So it does it brings back a lot of fond memories and hopes for the future and so forth and so on. So.

James Thull [00:02:17] Will you tell us about Buz Buszek's flies?

Don Lieb [00:02:23] He had about four flies or so that he had developed and one was the old gray mare and the Kings River Caddis. And also the western coachman and the Float-N-Fool are his so they were all wonderful flies.

James Thull [00:02:39] And this is the Western Coachman here?

Don Lieb [00:02:40] This is the Western coachman. This here one at one of them here is the is the dry version. You see it's dyed.

James Thull [00:02:48] Hold that up just a little.

Don Lieb [00:02:50] Where they hackle up front. And this is the wet version with the Hackle tied back and so forth.

James Thull [00:02:55] Can you hold that up just a little higher?

Don Lieb [00:02:58] Sure, just like that.

James Thull [00:02:59] There you go. That's perfect right. Excellent.

Don Lieb [00:03:01] Like I said this here, you can see that the hackle's back of the wings and so forth. And this is tied with the opposite to make it float.

James Thull [00:03:11] Wonderful.

Don Lieb [00:03:12] It's a wonderful fly. It's an indicator fly more or less and it seems like the more you fish it and the more ragged it becomes the better fishing it becomes.

James Thull [00:03:23] That's great.

Don Lieb [00:03:24] It's a great fly, yeah.

James Thull [00:03:24] What qualities do you think make a good fishing partner?

Don Lieb [00:03:31] Someone that observes the areas and appreciates the area. And also stays within the regulations and don't break the laws and so forth. But also I observe catch and release, I am always release my trout I haven't kept a trout probably for 15 years or more. So it's I believe strongly in catch and release. In fact it was up to me it'd all be catch and release because economics goes into it. It's sure not economical to raise trout. And having people catch him. Since so many people will go out and catch a limit the morning and they catch a limit in the evening and that's the way it goes.

James Thull [00:04:21] Yeah.

Don Lieb [00:04:21] So I do believe in catch and release but. Mainly and I had just a few friends I fish with locally and seem to be better that way.

James Thull [00:04:33] How did you get interested in Angling?

Don Lieb [00:04:39] I fished all my life more or less. In fact the first as I can recall I was 2 years old and we backpacked, we packed uh, animals from Bakersfield. We took a hay wagon drove all the way from Bakersfield up into the Pine Flat area which is probably 50 miles. It took one day to drive the whole thing and we would stay up there for a couple of weeks. And so I've fished all my life you might say.

James Thull [00:05:09] So is this your parents.

Don Lieb [00:05:11] My parents. The fish. They loved the fish. They weren't fly fishermen but they fish a lot.

James Thull [00:05:17] And about what year would have this been?

Don Lieb [00:05:18] Oh that was in the 20s and early 30s. See I was more 1920 so as I've seen a lot of different areas and so forth. So mainly the Kern watershed and the Kaweah watershed and the King watershed were my main areas.

James Thull [00:05:39] Would you credit your parents for instilling a love for fishing and the outdoors in you?

Don Lieb [00:05:45] Very much so. Yes. And then when I moved from Bakersfield which from where I was born why I moved to Visalia and I was in the late 40s right after the world war. And I become acquainted with Buz Buszek who owned the fly shop here at that time and so I learned how to tie flies over his shoulder more or less. And he more or less will allow you to watch him but he would never teach you much. He was that sort of a person. He didn't. He would say I'll give you a sheet and tell you how to tie a certain fly for and he

would charge you a dollar for it or something like that. But anyway it was. But that's how I learned to tie flies, was over his shoulder and out of books and so forth. So I never went to any school on fly tying or anything that's all developed by myself through Buz and books and so forth and so on.

James Thull [00:06:47] You worked for Buz Buszek tying flies for a while, correct?

Don Lieb [00:06:53] I worked for a while, especially after Buz passed away I worked to try to replace him and some of his co-workers at the time and his wife Virginia. So I've tried to help her right after his death so that's when I tied flies for them and then I have tied for Larry the son in law who took over the business and tied for a while for them as well. And I tie now and then for my friends and so forth. Who want special fly because it's not very economical to tie flies for a living anymore.

James Thull [00:07:31] Yeah.

Don Lieb [00:07:31] Especially I mean buy them a dollar apiece at some of these big stores and so forth. But anyway I do love to tie a fly. I tie flies probably. Every week I'd tie flies but if I'm not tying flies I'm up polishing rocks because lapidary is another one of my projects that I have. So I've done that all my life as well. But I do love fly tying.

James Thull [00:08:00] What do you love about fly tying?

Don Lieb [00:08:09] There's always a new one come along and every fly tier has a fly mostly a well known people have a fly and they develop and it's published in the books and so forth. And I have one old fly that I call the Lieb's bug which was developed in the early 50s and so forth and. It's a fly that, well like this one right here, it's called the Lieb's bug it more or less imitates the old-well we call it- the Stone fly. And it's a wonderful fly on the Kings River and so forth. And it's in some of the few publications as well.

James Thull [00:08:57] That's right.

Don Lieb [00:08:58] So that's and I just loved to tie flies it's just like some people like to do art work I like to do flies so.

James Thull [00:09:07] What sorts of changes and evolutions have you seen in tie flying over the years?

Don Lieb [00:09:13] Well the materials on the old used to be natural materials now they're mostly in their imitation, they're artificial materials and so forth. And every day there's something new comes along and that's one of the main things about the synthetics is you're going to get rid of the bug problems. One of the main things. You're not killing animals and so forth to get your material. So it's a good conservation thing as well.

James Thull [00:09:47] Who are some fly tiers that you respect or admire?

Don Lieb [00:09:53] Oh there's lots of them. Ted Leeson, he is one of my idols. And oh there's Mike Mercer. You know Mike Mercer I'm sure. There's many out there. All good tiers. I don't care how long you tie flies. You always learn something new from every tier you get something new and it's never it's a never ending. And they go and they like to say it. Time goes by. There's new materials and new patterns. The patterns are endless, you know. It's some of the old patterns you remember like the Royal coachman and stuff like

that. They're still good. This seems like no matter how old the fly is there's always a place for it so. And there's always a place for new patterns so it's just a great deal and just a wonderful wonderful hobby.

James Thull [00:10:58] Do you remember the first time you caught a fish on a fly you tied?

Don Lieb [00:11:04] Oh yes. First fly I caught was a Brookie and it was caught on a royal coachman so that was a big deal, when you tie your own fly and catch a fish with it. That was really the deal.

James Thull [00:11:24] Will you tell us the story about getting pulled out of a fishing camp to help fight a wildfire?

Don Lieb [00:11:31] Yes that, it wasn't a fishing camp it was a hunting camp. It was the old story this early in the morning just at daybreak. And we just unloaded the truck and got out of the truck and get our rifles and so forth and the truck pulled up beside us and knows the forestry service guy and he said "you guys see the smoke?". We said "what smoke" it was still dark. And he said "well there's a fire right up right up on the hill right alongside you. So you get in the truck you're going to fight fire". And so that day we had our wives. They were going to meet us up in the park for lunch. And we fought fire from almost daybreak till midnight that night. And no one was allowed to call out or anything else. And so our wives were waiting for us. They knew nothing about it, the Rangers in the park didn't know anything about the fire or anything else. So they were really concerned with what we were doing. They don't do that anymore. They won't confiscate you right out of the blue like that. You have to volunteer or actually go on a fight. I'll never forget that because the fire is something else. You've never been in a forest fire. You just cannot. You just cannot emphasize how terrible they are. And it's just like an inferno. For only after that I coughed up the smoke and debris for over a week after that episode. So anyway it's quite a deal.

James Thull [00:13:16] Will you tell us about your service in World War II?

Don Lieb [00:13:16] World War 2 I was inducted into the service and I worked for the phone company first. So I went into the Signal Corps and served three years. Then I did my basic training in Texas. From Texas we went to England and stayed in England for oh six months or so and then we went into France and I was D plus seven when we went in. And so the fighting was over on the beach front. But we went into Avaranches which was a little old El area in France, the wine country and so we took over small towns at first then we'd take over the telephone office. So wherever there's a need for telephones that's where we would go and then we ended up in Verdun France and oh. And then I went to do Luxembourg. I served in Luxembourg and then we went to Belgium and France and then back home.

James Thull [00:14:31] Did you get to fish when you were in Europe during world War II?

Don Lieb [00:14:37] No, the only fishing I ever saw there was the cook. The main cook went out with dynamite and dynamited the river. And we had fish dinner. That was the only fishing that I had ever even saw over there. They had some wonderful German Browns when we were over there in Germany but we didn't get to fish for them.

Don Lieb [00:15:07] No it's I made my fishing when I got out of the service. Of course I'd fished before we went in but. It's in England we didn't fish because it was all basic training really there so we didn't have an opportunity really.

James Thull [00:15:28] Over your lifetime of fishing what have you seen change in regards to Angling and the environment?

Don Lieb [00:15:35] Areas where I used to have to walk to get into an hour there's roads everywhere. So it's. And you've seen the fishing fish in the larger fish now than they used to be because there's a lot of plants now and so forth. But I do miss the wild fish. That's what I miss. Like I said I love main areas I like to fish where the small streams and the high lakes and so forth. So you. Some have deteriorated and some haven't. And they used to, we used to work here with the phone company and get off at five o'clock and go up to the river, catch your limit of trout, come back home. And no more. Now he is, you wonder if you can catch a trout up there anyway. It's up around three rivers there's so much development, so much area where they've taken all the water out of the river the system so there's just no fish. The water becomes too warm. What is left and so there's no trout there any longer.

James Thull [00:16:40] So is that the main changes you've seen? Kind of de-watering, more building development.

Don Lieb [00:16:45] De-watering... The biggest thing that I am discouraged with is the pollution that's involved. You know there's so much litter along with streams and the lakes and it's just very unfortunate that people are not more conscious of the environment. And that and the other thing is the policing is nonexistent around some of these rivers. There you just see people catching trout when they're not supposed to be and the catch and release areas are catching them with bait and that kind of stuff. So especially on the King's river on the lower Kings they have the catch and release area. You see bait cans all over, salmon egg jars and all that kind of stuff. And the enforcement is so limited and it is pitiful. So that's that's the bad part about it. But the in the like the Kings they dammed it so that that created a lot of fishing alright but it get warm water fishing and all that. So it's a lot of area miles and miles of it are no longer available for trout. There is a big lake and full of rough fish and few trout. So it's nothing like it used to be and you have a lot more people who used to go fishing at the time I was younger. You go fishing if you saw another other fisherman it was very odd. Now you could go in. It's hard to find a place where you can be alone. So it's one of those things. That's the way life is. And some of it is good some it's bad so it's uh. So let's see. I guess it's part of the evolution.

James Thull [00:18:48] Will you talk about your experiences with planted fish in California?

Don Lieb [00:18:53] They used to plant by airplane. Drop them in a high altitude lakes. Yeah.

James Thull [00:18:59] Carry the milk cans up on the mules.

Don Lieb [00:18:59] Yeah in fact I uh up in Mineral Canyon I helped plant trout by carrying a can on my back.

James Thull [00:19:07] Do you remember what kind of Trout?

Don Lieb [00:19:08] Yeah, was brookies.

James Thull [00:19:11] Brookies.

Don Lieb [00:19:11] And you have a little airpump with you and do a hike about all from 7000 feet up to 10000 feet and go to these high altitude lakes and plant them.

James Thull [00:19:24] What are the native trout here I know there's native Golden's are there native rainbows.

Don Lieb [00:19:28] Well they claim that the rain that the Golden was the main trout, so in the Kern river, there's a large one they call the Gilberti Rainbow and that's supposed to be the native there as well. Beautiful trout but they'd also in that drainage is the golden trout trout. So it's a they they're trying to keep the other trout out by putting the barriers so that some of these high streams so that they try to keep the goldens to maintain that original strain. So it's quite an effort.

James Thull [00:20:12] Have you had much luck fishing for Golden Trout over the years?

Don Lieb [00:20:18] Oh yes yes there's there's little trout right right here in the park that has little trout. They're small, very small but they're beautiful little trout, beautiful little trout. Yeah and there's a couple of streams that are available for goldens that are near here. And so if you want to fish for golden trout, why you. It's available but there's like I say there are small.

James Thull [00:20:45] Is there something special about catching a native fish in its native water?

Don Lieb [00:20:52] Well to some people it is. Some people it isn't. To me it doesn't make that much difference. Really I do. I see the rough fish. The one thing I don't like is that they, they catch and release area. They're nice but they don't fight like the native wild fish do. They have more stamina the wild fish do. So. You know that would be the only thing really.

James Thull [00:21:19] Do you think it is important to preserve populations of native fish?

Don Lieb [00:21:25] I believe so. It seems like it's a losing battle however that's the problem. And I don't think it's possible that they're trying to maintain that effort it's a costly effort far as I'm concerned but I do think it's worthwhile.

James Thull [00:21:45] Yeah it seems like we'd lose something if there were no golden trout left or no Yellowstone cutthroat or what have you.

Don Lieb [00:21:53] Yes it's. It's. We'd like to say something like we lose we lose something and then all the time you see like we lose something else lose something else so. It's it's it's a worthwhile effort that I'm sure to a lot of people.

James Thull [00:22:11] Do you have a favorite species of trout?

Don Lieb [00:22:17] I like I like Rainbows better than anything really. Because many that's the main fish around here. The Browns are I think they're more are more selective I believe than the rainbow. I used to always thought it was a feather in your hat to catch a nice

brown. Yeah yeah. Cause they weren't they weren't that prevalent but they are a different sort of species. I remember on the Kings River we used to fish for. We'd watch for the pockets of foam and wherever there's a foam pocket you would get your brown out of it. You just throw a fly into that foam and you've gotta brown come into it. So it's a place on the Kings River called the roaring river. A friend of mine used to backpack into it and it was all Browns. It was a beautiful place. But now that it's so remote it's hard to get to. It's dangerous to fish so they keep the people out of that particular area on the roaring river.

James Thull [00:23:30] How important are national and state parks to the preservation of native species and habitats?

Don Lieb [00:23:35] Right now and then the national forest we have a place called Big Meadows. We help them the club and the Fresno club went up and helped them try to restore the meadows so that the stream used to, due to deterioration with stock, cattle or grazing ruin sloughed off the banks and just become like a concrete path right through the meadow. And so it started to dry up in the invasion of trees into the meadow. So now what they did the forestry went up and they put dams in it and made it made it meanders through a meadow and now it's restoring itself. The trees are receding back again so hopefully that's going to help that meadow so much and do but then we had the droughts that came along that put a, sort of put a, delayed it somewhat so it killed a lot of fish I'm sure.

James Thull [00:24:41] Will you tell us about the fishing club you are a part of and about some of the work that the club does?

Don Lieb [00:24:47] We have fly fishers at a local club. It was developed years ago and it uh we try to uh. We have a first fly fishing and uh a catch and release area was developed it was developed sure on that Tule river. And it was a little small stream and uh it was developed into a catch and release. It is still a catch and release area. And I understand it was the first one when it was established so. And then the I have with the other club which is the Fresno club. And so we were together sometimes on these projects and so forth. So.

James Thull [00:25:35] Do you have a favorite spot to fish? If so, what makes it so special?

Don Lieb [00:25:42] Well the one I told you about on the Kings and the Gorge that we used to backpack into, that would be my favorite spot because it brings back so many fond memories of the past. Friends that I used to have and so forth and they were great days past and no longer I can get in there because of my health and so forth. So I try to remember that. It's a great place.

James Thull [00:26:09] Will you tell us about your progress from harvesting fish to practicing catch and release fishing?

Don Lieb [00:26:15] Yes. Yes. So he used to always get always strive to get the limit of fish and bring them home even though they were dried up ships when we got them home we still had to have that limit of fish. And uh you had that. As soon as I started fly fishing and become acquainted with Buz and so forth then I quit keeping of the trout and so forth. The more you learn it seems like the more you savor letting them go and so forth. Perpetuate themselves.

James Thull [00:26:48] Do you think there is a way to strike a balance between catch and release fishing and harvesting fish?

Don Lieb [00:26:55] There is a place for both I think than in the lower elevation areas where they can plant trout and then be successful with it would be a place but I'm against them planting up in the high countries and so forth. I'd rather see it being natural and have regulations catch and release so that it may preserve it that way but cause economically it's not it's not economical at all to just plant fish to eat and so forth. It would be better just give so much so much money that people let them go buy the fish out of a market.

James Thull [00:27:33] What piece of advice would you give to a new Angler?

Don Lieb [00:27:43] I would say find a person that you, a trustworthy person that's a fly fisherman and let him be your mentor. And another thing is if you're going to start fly fishing take only flies. Do not take any bait. Stick to the flies no matter how rough it gets and hope for the best. That's the best advice I can get on and now the other thing would be to stick to all reliable fly patterns. patterns that you know even though they're old, some of them, they're all reliable but they've been around a long time. So if you stick with a good fly that you know is catching catches fish, stick with it, you know, stick with it.

James Thull [00:28:26] Has your knowledge of the environment surrounding rivers helped you become a better Angler?

Don Lieb [00:28:32] Certainly a bit of it. Best thing you do when you go out fishing is a stand out and observe things for a while and see what's going on around you. See what the bugs are doing. Are they are they flying, are the fish taking off of the surface or we don't see any surface activity and so forth. You know doggone well you're gonna have to fish something down deep in the water so like I've said about they say roughly that's about 80 percent of the fish food is taken below the surface of the water so that tells you something. So if you see fishing fish feeding on the surface why then sure go use a dry fly and so forth or at least a fly near the surface of the water.

James Thull [00:29:17] Do you have an all purpose fly you could recommend for most situations?

Don Lieb [00:29:23] Yes Western coachman. It works just about any place you want to go. It'll work for bass, it'll work for Bluegill, it'll work for trout. Yes. If you're going to fish it and why fish. I always fish with a two fly rig. I'll put a dry fly on it with an indicator and then put on the nymph below it. And that gives you two ways to fish at the same time but the old Western coachman is a wonderful fly and it's a it's uh just works about any place you want to fish.

James Thull [00:30:01] What kind of rod do you use?

Don Lieb [00:30:07] I like. Well I like graphite. I do have bamboo rods and but I. You're always afraid you're gonna break one. I did have uh well well a rod here that one of the many old makers made and I finally sold it two years ago for thirty two hundred dollars so it was a quite a rod. So anyway. But I do have a three or four bamboo rods but I very seldom fish them and I do like the graphite rod. It's a wonderful rod.

James Thull [00:30:46] do you think it is important to diversify the sport of Angling?

Don Lieb [00:30:52] I do believe especially the minorities because the minorities are becoming the majority. So they're going to be affecting not only legislation they're going to be affecting everything. So we we better get these people on line so that they understand what this is all about. You know the trout fishing and preserving it. So yeah and also the women because the women that keeps harmony in the house you get the man and the woman, wife and husband together and then they both enjoying the sport. It's just a wonderful thing. So what. Yes. Both of those are very important. Yes. But especially this minority thing because here in this area where we're not the majority any longer. So there's quite a few you see quite a few of the minorities that are fly fishing now more so than used to never see the Latinos fly fish at all. But now you see quite a few.

James Thull [00:32:00] That's great. In the near future do you see any threats to trout and salmonid habitats?

Don Lieb [00:32:06] Outside the accessibility a lot of these big rivers is being purchased up by private enterprise and it's keeping the anglers out. So it's we're losing access to an awful lot of water.

James Thull [00:32:21] Does pollution or climate change do those kind of things worry you 40 50 years down the road for those waters?

Don Lieb [00:32:28] Definitely yes. The climate change especially as they said a lot of people don't believe in climate change but I don't think that's the problem. They believe it's getting warmer right. But they argue what's causing it. That's the thing. It's definitely getting warmer because you can see it all around us. How things have changed by getting things getting warmer.

James Thull [00:32:54] Over your lifetime have you seen any examples of climate change?

Don Lieb [00:33:01] Well I think I have I think some of this some of the streams that we used to fish when I was a kid are no longer streams they're just dried up. And so it's I know definitely that it's getting less rain than we used to get. And so forth that we used to have a glacier up here locally that was in the snow. It's no longer there. The southern most glacier is no longer gone. So that's some I don't think that's really that's sort of found argument with a lot of people that say it's not getting warmer but it's definitely getting warmer.

James Thull [00:33:42] Will you tell us about some of your other hobbies?

Don Lieb [00:33:48] Well when I was in I was in high school at the time why I used to read about the articles about taxidermy and that's so I took a little correspondence course in taxidermy when I was in high school and I more or less practice it off and on ever since. And so I did mainly birds. In fact I did. There is a school here that sixth graders go to. It's available to all of sixth graders throughout these two the counties surrounding counties. And it's called a Clemmie School of Conservation. They have a museum. So I'm out and oh numerous birds for them waterfowl, hawks, and turkey vultures because those were protected species. But I do have the permit to mount them if they are picked up from road kills and so forth. So I I did quite a bit of work voluntary work for them for that little museum up there. So I did a lot of that for them. I did some duck hunters done ducks or geese for them. The Lapidary I got started in that when I was early because my youngest daughter who is now this is in her 70s. She liked rocks so she'd gotten me started in Lapidary years ago and so I followed that throughout the years. I still do a lot of that. So I have a lot of

hobbies. In fact the newspaper ran an article about my life called the man of many hobbies. So it's quite satisfying.

James Thull [00:35:35] Is fishing your favorite one?

Don Lieb [00:35:37] Well, fishing is my favorite. Yes. Unfortunately I haven't been able to do much in the last year but I that's for my favorite sports. Sport or hobby or whatever you'd like to call it.

James Thull [00:35:49] Is there anything you would like to add to this oral history?

Don Lieb [00:35:55] Sure I'd like to say that try to pick out some friends in that and just getting started in fly fishing as much as possible because I think that is the answer to the fishing problem really. Because we got to get this to all more catch and release so we get the better it's going to be so the more people we get involved the better it is. That's why you brought up the subject of the minorities and women and so forth. Get them all interested in it and get them involved. So the best thing to do is get them involved and but just find out some good mentors. Fly fishing and fish get started. Find somebody that you know that knows how to fly fly fish and make him your friend and so forth and that's the best advice I can give.