

On experts and Western hats

from *A Trout's Best Friend: The Angling
Autobiography of Bud Lilly*

by Bud Lilly and Paul Schullery



Bud Lilly in a well-worn Western hat.

Photo courtesy of Bud Lilly.

Nothing is more uncertain or difficult to pin down in fly fishing than the notion of the expert. If you say the word "expert" to most fishermen, they immediately think of some person, whether someone they know or someone they've heard of, who always seems to catch the big fish. If you say the same word to someone in the fishing tackle industry, they're liable to sneer and make a smart remark about the "instant experts," or quote Lefty Kreh's comment that an expert is a guy with a slide projector, more than 50 miles from home.

Admitting right away that I wouldn't be writing books if at least a few people didn't consider me an expert, I have to say that the problem of sorting out the genuine authorities from the phonies is real. When the fishing around West Yellowstone started to get a lot of attention from the fishing writers in the late 1960's and early 1970's, those of us who lived there noticed a surprising increase in the size of the fish being reported (but not seen or photographed) from some rivers.

I'd been keeping records in the Lunker Club book for many years, and I knew how rare a real three-pounder was. I knew that only once in a great while could the Firehole, for example, produce a fish in the six-pound class, probably only once every few years. We fished the rivers hard, and we measured and weighed those fish; the Trout Shop was the closest thing they had to an official record keeper.

Then suddenly we started to read about four, five, and sometimes six-pounders being caught like fingerlings. I fished with some of those writers, and when there were witnesses around, the fish they caught looked pretty much like anyone else's, sometimes a little smaller.

There was a lot of poetic license in those weight estimations, and there's no real harm in that except that it put those of us who ran tackle shops in an awkward position. People would come out having read so-and-so's book and expect to start hauling in five-pounders from streams we knew had very few fish weighing over three pounds. We really knew, not only from our own experiences but from electroshocking studies that management agencies did.

So I'm sure I can't give you a simple definition of an expert. It isn't just a guy who knows more than most of us. The late Ted Trueblood, for many years an editor for *Field & Stream*, was one of the first writers whose stories really stuck with me, but I don't think it was just because he obviously knew what he was talking about. Ted had a quality beyond expertise. Ed Zern, who has never pretended to be a great authority on anything, and whom I have always considered the greatest outdoor humorist, is also my idea of a real expert because he knows how to enjoy himself and his companions and good fishing and because he doesn't ever take himself too seriously. What expertise often is confused with, or replaced by, is the image of expertise. Consider, as I often have, something that seems very inconsequential at first but actually is very powerful. Consider the fishing hat.

People are pretty easily impressed once they get out of their own territory. We had a tackle shop owner in West Yellowstone for awhile who wore a Western hat with a huge fleece hat band, the kind you would load down with flies. He had a real menagerie on that hat, and it became part of his trademark. People would come into the Trout Shop after they'd been visiting with this fellow, and they'd say, "Boy, that guy down the street, he knows a lot; he's got that terrific hat you know, full of flies....." And I'd say, "Did he tell you about that hat?", acting innocent and honest.

"No," they'd say, all ears.

"Well," I'd wind up, "he was down on the Madison the other day and he fell in, and he got three strikes before he got out."

I've thought about the hat for very good reasons myself, also having to do with image. I've always wanted to popularize the Western hat, partly because I was concerned about giving us a distinct image at the Trout Shop. I figured it was better than just wearing the Irish wool hats that have always been so popular among fly fisherman. So I started wearing my hat all the time, even in the shop. Some of those hats would get a lot of character over the years; I still have most of the ones I finally had to retire because distinctiveness was replaced by seediness.

Well, it worked. The hat became part of our image at the shop; I became very accustomed to wearing one, and people would sometimes look at me strangely if they saw me without it, like they weren't sure who I was. I didn't realize how successful I had been at developing the image until one day a fellow came into the shop and wanted to buy the hat right off my head.

"Jesus," he said, "I'd like to buy that hat. Is it for sale?"

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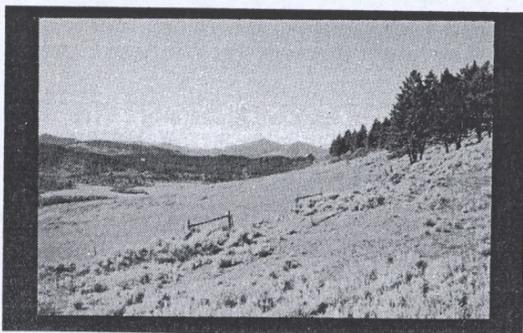


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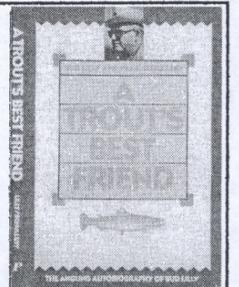
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Gambling in the garden

by Schuyler Judd

High altitude gardening is not the mundane, relaxing hobby common in lower elevations. Rather it is a chancy affair best approached with a philosophical turn of mind.

I'd always wanted to have a garden of my own to mess around with since the summers as a child I helped my grandmother harvest big, red tomatoes, pale yellow sweet corn, and crispy cucumbers. I liked watching the irrigation water inch down the long ditches between the mounded rows and munching delicacies straight out of the ground and off the bushes.

After I grew up, I started gardens several times, then left them for others to enjoy as we moved somewhere else in the state. Each time this happened, I said that some time I'd have a spot of my own to grow a garden for several years. Of course, I never thought I'd pick a particularly challenging place to attempt that gardening.

I'd also always wanted to live in the mountains, but I never considered the gardening problems this can present when those same mountains are in the northern part of the United States at over 6,000 feet in elevation.

Valley gardeners worry about such things as drought and insect infestations. High altitude gardeners deal with short growing seasons, wild animal invasions, and sudden frosts, among other peculiarities.

Early on I learned to follow local wisdom about spring planting time. Memorial Day weekend is the talisman. Earlier plantings usually lead to seedlings killed by late frosts, and later plantings often have to wait until the inclement weather of the first two weeks of June leave and the ground dries out and warms enough to be planted.

Even before planting can be done, the types and varieties of vegetables have to be chosen. This isn't the simple task of my low elevation gardens. Most of the seeds off the shelf aren't suited to mountain conditions. The growing season in these mountains is three to four months long at the most, and that's counting the marginal two weeks in early June and the last two of September.

In addition the plants have to like fairly cool daytime temperatures and chilly nights in the high 30's to lower 40's. They also must be able to survive a dip into the high 20's, as usually there's a freeze at least once a month in the summer. This means no tender vegetables such as potatoes, squash, cucumbers, and tomatoes. No hot peppers and okra. No corn and melons.

Safe choices are salad greens like lettuce and spinach and chard, peas and onions, and root vegetables such as carrots, radishes, and kohlrabi. Even these need to come from strains adapted to short, cold seasons. Of course, I've tried the others a couple years or so until I got tired of watching them be frost-killed at six inches tall or produce one cucumber or one small ear of corn when they manage to survive for a couple months.

Some of the herbs do well: thyme and mint and oregano. Some of the others must be started each May and grown against the south side of my house. I do grow a few short season tomatoes in my greenhouse, and it's always a race to see if any of the tomatoes will begin to ripen before a middle teen's frost kills the plants.

Most domestic flowers are too fragile for conditions up here;



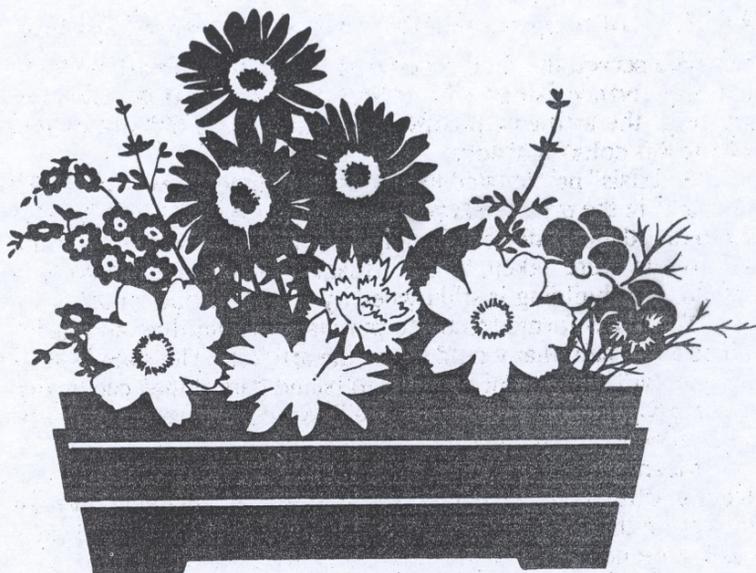
Experts, from previous page

"Everything is for sale except my wife."

"Well, I'd sure like to have that hat."

So I quoted him a price for it (there were a good many flies on it, as I recall), and he took it. I wore a Western hat for 25 years in the store, though I finally had to quit because in the last few years I had a little trouble with skin cancers. I like to think that we had something to do with the popularization of Western hats among fisherman and guides in our area, and I was glad to see it. I was glad partly because we sold Stetsons and Resistols in the shop, but also because it was part of the developing image of Western fly fishermen. Easterners had their tyroleans and little tweed hats and all that, but there was no clearly identified Western style.

The other hat that became closely identified with the shop was the one we'd advertise as "Greg's leather hat." When Greg (*editor's note: Greg is one of Bud's sons.*) and Bonnie were on their honeymoon in San Francisco, he found a wide-brimmed leather hat that had been made there. He came back wearing it, and I immediately announced we could make a fortune on that hat. We didn't really make a fortune, but we sold thousands of them over the years. I visited the factory once, down on Third Street, the same street where the Winston Rod Company



wildflowers or their cousins that have been only slightly modified over time do best. The challenge is there each summer, and the variations in particular trials never cease to happen.

Take this summer for example. The first two weeks of May were prime garden planting weather. The snows had melted early, and the earth was warm and dry. The temptation was great to plant, but I kept remembering the local wisdom of Memorial Day weekend, and I waited. This was a wise choice as the last two weeks of May were more normal with cold and wet days and nights.

Then the first two weeks of June proved unusually warm and dry; watering was already a necessity, and the seeds sprouted and grew quickly. The next five or six weeks were a different challenge, however. This unusual 'mini-winter' slowed plant growth almost to a standstill; even the weeds had a difficult time getting started.

Overnight the daytime temperatures went from the low '60's to the mid 80's. Most of the salad plants were so shocked they bolted to seed even though they were still miniature-sized. The sugar peas, however, did seem to take the change in stride; they continued to grow and began to flower profusely.

But just as a few pods were developing, the flowers disappeared. At first I suspected a wandering porcupine or rockchuck; they'd been known to move into the garden in past years in late August or early September when other forage was dry and not as appetizing. Then I noticed the heart-shaped tracks in both the pea patch and one of the wildflower beds and realized the visitor was probably one of the white-tailed deer from the nearby swamp. We ate the remaining few pea pods before the deer could come back and claim them, too.

The hot and dry weather continued, the lettuce turned bitter, and the spinach and chard gave up for the summer. The broccoli and cauliflower plants had managed to generate a few small heads when that cold front from Canada swooped down into these mountains, bringing a mid-20's frost that showed which new varieties of vegetables and wildflowers were too tender for these mountains.

Over the years I've learned to be philosophical, and I do like challenges. I eat many things from the garden when they're still small as they may not survive to reach maturity. I enjoy the flower beds when they are only filled with green as that may be the colors I get this summer. When I was a child the charm of gardening was the resulting harvest; now I find the greatest pleasure in the process of caring for the garden and learning what challenges it and I face together each varied summer in these mountains.

was located for many years. It was a rough section of town, and Pat and I took a bus down to the address we had; there was the building with the windows all broken out, no sign, all boarded up. But the number was right, so I knocked on the door, and a little Chinese man peeked out. I asked him if this was the Winfield Cover Company.

"Yup."

"May we come in and look around? We're one of your customers."

"Okay." So we went in and I introduced myself. "I'm Bud Lilly from Montana."

"Oh, God, have we wanted to meet you! We've been wondering who those crazy people were in Montana who were buying all those hats!"

There you have it. One man's expert was another man's sucker.

Bud Lilly lies in Bozeman with his wife, Esther, and her two children. Greg owns a tackle shop in Tuston, California: Greg Lilly's Fly Fishing Adventure. Hold your hat, if you own an original Greg Lilly special. They aren't manufactured any longer, Greg says, because the company was no longer able to buy the high quality leather that makes the hats unique and able to hold their shape.