

About 1950 words

Yellowstone /
Scotty

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AN ARTIST WITH THE FLY ROD

In Yellowstone Park, Scotty Chapman
was the first of the best.

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Cinquefoil Creek looked sterile, where we started our hike, a sluice so narrow that the willows on each bank overlapped in the middle. If anyone but Scotty Chapman had been in the lead, I would have suggested that we look for a better place to fish. But Scotty knows more about Yellowstone Park's waters than me. Perhaps he knows more than anyone.

The two of us walked upstream, looping around clumps of charred lodgepole pine. Where the trees stood singly, some had survived the great fires of 1988, and now they dotted the meadow with patches of shade. In this deep-green field, phlox and larkspur sparkled like stars in the Milky Way. We angled up a ridge, then, and when its sunburned grass had wiped the dew

from our boots, Scotty paused for a breather. He did not like having to do that. Ten years earlier, when he was in his seventies, he had stopped only to capture details for his paintings.

The break from our climb suited me. Scotty is not one to sit around reminiscing, but he is good for a story on the trail.

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Scotty Chapman first saw Yellowstone in 1927, after a ten-day drive from Colorado over unpaved roads. The Wyoming headwinds brought his Model T Ford to a shuddering halt, sometimes. Sounds like a long journey -- until you remember that some of us spend all of our lives searching for the most beautiful place in the world. Scotty found what he was looking for on the first try.

He was "a fishing nut already," he says, and Yellowstone's Firehole River was at its peak in those years. Old Faithful and dozens of other sources of warm water must have created ideal conditions for growth. Trout often reached 3½ pounds, sometimes 5 -- but these were browns of European origin, too wary for the standard American methods of the time. Most anglers waded downstream, cast wet flies on leaders of stout gut, and caught the smaller trout or none at all. There was not even a fisherman's trail on the banks.

Scotty had read a book on dry-fly fishing by George La Branche, and the Firehole taught the rest of the skills needed for big, selective trout. It was a sport that followed nature's rules. You had to find a hatch of mayflies and a trout rising for

them. The heavy browns usually fed under overhanging grass, so you had to sneak up the bank and kneel to cast, sometimes with one leg in the water. You had to convince the trout that your artificial fly was the real thing.

In 1930, Scotty became a Park Ranger. In 1937, writer Ray Bergman visited Yellowstone and Scotty introduced him to the Firehole. Bergman wrote that it had "more sizable fish to the mile than I've ever seen in any other stream", but they "thumbed their noses at me."

Bergman quotes Scotty as asking: "Did you try dry flies in size 18 and smaller?" The leader had to taper down to 4X, too -- finest silkworm gut generally available, and less dependable than modern 7X. Bergman wrote that "Scotty is an artist with the fly rod.... I've watched many anglers fish, but I have never seen anyone else who could so regularly throw the line so that the fly would float without drag under any conditions."

Scotty and Ray Bergman fished together until at least 1951, when I tagged along on one trip. Many of the photos Bergman used in his stories show Scotty in his Ranger hat -- a tall, athletic angler who happened to resemble another Montanan named Gary Cooper. If you look closely, there is something else that you may notice. There are no poses of angler with captured trout, dead or alive. Scotty does not care to be seen that way.

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Scotty and I hiked over another rise and downhill to the basin where Cinquefoil Creek flattened out in meanders. In this

hidden playground, the little stream was all dressed up like the Firehole. There were undercuts at the outside of the bends, shady clumps of grass, and riffles that giggled between the pools. There were even mats of water buttercup, which is a plant of fertile waters.

We both strung up our fly rods but Scotty said that he would watch for awhile before he started. He did not explain -- never does -- but I guessed that he was catching the scene for his canvas.

I knotted on a small coachman. It would look like a beetle to the trout but had little white V-wings that I would be able to see as they drifted under shady banks. I worked upstream with a short line, and the brook trout came for the fly but did not take it as well as they usually do. They would materialize below it, watch it for a second, and then splash at it and miss or get hooked lightly.

The problem was a good one to have. We had arrived at the perfect time of the morning -- the hour between dawn-cold and noon-hot -- and the mayflies were returning to lay their eggs on the water. It was not the kind of fishing that one expects to find on hidden little brook-trout streams. But of course an angler should not get so excited that he starts casting before he takes a look around.

I tied a long, fine tippet to the end of my leader and a size 18 fly to the tippet. By that time the trout were rising as far as we could see up the creek. I slipped into the water and

moved upstream, step after cautious step, like a heron. I draped the leader over tufts of grass, hiding it from the fish, and when the cast was right, they took the new fly confidently. I put some back and kept the best, eight or nine ^{by the time} inches long.

Scotty was bored by my heron act ~~before~~ I landed the third trout. He picked up his tackle and rushed upstream, working out line as he went, rod drawing dark loops on blue sky. I walked to the top of a rise and watched.

Above the angler were round golden hills and purple mountains with streaks of snow in their folds. Those are an amateur's colors -- Scotty could tell you the exact pigments. He was a small, straight figure against the meadow, fifty years younger with the urge upon him.

He fished like an osprey, using speed and surprise rather than stealth. I don't know anyone else who can make a fly pounce on trout like that. The scene from my hilltop was an impressionist sketch -- dash of predator, splash of prey. He did not wade, seldom knelt. He cruised up the bank, false-casting as he went, pausing momentarily to drop his fly on likely spots. It was not the Firehole method, but these were not Firehole trout. They would rise in the second or two before fear overtook hunger. Scotty knew his fish with the intimacy that only a wild predator usually achieves.

By the time I rejoined him, he was cleaning five trout between six and ten inches in length. He had taken them "as they came," he said. Fifty years earlier, he had returned big trout to

the Firehole, and that was before most people had heard of catch-and-release fishing. He said that he no longer liked to "hot-lip" fish unless he needed them for food.

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When I started following Scotty around the Park as a teenager, there were times when I wondered where he was going, but I kept my thoughts to myself except on one hike cross-country through miles of lodgepole tangle that would have dizzied a compass. I said, then, that I feared we had drifted off course -- and I confess that it was a frivolous comment, aimed at getting his reaction.

There was no reaction. Scotty kept on without a word and in fifteen minutes we hit the shore of a little lake right where we wanted to fish. A golden-eye duck whistled in for a landing, cutting a long silver furrow on the pewter surface, and I promised myself that I would not venture again to tell Scotty Chapman how to find his way around Yellowstone.

He would not say this, but I suppose that nobody else has ever covered as many miles of the Park on his own two legs. Not the Sheepeater Indians. (They didn't run patrols.) Not the mountain men. (They didn't last long.) Not today's Rangers. (There are committed people among them, but they don't spend the winters on skis.) You could drop Scotty without a map anywhere in Yellowstone's 3500 square miles and figure that he would hike straight to anywhere else he had a mind to be.

He was Assistant Chief Ranger and fire boss when that was

the toughest job in the Park. (Scotty would not say this either, but everybody knew it, back then.) Hundreds of fire-fighters had to be mobilized on short notice. They had to be given tools, food, experienced crew-leaders, and quick, clear orders. These were as close to military campaigns as anything in civilian life.

I was a Fire Guard during some of those summers. We did not have the resources to put out a sizable fire all at once. Someone had to know where the burn would do more good than harm, keeping the meadows open. On steep, fragile watersheds, however, the flames had to be stopped before they could destroy the trees protecting stream quality. You had to know what you were doing -- and do it. You could not duck decisions.

There is a good deal of talk about controlled burns today. With Scotty in charge, we always had controlled burns. I don't suppose that he saw Yellowstone as his biggest canvas. That's just how life turned out.

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We were late for lunch by the time we got back to Scotty's ranch, which lies against the northern boundary of Yellowstone. With the exception of near-fatal duty in the Philippines during World War II, nothing had separated him from his Park. He had declined transfers and the promotions that would have come with them. I asked silly questions, over the years, but I never asked if he planned to retire in Florida.

Scotty and his wife, Louise, cooked our trout. She had shared his commitment since 1932. During the couple's first

winter in the Park, they lived in an isolated cabin on Soda Butte creek, and Louise kept the home fire burning, literally. Heating was by wood stove, and the water supply was a spring outside. Scotty was usually away on duty -- rounding up the buffalo herd or patrolling for poachers. The patrols were real cross-country work, on nine-foot skis in deep powder, two weeks at a time. "Louise never complained," Scotty says. "I did, but she didn't."

The next winter, Scotty was assigned to the Bechler River cabin, even more remote. Louise left in December to have their first child and came back with baby Bill, in January, on a dog sled. She looks like a model, pretty and fragile.

We sat at the table with afternoon sun streaming through the windows and pulled bones away from the pink, steaming meat of our trout, eating in little bites. We had enough but were not stuffed. And then we talked. I don't remember most of what we said because one casual comment by Scotty got me thinking.

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Yellowstone shaped Scotty, and vice versa, in a time before helicopters and snowmobiles and graphite rods. He was in his Park when it needed the skills of Indian and cowboy and general and artist, all in one, and we will not see his like again.

(I have one of those paintings. It has hung on walls in Africa and South America and Europe. I always put it where I could see it from my desk. The furniture and houses and continents changed, but the picture stayed with me.)

It was easy to find our way up Meadow Creek, but I would not have guessed that the fishing was worth the walk. I had thought that I knew the Park, too. I had learned the routes without trails down the Yellowstone's Black Canyon. I had chased the trout of the Bechler River country and the Thorofare (parts of which are as far as you can get from a thoroughfare in the lower forty-eight). I'd found places where the trout grew big. Maybe that was my problem: I'd wanted the big ones. Scotty Chapman had wanted the good ones, which might or might not be the same thing.

His pools were a little bigger than those I had fished. The fish were running bigger too, which made him feel better about the stream's recuperation from the fires. I watched while his rod bent deeply in a trout. The fight did not last long, but this was a brook trout too, ten inches long, best of the day. He stopped right then and cleaned his catch. He had exactly as many fish as we wanted for lunch.

The hike back to the road was downhill so we coasted along, chattering like teen-agers. Meadow Creek was all right, all right, all right. We'd seen mayflies and trout and green meadows. The fishing was probably as good as ever. It was not better but it was good, good enough.

There were no trails over the winter snow, either. He

Gardner had looked like coffee with cream. The Lamar had looked like coffee without cream. This was midsummer, but there had been a light rain somewhere in the headwaters. It had washed in mud and ash from watersheds burned in the big fires of 1988.

We did not park at the culvert where Meadow Creek went under the highway. Scotty told me to drive a little further, then stop. Our hip-boots and fishing vests were already in back-packs, and before we hiked off, I made sure that there was no fishing tackle lying around the vehicle. I even left A Field Guide To Western Birds on the seat so that anybody who might case our truck would be misled as to our purpose. That was my idea, not Scotty's.

(I don't mind throwing other fisherman off the trail -- even good guys like you. Scotty will have no part of misrepresentations. This does not mean that he volunteers information, though. He had kept me in the dark about Meadow Creek for forty years.)

We hiked away from the road, Scotty showing me the way, then looped to the creek and followed it upstream. We began running into clumps of lodgepole pine that had burnt past recuperation. Where the trees stood singly, however, some had survived, and now they dotted the rejuvenated meadow with patches of shade. There were a few remaining black spots where big clumps of sage had burned down to mineral spoil. Most of the brush, however, had burnt cleanly and been replaced by soft grass that left drops of dew on our boots. In this deep-green field, phlox and larkspur

sparkled like stars in the Milky Way. I had never seen a meadow that looked better.]

Scotty stopped a couple of times for a breather. He did not like having to do that. Just ten years earlier, when he was in his seventies, he had stopped only when he wanted to remember something for his paintings -- maybe a yellow aspen illuminating a gray boulder, maybe an old patrol cabin where he had spent long winter nights. (I have one of those paintings. It has hung on walls in Africa and South America and Europe. I always put it where I could see it from my desk. The furniture and houses and continents changed, but the picture stayed with me.)^e

I had started following Scotty around Yellowstone Park when I was a teen-ager. There had been times when I wondered where he was going, but I always kept my thoughts to myself except on one twisting hike through miles of lodgepole tangle that would have made a compass dizzy. I could not help saying, then, that I feared we had drifted off course. Scotty kept on without a word and in fifteen minutes we hit the shore of the little lake we wanted. We stood theretill a golden-eye duck whistled in for a landing, cutting a long silver furrow on the pewter surface. I promised myself that I would never again try to tell Scotty Chapman how to find his way around the Park.

(That's what we call it. It was the first of the national parks and so far it has been big enough for all its owners --]

tourists in a hurry to see Old Faithful and fishermen who want to be lonely. It's the Park, the one with a big P.)]

Scotty got to Yellowstone in 1927,? and while he wouldn't say this, I will: nobody else has ever covered as many miles of the Park on legs. Not the Sheepeater Indians. (They didn't have patrols.) Not the mountain men. (They didn't ^{live} last long.) Not today's rangers. (They don't spend the summers on horses and the winters on skis.) You could, I think, drop Scotty anywhere in the Park without a map and figure that he'd hike straight to anywhere else he had a mind to be.

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We crested a rise and walked downhill to a basin where Meadow Creek flattened out and wound in casual curlicues like a mature river. It wasn't grown up, really, but in this hidden playground the creek was all dressed up like big folks. There were undercuts at the outside of the bends, overhanging clumps of

than harm, keeping the meadows open and removing excessive dead timber. Other fires, however, were on steep, sensitive drainages. Such fires had to be stopped before they could burn off the vegetation that protected water quality. The decisions sounded simple only to people who did not know much about them.

By 1988, there were two problems in Yellowstone: a fire-problem and a people-problem. One constituency did not want its Park burned. Another thought that the fires had to be good because they were natural. There was not much room for compromise. Decisions were slow in coming.

Scotty's contemplative mood started to wear off when I caught my second trout. At the fourth, he loped upstream like a teen-ager, lengthening his fly-line as he went. He was fishing Meadow Creek before I finished. I watched his dark line flattening against blue sky on the backcast, then driving forward with a tight loop. I could not see where the fly lit but knew that it would be close to where he wanted it. Fly-casting was never that graceful when I did it.

While Scotty fished, I cleaned my catch, all brook trout. I left their heads on because the ^{cheeks} ~~meat in them~~ would be the best of all. I left the fins on too, even the pectorals, just because they would look pretty with their red and black stripes. When I washed the trout, the water brought out the color of their skins, deep green with circles on the sides like targets with red bulls

eyes. I wrapped each fish in a fold of clean towel as if I were cleaning up after a party, stowing old silver serving-spoons with the initials of long-dead ancestors.

And then I walked up on a hill to watch the stream and the fisherman. There was just a short section of meanders, as Scotty had said, a couple of hundred yards of perfection. He was a small, straight figure flicking his fly into the pools. Above him, hiding our place, were round green hills and blue mountains with streaks of snow in their folds.

By the time I rejoined him, Scotty had caught and kept three little trout. He was "taking them as they come," he said, little or big. In this water as in most others west of the Mississippi, brook trout reproduced too successfully, becoming overabundant and stunted. The best thing for the population was to thin it out, preferably by removing the small ones. That's how I'd have put it, anyhow. Scotty had other reasons too. He just did not like to bother a trout unless he needed it for food.

His pools were a little bigger than those I had fished. The fish were running bigger too, which made him feel better about the stream's recuperation from the fires. I watched while his rod bent deeply in a trout. The fight did not last long, but this was a brook trout too, ten inches long, best of the day. He stopped right then and cleaned his catch. He had exactly as many fish as we wanted for lunch.

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What had worried me was the talk of fires releasing nutrients into the streams. I don't blame the biologist who said that: he will probably be proven right, for some streams, and Meadow Creek may even be one of them. But there is also a history of damage to Yellowstone streams by forest fires. Scotty knows the history. (Not me. I just get cognitive dissonance when I see coffee-colored streams in August and hear talk of nutrients. A Mexican tourist had his car washed into the Gibbon River by a mudslide that was probably not nutritious, but I don't know the big picture. I wasn't even looking for it up Meadow Creek.)

We were late for lunch by the time we got back to Scotty's house, but Louise cooked five trout for us anyhow. Louise had been married to Scotty for ?????? years. During the couple's first winter in the Park, they lived in a patrol cabin on Soda Butte creek, and Louise spent the weeks alone while Scotty was out on skis looking for poachers. Louise knew how to build fires, bake potatoes, and fry trout in a cast-iron pan.

And we all knew how to ~~eat~~ them. We put them on our plates and looked at them. I know what I was thinking. Then we opened

By the late '30s, a few anglers "called themselves nymph fishermen," Scotty says.

Of the anglers who wrote on Yellowstone at the time, Scotty had a high regard for Don Martinez, who described the Firehole method correctly. Bergman knew how to make a tale interesting, but sometimes at the expense of accuracy. He took his status as an expert seriously, too. Scotty remarked that Ray "always had to be right."