

About 1840 words

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BAILEY'S SECRETS

He knew about the hidden springs

Bailey took me fishing shortly after I moved to Washington, D.C., and wanted to get out of it. On the first free Saturday I bought a license and followed the Potomac River upstream, but I didn't meet Bailey that day. Another old man was at the landing to rent boats and provide advice, which was a responsibility he took seriously. He told me that I would catch more smallmouth bass by wading if I did not mind getting wet, and I didn't. Fishing wasn't much with the water at 84°, but I put a few little bass back and kept enough yellowbelly sunfish for dinner. The old man said that they would be better eating than bass, and we talked awhile, and when he decided I was all right he told me that the best cold-water fisherman thereabouts was Bailey Spigler in Sharpsburg.

Bailey agreed to find me some trout. I am sure that he recognized a sincerely desperate young fisherman when he heard one on the telephone, and then too he may have reached the point

in life when he welcomed recognition of his learning. Next Saturday just after dawn I was at the door of his white frame house. I did not step inside or meet his family -- never did, on that occasion or the others when I fished with him. People near the Mason-Dixon Line liked privacy, in those days. There was nothing suburban about Sharpsburg yet, no barbecue grills or gift shops. There were small old houses and Bailey just appeared at the door of one of them, hip boots on his feet, 3-piece fly rod strung with line but broken down, bait hook up against the tip-top.

Bailey gave directions to a tiny tributary of Antietam creek that did not look like trout water, and wasn't. He unfurled a seine between two sticks, stuck their bottom ends in the gravel, and told me to herd some minnows downstream toward him. Two were in the net when he lifted it. Some folks settled for bait-shop shiners, Bailey said, but there was nothing like real stream-dwelling bull-minnows to fool the trout. I suspected that he did not believe in wasting 75 cents on boughten bait, either.

We got to know each other during the half-hour it took us to catch our bait. Bailey was of average height and weight and his dark hair made him seem no more than middle-aged, but he did not move fast. What caught me was his good humor. I had thought of chasing minnows as just something that had to be done before we could go fishing, but Bailey took pleasure in the details -- miniature pools and runs, a seine bagging in the current, warty little fish flapping in the meshes with mouths open but silent.

We wound up admiring the trophies among bull-minnows.

I had been afraid that everyone else would beat us to the big fish, but it was still early enough for mist to be rising from the Potomac River when we drove across it. Bailey mentioned that he knew of a few cool springs, deep in the bed of the river, and that in years gone by he had caught real brook trout there. He supposed that the native fish had drifted down from shady headwaters and taken refuge in the springs when the Potomac turned warm on its way to Washington. He thought that maybe he was the only one who still knew about those springs.

I wanted to try them right away, though I could not have said at the time why the refugee trout sounded so desirable. I did have enough sense to back off when Bailey shook his head. Hadn't seen any of those big brook trout lately, he said. Maybe the pollution got them all.

He knew of a good place elsewhere, though. We bounced along a gravel road, paused on an iron bridge over Opequon creek, and looked downstream. A fish boiled below a rapid -- maybe just a fallfish cornering bull minnows in the rapids, like us, but I had not yet learned about fallfish (another warty creation) and Bailey went along with my salmonoid fantasies. He put together the pieces of his white steel fly rod, an antique even then. I was trying to get a 2-pound-test line through the guides of a light spinning rod. He gave me a hook like his and split our stock of bait, pouring my minnows into a marmalade jar. He took care to show me how the bait ought to be rigged and I can picture

the process still, hook going in the mouth and out through the gills and then back through again to form a loop. Then he pushed the hook through the minnow's body ahead of its tail and adjusted the loop until the body was pulled into a gentle curve by the leader. Bailey got tiny silver scales on his thumb and finger and the minnow had a faint smell of stream-bottom mud.

Bailey waded into Opequon Creek then, me right behind him, and eased downstream to a place where the water ran deep and shady under the right bank. He stripped off thirty feet of a dark, level fly-line and started roll-casting the minnow toward the good spot. The old steel rod was heavy and absurdly slow, by modern standards -- but it did not tear the bait. The line just cartwheeled out and the minnow plopped down where he wanted it. Bailey let it sink a couple of feet, drifting downstream, and then retrieved it barely fast enough to make it turn over. I watched it flicker, sink, struggle ahead, flicker, sink. After about ten casts and ten yards of stream, Bailey dropped his rod tip. The floating line was pulled deeper into the water by a fish I had not seen. Bailey eased the line back through his fingers till he felt a heavy beat and then struck. The rod bent alarmingly, because there was not much spine to it, but that trout was as good as fried in cornmeal. It rolled and dived a couple of times and then lay in Bailey's net, wondering what had gone wrong with the world.

We admired the fish and I remember that scene too. It's odd how some fragments of these old movies play back after more

important memories have disappeared. Bailey's net had a rubber handle and a spring-steel bow that could be unscrewed and collapsed for travel. The meshes were of faded cotton. The fish was a rainbow, plump and good-sized, almost a pound, but it was clearly a hatchery specimen, fins rounded, brain vestigial. It didn't hurt that Bailey knew exactly where the truck was wont to dump its load.

I moved off to do my own fishing, then. My short rod was not as effective as Bailey's but my line was good, a wispy monofilament that let me cast a bull-minnow thirty feet with one split shot. The trout I remember was on the hook when Bailey stopped by to see how I was doing, and I was doing fine. A boy on the bank was telling me to haul the fish in before it wiggled loose, while Bailey explained that I couldn't horse a trout on 2-pound line. The boy was too excited to listen, what with all the splashing. Those man-made rainbows did not have much for brains but they remembered how to pull.

Bailey and I fished together two or three more times that season and were contented in each other's company, mutually relieved to be with someone who understood the good things in life without explanation. Hatchery trout that I would have scorned, in Montana, seemed valuable when they pulled me away from a miasmal city. My memory may not be reliable in every respect, of course. Sometimes Bailey Spigler gets confused with all the other old men who saw something in me worth rescuing, but I think I have the important details right.

On our last trip of the season, Bailey guided me to a farmhouse in an unpromising part of the West Virginia limestone country, right off U.S. 11, and there he talked to a man he'd evidently known for years. The farmer gave fishing permission and Bailey took it, which sounds one-sided, but the two seemed equally happy to see each other. This was before Americans had decided that spring-creek fishing was worth paying for. Bailey went downstream and I up. The stream had been abused, like most others in the region, banks beaten down and bottom silted, but for all that there was water-buttercup waving in the current and two trout spooked when I waded close. I sneaked up on the third before it saw me and it was a real native. The event seemed miraculous, an apparition -- little trout at the surface taking invisible insects, white-edged fins clear. I cast a 1/16-ounce spinner far above the trout, brought it back glittering, and was almost relieved when the fish fled. Modern trinkets were all right for modern manmade trout but not for the real thing.

Bailey had two brook trout between 8 and 9 inches long -- lovely fish, we agreed, if not as big as the ones that hid out in the Potomac springs. He had caught the pair on worms drifted underneath some brush. They lay in his creel, glistening on a comforter of ferns, and I admired them fervently. Bailey was as near ebullience as I'd ever seen him. Last year, he said, he'd been in the veteran's hospital at this season, and the doctors had not been sure that he would fish again. They'd treated him

right, though. He had always been proud of fighting for his country in World War II and he felt prouder than ever when he walked out of that hospital. He'd have been glad if I'd caught a trout too but I was content to see the sun shining on Bailey alone. Nice day it was, too, wind from the west blowing off the haze.

I did not call Bailey till the next March. Wouldn't have known what to say, because he was not a talkative man and the only thing we really knew how to do together was fish. If I had been older at the time, I'd have figured some excuse to strike up a conversation between seasons. All winter I'd been hoping that he'd know me well enough, in a second season, to trust me with the secret springs. I would have treated them right, Lord knows.

Bailey's wife said that he'd died. It was a short conversation. I wanted to ask for his old steel fly rod but was afraid she'd think me one of those false friends who exploit widows. I just said that I was sorry and she probably knew I meant it, but if I was tongue-tied then, maybe this will explain.

April 5, 1992

Mr. Duncan Barnes, Editor
Field & Stream
2 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10016

Dear Duncan:

This one is a people story, with as much fishy detail as I could recall. If the idea works, I'll dredge my memory for some more of the old boys who encouraged me to fritter away my life.

Yours,

Enclosed: "Bailey's Secrets"