

The Test

Then and Now

Sylvester Nemes

I'm standing on a bridge over the Test River, where I stood 42 years ago, almost to the day. It was May then, 1944, and I was 21 years old, a private in what was then called the Army Air Corps, with only a few years of fly fishing under my wading belt. Bains, the aged keeper of the Leckford Club, whose best 12 flowed under the bridge stood by me. He was a tall man with a long face and a good head of course, gray hair. He was wearing plus fours, bagging well below his knees and a very hairy tweed jacket, under which he wore a shirt and tie. Me, I was dressed in army khaki, a fatigue jacket and shirt open at the neck.

Bains was stringing a ten foot Hardy bamboo fly rod with a heavy, green silk fly line for me to use. Earlier, at his cottage two hundred yards down the road from the bridge, he gave me a small Players tobacco tin well packed with Test river dry flies. There were Orange Quills. Ginger Quills. Olive Quills. Welshman's Buttons. Gold Ribbed Hares Ears. And some Wickham's Fancies. The flies looked as if they were tied by old Frederic Maurice Halford, himself, in the same bushy, over dressed style he prescribed in his and the world's first code book on fishing the dry fly in 1886, *FLOATING FLIES AND HOW TO DRESS THEM*.

On the bridge, a stocky British, yellow lab was sitting obediently and looking up at Bains as he reiterated the club rules for fishing this, the holy, the hallowed, the "Noble", the natal river of dry fly fishing.

"We fish different here than youn American chaps," Bains was saying. I liked the sound of 'American chaps.' It was a lot better than what I had been hearing at the P38 base in Andover, where I was stationed just 7 or 8 miles away.

"We fish upstream only with a dry fly and we fish only to a rising trout. We also kill all adult trout. You know, they won't rise to the fly once

they've been caught and released. You will probably catch some grayling, as well, and these are all to be killed no matter what size they are."

I supposed Bains was referring to the revolutionary, fly only, catch and release programs that were already starting on certain American trout streams. But I was surprised to hear that the British did not have high regard for the grayling. Apparently, we in America didn't either, because we wiped them out of our rivers long before the turn of the century.

I nodded to Bains to let him know I was hearing him loud and clear, that I was ready to do anything, even fish dry fly exclusively to get on my beat and start fishing. I wouldn't even look downstream, I told myself. No siree. For I had read somewhere that even God couldn't get a day on the Test, and here I was, a lowly private in the US Army Air Corps on the bridge over beat 12, a Hardy fly rod and reel almost in my hand, about to join the ranks of the Halfords, the Hills, the Mountbattens, the admirals and generals of the Royal British Army and Navy; and countless other well-endowed gentlemen who trouted on this great river and could afford it no matter how high the price.

I was also thanking God for the war and I was thinking it was very nice of the US Armed Forces to bring me over to this little, threatened island at no cost. For, it was also the same war that was keeping the Leckford Club members off their beats. And it was the same global conflict which promoted one of their members to suggest they might let American GI's trout sit their beloved river, so long as they behaved themselves and went according to the rules. There certainly were a lot of us around, so many in fact, it prompted someone, a British soldier, no doubt, to say we were over-paid, over-sexed and over-here.

Bains must have finally believed I would not commit grievous sins against the Test and let me go down to my assigned beat. Before I left, he warned me once more that even though there were no other anglers on the river, I was to fish my beat only. I saluted him and walked off

with my tobacco tin of flies and the strung Hardy rod and reel in my hand.

As I took the ancient path along the river, I was realizing for the first time that if God could not get a day on the Test, he certainly was to be thanked for creating this beautiful river. The water was gin clear with an almost mystical transparency and ran full and deep almost flush with the banks. Another couple of gallons and it would be over the banks. Close by the river, I was seeing, too, for the first time, the gray-white, yellow-white beds of chalk, which obviously gave this and other similar viers in the south of England their familiar name. Huge beds of weeds grew between the beds of chalk and trailed in the current like long, soft hair. And when the light was right, I was seeing the spotted demons hanging motionlessly in the current, as though embedded in lucite, obviously waiting for the morning feed. My heart was already pumping excessively. Those trout were two pounds and up, bigger than any trout I had ever seen in my few years of fly fishing.

I was hurrying to my beat and finally came to the white painted marker stuck in the bank ahead of me. There it was. The number with an arrow pointing downstream. I drew an imaginary line across the river saying everything below it was mine. At least for today. I had no idea how long my beat was, but I could not see the other marker even though I could look a half mile down the river. I was dying to start fishing. "Whoa, buddy," Bains' voice came to me. "...We fish only to rising trout." And there were none. At least, not yet. I backed off. Who knows, he might still be up on the bridge with a powerful pair of binoculars trained on me. "Can't trust those American Chaps, you know. Look what they've already done to our British lasses."

I found a bench along the bank and sat down reluctantly and waited, my eyes glued to the shining surface of the river for rising trout. Minutes dragged by. The Test made silky noises as it rubbed itself against the bank. I watched some cows in the meadow across the river. Somewhere

way off, I could hear the drone of fighter planes. Must be our P38 Lightnings up at Andover. It was about the right time for them to be coming back from their morning strike against the German fortifications across the Channel. Today, I would miss watching them hobble in, various parts of their landing gear shot out, or flaps gone. Poor bastards, they almost always made it back, but now and then they could hardly make it down. The stricken ones would circle the field, jockeying

the aircraft trying to dislodge the nose wheel, the right or left landing gear, or to get the flaps working so they might land the relatively hot P38 on the relatively short grass runways. They waited until the last minute when there was hardly a drop of fuel left. By this time, the runways would be lined with fire trucks and ambulances and the plane would come in on the proverbial wing and a prayer. Hundreds of us standing on wooden packing crates or on Niesen hut roof tops, would watch and pray the pilots would make it in safely, and cheer wildly as though at a ball game when they did.

Feeling a little guilty, I now noticed some swallows buzzing the placid surface of the river. They seemed to appear from nowhere and flew dangerously close to the surface. One actually dipped its beak into the Test. Then another and another. I didn't know what they were doing

until in the midst of them and close to my bank, I saw a trout rise. The swallows were feeding on them first insects of the hatch and now the trout were going at them, too.

Bains had told me to start out with the Orange Quill when I saw my first rises and switch to the other flies if that didn't work. So out came the tobacco tin. My heart was pumping excessively again as I tied the fly onto the silkworm leader. I moved cautiously up stream towards the rising trout and now I could see two, no three trout rising simultaneously, their big rungs colliding with one another; and I could see the smokey, blue-gray insects coming down in the current like little sail boats. Gulp, there goes one. And gulp, there goes another and another.

This was going to be a piece of cake. I would just take the closest one first, then work my way up through those spotted demons until I killed them all. Now I knew why the British fished upstream. So they could kill the lower down trout while the others went on feeding until it was their turn to join their brothers on the grass.

My first cast at the trout was two feet short and to the right, but the Orange Quill landed softly and cocked with wings up just the way Halford prescribed that it should. It floated high and was easy to see.

I pulled three more feet of line and was casting again towards the closest trout which was rising now like clock work. About every 10 seconds. How many duns can a trout eat, I asked myself. The Orange Quill landed about two feet ahead of the trout directly in his line of feeding. It's perfect. He'll see it and take it. And he did. My reaction was like that of a chained dog snapping at a T-bone. I jerked the Hardy into the air taking the line, the leader and the Orange Quill along with it. I struck so early, the rings of the rise were still moving out from the center of the take.

That trout would not rise again, so I turned my attention to the next one who was not affected at all by the crazy happenings below him. The Hardy was starting to feel better in my hand. I slowed down the push-pull of the false casting and stopped forcing the actual cast by letting the

rod do the work. The premature striking, however, I could not stop and I put all of the trout down in my immediate area, leaving Orange Quills firmly imbedded in at least three of their mouths, and went down the river dejectedly looking for more feeders.

There were many of them, and I was starting to think they really were more sophisticated and more educated than the trout I fished for in America. They were all certainly a lot bigger. Slow down, I said. Be more phlegmatic. Be more British. Stop being so American, So over-anxious. I finally realized I had to do that or I would never take a Test trout. Okay. Okay. With the next one, I'll count to five before I set the hook. So, I found another feeder and went through all the same motions. He rose with the same phlegm to another Orange Quill, the last of the pattern in the tobacco tin, and I waited with the same phlegm before I set the hook.

Lo and behold, I had him, a fine shaped, well-nourished, beautifully colored and spotted, Test river brown trout, perhaps two or two and a quarter points, the biggest trout I ever caught in my young fly fishing life. Then I got another before I found the downstream boundary of my beat.

I remembered Bains' admonishment to finish my beat only and looked wistfully down the river where I was sure the trout were feeding more voraciously and where the rings seemed even bigger than the ones on my beat. I resisted the impulse, however, and started back up stream. I never caught another trout on the way back to the bridge. It was now quite dark, so I walked the two hundred yards to Bains' cottage. He had asked me to stop in for tea and to leave with him any trout I had caught and killed which he in turn would give to some townspeople of Stockbridge. They appreciated fresh, Test trout, during these days of strict food rationing. I also had to return the club's equipment.

"Well, how did you do?"

"I got a couple. They were tough to catch. I struck too early."

"Oh, you got a brace, then."

"A brace?"

"Yes, you said two didn't you?"

This was my first encounter with the word, brace, which the British use when they mean two, a pair, a couple. The word is also applied to game birds like pheasant and grouse. While Bains, made the tea, I rolled the word over in my mouth a few times. It certainly sounded better than two, when two was all you had. It was more satisfying, more distinguished, more complete. I learned later, the word could be halved, for one, a half brace and that British bird hunters might kill one or two hundred brace or pheasant or grouse or partridge in one day, which in this case, didn't sound as devastating as giving the amount of birds in the true, numerical number.

Mrs. Baines joined us for tea in her wicker chair while Mr. Bains boiled the water and made the tea and buttered the bread.

"You'll have to come again. In fact, why don't you come whenever you have the opportunity. You're just a few miles away, and it's not likely many of the regular members will be coming and there haven't been many Americans to come and fish our water." He knew we were getting ready for the invasion. That it was soon to come.

In fact, in my fighter control squadron, we were already waterproofing jeep and truck engines in anticipation of the watery landing on French soil from the LSTS.

I did come again several times before my outfit left for the Normandy beachheads. I learned to strike the big, slow takers on the Test and was averaging two and three brace a day. Sometimes a half. I caught many grayling, which I thought was just as noble and handsome a fish as the Test brown trout. Bains grew more friendly and would ask me to accompany him on his chores at the stew ponds where the club grew the brown trout which the river was stocked regularly. The ponds were fed with moving Test water and all the young trout were the direct progeny of Test brown trout. I once asked Bains about poaching as we sprinkled the fish pellets over the surface. He said he knew two or three lo-

cals who occasionally took a large brown on worm or spinner from the river, but they never would steal trout from the stew ponds.

I never got a trout over three pounds, the river was full of the two to three pound variety. The biggest fish I caught and helped to land was a brown male. Bains usually gave me beat 12 or 11 or 13 because they were close to his cottage and within easy walking distance. One night, I was returning from beat 13 and encountered a fisherman, fast into a big

fish in the weir pool just above the bridge. He called out to me to come and help him. There was desperation in his voice so I hurried over.

The gentleman could hardly speak. He was frozen to the bank, his rod bent like a hairpin with a seemingly immovable object on the end of it.

"My God, what have you got on there?"

"I've had him on for 25 minutes already. He's a big one. I've given him the butt, but he ignores it. He won't move. He's just sulking there like a log."

I edged over to the bank and looked down and saw him in the fast falling

light. The fish was huge, indeed. It was sulking trying to work out the fisherman.

"He's pretty big. How can I help you?"

"We need this one." I poked Bains' net which I was borrowing toward the fisherman. It had wooden hoop and a long handle which pulled out and snapped into place.

"It's not big enough, but it'll have to do. Go ahead and try it."

I really didn't want the responsibility. If I lost that trout for the gentleman, obviously a regular member, I might lose fishing the Test forever. But I had to do it. I lowered the net into the water behind the trout. The leader was as taught as a bass fiddle string. It was hard to judge the depth of the trout and the handle of the net was almost totally submerged. I started to move the net forward to encompass the fish. I was too high. He must have had a very sensitive tail for when he felt the hoop, he erupted into a wild, careening torpedo in and out of the water; and in seconds had reached the other side of the river, nearly 50 yards across, and looking much like the angler would have to fight him all over again. But the starch was out of the fish and was led quite calmly back to our bank where he practically swan right into Bains' net.

When the angler saw I had the great trout in the net, and high out of the water, he moved back away from the bank, dragging me and the net and the trout with him.

"By Jove, you've got him."

"By Jove, you've got him," he said again as he hoisted the fish out of the net with his finger in its gills. Now, he grabbed the net from my hand by the hoop turned it and killed the trout with repeated blows of the handle on the head. The size 15 Orange Quill was still stuck in the mouth of the trout and instead of taking it out, the angler cut the leader leaving the fly.

We had to get Bains up at the cottage.

"I'm sorry, Bains. But I think I've got the biggest trout ever caught on the Test. We've got to weigh him, now, before he loses an ounce. For the record, you know."

"Yes, yes. Of course. Let's go into the kitchen."

The trout was almost too large for the scale, and had to be balanced across the tray, his head sticking out on one end and the giant tail beding substantially over the other. We three leaned forward. The needle stopped wavering and stood stationary. It looked like 5 pounds even. Bains peered at the pointer. "He's one ounce under 5 pounds. He's a right good trout and a beautiful specimen. But he's no record fish for the Test."

"Well, it's the biggest trout I ever saw. I'd like you to send him to London tomorrow so that he can be put up."

I left England soon after that and landed at Omaha Beach on D plus 12. There was no shooting, but we did have to jump into the water from the LSTS. I returned to England in March 1945 and was married to a British girl who watched me fish the Test a couple of times previously. Visiting her in July, I was able to fish the river again for the last time before returning to America. When someone in the club heard I was now married and had my young wife with me, he asked Bains to invite us to stay at a private inn belonging to the club. I was still a private, but all of the members we met made us feel

End of Part One. Part Two will be carried in the next issue.

Even after 42 years, it was relatively easy to find the bridge over beat 12 of the Lackford Club, if indeed there still was such a beat and such a club. I parked the rented car at the end of the bridge and got out and walked to it. Automatically I turned upstream and saw the same view I had been so many times all those years ago. One hundred feet upstream was the weir and thatched roof hut. Eel pots, probably the same ones used in the forties, sat on top of the weir in a neat row. The pool between the weir and the bridge was still deep and probably harbored other five pounders, like the one I helped land on the right bank. "By Jove, you've got him," rang through my head and I wonder how many other big fish grew up in that pool and surrendered themselves to angler's Orange Quills during that time. Looking also in the direction of Andover, I half expected to hear P38's coming back from the French coast.

Two young ladies started to cross the bridge.

"This is the Leckford Club water, right?"

"Yes, I fished here during the war." I said with distinction. "There used

"I'd like to find out if I could fish the river again."

"My husband should be along here in a while. They'll be in a Land Rover."

The two young ladies crossed the bridge and walked out of sight. I jumped from one side of the bridge to the other taking in the views.

Soon the Land Rover rumbled towards the narrow bridge. There were two youngish men in the front seat. I flagged the driver down. He stopped by the side of the rented car. The man on the passenger side rolled the window down.

"I guess you're the keeper. I talked to your wife," I said.

"I'm one of them. He's another." He pointed to the driver.

"We're assistants." Three keepers? I wondered how old Bains kept the club all by himself.

"I'm an American. I fished here during the war as a guest of the club. This is my first time back. I'd like to find out if I could fish the river again or at least walk along the banks?"

"I can't give you permission. A lot of the members are out there fishing. You'll have to see the secretary at the estate office. It's just up the river road there. You'll see a sign."

I found it easily and was sure it was the same building where I got permission from the club secretary in 1944. The secretary, a young lady smiling constantly, was happy

to hear my story and when I asked her if I could fish the river again, she merely looked at her schedule and said, "We could let you have beat 3 on next Thursday, the 8th of May. Will it just be you fishing, then?"

"Yes, just me."

"Fine. The charge will be 35 pounds."

I didn't collapse when I heard it would cost me little more than \$50 to fish the Test for one day. A fly shop in Stockbridge earlier quoted me 97 pounds for a day's fishing on the river downstream at the Broadlands, Lord Mountbatten's old place. But that's where Prince Phillip and Di honeymooned. I almost wished the war was still on, instead, I said, "Yes, yes, of course."

welcome and at home. The memory of them and Bains and the Test will be with me forever.

to be a keeper's cottage. Up that way, I believe." I pointed up the road. "It's still there. We live in it."

With my payment, I received the rules for a day rods for the 1986 season, along with a map which showed how to get to the beat. I hurried to the car anxious to check the regulations to see, what, if any changes had occurred since 1944. The first six rules pertained to size, bag limits and charges. Rules 7 and 8, however, jumped out at me. "&. Upstream dry fly fishing only. Maximum size of hook permitted, size 10." "8. Upstream nymph fish will be allowed to those who wish to try this

method from August 1st onwards, when the fish ignore the dry fly."

I was in a state of shock. I felt like running back to the smiling secretary demanding my money back. How revolutionary this was! Where was Bains' and Halford's line"...and we fish only to a rising fish?" Could I just wander up and down my beat casting willy nilly without seeing a trout rise? That was just "...chucking and chancing it" what the dry fly purists levelled at wet fly fishers for more than 100 years. And how dare the Leckford Club permit a wet fly to be used on the holy water of this noble river...even if it is upstream and even if it is only after the first of August. Trout, particularly Test brown trout just do not ignore the dry fly, ever. I could see Halford spinning in his grave. It was more than I could stand. In a mere 42 years, the trout fishing on the Test, to my mind, had gone to hell. And I just paid \$50 to fish one day on it. There was nothing sacred anymore in fly fishing, and I was almost tempted to give my day away to anyone who wanted...even God.

But I just had to see her one more time, walk along the banks with a fly

rod in my hand and see if the trout were still as educated and had the same old phlegm as the World War II fish. So on the 8th of May, I was on beat 3 which was towards the top of the club's riparian holding on the Test. And there to meet me was the head keeper, who heard from his assistant and probably from the secretary that I had been a guest of the club during the war.

He knew of Bains, but was too young to have been keepering when Bains was alive. He was a pleasant, trim man dressed in an open windbreaker and sun tan work pants. He wore a tie. He appeared very busy, quite different from old Bains, who would walk to the beat with you anytime and chat about buzz bombs, Churchill and the war. And I took it, he was college trained in biology or fish management, while Bains, who must have been born as early as 1880, appeared to have little or no formal education. Bains had the subservient quality about him, born of being born poor in Victorian England. This keeper was the equal to anyone, even his richest, most titled and venerated club members and even occasional guests from America. Still, I think he liked me and would confide in me because of my age and fly fishing background.

Our first topic of conversation was rule number 7. Was this true I asked the keeper? Could I really just fish blind upstream to places suspected of holding trout without first seeing a trout rise?

"Yes," he said sheepishly and a little sadly. "I think the Test deserves better than that, but we've been permitting that for quite a while now. Club members just don't have the leisure they used to. They're just too busy to wait around the river for a fish to rise. This early in the season you may have to wait all day before you see a little hatch of dry fly, which won't last very long once it comes."

Now, I sought an explanation for rule 8, the nymph during August.

"August is the poorest month for dry fly fishing on the Test. In the past, few club members would even both to fish the river after the end of July. But upstream nymph fishing has become more and more popular in England and some of our members

have taken to it. Those that haven't aren't here to be pained by the sight of wet fly on the Test." A little smile came on the keeper's lips and I could see a lot of this stuff was nonsense to him.

"And you still kill all adult fish?" I asked. This was a loaded question asking for a response. Killing trout was right there in rule 3, while most American anglers never killed them. Oh, they cuddled them, took pictures of them, and even occasionally kissed them before releasing them,

sometime when it was too late for the fish.

"We fish different than you American chaps," the keeper said. "We still believe trout become shy and go off the feed if you keep hooking them and releasing them. If the trout falls for a dry fly once, he should be removed from the river. Oh, we're experimenting with catch and release here in England and have done for quite some time. On the places I know where they're trying it, the trout have regressed, become runty and difficult to catch."

I held my tongue for I knew that large trout caught on the Henry's Fork in Idaho and on the Madison river in Montana, both with lengthy portions of catch and release and fly only regulations, frequently had one and sometimes even two flies stuck in their jaws from previous, victorious tussles with anglers. And these fish, when hooked again tore up and down the river trying for another one in the jaw. If the latest angler won the battle, he would gladly remove the fly or flies, including his own and set the trout back in the water. The sight of one or two flies stuck in the mouth of a Test trout, just landed, might be

more than the Test angler could stand. There may be something of the virgin principle here, that chalkstream anglers don't want to catch and handle a trout that has been caught and handled by a stanger, or strangers.

The keeper continued and smiled again, "We can't understand you American Chaps. Most of the ones we see here talk about fishing as though it were a religion. When they talk about flies, they use the Latin names, many of which we never heard before. Frankly, we don't know what they're talking about. We've always used the vernacular names to identify trout flies."

Now, I knew that the excessive use of a dead foreign language to describe the insects the trout feed on by American anglers and particularly by the new "yuppies" invading our sport, was leaving a trail of poshishness and snobbism which was staining the character of some of us old timers who still said blue winged olive, not *Ephemerella Ignita*. I thought the keeper should visit the Henry's Fork for a couple of days, where during the end of June, he would hear, "Man, did you see those Infrequens?" Or, "We killed em with the Paraleptophlebia." And "I never saw no Calibaetis."

The keeper and I now switched to the topic of stocking and I was quite surprised and disappointed to hear that rainbow trout, not the classic, free rising brown trout, were fed into the river to replace the ones caught and taken away by the anglers. I knew the reason for this was simply economics. Rainbows grow faster so are cheaper to raise and are not a subject to hatchery diseases are the browns. I don't think there was a single rainbow trout in the entire United Kingdom before the war they were brought here from America sometime after it. The keeper didn't seem too happy with them. "Brown trout and brown trout only belong in the Test. Maybe some day soon, we'll be back to them, although there are still some wild brown trout in the river."

Well, I was anxious to start getting my 50 bucks worth, and the keeper had many chores. "I'll stop in on you later to see how you're doing," he

said. He wished me good luck and we shook hands.

I was left alone and strung up a Winston, 4-piece travel rod. The car park was very near the bottom of the beat and I thought I would first walk the whole thing with my rod to get the lay of water. It was more than 1/4 miles long, consisting of the left bank facing upstream. The last time I had that much water to myself was on the Madison, below Quake Lake in Montana. But it was December, and the snow was thigh deep. So you can be along on American streams if you wait long enough.

I walked to the top of the beat looking for any signs of a feeding trout and never saw any. Much of the water on the way up was canal-like and deep with a slow, but distinct current. There was not the transparency which dazzled me so many years ago and I could not see trout holding in the current. Where the path took its course over sawmy areas, there were wooden boardwalks placed over them to permit the angler to fish dry shod.

At the top of the beat, I found the upstream marker which showed a 1 pointing upstream and a 3 pointing down. I assumed beat 2 was on the

other side of the river. There was a thatched roof fisherman's hut over there was a solitary fisherman. We waved at each other. Here, I realized how big the Test really was. That angler could be fishing his side and I could be fishing mine with no possible conflict between us.

The bottom part of my beat looked to be the most promising. It started at a little falls and continued for perhaps a hundred yards. Here the current really picked up producing a broken surface which looked ideal for a general, nondescript dry fly such as an Adams. There was nothing showing on the water, so I put it on feeling sinful that I would attack the Test trout with such a typical American fly. After many casts, a trout took it, a brown trout mind you of about two pounds. He was landed and, following the rules, was thunked into oblivion. At about 2 in the afternoon, a nice, but sparse hatch of iron blue duns came down the river and several trout in the tail of the riffle were feeding on them. I put on a blue dun parachute fly and made contact with two or three of them, but never hooked one firmly enough to bring him in. In a very short time, the hatch was over.

Towards the end of the day, the keeper returned and I showed him the brown. "You were lucky to get a brown trout," he said. "There aren't too many of them left in the river."

Yes, I thought, that fish might have been the progeny of the same browns I fished for during the war. And it was nice of the Test piscatorial saints to offer me one of them.

That was the Test, at least the Leckford club water of it then, in 1944 and now, in 1986, seen through the eyes of an American who was lucky enough and privileged enough to be there in those years and this. It might hold more rainbows than browns now and the wet fly is finding it's way back into the river, but she is still beautiful, still compelling and still mystifying, still, as John Waller Hills said in *SUMMER ON THE TEST*, "...the greatest trout river in the world."

The Soft-Hackled Fly

Sylvester Nemes

Witness here the re-birth of a century-old tradition, almost lost to us in the nymph and dry fly frenzy of recent years. An important article, we feel.

FOR MORE THAN 15 YEARS, I HAVE ENJOYED WHAT I BELIEVE to be more good fly fishing than most anglers, primarily because of the almost exclusive use of one basic fly pattern — the soft-hackled fly. I say this, not only because I think I have actually had more fish come to this fly than the typical fly fisherman using dry flies, winged wet flies, nymphs, streamers or bucktails, but because these flies produce more pure satisfaction than any other angling method.

Such a statement, I realize, places me precariously far out on the old piscatorial limb. However, I don't intend it as a challenge — no more than W. C. Stewart meant it as a challenge when he said "fish upstream," or F. M. Halford when he stumped for "dry flies only," or G.E.M. Skues when he issued his mandate to "fish nymphs!"

I make the statement because on many blue-ribbon trout streams in the West and in the upper Midwest the flies have worked well for me when other flies were not working as well for other fishermen.

I am and always have been a friendly angler. Some fishermen, I'm sure, thought I was nosey. I don't believe they lied when they said fishing was poor, so all I had to do was compare my fun — and results — with theirs.

When the less-fortunate angler said he hadn't done well, I always felt sorry for him, because the simple, sober-hued soft hackles were tearing up trout for me up and down the stream. I wanted these fishermen to know that I was using soft hackles, and invariably I would give them three or four — "Here, try these." This was even before I ever thought of writing a book about them.

There are probably many dozens of fishermen to this day with these soft hackles still in their Wheatleys or Perrines, having forgotten where they got them or why, for I have given hundreds of them away. I hope some have been used, and used properly.

In and around Yellowstone Park, I have actually guided novice anglers who couldn't cast decently, who couldn't wade properly, and who couldn't, by themselves and in the hapless manner they were fishing, have taken a single trout in a whole week. In particularly effective areas for these flies — on broad riffles of the Firehole,

for example — I had these men catching trout with their fourth, fifth or sixth cast. On that water, I am so confident of the flies, I think I could stop a tourist's car, drag any of the occupants out of it, and over to the riffle, put the rod in his hand with a soft hackle on the end of it, get behind the bewildered person, guide his hand through the act of casting, and have him on the other end of the trout after several casts.

Well, what new fishing magic does the soft hackle conjure? What is it? What does it represent or imitate? Where did it come from? Were they invented by the keeper of the River Styx, with whom one has to sign a pact to enjoy their effectiveness?

Generically speaking, the soft-hackled fly is one tied with the hackle of any birds such as partridge, grouse, woodcock, snipe, starling or jackdaw. The hackles come from the backs, necks, breasts and from the leading edge of the wings of these birds, where they help streamline the bases of the larger flight feathers of the wings.

The hackles are small and soft, but not floppy like marabou. The flies have no wings and only few patterns have tails. They have no tops nor bottoms, permitting them to balance accurately and to swim smoothly. Bodies of silk floss are short and sparse, with the material just barely covering the wire. When fur dubbing is used, it too is sparse, with the silk thread showing through. Fly sizes are generally small, ranging from #10 down to #16.

I believe the flies perform so well because they imitate or suggest both non-emerging or emerging nymph

Sylvester Nemes began serious fly fishing on England's Test during World War II, and among his war souvenirs was a wife from a nearby Hampshire village. In his work as an advertising photographer he travels the country, fishing as he goes. We have fished with Syl in Michigan and in Colorado, and we have fished with his flies and we have caught fish with them. We hope that this article, and his book The Soft-Hackled Fly (Chatham Press) to be published this fall, will re-kindle an interest in the wet fly and its proper use — almost a lost art form today.



Selection of the writer's favorite soft-hackled flies. Top row: Snipe-and-Yellow; Partridge-and-Yellow; Partridge-and-Green (with fur thorax); and Tups Indispensable. Middle row: Partridge-and-Orange (fur thorax); March Brown Spider; Grouse-and-Orange; Iron Blue Dun. Bottom row: Partridge-and-Yellow (fur thorax); Snipe-and-Purple; Starling-and-Herl; Pheasant Tail; Partridge-and-Green; and the Partridge-and-Orange. Photo by the author.

Photos by Sylvester Nemes

1. Soft-hackled fly in special flow-tank to demonstrate action of the long, loose hackles. This photo shows fly with no drag.

2. Same fly with current (or fly motion) activating hackles.

3. Same fly with full action of water, moving hackle back into streamlined position. Nemes recommends natural action of current to activate hackles rather than heavy jerking by angler.

forms, not only of the *Ephemera* or may fly but also of the pupal forms of the *Trichoptera* or caddis.

Every fly fisherman knows the river is loaded with many different kinds of nymphs or pupae at the same time. Unlike the dry fly fisherman who can see the adult fly on the water's surface, the sunken-fly angler can never know what is really happening down there, so why would he want to imitate one specific type when a suggestive fly like a soft hackle would have the appeal of them all.

To be good, any sunken artificial must transform itself in the water into something alive, something suggestive and moving, something that looks good to eat. Such a fly looks different in the water than it does out of it. The best way to demonstrate this is to look at the soft-hackled fly while dry, then wet it and take another look. The transformation is amazing.

The soft partridge, snipe or starling feathers, with their tapered barbules, mold themselves against the body with the hackle tips toward the tail of the fly. There is a natural lump or thorax created at the front of the fly, by reason of the fast-tapering barbules, which are thicker and closer to the stem of the feather than at the tips.

Moving naturally downstream, with no fly action on the part of the fisherman, these barbules close in and out, squirm against the body of the fly, and react in a life-like way to the slightest pressure. And often, strange and irresistible lights appear and disappear in the ball of the barbules.

The soft-hackled fly usually works when others don't because it is not a nymph, yet not a dun; not a pupae, but still not an adult caddis. The barbules are really too long and too soft and too many to represent the six legs of the nymph. Still, the hackle is everything in these flies, and one could tie the fly with the hackle only and have a killing fly. W. C. Stewart did.

WHERE AND WHEN DID THE SOFT-HACKLED FLY ORIGINATE? In the beginning, of course. It—or one of its breed, the Orange and Partridge pattern—was the first fly in the list of 12 set down by the Dame Juliana Berners, in England, back in 1496, making her tome the first written work in English on fly fishing or any other kind of fishing. The Orange and Partridge was then called the Donne Fly. The British writer J. W. Hills thought it to be the same fly as the Orange and Partridge of today—that is with the hackle wound around the front part of the hook. John McDonald, the contemporary authority on angling lore and literature, disagrees with him and thinks the partridge hackle was tied upright like the wings on modern trout flies.

The Dame's list—including the Donne Fly—was, according to Hills, pirated by Markham, Cotton, Chetnam, Bowlker, Aldam and many others. Hills thought the fly miraculous, imitating or representing not only

a stone fly, but also the nymph of the Blue-Winged Olive, a mayfly, as well. When Hills, fed up with dry-fly-only dictum of F. M. Halford, turned to the sunken-fly fished upstream on the Test around 1930, set into print the following statement:

"One of the softest, most compressible patterns is the partridge hackle, and when this be the reason or not, I consider it the best sunken fly on the Test. Its body of silk can be of many colors. I find the old Cumberland pattern, the orange partridge, best; and next to that the red."

But even before Hills and the final codification of the dry fly by Halford, the soft-hackled fly was probably the most-discussed fly in England and Scotland during the 19th century. I can name sixteen angling authors of that period who included the grouse and other soft-hackled flies in their lists of the most killing patterns. One author liked the partridge fly so well that he tied it with 11 different-colored silk-floss bodies.

Like the complaint of the Englishman in *My Fair Lady*—that in America, Americans had not used English for years—American fly fishers had not used the English soft hackled flies for years. Gordon listed one. Jim Leisenring was on to them. The storied rod-maker Paul Young of Michigan was on to them, too. He called them "PHY Partridge Spiders" and sold them for about 15 cents each with green, yellow and orange bodies. His "less fussing . . . more fishing" brochure said:

"Fished like a nymph, this is one of the best all-around wet flies I ever used. Fish down and across the stream, and take trout. Hackles lay back along the hook when wet, and crawl or work in the current."

There has been recently an evolving renaissance of the soft-hackled fly in American angling literature. McDonald probably helped when he took the Dame's 12 flies apart in *Quill Gordon*. Western angling writer Charles E. Brooks, in his *The Trout and the Stream*, suggests that soft hackles best imitate caddis pupae. And Schwiebert, in *Nymphs*, agrees with this and paints beautiful colored specimens of the pupae in the book. When I first saw those pictures—the slim bodies of green, gold, yellow, brown and orange, and the small drooping wings, and the long floppy, dangling legs extending behind the end of the bodies—I thought they were the closest thing I had ever seen in print to the soft-hackled flies I had been using so rewardingly for so long.

Well, I fished "down and across stream" as Young directed—and I took trout. But I was making the same mistake the average sunken-fly fisherman makes when he jerks the fly through the water and gives it "the strength and agility of an otter."

With advancing middle age, I stopped advancing the fly. This improved its performance. I cast higher into the stream, threw more slack and let out line when the

Soft-Hackle Flies . . .

fly got below me. But I still needed something. I found it in "Jock Scott's" famous book on greased line fishing for salmon. It was called mending.

Mending, as many long-line anglers for migratory fish know so well, is the act of lifting the dragging or bellying part of the line between the angler and the fly, and flipping the line upstream (or down), to compensate for the action of the current, which otherwise quickly causes the fly to drag.

Downstream bellying of the line is more prevalent than upstream, because generally there is more fast water between the fly and the angler. If the current is all in a sheet—that is, with the same velocity from bank to bank—then mending is not required.

I believe that the soft-hackled fly, when used with the mending technique, is the most generally effective way to fish for trout.

Earlier, I said the soft-hackled fly produces more angling satisfaction than any other kind. If one thinks that "fun" is at its highest at the moment of contact with the fish, then he must agree with me. For the take is extremely physical, almost violent. There is no nibbling. The fish has the fly or it doesn't. Nothing matches it, and I would rather take one trout with this method than I would five with either dry fly or upstream nymph (weighted or unweighted).

There are many fly fishermen fishing 15 years or more who have never taken a trout over 16 inches. Fewer anglers have taken trout over 20 inches. If they had been using soft-hackled flies during that time, they might have done at least as well as I did—with a 22-incher from the Madison at Ennis, with several 16-inchers from the Madison in Yellowstone Park, with a 16-incher from the South Branch of the Au Sable, and one from the fly-only water of the Pere Marquette. One fish from the Madison in early October of 1973 was in the 7 or 8-pound class and of Lord knows how many inches—because he *broke the hook* just below the barb of the #12 Pheasant Tail soft-hackled fly I was using.

The same evening, after that frustrating incident, I entered a storied pool on the Madison just inside the Park. It was just past 6:30 p.m. Two anglers were climbing up the bank from the pool. "It's all yours," they said.

The next 45 minutes were the most exciting fishing moments of my life. Using the Partridge and Green, I landed and released two browns and a rainbow between 18 and 20 inches.

After releasing the first fish, the soft-hackle resembled few if any of Nature's creations, but it was then too dark to change. After the second fish, the floss was torn to shreds with just a couple of the barbules still hanging on. And after the third, the hook was practically bare—yet I think I could have taken another if total darkness and the nighttime cold hadn't settled on the river.

As far as I was concerned, that fishing nun, Dame Juliana, was liberated that night. You can be too—with the soft-hackled fly. ■

New York's Ausable River — Part II

Art Lee
FFM Field Editor

Big trout often lie behind natural oxygenators such as heavy riffles between pools on these Ausable flats. Success requires careful positioning of the angler and delicate presentation with a fine tippet.

Photograph by Kris Lee.



I couldn't have written my last book, 'Two Centuries of Soft Hackled Flies,' if I didn't like to collect and read books on fly fishing, and if I hadn't started reading them many years ago. True, I didn't own all of the nearly 40 mentioned in the book, and had to borrow copies from the FFF, Judith Bowman, Jim Adams and Vernon Gallup. Had I waited a year or so, perhaps I could have got all of the books I needed right here in Bozeman, at Montana State University, which has begun to build a library specializing in rare books on our sport.

So, the interest in fly fishing and the literature behind it continue to grow, and I have met a few collectors who fish only rarely. Consider what you have to do to visit your favorite water for a few hours fishing and compare it to what you have to do to fish in one of your favorite books on the sport. No waders. No rods and reels, leaders and flies. No excuses to your partner and no suffering in cold water. Just reach up to your book case and grab the "Fishing in Print" by Arnold Gingrich, and newer books like a Concise History of Fly Fishing by Glenn Law. Books on fly fishing have been aimed in that direction since an English nun wrote the first one in 1486, in which by the way, the partridge and orange soft hackle was number one or two in her list of only twelve flies. This was soon after the invention of moveable type and we can see how important our sport was even then because many books on other more important subjects had to stand in a long line to wait their turns to be printed on the few new available printing presses.

To me and to many other fly fishers, books on angling are therapeutic, because they replace the bent rod and screaming reel. They also help you increase the pleasure of your sport by telling you when and where to go, and what to do with your rod, lines and flies when you get there.

A few patterns from "Two Centuries of Soft Hackled Flies." may help, too. From the "Angler and the Loop Rod" by David Webster we have the March Brown. "With the exception of the sand or gravel-bed fly, there is perhaps no more deadly artificial lure than the March brown. In an open season it makes its appearance in March, but if the weather be cold, its advent may be delayed till April. In balmy weather they may be seen flitting o'er the surface of the stream in myriads while the trout literally rise to the occasion, the water seethes from bank to bank, and the fun grows fast and furious...The brown is dressed thus: Wings--the dark side of the feather of the partridge-wing. Body--the reddish-brown of the hare's breast, mixed with a little of the hair from the ear, tied with yellow silk on a No. 3 Hook."

From "River Keeper" by John Waller Hills, we have Lunn's Little Red Partridge Hackle. Hackle: Feather from the partridge, with fibres a little longer than the hook. Tail; Pale buff. Body: Red tying thread ribbed with plain gold wire."

From "Trout Fishing From All Angles," by The Lonsdale Library, 1933, we have "The Red Spinner: Silk: red. Hackle: Dark rusty dun. Tail: Honey dun. Ribbing: Fine gold wire.

And Body: Darkest claret seal's fur.

And from G. E. M. Skues' "Minor Tactics of the Chalk Stream," we have "A soft-hackled fly adjusts itself easily to the action of the water, but a fly with stiff, staring upright wing or hackle may easily cause such a disturbance in the water as to give proof of a bad entry. The lines, therefore, on which an artificial wet fly that is to be fished against the stream in any way is built ought to be fine, like the lines of a yacht or swift boat, or high class motor, slopping backwards, so as to offer the least possible resistance to the current, and such resistance as there is should be elastic. The fly ought to be equal on both sides, so as to balance accurately and to swim smoothly, and any excess of bulk is to be deprecated."

Soft hackled fly tying piece for Dave Hughes.

I have been tying and fishing soft hackled flies for more than 40 years and I thought there was nothing new that I could learn from designing, tying and fishing them which would make them more effective. Then, I started working on TWO CENTURIES OF SOFT-HACKLED FLIES, (To be published by Stackpole Books) a history which is being written by studying and reviewing fifty or sixty books on fly fishing published after the year 1800. Most of the books, of course, are from England, and one of the more important of these is "MINOR TACTICS OF THE CHALK STREAM", 1914, by GEM Skues, who latched on to Yorkshire soft-hackled flies when he tried to reintroduce the wet fly or nymph to the classic chalk streams of southern England.

One reason Skues thought soft-hackled flies were more effective was that they hooked better, "In my experience the trout which takes underwater is generally very soundly hooked. A trout taking floaters on the surface frequently sips them in through a narrowly-opened slit of mouth, but an under-water feeder draws in the fly by an extension of the gills which carries it in with a full gulp of water."

Skues was a great wet fly designer and he popularized several classic wet flies, including the Yorkshire soft hackles which he used as examples of the kinds of underwater flies anglers should use on these famous waters. And he found ways to make the classic soft-hackled fly even more effective, one of which was, "Kick." I'll let him explain.

"This is a quality which every hackled wet fly, for use in rough water, should invariably have. Without it, it is a dead thing; with it, it is alive and struggling; and the fly which is alive and struggling has a fascination for the trout which no dead thing has. How is this quality to be attained? It is a very simple matter. Finish behind the hackle.

"Suppose you are tying an Orange Partridge. You have whipped on the gut, (Skues is writing before eyed hooks) tied in the floss, whipped to the shoulder, wound on the orange floss, whipped down the end, cut away the waste. You then take your brown partridge hackle, and place it face downwards on top of the hook, with the stump towards the bend, you whip it down with two turns towards the head; then, whipping over the hook and back to the feather, you form the head. Then you take two turns over the butt, and, taking the centre of the hackle in your pliers, you wind at most two turns of the hackle and secure the end with one turn of the silk. Then you pull all the fibres forward over the head, and finish with a whip-finish tight up behind the hackle, and break off the waste. You then soak the whip-finish with celluloid varnish (head cement). push back the hackle over the bend and varnish the head, and your fly is complete. The turns of silk behind the hackle make each fibre sit up and stand out, and the fly has kick, and

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it will improve rather than deteriorate with use. Hackles with good natural resilience are, of course, essential."

Skues' directions seem archaic and a little confusing. We don't use celluloid varnish any more. And I had to read the instructions over a few times before I got them straight in my mind. First, the fly with 'kick' can be made without floss if one is not used to using the floss material in the bodies of his soft-hackled flies. Next, "hackles with good resilience" are those from older, more mature birds. It is best to buy the partridge feathers on the skin preferably from your own selection of two or more necks chosen from a group of many; those on the breast will be of a lighter gray color and those on the back of the bird will be the brown ones. I also recommend three wraps of the feather rather than two. And it is not necessary to begin the fly by tying the partridge hackle "face down-wards on top of the hook with the stump towards the bend of the hook.", but the stem of the hackle can be tied in under or over the hook at the head, depending on the manner with which the tier is most experienced.

Another little tip. Touch the tips of the barbs with your finger as you wind the hackle on the hook in order to separate one barb from another. The reason they want to stay "married" is the natural design of barbs and barbicels of a bird's feathers which open and close in flight depending on the speed and climb of the bird. The partridge and orange soft hackles and other soft-hackled flies made like this are, indeed, fuller in the hackle and better looking than any I've ever tied, and I think the reason is that the 'finish behind the hackle' helps to hold the barbs, particularly the lower, thicker stem parts of them, outwards away from the body, while the tips of the barbs are free and unrestricted and more apt to squirm and wiggle like a real insect.

Tying soft hackled flies with Kick

1. Strip the barbs off the stem. Hold the feather by the tail in your right hand and pull the barbs forward with thumb and forefinger.
2. Tie in Gossamer silk (4/0) in desired color at thorax.
3. Wind thread for the body in tight wraps towards tail, stop in the middle of the point and the barb and wind back in tight wraps to thorax.
4. Tie in prepared partridge hackle by the stem with curve of the barbs pointing backward. Pull the feather so that it is at right angles or perpendicular to the hook shank. This helps wind the hackle around the hook and obtains a nice separation of the barbs as they go around. Touch them with your right forefinger as they go around the hook.
5. Tie in the last wrap of the feather, leave thread hang down on the bobbin, pull the barbs forward over the eye with thumb and two forefingers, and take two or three wraps of the thread tight up against the back side of the hackle barbs. (I'm right handed and I find I have to tie the thread behind the barbs with my left hand, while my right hand holds the barbs forward over the eye of the hook.)
6. Pull the barbs back toward bend of hook, and wind the thread over in front near the eye and tie off with whip finisher.
7. You can also tie the same fly, but with perhaps a little more kick, by tying a hare's face thorax at the front of the fly, between steps three and four. And the same kick could be obtained by adding it to some of the other soft-hackled fly patterns made with feathers from grouse, starling, woodcock, etc.

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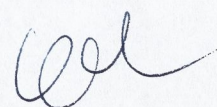
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