

# FISHERMEN'S VOICE

Vol. 12, No. 6 – June 2007

*News & Comment for and by the Fishermen of Maine*

**FREE**

## **May Fly Hatch**

Seven brookies lay flat in the old creel lined with green river grass. Seven beautiful trout with their iridescent spots of red, blue, yellow, and green. A few, like me, still quivering. Fifteen minutes of wild, heart thumping adrenalin rush was just coming down as I tried to get a wrap around a replay.

Day was overcast with a constant drizzle. Water was dripping off the eaves just enough to spell discomfort. Real lowery day. Only dilemma of any importance was roll over and sleep or roll out for Phil the druggist's leftover biscuits and beans. Aroma of fresh coffee and bacon spitting with Phil's call for "how many eggs?" (farm fresh from Quebec) made the decision easier. I tucked a shirt into jeans, made a run through raindrops for the outhouse with panoramic view, cleaned up and made it to the table for first serving.

John Pottle, longtime fishing companion on the St. John River, as he was wont to do rain or shine, had been out early to drop a fly in front of "Rolling Banks" camp. As breakfast was winding down and we shared one more biscuit laden with Canadian butter and strawberry jam, I asked John if he caught anything other than a cold.

"No," he replied, "One poked his head up for a look but he passed. River's still high with all this rain. What say if the elders are planning a cribbage morning we hike up to Big Rapids? See if there might be a trout to be tempted by fly or worm?"

I hesitated for a fraction. The thought of slip sliding over mossy rocks, around alders and getting soaked against a warm cabin and a good book required just a second of reflection. Teen years are a time to make one's mark. Want to be a fisherman or hunter, want to enjoy the outdoors and fill life with experiences, want to know discomfort along with elation of the score, then you surely have to get out of bed early in the morning and go. Whatever the weather. Proof would be found in this day to come.

"Sure John," I answered, "let's do the dishes and head out."

It was not an easy stroll. But we spotted some late fiddleheads to be picked on the return and after about 45 minutes we broke out on the expanse of Big Rapids. Big Rapids is perhaps a quarter mile of rocks, pools, and fast water. Great habitat for pursuit of the elusive brook trout. Every conceivable situation lies in that section to try the talents of an erstwhile Isaac Walton and an experienced troutster.

We spread out. John continued upstream while I elected to work the lower area and wade out to a few large flat rocks I'd remembered from years past. Hunting or fishing I always seem to have an itch in my boots. Eager to see new territory or try the next pool. Many is the time I've failed to fully work over where I'm

standing. This morning was no different. Before long I was wet to the waist and cold. Hadn't so much as had a nibble. Not even a rise. Every so often I'd cast an envious glance upstream where John was laying out fly line in long elegant curls. Fly fishing just hadn't connected yet with me. I'd get too frustrated with back casts in the alders, snapping off a fly or just plain getting line so inordinately tangled that Dad would have to unravel the rats nest or myself. My teen A.D.D. at work.

Spinning reels were really just coming into play about this time. Dad had bought me a new Johnson "Century" closed-face reel which gave trout fishing a whole new horizon after fighting with bait casting reels in my kid years. With the patient help of our part-time guide, Camille Beaulieu, from La Frontière Canada who delivered the mail to the woods camps in Northern Maine trout fishing had taken on a new meaning. And, I finally had some control over where the bait was going. Camille had opened up his bag of tricks for me. One of which was cutting off a fish's bottom fin for bait. Over the years I've had the opportunity to give him a silent thanks when other lures and baits have failed.

Finally, after flailing the water for about an hour a nice fat chub decided he needed breakfast and his hunger yielded a desired fin before release. I went back to work over some of the pools I'd fished with worms and lures. No trout. Just a few more chub to relieve the anxiety. Then, all of a sudden a good strike. I pulled the rod tip back and set the hook as he came out of the water. Flash of bronze. A nice trout. Finally I played it in and slipped it head first into the creel. No sooner did I cast than another struck. Then another as fast as I could cast the line out. What was going on? Then I realized. Mayfly hatch. They were all over the river. I'd heard the elder's stories and now it was my turn. The most fantastic trout fishing ever. Two fish and the fin bait was gone. Cut another with shaking fingers from the last trout. Get that line out again. Bang, another one. Fight him in. A big one. Don't horse him. Guide it into the net. Gently now. Untangle the net. Take two seconds to admire this wild beautiful fish and into the creel. I quickly glance upstream. John's rod is facing backward and reel is in his hand. He's having problems. I yell and he waves back. No time to stop. The Mayflies are still drifting by and seems like hundreds of trout breaking water, jumping, rolling in a voracious feeding frenzy. The rain has stopped yet the water is alive. Minute my line hits the water, a fish hits. Small or large, I quickly de-hook the undersized, flail off the occasional chub and work that new rod with every ounce of exuberance in every ounce of fiber in my soul. To this day I can still get excited by the memory. There were hungry Mayfly chasing trout and were going to feed on whatever looked good in the water.

All too quickly the hatch had floated downstream and trout returned to hiding. I fished a bit longer till John had worked his way down river. It was over. Switch was off. Unfortunately, through a good part of the hatch, John had had problems with his reel and hand lined his casts which slowed his retrievals. But, he had some fine fish to show as well. We both had an excitement of stories for the elders around the table that night.

There is absolutely no finer meal to a lover of the outdoors than fresh trout fried in a bit of salt pork accompanied by boiled potatoes with fiddlehead greens also boiled with salt pork and fresh biscuits. Four of us

dined as kings that night as we had many other nights on this beautiful river, but this one was one of those high memory days to be retold at the old folks home when all that's left are a rocking chair and memories.

This one is for serious grill lovers, from "Fire it Up" an inspiring new cookbook for grillers. (Next month a new way to do poultry on the grill.)

### **Pan Fried Trout or Other Fresh Fish**

First off, salt pork. Good salt pork is hard to find. The "whatever" that passes for salt pork in the supermarket wouldn't have found space in my mother's kitchen—true salt pork is pure, clear pork fat, no meat, that's been salted down. A good butcher shop is your best bet.

First, 'try' out a chunk or two of salt pork. Cut up and use a heavy (cast iron is the best) frying pan. Set the burner at about quarter throttle. Do not burn. Let the chunks come to golden brown, remove from pan immediately and set the frying pan aside. You'll want just enough grease to better than coat the pan.

Mix together flour, about a tablespoon of corn meal, pinch of salt and a pinch of black pepper. Make sure whole fish or filets are relatively dry (don't take the hairdryer to them). Either put the flour mixture in a plate and coat the fish or what I like to do—take a smallish paper bag and dump the flour in that then put in 1-2 pieces of fish at a time. Hold the top closed and shake the bag to give a good coating.

Heat the burner to about 3/4; let the pan heat until a drop of water dances and sputters. Slide in the fish. Adjust the heat if needed. Cook a few minutes to brown one side then flip. Do not turn again. Cook a few minutes on this side until a fork will just go through. Take them off as they will continue to cook for a few minutes. Try to serve as quickly as possible to keep a crisp outside and moist, tender inside.

Salt pork is absolutely essential in fish, clam, and mussel chowders. Also in green beans, fiddleheads, and baked beans.

Once you've tried good salt pork you'll understand when I say it's sad that it's seldom found in today's cuisine.

Fair winds and good roads.

*Lee S. Wilbur*