

the DUDE and the Trout Wrangler

In which a fly rodder from Indiana takes a top Montana guide to Idaho for his first steelhead adventure

Sylvester Nemes

EVERY YEAR I ASKED HIM. For five years, each fall, I said, "C'mon, Pat, let me show you some *real* fly fishing. Let me take you to my favorite steelhead river in Idaho. I promise you'll hook two or three, maybe more. The rest will be up to you. You be the client and I'll be the guide."

I was chiding Pat Barnes, famous Montana guide and fly-fishing shop proprietor of West Yellowstone, trying to incite a professional angler like him to join a journeyman, once-in-a-while fly fisherman like myself in my annual autumn trek to one of the finest steelhead rivers in the West. It was like asking Joe Namath to play touch tackle on the local neighborhood team or getting Marlon Brando to star in a super-8 home movie. The proposition seemed, at least from my point of view, relative to the quotation in the New Testament — "and if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch." My role was to be the guide leading the guide. I hoped neither of us would fall in the ditch — or my cold Idaho steelhead river, either.

In the previous years, Pat was busy with guiding assignments. In late September and October, big browns run the Madison and the Missouri Rivers, and Pat is usually guiding affluent corporation presidents, rich widows or famous fishing writers trying to get material for their next article or book.

Last fall, it was different. When I marched into his store in early October, 1973, and uttered the same challenge, he re-

plied, "I think I'll go steelheading." He looked at his wife, Sigrid, who was bent over the vise, typing those beautiful flies they market as Waterborn Flies, and asked her what she thought. She looked at a calendar near her and said, "It looks like you can make it for four or five days. Besides, you need the rest." That man had married well!

My own reason for being in West Yellowstone every fall was the same as the corporation presidents, widows, and fishing writers who wanted the services of Pat Barnes. Big browns! As good as this fishing gets at this time of the year, for me, it was always a stopover, on my way to the steelhead river in Idaho. I had been making these trips for several years, on the pretext of working as an industrial free-lance photographer. The Madison at West Yellowstone always seemed to be on the way.

I was a bit stunned when Pat said he'd come. Did I bite off more than I could chew? Could I really put this professional into a couple of worthwhile steelhead? Would the fish be in the river? Those are questions even Pat Barnes can't answer about his own rivers, but, like Pat, I knew my river well. After five seasons on it, I could show anybody 25 or 30 known steelhead riffles. I knew where the fish generally lay, and I knew what flies they liked. And I knew that these flies, fished on a floating line close to the surface, would raise steelhead if steelhead were there.

I was pleased that Pat Barnes was going to join me. My



The Salmon River's "breakfast riffle" proved an early-morning eye-opener.

new role as guide excited me. Besides, I liked Pat from the first time I met him in his store. It's true, I never fished with him, nor did I ever see him fish. I never used his guide service because I always felt I could find my own fish. His float trips down the Madison in the shallow riding McKenzie River boats, offer anglers some of the finest and most productive trout fishing in America. But I never enjoyed fishing for trout from a boat. I prefer to wade the water, not ride on it. And I never felt I could afford guide services at \$50 per day, even with Pat Barnes leading the way.

In the store that evening, Pat was getting ready for the trip. He asked me what size leader tippets he would need? What distance would we be casting? Did he need floating lines or sinking? How much backing? Did he need a wading staff? What kind of clothes should he take? What flies did he need? To every question, I gave the answer without ponder-

ing. I was beginning to feel like a guide and we hadn't even left the store.

During this time, Pat was moving from the front of the store to the back room and back again with a nervous little gait. Each time he went in and came out, he had some other kind of fishing gear in his hands. He seemed excited. He was showing all the signs of the rank amateur and acting like the beginner about to go on his first fly fishing trip. He admitted it later when he told me he had never caught a steelhead on a fly. Before the night was over, Pat tied a couple of dozen Skunks, Golden Demons, Skykomish, Fall Specials, Thors and a local steelhead pattern called the Purple People-Eater.

THE TRIP TO THE RIVER was a day's drive from West Yellowstone. We had plenty of time to talk. I was intrigued with his stories of guiding and I told Pat they could

easily fill a book. The more he talked, the more I knew why I had liked him from the beginning. He seemed honest and natural and straightforward, just like you might expect any native-born Westerner to be. For he was born and raised in Montana not very far from the famous rivers and lakes he guides on.

He started fishing as a child under the tutorship of his father, who, Pat said, fished for the pan not for the fun. Pat was going his own way with the fly before he was out of his teens. This was in the early 1930's. Skish, or tournament casting, was popular then and Pat competed in both bait-and-fly-casting. He admitted modestly that he won a regional championship once in fly distance and accuracy. "Double-hauling isn't new," he said, "we invented it in tournament casting years ago." Before World War II, Pat attended the University of Montana in Missoula, where he earned a master's degree in education. He served in the war and returned to Helena, Montana, where he took a high school teacher's job, a position he held until his retirement a couple of years ago.

For a couple of summers after the war, Pat guided and tied flies professionally for Don Martinez, one of the early innovators of Western-styled nymphs and streamers. When Martinez moved from West Yellowstone to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, Pat started his own guide and tackle business and has been there every fishing season since.

With the education Pat had, at a time when fewer people attended schools of higher learning, it is easy to venture that Pat could have become a doctor or lawyer or corporation executive. Instead he chose to be a high school teacher. It dawned on me, sometime later, that he chose that profession because it offered long, summer vacations which would give him plenty of time for fishing.

It is difficult to guess how many thousands of trout he has caught or has helped his clients catch; how many tens of thousands of flies he and his wife have tied; how many trips he has made down the Madison, Missouri or Henry's Fork. It doesn't seem to really matter, for he obviously likes his work more than he likes anything else. He has been fortunate among men to be able to do so much of what he likes to do.

AT THE END OF THREE DAYS of hard fishing, neither Pat nor I had had a single rise. We fished riffle after riffle, from sunup to sundown. Up and down the river we went, 30 miles in one direction and then another 30 miles in the other. My favorite riffle, just a quarter of a mile from the motel, seemed barren. We did see two nice fish taken by friends of mine in the lower reaches of the river on the afternoon of the third day. Because of my acquaintance with the two men, Pat's confidence in my guiding ability went a notch upwards — although, I must admit, I thought it was waning up until that time.

The river was in fine shape, however, a little low for the time of year which made for easier wading and easier and less strenuous double-hauling. I was surprised at Pat's casting ability. Well into his sixties, he double-hauled like he was back in those "skish" days. It seemed the more strange, because he is a southpaw angler, one of the few I've met in many years of fly fishing. His movements in the double haul were exact and orderly. Timing was consistently perfect. Lots of line in the air, going backward and forward smoothly during the false casts, and a good, shoot at the end taking out enough extra line to reach the holding water in the riffles. If anyone was doing the job right, and if this meant catching a steelhead, then Pat was going to do it.

On the fourth morning, he did. Not once, but twice!



Long-time Montana guide Pat Barnes takes his first steelhead.

It happened on the "before breakfast riffle" just a quarter of a mile below the motel. Mel Levin, a Hollywood, California, song writer first took me there. We used to fish it every morning before breakfast. Because of its productivity, it was his favorite and quickly became mine. I don't doubt that it has since become Pat's.

It is one of the easiest riffles on the river. The top of the run is quite shallow. Water bubbles over this shallow. There are no large boulders here, just small flat stones about the size of a half dollar. Several yards down from the top, the water picks up speed, gradually getting deeper and deeper, and widening. Here are the big boulders under the water which break up the surface into a constant rolling boil. The whole riffle moves all at once, permitting very little belly in the line and no drag on the fly. You fish it from the slack water, wading on the flat stones which get bigger and bigger the further

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down you go.

We had been taking turns going first down the riffles, and this morning it was Pat's turn to go first. He started in at the top and in a few minutes was into the deeper, boiling water. I moved in at the top, following Pat down. I didn't see the steelhead rise to Pat's fly, because I was concentrating on my own fishing. All I saw was Pat racing for the bank, churning the water as he ran.

Earlier, I had told him it was wise to get out of the water once you hooked a steelhead because if it were a big fish, you would probably have to move quite a way downstream with it. But this was ridiculous.

Pat was making for the bank as if his life depended on it. He was holding the rod high, with the fish already starting down stream. Once on the bank, Pat was following the fish, letting it take line against the drag. This man, I knew, had fought big fish before.

I was deliberating whether or not to go out and help him. I hated the idea, because it's always good practice to go right on casting, once your partner downstream has already moved a good distance below with his fighting fish, because there could be other steelhead in the riffle with the same inclination. I decided to get out and help him, if he needed help — like any good, honest guide.

By this time, Pat was a hundred yards down the bank. When I got down to him, he was in complete control, the fish making big circles, then smaller and smaller ones showing the gathering strain and fatigue. Hell, Pat didn't need me. He stepped down into the water, grabbed the steelhead by the tail and swam it right up onto the bank.

Now we were both smiling, slapping each other on the shoulders, shaking hands, with him congratulating me for being such a good guide, and me telling him what a good angler he was.

We walked back up to the riffle, where Pat laid the fish down on the rocks. I said I would go up to the car and get the camera. By the time I returned, Pat was back in the water at the same spot. I was kneeling over the fish trying to compose the photo. I glanced up at Pat and he was making the same mad dash for the bank he made less than a half hour before. Son of a gun!

I had not only "guided the guide" to two lovely steelhead, but now with my Nikon in hand I was shooting action pictures of my client — in color yet.

This fish was bigger than the first. Pat had to go down a little further than before. I followed in and out of the water shooting as I went. He was smiling the whole time, clearly enjoying himself. The second steelhead, even though larger than the previous one, presented no real problems and in a short time Pat was swimming the fish by the tail up the boulders on the bank.

Back at the motel, we weighed the two fish. The total was 14 pounds. Very respectable. We had breakfast, decided what other riffles we would fish on our last day, and started out.

We passed the "before breakfast riffle," looking down on it from high up on the road. "Beautiful riffle, isn't it?" "Sure is," he said, "Do you think I would ever make it as a guide?" I asked, jokingly. "Syl, I'd recommend you to anyone." But I'm still waiting for my tip. ■

Barnes, with the grace of a dazed water buffalo, heads for shore with his second steelhead of the trip. Photos by Sylvester Nemes.



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