

Spruce Creek Diary

JIMMY CARTER

IT WAS IN LATE MAY OF LAST YEAR, and my wife Rosalynn and I were taking our first private motor trip since our daughter Amy was born more than thirteen years ago. We had spent two days in a camper-van moving through the Great Smoky Mountains and up the Shenandoah Valley to Pennsylvania. As we crossed each mountain stream in northern Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland and southern Pennsylvania we examined it carefully to assess the effects of recent heavy spring rains. Some were muddy and silted, while others were pure and clear, but I was certain that Pennsylvania's Spruce Creek, our destination, would be among the better ones.

Wayne Harpster, our host, farms much of the Spruce Creek Valley land along the upper reaches of this productive stream, and he uses no-till practices to maintain a permanent sod cover and minimize erosion of the hilly but highly productive land. His hundreds of acres of corn and pasture are not cultivated at all, and he has followed this energy-saving and profitable procedure for the past ten years. I wish that all outdoorsmen and farmers of these valuable bottom lands would come to appreciate Wayne's wisdom as much as we did when we arrived and found the land free of erosion and the stream clear and in excellent condition. Also, of course, controlling runoff

minimizes the chance of damage to the ecology of a stream from insecticides and herbicides.

Wayne Harpster is an outstanding dairy farmer and, not coincidentally, one of the best trout fishermen I know. While living in the White House we visited Wayne several times, spending a day or two in one of his farmhouses on the north bank of Spruce Creek, and for more than a year we planned to return the last week in May to celebrate two important events—Wayne's birthday and the annual Green Drake hatch. We never quite decided which event was more significant to him, but we did accuse him of changing the date of his birthday to match the hatch.

I had called Wayne from Plains the night before we left home and he reported that the Green Drakes had arrived about on schedule, but had moved up the creek more rapidly than usual. The first of the heavy hatches occurred on Sunday night, May 24th, but he expected them to continue each evening for at least a week, well after our arrival.

Thursday Afternoon: *Quickly Up the Creek*

AS WE SAT ON THE FRONT PORCH assembling our rods, checking our leaders and dressing our lines in the late afternoon, we could see the large mayflies (called "shad flies" by some of the local fishermen) darting up and down, their always-entrancing mating dance outlined against the dark

Shortly after leaving office last spring, President Carter trekked with his fly-fishing family to Pennsylvania's Spruce Creek to match the Green Drake hatch. The intensity of his interest in fly-angling is reflected in this photo as well as in his hour-by-hour, day-by-day journal published here.

Carter Presidential Materials Project, National Archives and Records Service photos

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branches of the hemlock trees on the far bank. An occasional trout rose, although we could not yet see any of the big flies on the water. I couldn't wait until after our early supper, though, so I floated a small yellow-bodied Adams far under the overhanging limbs and soon netted a nice stream-bred brown trout. It was a good omen for the coming days.

As dusk approached we were in a heavily wooded area, waist-deep in the cold water, casting Green Drake patterns upstream into the riffles and along the overgrown banks. There were no stocked fish in this area, but we knew there was a heavy population of wild browns in the rich limestone stream. About eight o'clock the cloud of mayflies began dipping to the water's surface for the females to deposit their eggs, and trout began to rise regularly to take the floating insects. When our casts were on target and the floats natural we caught fish, even after darkness forced us to depend on rough estimates of distance and direction. Most of our catch were 11- to 13-inch browns, but Rosalynn netted and released a beautiful 16-inch fighter. However, during the last half hour I missed on every strike and was disgusted that my judgment and reflexes were so poor. Back at the cabin, I discovered that my hook was broken off at the bend. I was foolish not to have checked my fly and tippet regularly, even in the darkness.

Thursday Evening: *Looking Ahead to Streamside Seminars*

DURING THE NEXT FEW DAYS our entire family would be together, all avid fly fishers except daughter Amy, who still maintains a few other more urgent priorities. After more than a decade in public life we naturally value privacy during our rare vacation times, but we also cherish good companionship, so at our request Wayne had invited our fishing friends Lloyd Riss and George Harvey to join us.

They are both superb fishermen, and during the previous autumn they had introduced us to the special fishing skills required during the swarming daytime *Tricorythodes* hatches. We would sit on a shady rock in the meadow, watch for the telltale signal of barn swallows and other birds diving through the clouds of diminutive mayflies, then move to the area and wade cautiously upstream, casting carefully constructed 12-foot leaders tipped with the tiny fly just above the quietly sipping trout.

At times I would be able to induce George Harvey to wade alongside me in the stream, an illuminating but sobering experience to a relative newcomer struggling to master one of the most challenging techniques of angling. With almost perfect accuracy his line would straighten out two

or three feet above the water, stop in midair and then drop gently to the surface as he checked and lowered his rod. The leader would fall in sinuous curves, and the apparently unattached fly would float naturally toward a waiting and hungry trout. George was patient with my mistakes, having taught more than 35,000 students both the rudiments and the advanced skills of fly-fishing and fly-tying as a professor at Pennsylvania State University. Now retired, he still shares his knowledge and wisdom—and his beautiful flies—with a few lucky friends. We were delighted that he and Lloyd had come to join us.

For those of us who usually release trout, George crusades for barbless hooks, and during the week we were to be convinced of the value of his advice. It is much easier to slip the hook out of the trout's mouth without a wet and wild wrestling match and possible injury to the fish. For fishermen like me who might be concerned about losing too many hooked fish without barbs, George has a simple argument. After a trout is on his line he will ostentatiously lay the rod on the ground and ignore it for a minute or two, then lift it again and reel in the fish. During these demonstrations he rarely loses a trout.

In addition to our discussions about fly-fishing strategy and tactics, my fishing companions commiserated with me over my loss in moving from the White House back home to Plains—but not in reference to the elections. Along with my other prized rods I had packed two superb bamboo rods, one of them specially designed by Tom Maxwell and built for me after their normal working hours by the craftsmen at H. L. Leonard Rod Company as a gift for a fly-fishing President. It suited me perfectly and was a favorite for light-tackle fishing. The other rod was part of a special conservation award commissioned by one of the sporting magazines after we had moved successfully to protect more than 100 million acres of the Alaska wilderness.

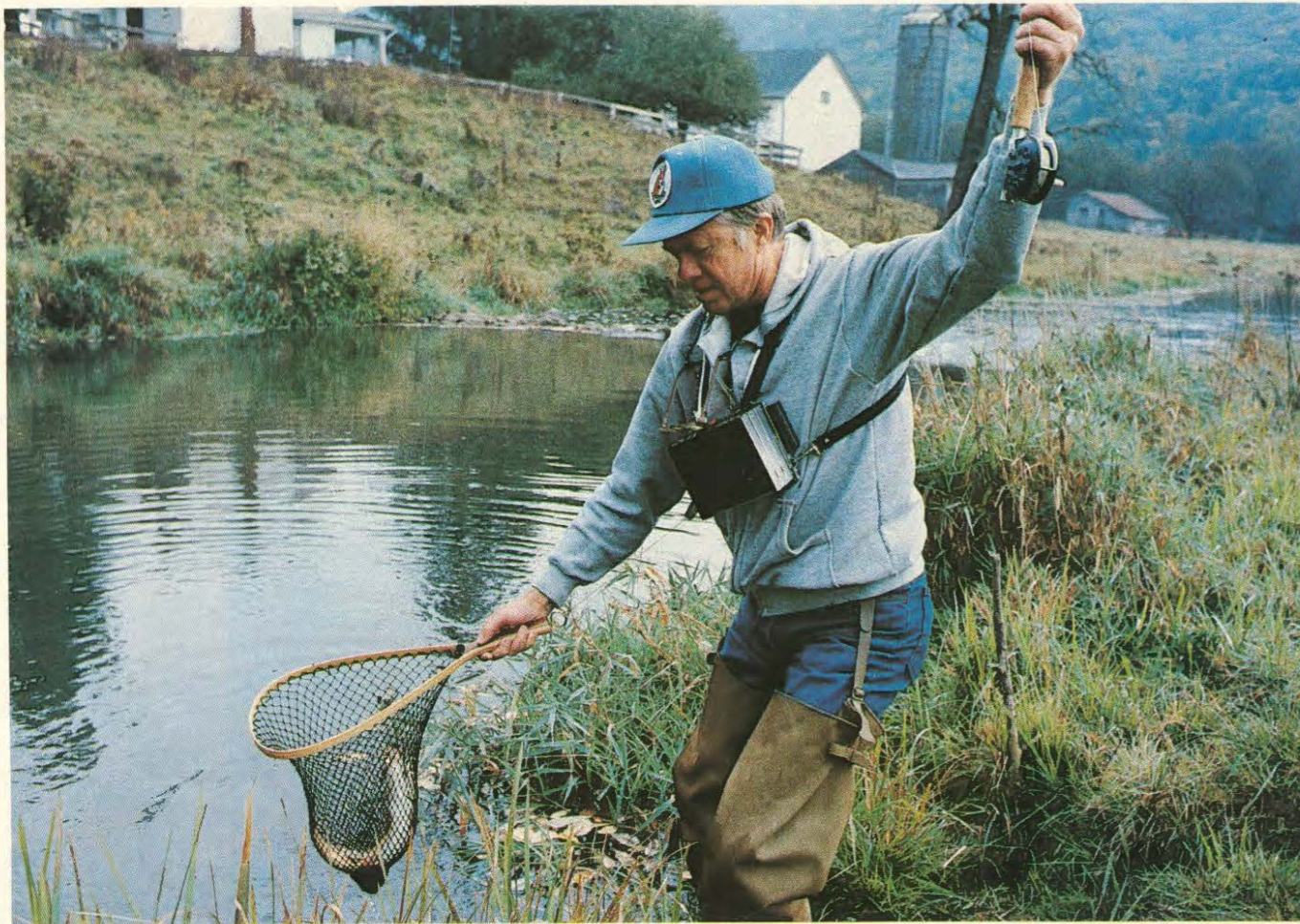
They were among my most cherished possessions, and had been handled with special care for the trip from Camp David to the White House for crating and shipping to Georgia. When I opened the wooden crates containing my fishing equipment the two rods were missing. A subsequent investigation indicated that they had been stolen. These rods, not the election campaign, seemed to be the more serious loss to all of us as we discussed important matters by the tumbling waters of the Pennsylvania creek.

Friday Morning: *Early Bird, Without Worms*

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING I was the first one up, eager to try the meadow stream above our cottage. For an hour or so I had to be satisfied with



Good works bring good rewards. Rod high, line taut, a pleasant strain on the wrist, the President tests the mettle of a Spruce Creek brownie.



A taker becomes a short-term keeper. A confirmed catch-and-release believer, Jimmy Carter was convinced during his trip by angling companion George Harvey as to the efficiency of barbless hooks.

solitude, the beauty of the sunrise and some practice in wading, casting and testing my dexterity in the early-dawn chill by tying on a wide variety of dry flies. Finally the sun warmed both me and the water and, using a Deerhair Black Ant, I began to take trout. The more frazzled and bedraggled the fly became, the more eagerly the trout seized it. On my last four casts I caught and released three fish, so I went back to the cabin to get my wife and three sons out to share the promising fishing. It was midday before we finally realized we had forgotten to eat breakfast.

Friday Evening:
Brief Lesson in Ethics

THAT EVENING WE HAD GOOD FISHING to a somewhat sparser Green Drake hatch—enjoyable except for one unconcerned fisherman who came from upstream, cast from the bank into one pool after another, and covered a mile or more of the water without any apparent regard for the other fishermen who were casualties of his flailing line. All of us just had to wait patiently until he passed to rest the water and let the fish resume feeding.

I was fishing again with the large “shad” fly, but it soon became obvious that the heavier hatch was

the Pale Evening Dun. On subsequent evenings we fished with these imitations or with #12 and #14 Light Cahills with equal success.

Saturday Morning:
Out Fishing—and Out-Fished

DON DAUGHENBAUGH IS A HIGH-SCHOOL teacher in nearby Williamsport who has spent each summer for the last seventeen years as a fly-fishing specialist in the Yellowstone area, where we met him on one of our Presidential trips. I had invited him to join me early the next morning. I began to take a few fish on a small Fore-and-Aft fly with one grizzly hackle at each end of the hook and peacock herl wrapped in between. Later I tied a few of them and the pattern proved to be surprisingly effective, both in the riffles and in the smooth water, even at times when the all-black Spruce Creek Special or the redoubtable Black Ant would not work in the meadow pools.

Just as we were preparing to leave the stream, Don flicked the little fly behind a partly sunken snag near the left bank of the creek; a large trout took it, and with a tremendous whirling dive, immediately broke his leader. I marked the spot very carefully and determined in the coming days

to provide other opportunities for the big brownie to test his shrewdness and strength—and my leader.

Saturday Night:
The Loneliest Night of the Week

THAT NIGHT BROUGHT MY MOST FRUSTRATING experience: I had decided to try out a new and heavier rod so that we could shift to some late-night fishing with streamers after the evening hatch was over. The weather was good, but everything else was wrong. Because of a malfunctioning reel I found it very difficult to strip off line when casting, and I broke my leader twice when large fish made strong runs downstream. I had forgotten my small gooseneck flashlight and had to tie the double surgeon’s knots and the “gin-and- tonic” knots without light; I didn’t even try the more complicated blood knots in the dark.

The trees, grass and snags reached out for the fly on almost every cast. Fish were feeding voraciously on an excellent Evening Dun hatch, but they were not for me. I finally gave up and waited for the others to return from the stream and, predictably, everyone else had had notable success. I spent several hours that night and the next morning disassembling and servicing reels, tying flies and putting together new leaders.

Sunday Morning:
To Church, Then Back to the Old Vise

THE NEXT DAY WAS SUNDAY, and after my sad experience everyone was convinced that I needed to go to church. Afterward, we drove up to State College to visit George and Helen Harvey. We found them hospitable, as usual, but quite disconcerted by an unbelievable gypsy-moth larvae attack on the trees around their house. The little black caterpillars (which properly selective trout refuse to eat) covered the trees, roofs, streets and yards, and hung by threads of webbing in the air. We went inside to escape them and George ushered us into his workroom, where some of the best fly-tying in the world takes place. Each of his flies is a work of art. He gave me a much-needed lesson and then helped as Amy and Rosalynn replaced me at the vise. As we left he offered me one of his ultimate gifts—a box of pre-World War II hooks made by S. Allcock & Co., Ltd., in England. We compared them under a magnifying glass with some of the most expensive hooks made today, and their superiority was surprising.

Sunday Afternoon:
Amy Catches One

WE RETURNED TO SPRUCE CREEK later that day for Wayne’s birthday party, attended primarily by his

relatives and old friends of his father. For a present I gave him a small, handmade mahogany box, with dovetailed corners and a panel-top lined with leather, handtooled with his name and a leaping trout. It had taken me almost a week to make it, and I could only hope that my obvious special effort made up for the amateur quality of some of the workmanship.

Everyone was in good spirits, dampened only by a fly hook embedded in the lip of Wayne’s six-year-old daughter Heidi, who had walked too closely behind daughter Amy on one of her backcasts. After a fast trip to the local hospital Heidi returned with a large ice pack and an almost normal lip, and Amy gave her a small toy raccoon and a handwritten note “to my brave fishing partner” to help ease the pain.

Sunday Evening:
Snatching Defeat from the Jaws of Victory

THAT EVENING ROSALYNN AND I fished together on Spruce Creek, leapfrogging upstream in alternate pools. I managed to enter the large pool on the opposite side from Don Daughenbaugh’s well-remembered sunken snag, and picked up several trout as I fished a broad, shallow stretch. It was just after I returned the last one that I saw the large trout again, rising methodically to take the light golden mayflies as they floated across his lair, which was shielded by the sunken log and a nearby pile of limbs and trash.

It must have taken me five minutes to change to a heavier 2X tippet and then ease quietly out into the center of the stream, my heart pounding as I mentally rehearsed how to cast a righthand curve. Finally I was ready, took a deep breath and launched my fly. It curved perfectly, landed two feet above the trout, and he swallowed it as he rolled beneath the snag.

Even more amazingly, the big brown moved forward into the clear water, and I slowly but steadily worked him closer in. All went so well that I turned to call out to Rosalynn about my good fortune—just as the trout turned effortlessly downstream, stripped off line and plowed under the mound of limbs and trash.

He and I had a long tug-of-war as I waded closer and closer to the pile of debris. I couldn’t pull him out, and finally ran my hand down the leader and felt his mouth. As I tried to lift him free, he thrashed loose, leaving me with a cleanly broken leader.

That morning’s church sermon and my Baptist upbringing had not totally prepared me for such ignominious defeat, and I used a few choice words which disturbed the tranquillity of the now quiet, gurgling stream. (To ease any suspense on the part of the reader, let me report now that, yes, I tried

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again to catch him a couple of days later, got him to rise once more to a Pale Evening Dun, but finally had to admit that I had more than met my match. I remembered, with resignation, "that the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.")

Monday Morning:

We Make a Splash at Gray's Run

ON MONDAY ROSALYNN, MY SON CHIP and I drove up above Williamsport to Gray's Run as guests of Don Daughenbaugh and the Gray's Run Rod and Gun Club. Since Spruce Creek is a limestone stream, it would be a different kind of fishing at Gray's Run, very similar to the freestone creeks around Camp David that we had enjoyed so much. It is a wilderness area with deer, bear and other animals frequently visible along the stream. During the morning we caught a few fish, all brook trout except for two small browns, but in the crystal-clear water we did see several very large trout.

After lunch none of our dry flies would raise a fish, and so finally, out of desperation, I tried a slightly weighted old Muddler Minnow variation of my own design, retrieved diagonally upstream-and-across the tail end of a deep pool. The response was electric, and the big brook trout struck repeatedly, moving out of the deep water to

attack the fly. After losing two large fish, I finally netted and released one, and called Rosalynn to take my rod. Within a half hour she, Chip and I had caught and released brook trout weighing over two pounds. Anticlimactically, we caught several other smaller ones before we stopped for the day and drove back to Spruce Creek.

As we left Gray's Run, one of our hosts was already contemplating a change in the club's bylaws to outlaw the Muddler Minnow, but he decided to table the motion until he had a chance to try it a few times himself—to see if its effectiveness was permanent!

Tuesday All Day:

A New Professor, a New Text

I WAS GLAD THE NEXT MORNING to meet Joe Humphreys, who has managed most effectively to fill George Harvey's waders at Penn State for the last several years. We talked about our recent fishing experiences for a few minutes as I thumbed through his new book, *Trout Tactics*, and then I asked if he wanted to go fishing. He replied with a question: "What is your favorite kind of fishing?" I replied, "Dry fly, rising trout, long leaders, fine tippet, deep water." "Okay," he said, "then let's try nymphs on the bottom in riffles and shallow pocket water!" It was like dealing with Congress!

As we sat on the porch, Joe quickly tied a couple of Gold-Ribbed Hare's Ear nymphs and we headed for a riffly section of Spruce Creek. It was the first time I had fished this way. In a few minutes I was using the tuck-cast to put the fly deep before the line drag began to move it downstream, and trying to remember to keep my rod tip high as the nymph floated toward me. As an old south Georgia creek fisherman for red-breast and bluegill bream, I had no trouble detecting the subtle takes. The fish seemed to be waiting for us and took the nymphs regularly. They were larger, on the average, than our usual daytime catch on dry flies. After a few hours I was pleased with this new experience, but pretended to be somewhat chagrined that I hadn't matched Joe's earlier 16-pound brown trout, a Pennsylvania fly-fishing record.

That Tuesday evening brought my *best* fishing experience. Everything went right. On my second cast, around and under a deep bank, I caught a 17-inch wild brown beauty, and from then on I couldn't seem to miss. Never a broken leader or a foul-up in the trees, hitting my targets, catching almost every rising trout I saw, I netted and released more than two dozen good-size fish. Then I accepted an invitation to join the weekly neighborhood poker game, and my luck still held. I finally went home tired, ahead of the game all the way around, and happy and thankful for one of the best days of my life.

Wednesday Evening:

Too Soon Dark

DURING OUR FINAL AFTERNOON at Spruce Creek, Rosalynn and I climbed the steep and rocky slope above our cottage so that we could enjoy the view and see the thick pink and white laurel blossoms growing near the top of the mountain range. It was an exhausting climb, but worth the effort.


Tired after supper, but somewhat sad to be leaving soon, I decided to do my last fishing with Wayne Harpster. It was a moonless night, drizzling rain. As we left our cabin later than usual, we noticed several of the Pale Evening Duns clinging to the window screen. It proved to be a good hatch and we both took fish, but the darkness came too quickly for me.

Wayne was perfectly at home, and continued to net trout when I could barely see the banks of the stream. With years of experience, he knew exactly how to place the floating fly to cover each barely audible dimpling in the water. We moved upstream for several hundred yards, and I listened intently as he recalled for me some of the earlier angling advice he had gotten from his father as a boy and young man on this same fine stream beside the mountain. (I immediately classified this information as "top secret"—for my ears only.)



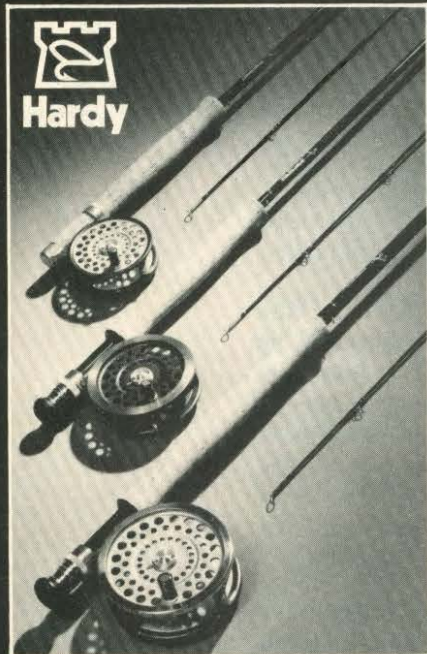
Late at night as we walked back toward the distant cottage lights, Wayne suggested that we stop briefly near a large willow tree, with deep pools immediately above and below us. I couldn't hear anything except running water, but he moved immediately to enter the upper pool. Convinced that we were wasting our time, I waded out into the dark, belt-deep water of the lower pool and began to cast, safely but futilely, toward the middle of the stream. I couldn't see Wayne, but every few minutes I could hear his soft laughter and the splashing of a fighting fish.

Then he announced that they had stopped feeding—after, of course, he had landed the three largest trout of the evening. "I don't see how you do it," I said admiringly, and he replied gracefully, "You're really improving as a fisherman—when it's light enough to see."

THAT NIGHT ROSALYNN AND I talked about how Wayne, George, Lloyd, Don and Joe all seemed very close to us, part of a large but close-knit fraternity of sportsmen who love God's world with its changing faces and seasons and want to preserve its beauty and its challenge and its excitement. After my week on Spruce Creek, I could see very clearly how far I still have to go to realize one of my goals in life: to become a good fly fisherman. But I look forward to the challenge—and to the excitement it brings. 

Rosalynn Carter is rapidly becoming a proficient fly-fisher herself, the former President's angling friends report with a knowing smile. Son "Chip" is also an enthusiastic fly fisherman, but, as the author indicates in this article, daughter Amy still has some casting skills to hone.

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