

For trout fishermen ...

'Twas the best and worst of times

As a boy, I spent part of my summer vacations with my father and his hired hand on his oil lease at Wetmore (Pa.), between Sheffield and Kane. We lived there in an old house with two bedrooms and a big kitchen with a huge wood-burning stove.

Standard diet for the three of us was big kettles of rice or stacks of pancakes. We shared the place with a variety of mice and rats. Dad had given me a single-shot, Savage .22 rifle at an early age, and one of my favorite pastimes was popping mice as they ran between stove and pantry. The kitchen door had numerous holes along the bottom!

I liked staying at the lease mainly for the fishing. The East Branch of the Tionesta Creek ran right through the property and was one of the most famous trout streams in the state. Next to the house we lived in was an abandoned chicken shack whose rafters were lined with the skulls of brown trout caught by my grandfather. Some measured five inches across the top!

There was a nice fishing hole in the stream behind the house, and it served me well for swimming and rafting, too. Many nice brown trout were caught right there as well as some big speckled brook trout.

Within a mile of the house, two small runs came down into the main creek. Either would yield up a creel of tasty little brookies in less than an hour. A few hundred yards downstream there was an old log dam with a nice, deep hole behind it. On a sunny day you could see big brownies lying near the bottom, barely moving. My dad swore there was one old-timer nearly three-feet long in that pool.

The road to the house crossed the creek on a log bridge, and it was often my pleasure to lie on the bridge and watch the fish beneath. On more than

one occasion I saw big browns swim by that would have weighed four or five pounds. We could have speared them easily, but Dad would never stand

for that. He was a dedicated fisherman who lived by the rules.

Then, with the onset of the Depression in 1930, everything changed. The glass

plants, tanneries and sawmills at Sheffield and Kane, which had imported hundreds of immigrants for cheap labor, were forced to close. Out of work and barely able to speak English, these desperate people were left pretty much to fend for themselves.

One of their favorite means of providing food for their families was to hand-pick the trout streams. Carrying big, copper wash boilers, a group of them would wade down the stream corralling trout against rocks and along the shore.

They didn't miss many! On the few occasions Dad caught them at it, he would run them off with a shotgun, but it was a hopeless task. There were too many too often.

Years later, the state began the process of raising trout and restocking streams with some success. In the beginning, eager fishermen followed the stocking trucks and caught the semi-tame fish as fast as they were dumped. Then the state got smart and started going out at night without advance notice.

Today the trout have made a comeback, but you can still get a good argument from dedicated anglers as to the merits of stocked fish versus native born.

The last time I saw the East Branch at the lease, all the brush along the stream was cut or trampled and vehicle tracks ran along both sides. Beer cans and paper trash littered the banks and, try as I might, I couldn't spot a single fish.

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