40. TROUT FISHING

In the early summer of 1982, a tall gangly young man with a black mustache and vaguely oriental features turned up at the ranch. He was accompanied by a quiet friend of clearly occidental persuasion. They were Steve Goto (opposite)[1] and Jim Schmehl asking permission to fish in the canyon. Steve said he was a contractor and that he and Jim would do construction work in exchange for fishing....I must say, that got my attention.[2]

I was no fisherman. Steve and Jim were my introduction to the decidedly odd world of "catch and release" fly fishing. To my astonishment, I was to learn that there actually were fully grown adults who would scale the canyon, fish all day, fighting horse flies all the while, catch a bunch of big trout (only to inexplicably return them to the stream) and emerge at sunset tired and happy as puppies with an old glove – but no fish to eat. Not only that, some fly fishermen had real money. Go figure.

Jim was one of the founding directors of Rocky Mountain Flycasters (RMF), which became only the tenth Trout Unlimited Chapter in the United States. Steve was the chapter President in 1987-88.

At that time the canyon was little known but to the likes of Manuel Pineda (Chapter 39) who, as a NPIC Director had a key to the Halligan gate, a few friends of Pat Ferree and occasional determined trespassers. Steve Goto did more than anyone to bring the angling charms of the North Fork to the attention of the fly-fishing community (including lots more trespassers).

Steve's enthusiasm was infectious. He even convinced me to try my hand at fly fishing, but it turned out that I was way too ADHD (or something) to stand still that long. I did watch and listen, however. I was captivated by the gadgetry, like the eye dropper used to extract a trout's stomach contents to see what it had been feeding on before releasing the fish.

I learned that the North Fork below Halligan was a 'tailwater' fishery. The artificial pattern of the stream flow enforced by the management of the dam for storing and releasing irrigation water, combined with cool temperatures in the summer releases of water from the bottom of the reservoir made for great fishing.

Steve said he considered the fishing in the canyon at that time to be among the very best in the US. He named the long reach, below The Nature Conservancy's visitor center, "The Madison Stretch" after the river that rises in Yellowstone.

The North Poudre Irrigation Company (NPIC) owns about thirty reservoirs, Halligan being the highest. By 1982, Halligan (built in 1909) had more than seventy years history of a harsh management regime that could have been disastrous for fish populations on another river.

The Precambrian granite that the North Fork has worn through to form the canyon had been so incessantly pushed and shoved and heaved and bent for eons that the water has carved out unusually deep holes in the fractured rock.

Unlike normal irrigation reservoirs that get drawn down near dry as summer wears on, Halligan had been used primarily as a re-fill reservoir. Most years Halligan was maintained near full through the summer, with only enough water released to serve a few farmers and ranchers at the northern end of the NPIC system in the Livermore and Buckeye areas. In the early fall, when the canals connecting NPIC's lower reservoirs were no longer carrying water to crops, water from Halligan replenished the lower reservoirs. Then the gates were shut and the winter flow in the canyon was cut to a trickle, while the reservoir filled over the winter leaving essentially no water for fish to swim in except in the numerous big holes.

For those few that knew, the river below Halligan was prized for its Native Cutthroat/Rainbow hybrid trout that spawned in the spring. Steve explained that the drastically reduced fall/winter flows worked to the disadvantage of the more aggressive fall spawning Brown Trout.

No matter...whatever fish were in the river below the dam survived the winter shutoff in the big holes up and down the canyon, but the Cutthroat/Rainbows were more successful at reproducing under this extreme flow regime. It was explained to me that the adult Brown Trout in the river below Halligan Dam had come through the gates. Note that a summary of a 1983 fish population study shows almost all the juvenile trout to be Cutthroat/Rainbows (opposite).

In Chapter 13, I mentioned the trespassing problem we had and my pact with Roy Brown. At the other end of that prosecutorial pipeline were Steve and Jim, who organized the membership of RMF to supply two members in rotation to fish the canyon and keep an eye out for trespassers. Upon encountering miscreants, the RMF patrol would politely request to see fishing licensees, which they confiscated. I relayed the fishing license information to Roy.

At my request (and always happily), Steve accompanied many prospective investors who 'required investigation of the fishing' in the course of their due diligence. They usually returned in a dazed state – Steve was a gifted master who could almost always make the fishing look good.[3]

Thanks to Steve's widow, Dawn, for her assistance with this chapter.

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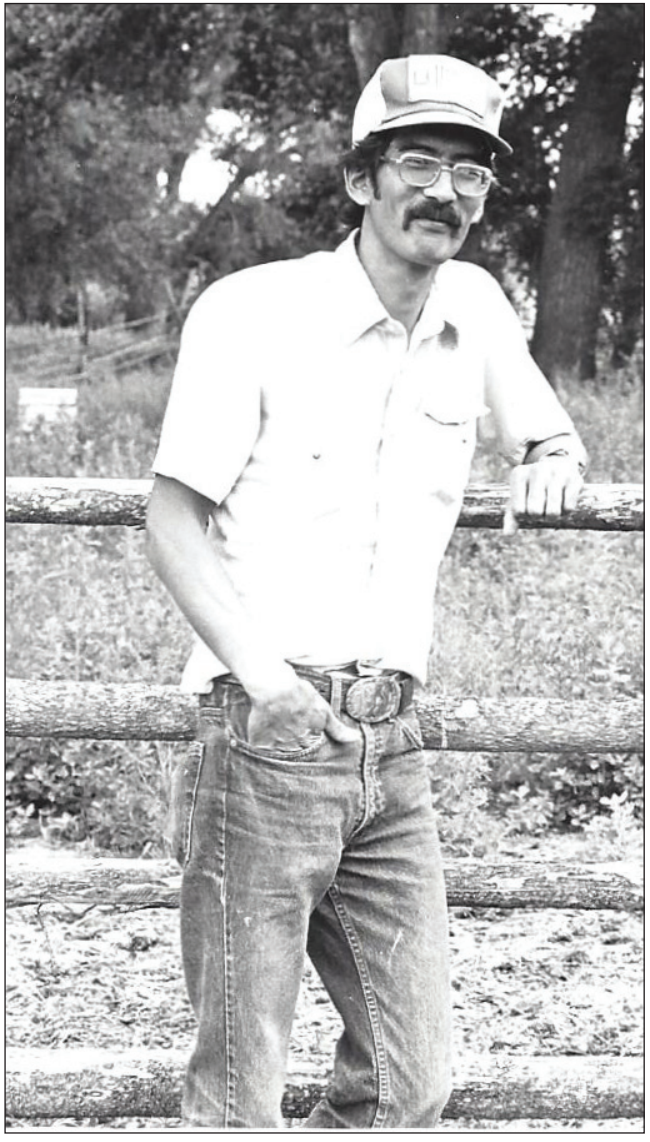
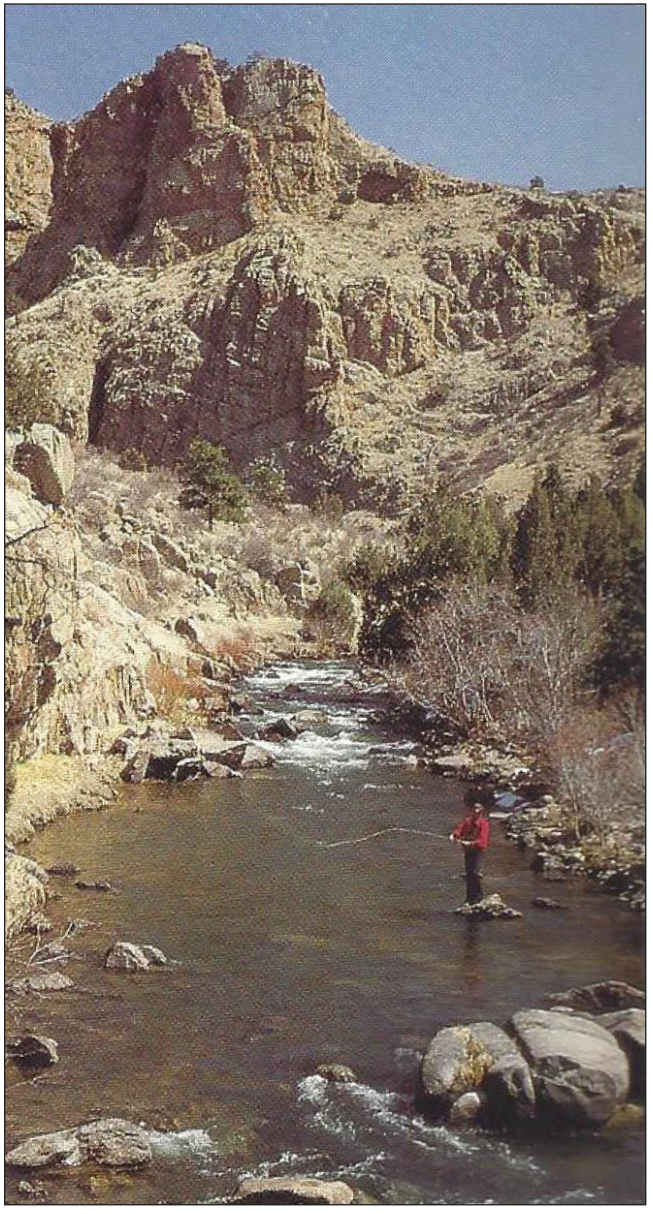
[1] Steve Goto (1949-2002) was an *army brat*, born in Sapporo, Japan.

[2] Their work included the office addition to the Tibbits house (Chapter 4), restoration of the Morgan barn (Chapter 5), remodeling of the house at the Koch Place (nka Waterfall Ranch) for Kent and his family and the construction of the cabins at Meadow Creek (more about that later).

[3] Our son, Arthur, (about 10 at the time) often tagged along and thereby became a first-rate fly fisherman.



Steve Goto



Fishing below the Crescent Island

The following technical trout population analysis is taken from a study prepared in September, 1983, by the Department of Fishery and Wildlife Biology at Colorado State University.

Population estimates of rainbow, brown, and all trout in a 262-m section of the North Fork of the Cache la Poudre River.

Total Length		Population Estimate		
mm	in	Rainbow	Brown	All trout
74-149	3-6	293		
100-149	4-6		5	
150-199	6-7.9	0	2	2
200-249	8-9.9	24	11	34
250-299	10-11.9	28	34	63
300-349	12-13.9	41	30	71
350-399	14-15.9	17	32	52
400-499	16-17.9	9	7	16
450+	18+	4	7	12
Total > in		123	123	250
95% CI		74-282	84-213	176-395
Ave. length (in)		12.5	13.1	

Trout populations in the canyon

Graphics and layout by Nina Judson