

WALL OF HONOR

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I was born into a fly fishing heritage that now encompasses more than 100 years. My grandfather, Samuel Peter Eagle, came to Yellowstone Park just after 1900. He worked for the park's only hotel, Fountain Hotel, catching fish for the restaurant by day and tending the bar at night. He married a young woman, Ida, who had also come to the hotel to work. Together, along with another couple, they started a new entrance to Yellowstone Park, West Yellowstone, in 1908. In establishing Eagle's Store, Sam also began the region's first fly fishing shop and would become the first licensed fly fishing guide in the region. Over the years, through weekly family picnics on the park's Madison, Gibbon, and Firehole rivers and many other family fishing excursions, Sam taught each of his ten children the art and science of fly fishing for trout. My father, Wally, was the youngest. Perhaps because of that, he was fortunate to spend endless hours with his father, learning virtually every stretch of the region's rivers, the seasonal fly hatches, and the environs that typically attracted the most and/or largest trout. Like his father, so too did my father take me under his wing, teaching me everything he knew about the rivers, the fish, the insects, and the joy of fly fishing. And so it was that I would do the same with my son, Taylor, through our annual sojourns to West Yellowstone as well as other fly fishing opportunities in New England, Florida, and Michigan. It became clear to me that Taylor had both the passion and patience needed for fly fishing. How wonderful it has been to observe his steady maturation in the sport coupled with that same fascination for fishing that I've enjoyed for more than 50 years.

Many years ago, my family created a "wall of honor" in Eagle's Fly Shop featuring framed photographs of most of Sam and Ida's children holding magnificent trout taken in the waters of Yellowstone alongside a picture of Sam. Over the years, the third generation was added to the wall, with pictures of me, my brother, and several of my many cousins, again holding beautiful trout before release (Figure 1). As would be expected, there began a discussion between Taylor and me about whether one day his picture would adorn the family's wall of honor. I explained to Taylor that there were no strict criteria about how big the trout had to be in order to be added to the wall, and further that there was no specific process for determining if or when one of the Eagle descendants would be added to the wall. I also explained to Taylor that I was confident that someday he would catch a Yellowstone trout that was worthy of being permanently exhibited on the wall. I also said to him that we would probably both know when that moment was, and that I would convey this request to the family and store manager if and when it occurred.

It became a common thread for our annual trips to Yellowstone: Would this be the year that such a fish was taken? One year, when Taylor was around 18 years old, he caught a nice 16-inch brown trout on the park's Madison River. Taylor caught the fish on a small dry fly, and it made for a nice photograph. Taylor asked me if I thought it was it worthy of the wall. I asked him to think about

the other trout on the wall and suggested that he consider whether this fish was in the same category. He recognized that the wall's photographs showed Eagle descendants with trout anywhere from perhaps 18-inches long to as large as 10 pounds. In that reflection, he answered his own question. He couldn't imagine being on the wall without a trout worthy of that honor. He began to recognize two things: first that the region's fishing pressures have diminished the number of large trout taken on area streams, and second, that it would actually be embarrassing to have a picture on the wall with an unworthy trout!

It was with this backdrop that Taylor and I went to Yellowstone in July of 2014. With a full week to fish together, I looked forward to the chance to show my son many stretches of the Madison, Firehole, and Yellowstone rivers that I had fished with my father when I was young. I also knew that quite possibly one of these spots would bring Taylor the fish he so wanted to catch.

July is typically not the best month to fish the park's upper Madison River. With warmer air, the waters also warm up, and the fish become less active in their day time feeding as the fly hatches diminish. However, if one knows the rivers like I do, there are certain spots that produce trout no matter what the season or month. A hole called "Nine Mile" is such a place. My father taught me about "Nine Mile" many years before. The river flows into a far bank on a gradual bend, where two structural elements create a unique trout environment. First, there is a lava shelf on the far bank where the river depth drops from 6 to 12 inches to about 5 feet along a sharp ledge that is roughly 20 feet long. The second element is a spring that comes into the river just upstream from the lava shelf. These two factors create an environment that larger



Figure 1. The wall of honor in Eagle's Fly Shop features three generations of Eagle fishermen holding their catches before release.



Figure 2. The author's son, Taylor, catches what may be a fish worthy of the Eagle's Fly Shop wall of honor.

trout really like: a safe "hold" out of the way of predators, deep along the ledge, and cooler water that trout prefer during warm summer months.

Taylor and I approached "Nine Mile" that summer of 2014. We waded to the center of the river at the top of the run and then steadily worked a wet fly (Muddler Minnow – size #6) over the far ledge. In my experience, landing the fly on the ledge, then swinging it down over the deep trough, attracted fish lying deep in the hole. Before we started, I told Taylor that we probably would not see or catch anything, but if we did hook a fish, it would typically occur about halfway down the ledge and most often would be a sizeable fish based. You can imagine my excitement when, in exactly that



Figure 3. Taylor displays his trophy, a 20-inch male brown trout.



Figure 4. Taylor carefully works the trout back and forth in the river to move oxygen into its gills before releasing it back to the wild.

place, Taylor's line surged away and downstream as a trout took his fly. "Got one!" he exclaimed. The fish thrashed the surface and then rushed downstream peeling off yards of line. "He feels solid!" Taylor yelled as the fish took out the line. This first run was followed by a similar rush upstream, where Taylor struggled to keep the line taut. I held my breath, hoping that the fly would not pull out of the fish's mouth. The fish ran back into its lair along the ledge. The next 10 minutes was a tug-of-war as Taylor tried to apply pressure on the fish without breaking the 6-pound leader tippet or pulling the fly out of the fish's mouth. Despite a series of these comings and goings deep in the pool, Taylor and I still had not seen the fish clearly and did not know its size.

Taylor mused, "It could be a wall fish, Dad!" I said that I thought so, but we wouldn't know until it was in the net. Amazingly, the fish never jumped, never really showed itself, until it was nearly spent. After a final surge downstream, the fish was steered toward shallow water where both of us were awestruck by its beauty. This 20-inch male brown trout was in spectacular shape, deep through the thorax, wide across the back, with the typical golden brown sides with adorning spots. In the net, we could see he was a real prize (Figure 2). Taylor looked at me, eyes wide, and said, "What d'ya think?" He knew what I was thinking, and I nodded my agreement. "He's a beauty!" I said. After photographing him (Figure 3), Taylor carefully worked the fish back and forth in the river to move oxygen into his gills (Figure 4). Gradually the fish came around, reestablishing his strength as he cruised back into the river. In Taylor's eyes I saw the joy of the catch, the deep meaning of releasing the fish, and the knowledge that he would now have a photograph adorning the wall of Eagle's Fly Shop. This would represent a physical reminder that he was part of a family that for five generations has enjoyed the uniqueness of Yellowstone and its magical trout fishing. When he saw the picture on the wall this past summer, he reflected that throughout his life, he would remember that day, that moment, and that connection with me, his father. I know that I will always remember that special day and the lifetime bond between me and my son in a recreational heritage that links us to past, current, and future generations.