
A RIVER RUNS THROUGH MY FAMILY

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Image 1. Three generations of Eagles: Taylor, father Kim, grandpa Wally, and Taylor's uncle Arnie Owen (husband of co-author Kendra Eagle Owen) on the Missouri River, Craig, Montana. **Image 2.** Taylor Eagle with his grandfather, Wally Eagle, on Yellowstone Lake, Yellowstone Park. **Image 3.** Taylor Eagle with a German Brown Trout, taken on Eagle Bend, Upper Madison River.

My rite of passage into the Eagle family's fly fishing "Priesthood" occurred on a fine bright July afternoon in 2003. I was 12 years old. My grandfather, Wally Eagle, and I chatted away in the car as my father Kim drove us upstream from West Yellowstone to Madison Junction and then up the Firehole River toward Old Faithful. Although I had caught bass using spinning rods and lures in the Adirondack Mountains, today was to be my first experience angling for trout with a fly rod. It was a day I had long discussed with my father, Kim Eagle, and it was a defining moment. Fly fishing runs deep in the Eagle family, and it started with my great grandfather, Sam Eagle, Wally's father.

When Sam came to Yellowstone Park at age 21 in the early 1900s, he became an historic anchor in the region's fishing lore. First employed as a bartender and commercial fisherman at Yellowstone's Fountain Hotel, Sam would take orders from the hotel cooks each morning regarding their interest in having fresh trout for dinner. Armed with specifications for both number and size, Sam would fish the Firehole River and several of its tributaries (e.g., Nez Perce Creek) to accommodate the hotel guests' wishes throughout the summer season. One day he took his horse and gunny sack out and brought back 144 brook trout taken on a single black gnat fly!

Not long after his arrival, Sam married Ida Carlson and, along with partner Alex Stuart, moved to the west entrance of Yellowstone in 1908 to establish the fledgling town's first business, the Eagle-Stuart Store. From the beginning, the variety store catered to fishing enthusiasts, offering flies, rods, reels, and lines as preferred by visiting Eastern anglers. In addition to launching his own store and serving as postmaster, Sam became West Yellowstone's first licensed fishing and hunting guide in 1907. For nearly 50 years, Sam was a fixture in the regional angling scene — guide, mentor, fly tier, and conservation officer. What evolved

into Eagle's Store and Fly Shop offered fishing enthusiasts bamboo rods from Granger, Abbey and Imbrie trout flies from Spain, the finest silk lines, and the East's best leaders. Fishing enthusiasts who patronized Eagle's included a number of celebrities including Presidents Hoover and Carter, actors Gary Cooper, Richard Widmark, William Conrad, and news anchors Chet Huntley and Charles Kuralt. However, the most important mentoring in the art of fly fishing that Sam Eagle provided was to his 10 children.

Fly fishing was part of the fabric of life for Henry, Sam, Edward, Bill, Harold, Wally, Joe, Betty, Helen, and Rose Eagle. In addition to being surrounded by the constant banter of fishermen coming through Eagle's store, many a family picnic included lazy afternoons spent exploring every bend, eddy, and rock of the Park's Madison, Gibson, and Firehole Rivers. To varying degrees, each of Sam and Ida Eagle's children became proficient in fly fishing and its lore. When the older children had married and moved to other regions of the country, they still came back each June to the store's annual meeting and often had a chance to wet a line on one of the region's hottest rivers. Like me, many of their children and grandchildren were schooled in the family fishing "priesthood."

Of all 10 Eagle children, the youngest, Wally, may have inherited the greatest penetrance of the family's fishing gene. From his early youth, fly fishing drew him to the rivers and back country of Yellowstone with incredible force. Perhaps partly because his father, Sam, had more spare time later in his life, he and Wally spent countless hours together hunting and fishing. This apprenticeship was thorough and successful. Wally tied flies for the fly shop and later oversaw its purchases and inventory during his summers on leave from teaching mathematics at Bozeman Senior High School. When my father started working in the family store, 7:00 AM coffee at Eagle's Store and Fly Shop entertained a

colorful fraternity of the area's most avid anglers. Heated debates about the best fly, best river, best time to fish, or "biggest-one-that-got away" stories enriched his youth with lasting memories. And centered in that fraternity was my grandfather: teacher, employer, mentor, and friend. He taught my dad to appreciate the rivers, forests, trout, and wild life of Yellowstone. He taught him the joy of resuscitating a tired trout and returning it to its habitat. He taught him the true unadulterated joy of wading in a river, all day, searching for that big monster trout that had to be just around the next bank. The simple and complete joy that my father experiences while fly fishing in any stream, under any condition, in any state or country, is not normal! I'm sure that the family fishing gene penetrance runs deep within my dad and within me, too. My fishing portfolio and skill set was carefully and dutifully honed by my father, just as his father had done with him.

My grandfather and father chose Hoot Owl Hole on the Firehole River to "baptize" me into the art of fly fishing. Many years ago my grandfather was fighting a fish when a Great Horned Owl swooped down, picked it up, and started flying away! My grandfather pointed the rod tip at the owl as the line screamed off the reel. As the owl reached the far bank, the leader broke, and as it did, the owl dropped the trout. Since that day, the family and our fishing fraternity had referred to the run as Hoot Owl Hole. This stretch of river was among the first that Sam fished when he came to Yellowstone Park more than 100 years ago. This was a place that he brought my grandfather, Wally, in his earliest fly fishing experiences 70 years ago. So, too, was it the place that my father had his first trout on a fly rod when he was just 10 years old.

We finally arrived at the pull-out by the river and began preparing our gear. My dad pointed out the huge rock in the middle of the river where the hoot owl used to perch at dusk. After we had strung my rod and put on our chest waders, we walked a few yards to the river and waded in. My grandfather sat on a collapsible seat on the bank as my father and I gradually waded into the current.

"What are we fishing with?" I asked my father, Kim.

"Let's try a feather duster nymph," he replied, which was no surprise to me since my grandfather had originated that fly

some 30 years ago. He took ostrich feathers from one of the store's feather dusters and made the body of the fly from ostrich hurl while using pheasant tail feathers for the tail, legs, and wing case. My father pointed out a lava shelf downstream where the water depth dropped from just a foot or two to more than 5 feet. He explained to me that the trout like to lay along this shelf, and that if we were going to catch any trout it would likely occur in a small area next to the ledge.

Over the next hour, I carefully fished through the main run of Hoot Owl Hole, and true to my Dad's prediction, I caught two nice German brown trout in the pool by the lava ledge. Neither fish was very large, but to me they were gigantic! Having my father and grandfather there and connecting to Sam Eagle and his explorations of Yellowstone's rivers more than 100 years ago, this was an epic moment! I realized in those few minutes how deep my roots to fly fishing and Yellowstone actually ran. I also sensed with my father and grandfather that their happiness in seeing me catch a trout clearly exceeded that of catching a fish on their own. I didn't say much, but I brushed some tears out of my eyes.

My father was beaming all the way back to West Yellowstone. Something special happened to all of us that day. Having both my father and grandfather there to share the moment was critical to my experience. While I have since caught many trout in Yellowstone during our annual sojourns there, those first two fish connected me to a century of our family. The experience helped me appreciate how traditions like these are anchors that provide points of stability in a world that moves very quickly. The river runs deep through the Eagle family. Like my father, I feel the force of the river, and it is strong within me.



Image 4. Taylor Eagle with fishing guide Bob Jacklin, on the Upper Madison River.



Image 5. A young Taylor Eagle (left) and his grandfather, Wally Eagle, on the Madison River, Yellowstone National Park.