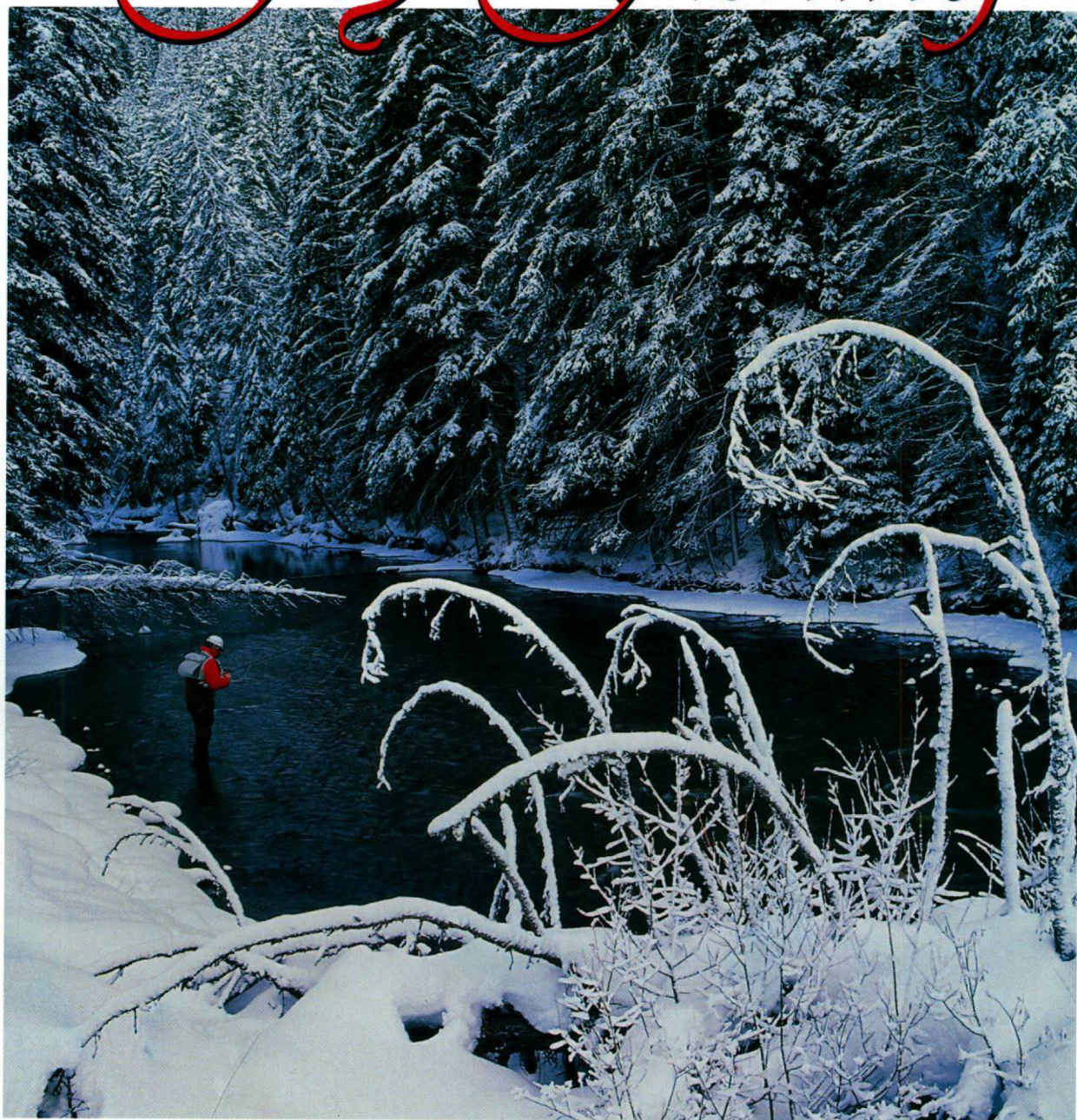


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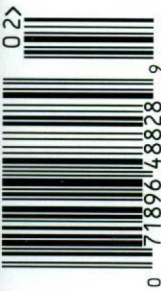
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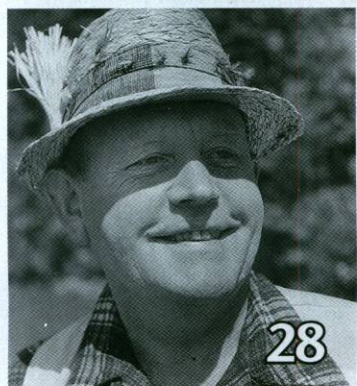
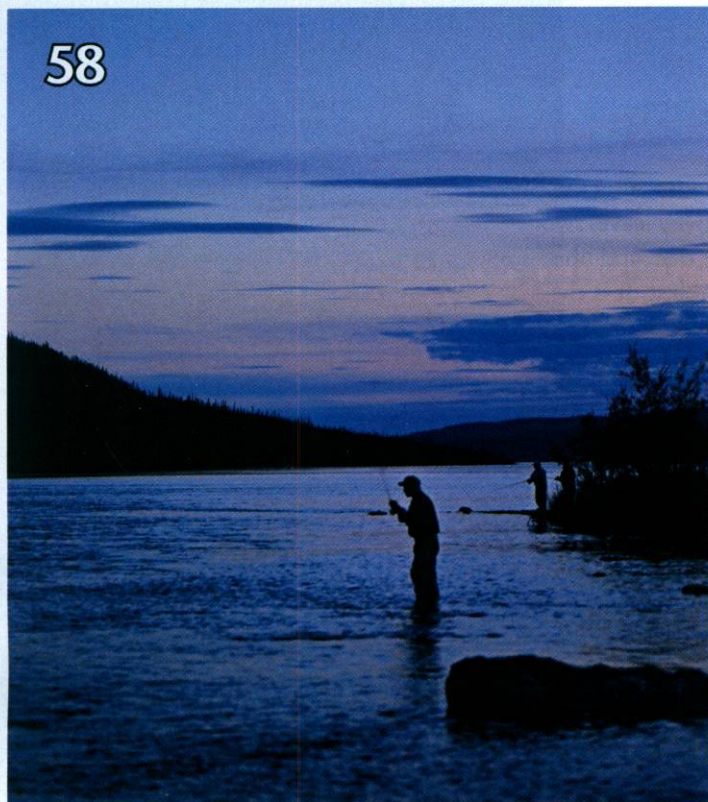
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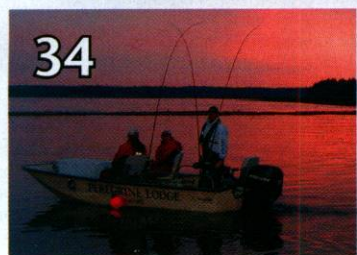
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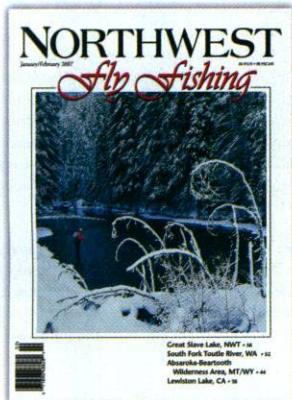
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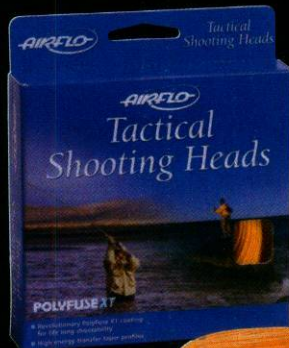


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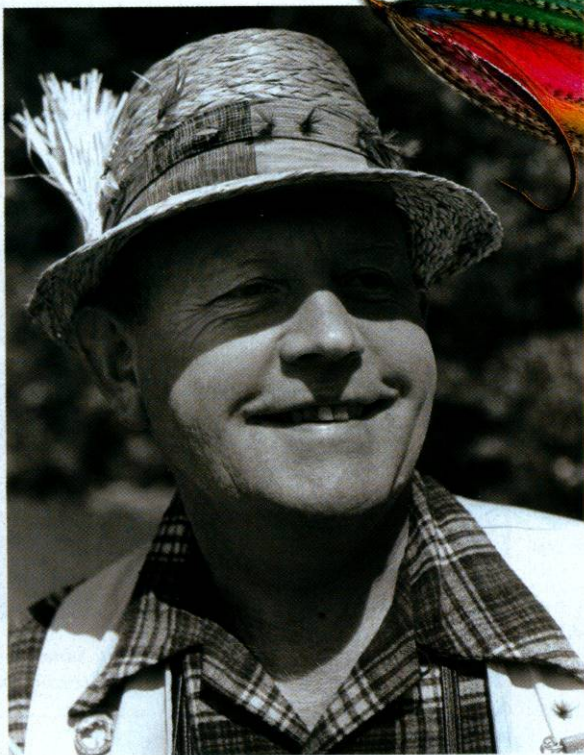
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Pioneers & Legends

Walter C. Johnson (1915–2002):
Pioneer Washington Steelheader, Light-Tackle and Dry-Fly
Enthusiast, and Creator of Unique and Artistic Flies

By Jack W. Berryman



Photographer Ralph Wahl, one of Walt Johnson's fishing partners, captured this photograph of Johnson in 1964, after a day of fishing for summer-run steelhead on the Stillaguamish River. (Ralph E. Wahl Photographic Collection, Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, Western Washington University). Spectral Spider tied by Walt Johnson (inset)

Walter Johnson was born on October 24, 1915, and resided in Kirkland, Washington, during his youth. There, in the Rose Hill neighborhood, young Walt fished nearby Lake Washington and its tributaries for trout and salmon. He particularly liked fishing for trout in mountain lakes and remembered spending "many days of my youth backpacking into the high lakes of the Cascades." In doing so he acquired a lifelong "respect for all of nature and its creatures."

After high school, Johnson went to work at his father's lucrative blueprint paper company in downtown Seattle

and each day rode a ferry across Lake Washington to get there. Soon Walt had acquired a motorboat that he used to "cruise" Juanita Beach, and he became enamored with sports cars.

Still a bachelor in his mid-20s, Walt was introduced by a coworker to Enos Bradner (*Northwest Fly Fishing*, Winter 2003) at his Capitol Hill bookshop in 1939. Bradner sent Johnson across Broadway to a barbershop where Dawn Holbrook was tying flies in the window to attract customers and hopefully sell a few flies. Soon thereafter, Letcher Lambuth (*Northwest Fly Fishing*, Fall 2001)

sponsored Walt as a member of the newly founded Washington Fly Fishing Club (WFFC), where he quickly befriended another new member, Frank Headrick. Walt was fond of his fellow WFFC members and was especially grateful to Bradner, the club's first president. He remembered clearly that it was "through his association I was introduced to the steelhead trout."

Walt's lifetime of steelheading began in the late summer of 1939 when he first visited the North Fork of the Stillaguamish River. After losing six fish he hooked on that trip, Johnson returned to finally land his first summer-run steelhead on a fly—an Orange

Shrimp pattern. He quickly fell in love with the river, its wild steelhead, and its main tributary, Deer Creek. The following year he was married. He and his wife, June, had a daughter, Joyce, and eventually four grandsons. Soon thereafter, Walt moved to Seattle to be closer to his work.

Johnson became directly involved in the WFFC's attempt to make the North Fork Stillaguamish fly-fishing-only during the summer months and was thrilled when this proposal became law in 1941. He began searching for property along the banks of the "Stilly" and in 1943 completed a log cabin near the confluence of Deer Creek and the small town of Oso. Soon he had other notable steelheaders as neighbors: Frank Headrick, Ken McLeod, Wes Drain, Ralph Wahl, Walt Ribble, Al Knudson, Enos Bradner, and Sandy Bacon. Author Trey Combs suggests that this "little colony" of cabins "marks the birthplace of steelhead fly fishing in Washington."

Also during the early 1940s Walt began fly fishing for winter-run steelhead. He was well aware of the success of friends Ralph Wahl (*Northwest Fly Fishing*, Summer 2004), Ralph Olson (*Northwest Fly Fishing*, Summer 2006), Wes Drain, Dawn Holbrook, and Al Knudson and began to fish the Skagit regularly. However, he took his first fly-caught winter-run from the Skykomish. Summer-run steelhead were still his passion, however, and he traveled extensively to fish for them. He made his first trip to the North Umpqua in 1943 and was introduced to the Kalamia by Mike Kennedy at about the same time. Johnson and Wahl fished it many times, and Johnson "fell in love with this stream on the first visit." It was around this same time that he began using shorter and lighter bamboo rods in an attempt to entice a steelhead to take a small dry fly. When this finally happened on the Stilly, Johnson knew "that the dry fly and light tackle bug had me, and I was destined to continue this pursuit the rest of my life."

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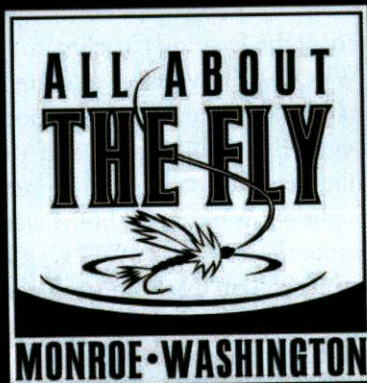
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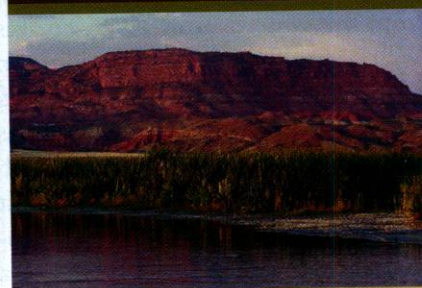


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the WFFC and his neighbors on the Stilly, noted there were not many summer-run steelhead upstream of Deer Creek. As chairman of the WFFC's Summer-Run Steelhead Committee in 1945, he worked with the Washington State Game Department in its inaugural attempt to raise summer-runs in a hatchery. They trapped Deer Creek fish, spawned them at the Arlington Trout Hatchery, and raised more than 22,000 smolts that were tagged and fin clipped. These were released in Deer Creek and tributaries of the Stilly in the spring of 1948, with the program claiming success as some marked fish returned the following year. Johnson's report, "Operation Summer-Run," was presented to the WFFC in 1950 and documented this innovative experiment that was later replicated throughout Washington.

Walt rapidly became an expert steelheader, as evidenced by *Field & Stream* Honorable Mention awards for an 11-pound, 13.5-ounce steelhead from the Kalama in 1947 and a 13-pound fish from the same river in 1949. For his WFFC work over the years, Johnson received the club's Empty Creel Award for 1948, presented to "one who has made consistent contributions to club welfare." Also in the late 1940s, Walt first met Syd Glasso from Forks, Washington, who was fishing the Stilly as a guest of Al Knudson. He remembered that this "was when I first became introduced to the beautiful Spey flies Syd had devised for his steelhead" and credited Glasso as being "instrumental in the slow demise of bucktail patterns as more and more talented tiers were enticed into devising their own Spey creations." Johnson believed the Spey fly's "slim beauty, long flowing hackles and deadly action surpassed all other designs for steelhead."

After Walt fished with Glasso on the Olympic Peninsula in the early 1950s and "saw how effective his Spey flies were," he devised his Deep Purple

Spey. Already convinced of the attractiveness of purple to steelhead by the success of his friend Ken McLeod's Purple Peril (*Northwest Fly Fishing*, Winter 2006), Walt had developed a pattern he called his Violet Nymph, noting that "our well guarded secret lie[s] in the use of gentian violet dye for the body and hackle" and that his Deep Purple Spey "became the final metamorphosis of purple flies in my arsenal." It was followed by his Red Shrimp, Lady Coachman, Migrant Orange, Thompson River, Indian Summer, Prawn, Dusty Coachman, and



Red Shrimp tied by Walt Johnson

Springer Green. More recent wet-fly patterns included the Spectral Spider, Golden Spey, Royal Spey, and Kingfisher Blue Spey. His best-known dry-fly pattern is the Evening Coachman.

Walt was always eager to share information with others and corresponded regularly with anglers and tiers throughout the world. Yet, he never lost sight of his roots and home water. He wrote an essay for the WFFC's *Creel Notes* in 1953 on fly fishing for winter steelhead and provided a short piece on catching summer-run steelhead on Orvis's small Deluxe Midge rod for the Orvis catalog in the mid-1950s. In fact, Johnson was pioneering light-tackle fishing for West Coast steelhead at the same time Lee Wulff was catching Atlantic salmon and Joe Brooks was landing bonefish on the same tackle. Walt became president of the WFFC in 1955 and continued to make regular contributions to *Creel Notes* about his steelheading adventures. For the WFFC's 20th anniversary, in 1959,

Johnson put together an exhibit of his custom-built fly rods.

By the 1960s, Walt was recognized throughout the Northwest as an artist at the vise as well as a master steelheader, especially with the dry fly. He was a "firm believer that the color of the stream bottom as well as light factor determines the effectiveness of our flies as a dark bottom absorbs and a light one reflects." For his fly styles, Walt noted that he "always attempted to create patterns which appeal to the fish as well as look respectable" and was particularly "content with the Spey patterns for obvious reasons, action and color, my preferable criteria."

Walt was also popular with the Flyfishers Club of Oregon and published a few short articles in their monthly bulletin, *The Creel*, in the 1960s and early 1970s. In a 1968 article, "Steelhead Trails," Johnson confessed, "This artisan of the split bamboo had learned that patience and perseverance were virtues he must practice with utmost diligence."

In the mid-1970s Johnson sold his cabin on the Stilly, sold his Seattle company, and purchased five acres of land in Oso, where he and his wife built their retirement home. Then, because of his proximity to both the Stilly and Deer Creek, Walt became the resident river steward. He and his flies were prominently featured in Trey Combs's *Steelhead Fly Fishing and Flies* (1976); in an interview, Johnson told Combs that "there just isn't anything in angling that can compare with the slashing rise of a summer-run steelhead to a dry fly on midge tackle."

One of Johnson's few articles in a national magazine was published in *Fly Tye* in 1980. Writing about his Deep Purple Spey and his Lady Coachman, he remarked that the former fly "has rewarded me with more steelhead over the years than any fly I have ever used." At the January 1983 meeting of the WFFC, Johnson received the Letcher Lambuth Angling Craftsman

Award "in recognition for his many contributions to steelhead fly-tying and fly-fishing knowledge."

In the 1980s and '90s, Johnson began to receive more national recognition for his flies and steelhead fly-fishing prowess. His flies were displayed at the Federation of Fly Fishers' 1984 conclave in West Yellowstone, and three years later he was featured in *Flyfishing* magazine in Robert Arnold's in-depth article "Walter Johnson, A Life on a River." That same year, in *American Fly Fishing: A History*, Paul Schullery described some new graceful steelhead flies and called Walt a "recent master." Johnson's contributions to fly fishing were well documented in *Backcasts*, Steve Raymond's 1989 book commemorating the 50th anniversary of the WFFC. Combs featured Johnson in his chapter on the Stilly in *Steelhead Fly Fishing* (1991) and devoted another entire chapter to him, wherein he suggested, "The stories of his days with Deer Creek steelhead stir the memory and prick the conscience

like nothing else in fly fishing."

The following year, Deke Meyer devoted a subsection of his *Advanced Fly Fishing for Steelhead* to "Walt Johnson Speys," and Dick Stewart and Farrow Allen referred to Walt as one of the "steelhead fly-fishing pioneers" in their book *Flies for Steelhead* and featured eight of his flies. Finally, in 1993, Arnold discussed Walt throughout his book *Steelhead Water* but most dramatically in his chapter "Dry Fly Dream." Here, he referred to Johnson as a "pioneer" with dry-fly techniques and said he had "a patience and quietude that is found only in the best trout fishers."

Although Johnson received many accolades and was a recognized authority on steelhead flies and fly fishing, he spent less and less time fishing. His wife was ill for several years, which kept him close to home, and he also devoted more and more of his time to the fish and their environment. From the mid-1980s on he played a significant role in the Deer Creek Policy Group and the Deer Creek

Restoration Fund, and by the early 1990s he was campaigning vigorously about the demise of his beloved Stilly. In a letter to John Shewey, Walt noted that the "once beautiful holding pools lie shallow and silt filled with favorite lies scoured beyond recognition." He went on to admit, "It saddens me to witness what has happened to this lovely stream." Crowds of anglers and their nontraditional techniques and tackle also upset him, and in another letter to Shewey in 1995, he noted that "the yo yo experts are out in force" and volunteered that he had not "been out to join the fiasco." The following year, Walt became outraged when anglers at the mouth of Deer Creek were "using leaded flies, lead heads, and bobbers for strike indicators thus degrading the true traditions of fly fishing."

Through his intervention, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife closed the area during the low water of summer. Part of Walt's testimony at a meeting held in Oso regarding this issue included his plea



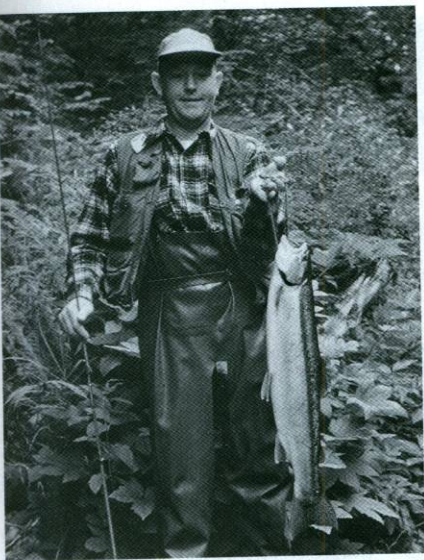
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Walt Johnson with a bright Stillaguamish summer-run steelhead and his favorite midge rod in the 1950s. (Ralph E. Wahl Photographic Collection, Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, Western Washington University)

to those in attendance to be “custodians” of the wild steelhead and urged everyone to “increase our efforts to provide sanctuary for these irreplaceable native trout.”

In his 1994 article “Stillaguamish

Reflections” in *Flyfishing*, he elaborated upon his love of dry-fly fishing and his midge rods, as well as some of the other pioneers on the Stilly. More recently, San Diego journalist Richard Louv, who traveled throughout the country for three years visiting fly anglers, wrote about Walt in his widely acclaimed book, *Fly-Fishing for Sharks: An American Journey* (2000). In a chapter titled “Fishing for Ghosts (or, Sasquatch of the Stilly),” Louv discussed his visit to Johnson’s home and how he got that nickname: Johnson’s fellow anglers would see Walt on the river, look away, look back, and he would be gone, fading “into the woods like Bigfoot.”

In 2002, just before Walt’s unexpected death, Shewey included a subsection on “Tying the Walt Johnson Flies” in his book *Spey Flies & Dee Flies: Their History & Construction*. Here, he noted that Walt’s flies “represent a rare combination of functional elegance, purposeful design and remarkable beauty.” Shewey further explained that the “beauty of Walt’s patterns derives from their quiet

simplicity and attention to detail. Each is a work of art.” Later that same year, Shewey featured Johnson in his inaugural “Innovative Fly Tier” column for *Northwest Fly Fishing* magazine.

Johnson’s death in February 2002 was a sad event for the fly-fishing community. His rich and productive life spanned several generations of steelheaders, and he was known among them as a talented and kind gentleman always willing to help someone. Tim Bohlin wrote an obituary for the WFFC’s *Creel Notes* and remembered Walt as “a great story teller that spoke interchangeably about friends old and new.” Similarly, Bob Wethern penned a beautiful remembrance of Johnson for the Flyfishers Club of Oregon’s *Flyline*. More recently, in Terry Hellekson’s massive *Fish Flies: The Encyclopedia of the Fly Tier’s Art*, Walt was described as “a Washington legend for steelheading and for the tying of beautiful flies.”

Jack W. Berryman is an angling author and historian who lives in Kirkland, Washington.

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