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A conversation with Jack Berryman

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Jack Berryman holds a wild Washington steelhead just before release.

Jack Berryman, UW professor of medical history and adjunct professor of orthopaedics and sports medicine, is an avid sportsman, historian and scholar. His newest book, *Fly-Fishing Pioneers & Legends of the Northwest*, received the 2007 Excellence in Craft Award from the Outdoor Writers Association of America (OWAA) a nonprofit, international organization that represents a diverse

group of professional communicators who are dedicated to informing the public about outdoor activities, issues and the responsible use of our natural resources. The book was praised for its depth of research, photography and graphics.

Pioneers and Legends (Northwest Fly Fishing, LLC, 2006) brings together Berryman's long-standing interest in Northwest history, fly-fishing, writing and research. The book profiles 23 fly-fishing pioneers from the Pacific Northwest, including British Columbia, California, Montana, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington.

Q: How long have you been fly-fishing?

A: I've been fly-fishing since I was 6 or 7 years old back in central Pennsylvania. There's a long-standing history of fly-fishing and conservation on the East Coast.

Q: What is it about fly-fishing that captures your passion?

A: I love fly-fishing because I like to go where the fish live — cold, fresh, flowing rivers that eventually lead to salt water. This sport takes you to some of the most spectacularly gorgeous scenery that nature has to offer in Oregon, Russia, Alaska, British Columbia. I love seeking wild places and wild fish.

Fly-fishing is about trying different methods, lines and making different flies.

It's the challenge and catching a fish with something that you've made — a fly made out of feathers, hair, or tinsel — that you hope replicates what the fish are eating. It's pretty exciting. There's an art and science and challenge involved in it. And, in fly-fishing there's the solitude.

Q: What fueled your interest in writing your book, *Pioneers and Legends*?

A: As an historian, I asked myself, what was fly-fishing like in the 1800's and 1900's? Who were those who lived and fished here? What did they think? I looked at Northwest fly-fishing through the eyes of the individuals who shaped it. There was a long-tradition of rich literature about fly-fishing on the East Coast, but not on the West.

Fly-fishing is a long-standing recreation that many people are and have been involved in, including Jimmy Carter and Dwight Eisenhower. When they got a break from the presidency, they went trout fishing.

I've taken all of my curiosities and passions and put them all together, resulting in my current book, *Pioneers and Legends*.

Q: How has fly-fishing changed over the years?

A: There has been a tremendous amount of innovation. It started with people using all natural materials — feathers of quail, duck, geese, and fur of deer, rabbit and squirrel. Synthetic fibers came later — people started innovating with yarn and that progressed through the use of new materials and different ways of tying flies. There were patterns and recipes for tying flies. Patterns required giving the flies a name and writing down the recipe step by step.

There have been technological changes, as well. Rods have evolved from bamboo to fiberglass to graphite, which is lighter and stronger. Lines have evolved from braided horsehair to monofilament and other synthetic materials.

Q: Was there a commonality among the people you profiled in your book?

A: Yes, they all had a great love of wild fish and the outdoors — the water, the wilderness, and the challenge involved in catching a fish on a fly.

Q: How do you reconcile fly-fishing with your interest in conservation?

A. Sportsmen have been at the forefront of major conservation movements because they love the species and the environs in which they live and need to survive. They are also some of the first to see environmental threats to a species. Because of a lot of logging, farming, and other activities, a lot of habitat has and continues to disappear.

Northwest fishing for steelhead and salmon became a passion for me in the mid-1970s and I immediately got involved in the conservation movement. I'm interested in the conservation of cold-water fish — salmon, steelhead, and trout — species native to the West Coast that leave fresh water, go to the ocean to spend their adult life, and then return to fresh water to spawn. I am past president of the Wild Steelhead Coalition.

By the way, did you know that Washington's official state fish is the steelhead and not the salmon?

Q: So, it seems that fly-fishing is an opportunity for you to commune with nature.

A: Fly-fishing is a beautiful way to spend time. I've got canoes, rafts, and boats. I like to spend my time in the water. Fly-fishing allows me to enter the natural world, appreciate it, and leave it alone. Native Americans see this. They worship the salmon, which is central to their culture. I can also see a piece of life that's been here for hundreds of years and become part of it. Fly-fishing allows you to step into that world.

If I don't catch a fish, it's no big deal, I'm out in all of this beauty — I see eagles and other wildlife. Catching a fish is an extra bonus. I practice catch and release with barbless hooks. I'm not doing it for food — but for the skill and the challenge.

Since I'm not fishing for food, the fish are not harmed and are released. Catch-and-release fishing — now that's a sea change from what it used to be.

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Berryman is the official historian for the American College of Sports Medicine, a founder and past president of the Pacific Northwest Historians Guild, and is currently a member of the advisory committee for recreational sports programs at the UW. He is the author of *Sport and Exercise Science: Essays in the History of Sports Medicine*, (Univ. of Illinois Press, 1992), and *Out of Many, One: A History of the American College of Sports Medicine* (Human Kinetics, 1995).