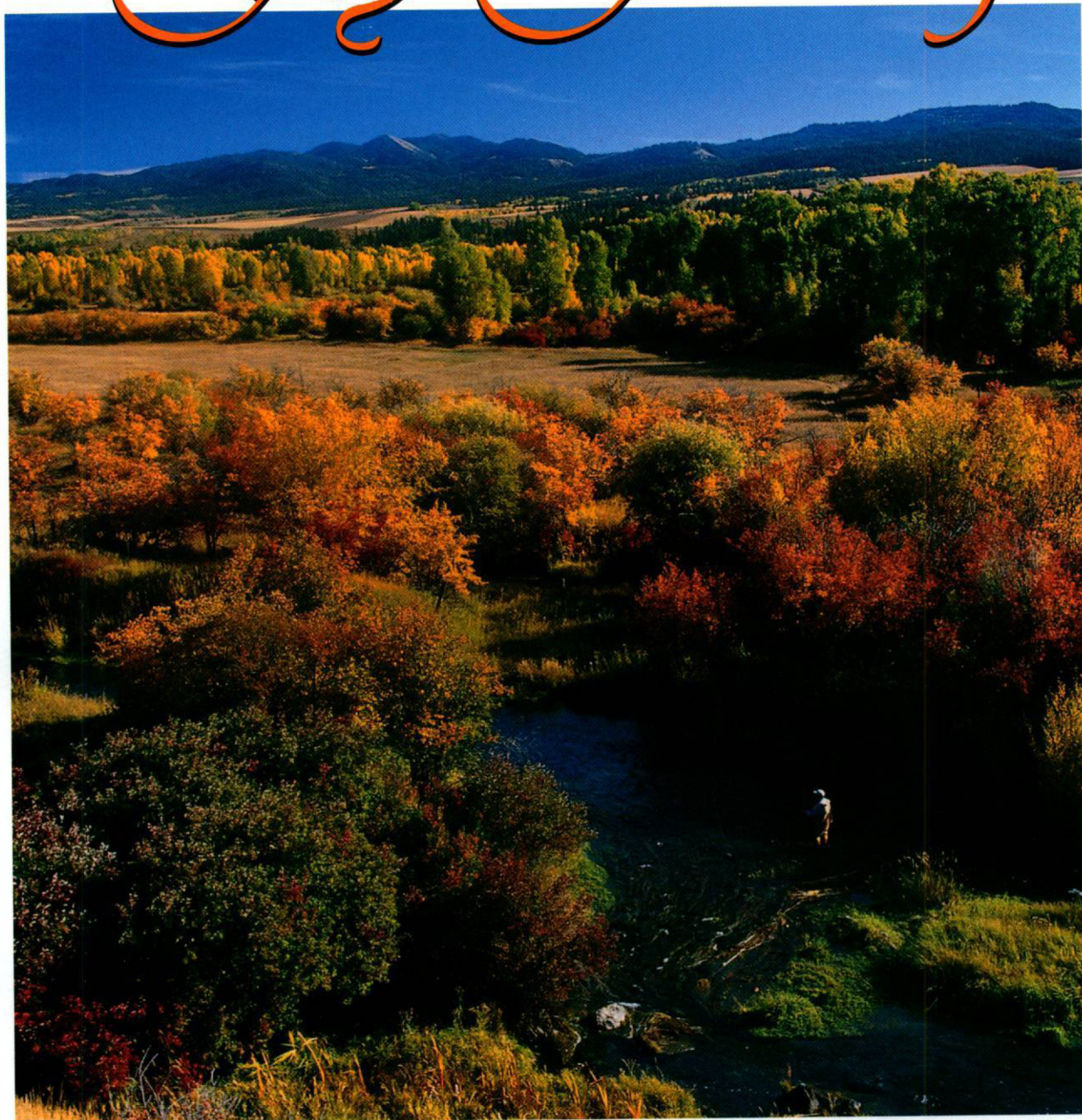


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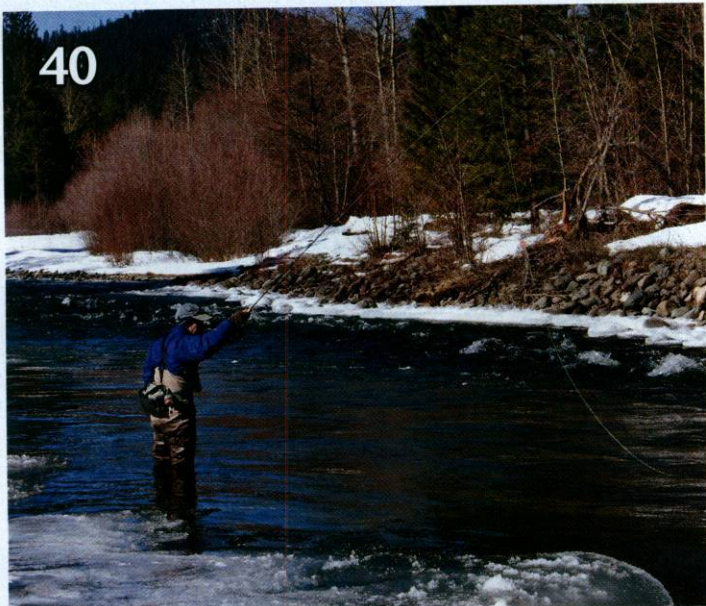
## *Fly Fishing*



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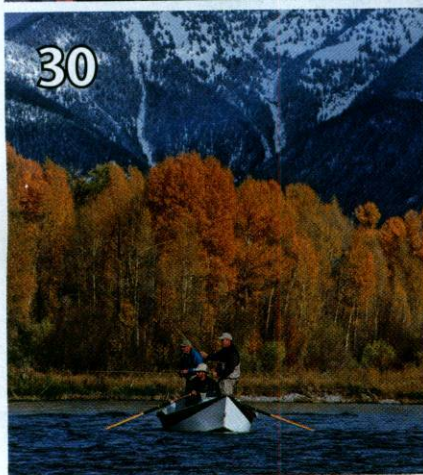
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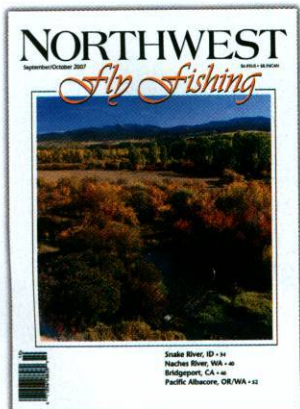


Cover: Autumn colors emblazon an Idaho Valley.

Photo by: John Juracek



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# Pioneers & Legends

Alfred S. Knudson (1901–1980): Commercial Fly Tier, Popularizer of the “Wet Spider” Fly Style, and Pioneer Steelheader in Oregon, California, and Washington

By Jack W. Berryman

Alfred S. Knudson was born on August 11, 1901, in Flandreau, South Dakota, a small town on the banks of the Big Sioux River. Al, as he was known to his friends, began fishing at age 7 and spent many days with a long cane pole dangling bait in the local mill pond. But by the age of 12, he graduated to artificial lures and a bait-casting outfit. As a teenager earning his own money, Knudson bought more-expensive casting reels, roamed the shorelines of rivers and lakes, began building his own rods, and “had my first fling at tying flies, mainly on spinners.”

He left South Dakota in 1923 and moved to Marysville, Washington, where he worked for his uncle, who operated a box mill and shingle factory. He soon caught a sea-run cutthroat on a fly in the nearby Snohomish River. This peaked his interest in tying flies, and he developed a small sideline selling fishing tackle and flies. He was married just long enough to have a daughter, Peggy. He divorced soon thereafter, and as one close friend recalled, he “essentially married fishing. . . occupation, marriage, family, and other concerns all took a back seat to fly fishing.”

Knudson became intrigued with steelhead fly fishing in 1926 and, because of faulty equipment, lost the first several fish he hooked. After making his own rod and winning a Shakespeare “Steelhead Trout Reel” for selling *Field & Stream* subscriptions, he finally caught his first summer steelhead in 1927 from the North Fork Stillaguamish. That same year, he took his first winter-run fish on a fly in the South Fork Stillaguamish. He learned to rub graphite on his fly line to facilitate sinking and shooting ability. By the end of 1928, he was regularly catching summer steelhead on dry flies and taking a few winter fish on sunken flies.

As the Great Depression hit the country in 1929, Knudson lost his job and befriended a former comedian from Oregon who had traveled to Washington to borrow money for a new business. Knudson packed his belongings in his new friend’s car and traveled with him down to Grants Pass, Oregon. Here, in the Del Rogue Hotel, he began tying flies in a front window display, sleeping



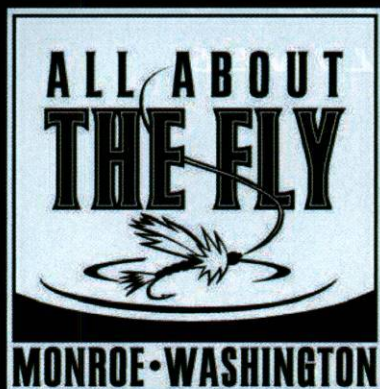
Al Knudson with a 15-pound steelhead from British Columbia’s Kispiox River in September 1956. Photograph by Ralph Wabl courtesy of Jack Hutchinson. Wet Spider (also known as Grey or Yellow Spider) (inset) Tied by Al Knudson, courtesy of Jack Hutchinson

in the back room of the chiropractor’s office with which he shared the space. He noted that “a good supply of flies enabled me to get around a lot during the depression,” and he liked the fact that “when hitchhiking, I could always help out with gas money by selling a few flies in whatever town I happened to be in.”

He tied all of the popular patterns at the time and supplied about 20 stores and fishing camps on a regular basis. It was a tough time, but Knudson recalled, “I did end up with a lot of trout and steelhead fishing.”

By 1930, Knudson had moved to Medford, Oregon, where he opened a small shop and supplied flies to about 16 stores. He fished the Rogue regularly for steelhead

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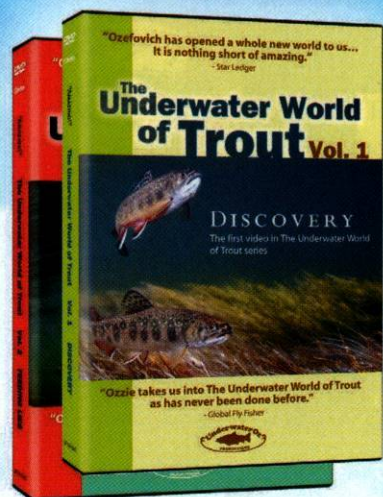


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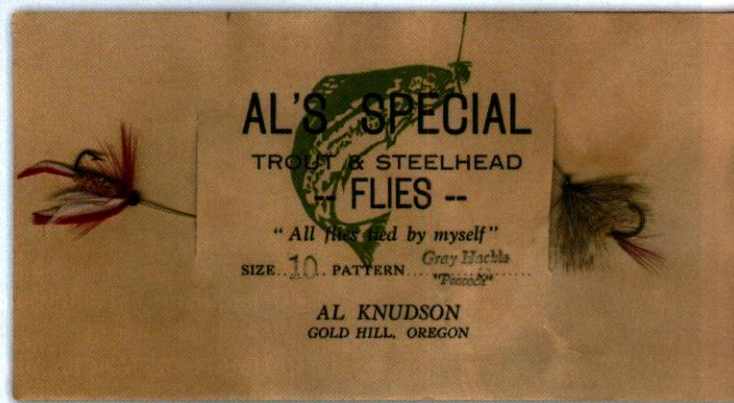
using his favorite fly at the time, the Parmacheene Belle. And when he returned briefly to Everett to fish the Stilly and visit friends, he developed his Stillaguamish Belle. On one occasion, while fishing the Rogue during winter at Hardy Riffle, he hooked six steelhead on a new fly he dubbed Al's Rogue. The news of this rare feat quickly spread, and Knudson started to show by example that winter steelhead could be caught with flies.

As the Depression lingered, Knudson moved again, this time to Gold Hill, Oregon, where he fished the Rogue year-round for steelhead to eat and sell for grocery money. At this time, about 1931, he began the innovative packaging of his flies in small cellophane envelopes. After a year back in Everett, between 1931 and 1932, Knudson moved back to Gold Hill, and then a year later, back to Medford. Here, he met and befriended a retired British army captain who loved to fly fish. On one occasion they drove down to fish California's Eel River, where Knudson landed three steelhead at the popular Bridge Pool. Unbeknownst to him, he had been observed by Sam Wells, a well-known sporting goods dealer in Eureka. So the next day when Knudson took several cards of his steelhead flies to Wells's shop to sell, Wells remarked, "You sold those flies yesterday when you caught those three fish."

Al's Spider, as Knudson called it, developed gradually as a cutthroat fly in the early 1930s. He said he could not "take credit for the dry spider but I did evolve the wet." It became a steelhead pattern after Dan Ashton, former editor of the *Everett Daily*

*Herald*, fished with a size-10 Al's Spider on the Rogue only to have the hook straightened by a steelhead. "That was the start of tying Spiders on steelhead hooks," Knudson remembered.

By the mid-1930s, Knudson's reputation and his flies were becoming increasingly known in northern California and southwestern Oregon. The sport shop in Klamath Falls advertised, "We also carry a full line of tackle, featuring Al Knudson hand-tied flies," and his flies were also sold at Lamport's Sport Shop in Medford as well as in Sam Wells's Sport Shop in Eureka. In January 1935, the Medford newspaper reported that "C.J. Chord and Al Knutson [sic], local fishing enthusiasts, have again done what many people consider the impossible—caught three large steelhead on flies." Also around this time, Knudson began fishing the Umpqua River, where he developed another steelhead pattern, his White Streamer, or White Marabou. These were usually tied on size-4/0 hooks for better visibility in high, stained winter water. Knudson admitted tying this pattern as large as 7/0.



An Al's Special display card with two snelled trout flies attached. Knudson was one of the first commercial tiers to display his flies in this manner in the early 1930s. He also made clear to prospective buyers, "All flies tied by myself." Courtesy of Jack Hutchinson

During the late 1930s and early 1940s, Knudson lived and worked at the Cal-Ore Tavern in Dorris, California, south of Klamath Falls. He corresponded with Clarence Shoff of Shoff's Fishing Tackle Company in Kent, Washington, and Stan Riddle of Riddle's Sporting Goods in Everett, Washington, about

flies and steelhead fishing. Based on his vast experience by this time, Knudson believed that winter steelhead would come up to a fly and argued against the common belief that flies had to "dredge the bottom." He also did not think that fly pattern made much difference. He is believed to have pioneered winter steelhead fly fishing in 1940 on the South Umpqua when he landed a January fish on his White Streamer.

During World War II, Knudson feared gas rationing would prohibit his vagabond lifestyle and curtail his fishing, so he moved back to Washington in early 1943. He rented a cabin in Oso on the North Fork "Stilly," where he began to perfect his streamers into specialty flies for steelhead and caught his largest steelhead, a 16-pound, 8-ounce fish, on January 27. If steelhead caught in January would have been eligible for the *Field & Stream* annual contest that year, his fish would have placed second. Ken McLeod (*Northwest Fly Fishing*, Winter 2006) reported the large fish in an article titled "Knudson's Luck" in his regular *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* outdoor column, as did an article in the *Everett Herald*. Knudson spent most of the next few summers fishing the North Fork and purchased a campsite beside Wes Drain's cabin near the confluence of Deer Creek in 1946. Accordingly, he joined the small band of devoted steelhead fly fishermen who either owned property or were fishing "regulars" on these hallowed waters. This group included Ralph Wahl, Enos Bradner, Sandy Bacon, Ralph Olson, Walt Johnson, and Ken McLeod, among others.

Knudson's prowess for catching steelhead on flies year-round became even more widely known and appreciated through the 1940s and '50s. He landed fish large enough to place fifth in 1946, seventh in 1949, and seventh again in 1952 in the annual *Field & Stream* contests. All three fish—the first from the Skykomish and the latter two from the Skagit River—took his Al's Yellow Hammer, or Al's Special Streamer, a fly he devised based on the Conway Special developed by Seattle



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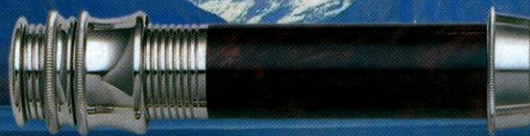
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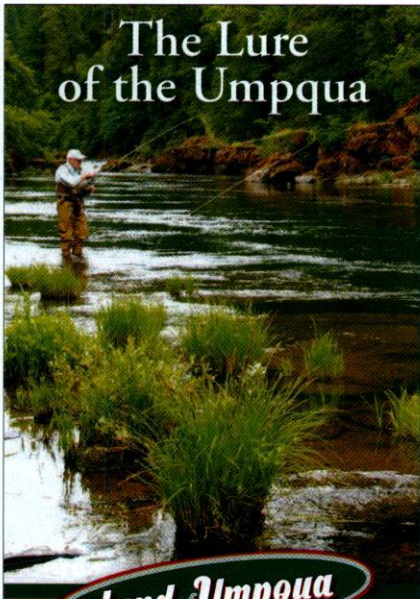


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angler Dan Conway. Local papers continued to write stories about Knudson, and his ability was so admired that Walt Johnson wrote him a letter asking if he could “go along sometime on a winter steelhead fly fishing trip,” admitting that he was “not too familiar with the good fly water on the Skagit but would certainly like to improve my education on the art of taking steelheads.”

Knudson was one of the founders of the Evergreen Fly Fishing Club in the Everett area in 1954, and the club patch features a Knudson Spider displayed on a green background. He is also pictured tying a fly on the club Web site. Later that year, A.J. McClane’s book, *The American Angler*, included Knudson on the list of the 50 largest steelhead taken over the past 10 years entered into the *Field & Stream* “Western Rainbow Trout—Fly Casting” division. Knudson continued his record fish ways in 1955 and 1956, placing ninth and eighth respectively, in the *Field & Stream* annual contest. By this time, too, Knudson and Wahl were fishing partners and close friends, as evidenced by the numerous photographs of Knudson in Wahl’s extensive collection.

By the mid-1960s, Knudson retired from his work as a custodian and quit winter steelhead fishing. He still fished occasionally for summer fish, but for the most part, the majority of Knudson’s fishing was in stories, while his main physical activity was tying flies. He still served as a fly-tying instructor for the Evergreen Club, loved to reminisce and show others his photo album, and met several close friends on a regular basis for meals. Dressing up for him was wear-

ing a bolo tie. He had trouble listening and communicating in crowds because of his lifelong hearing difficulties. Yet Knudson had a legion of friends and admirers who began to adopt his style of tying. Among that group were Alec Jackson and Russ Miller, as well as

those who developed their own “spiders,” like Walt Johnson’s Spectral Spider, Les Johnson’s Partridge Spider, and Roy Patrick’s Chukar Spider.

Always generous with his flies, Knudson started putting them in plastic coin cases and giving them away to anyone who showed an interest.

As he neared 70, his significant and pioneering efforts began to be recognized more and more. Trey Combs featured “Al’s Special” in his regular *Salmon Trout Steelheader* (STS) column in early 1970 and asked Knudson to

be the featured tier of the *Parmacheene Belle* for another column. The Washington Steelhead Flyfishers made Knudson an honorary member in 1972, and he was accorded much attention by Combs in his *Steelhead Fly Fishing and Flies* (1976). Fly-fishing historian Pat Trotter interviewed Knudson at his Marysville apartment in 1976 and wrote about the “Knudson Spider” the following year in STS. In 1978, Jack Hutchinson, a former Patrick’s Fly shop employee, fly-fishing historian, and a friend of Knudson’s since the 1960s, donated a collection of Knudson’s original flies to the Museum of American Fly Fishing in Vermont. They appeared later that year in a color plate in an article in *The American Fly Fisher*.

Knudson was awarded the highest honor of the Washington Fly Fishing



Al’s Special (also known as Al’s Yellow Hammer)



White Streamer



Black Bear

Original Knudson steelhead patterns courtesy of Jack Hutchinson

Club when they named him recipient of their 1978 Letcher Lambuth Angling Craftsman Award. In *The Greased Line*, the newsletter of the Washington Steelhead Flyfishers, Knudson was acknowledged: "A quiet man, he is the forgotten pioneer of our sport."

Knudson died in Marysville on November 25, 1980. His memorial service was officiated by Reverend Robert McLaughlin, a fly-fishing friend who credited Knudson with teaching him to tie flies and guiding him to his first steelhead. The service was mostly attended by fly anglers, both young and old, who spoke of their appreciation "for this unsophisticated, soft-spoken gentleman for whom fly fishing was a way of life." These words, written by McLaughlin in a beautiful "Salute to the Spider Man," printed in *Flyfishing the West* in 1981, were echoed by everyone who knew Knudson.

Since his death, others have written testimonials to Knudson's innovations, character, and pioneering efforts. His many contributions have been touted in books such as Combs's *Steelhead Fly Fishing*, Les Johnson's *Fly-Fishing Coastal Cutthroat Trout*, and John Shewey's *Steelhead Flies*, as well as magazine articles by Walt Johnson and Pat Trotter. Johnson suggested that "when Oregon and Washington anglers reverently speak of legendary fly fishermen, one name probably stands out above all the rest and rightly so, for Al Knudson undoubtedly caught more steelhead on a fly than most modern anglers dream about."

He went on to say, "If there ever was a Mr. Steelhead, Al was the one."

The author would like to thank Jack Hutchinson of Everett, Washington, for his assistance in assembling much of the information for this article as well as for providing several original Knudson flies for photographing.

*Jack W. Berryman is an angling historian and author of Fly-Fishing Pioneers & Legends of the Northwest. He lives in Kirkland, Washington.*

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