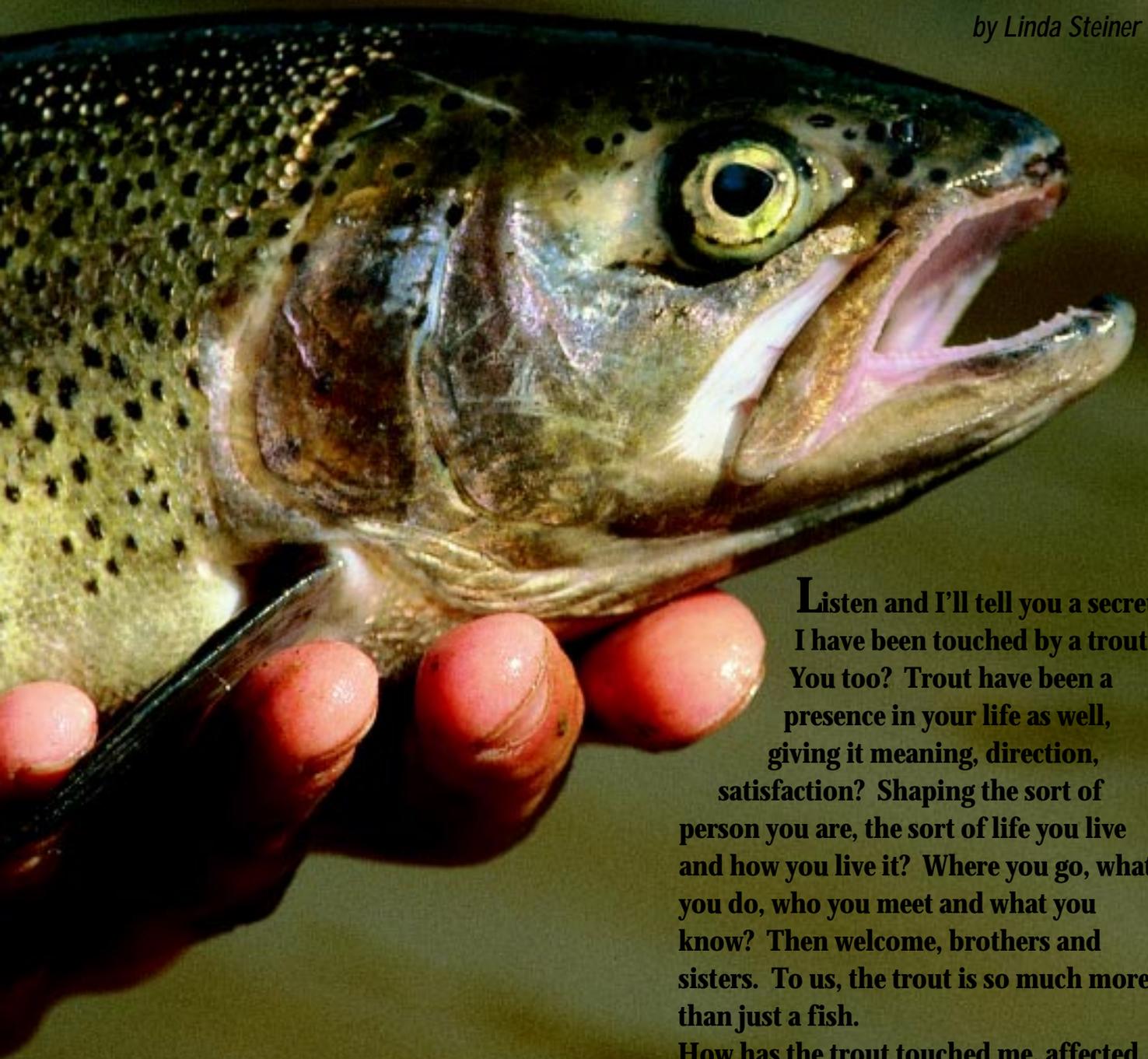


Trout:

More Than Just a Fish

by Linda Steiner



Listen and I'll tell you a secret. I have been touched by a trout. You too? Trout have been a presence in your life as well, giving it meaning, direction, satisfaction? Shaping the sort of person you are, the sort of life you live and how you live it? Where you go, what you do, who you meet and what you know? Then welcome, brothers and sisters. To us, the trout is so much more than just a fish.

How has the trout touched me, affected my life, my soul, and my outlook?

To me, the trout was at first an invitation. I went fishing, and the trout beckoned me to look into a world of water that flashed cold and clear as a diamond, yet moved like a living thing. The world of the trout, I saw, included the life-nurturing stream and the green places beyond that it fed, and that fed it. The trout showed me the truth that this wild world was the real world and the place I belonged, not that artificial world of concrete and mall traffic I find myself in too often. The trout's home was my home.

The trout taught me, too, that the living world is a seamless world. By paying attention to the lessons of the trout and its home, I saw how this water planet moves that precious liquid through cycles and recycles. The journey begins, perhaps, in the melting of a single icicle, and goes on to where the trickles gather and the waters head downhill.

On their way, I saw the streams drink in what the land around them served, like the tart flavor of acidic soils with their hemlocks and oaks, their sandstones and quartz. Or they took on the sweet flavor of rich and fertile lands, of watercress, limestone, and clay.

Follow the rivers down, the trout said to me, even to where they become an elemental earth force, a place of primeval pressure and speed, of waterfall and flume, surges and slack, and at last I will give you the sea. But without the trout to guide me, to help me understand what was there at the beginning of the journey—the droplet—and to encourage me to follow the story to its end, I doubt the ocean would mean so much.

Trout have brought me the seasons in a fullness I would not have known otherwise. At the trout's urging I went outdoors to witness what I might otherwise have missed and what I know I can never replace. Trout were the reason I walked along the mountain streams to see spring hang bare trees with bright blossoms. They told me to come outside to see their namesake among the wildflowers, the trout lily, blooming along forested waterways at the time of the traditional trout season opener in mid-April. I never was much for poetry, until I followed the trout and saw, firsthand, "a world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wildflower."

When summertime struck and I sweltered in front of the fan, the trout teased me into going where there was natural air conditioning, along deep-woods streams. While the city was hot and noisy, the hemlock-shadowed world of the trout was cool with damp moss, serenaded by birdsong. If I had foresight enough to take a spare pail in the car, trout fishing gave me the bounty of the season, from morels to blackberries. The poet was right again, said the trout: "I and you pocketless of a dime may purchase the pick of the earth."



Grannom caddis

In autumn, following the trout took me to see the glory of the season times two, as flame-hued leaves doubled in the water reflection. Trout even gave me a new view on winter, especially along never-freeze spring creeks and the Lake Erie steelhead tributaries. Thanks to the trout, I've seen the water's warm breath bedeck shoreline trees and bushes with ice that glistens like a thousand jewels.

Trout have given me the seasons and all of their weather. Surprisingly, I found some of the best days to be outdoors and fishing. Those not in the know, who have not been touched by a trout, thought they were having the most fun by staying snug and warm inside. Ha!

The trout was a tantalizing prize dangled before me, and to catch it I needed to look beyond the simple fish to decipher its alien world of water. If I wanted to be a successful trout angler, I had to see past a surface that was sometimes opaque, and that hid its secrets, and was sometimes transparent, an ever-changing window to the depths.

The stream secrets that I wanted to decipher were practical ones, but they led me to skills as strange as an alchemist's. As I grew to know trout fishing and trout, I became intrigued with fly fishing, the myriad shapes and colors of artificial flies, and the wonder of what they represented.

Sure, you can catch trout on worms and cheese and corn, I knew. But grocery store baits are not part of the neighborhood community of the stream. They don't live in the stream, don't secret themselves in dim hideaways between boulders, or rise heavenward on new-formed wings, a living miracle. They don't belong.

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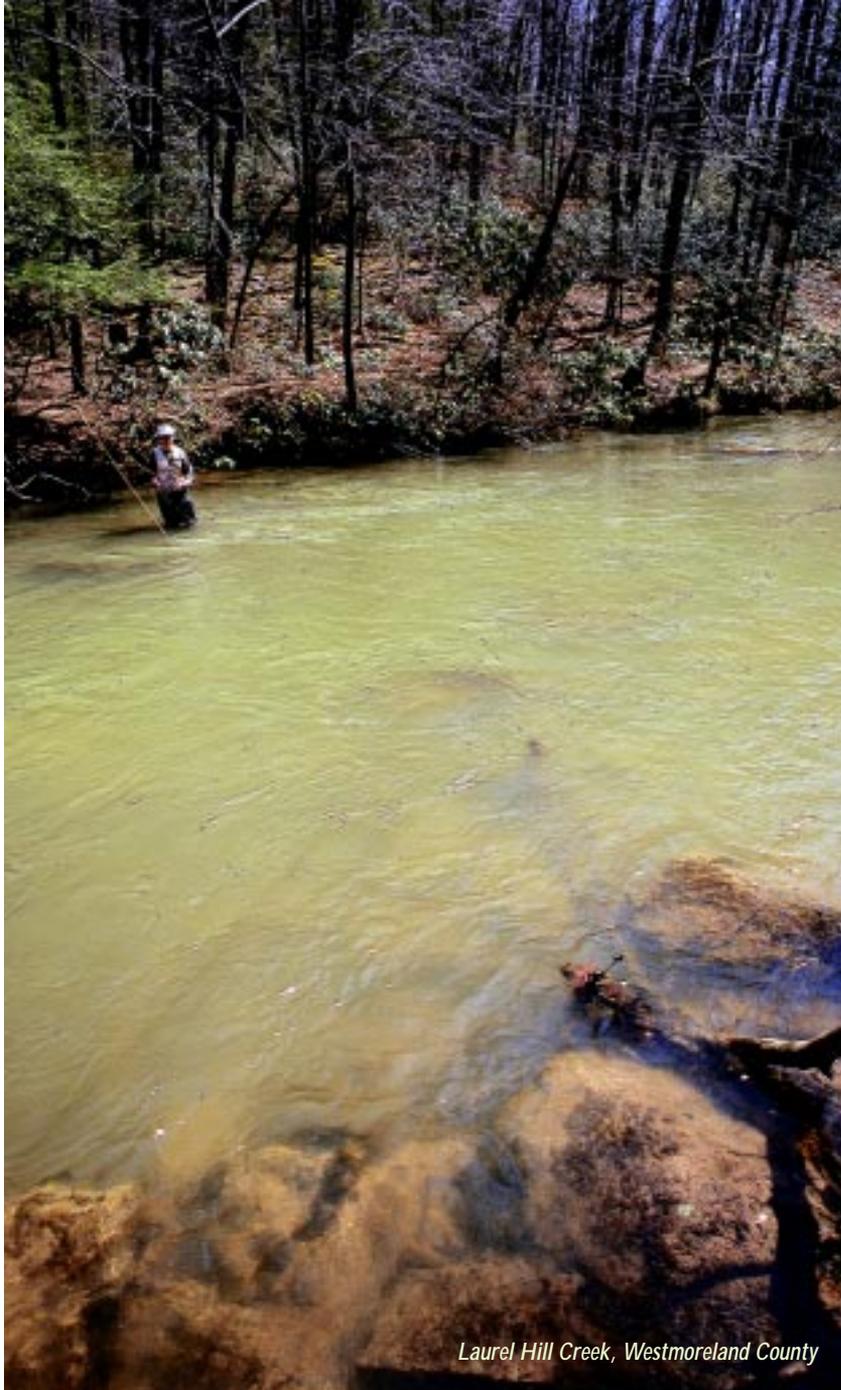
the water itself, something to be celebrated, not swatted. Trout taught me that pollution-sensitive insects, like caddises, stoneflies and mayflies, were indicators of whether or not a stream was a healthy one, a fit home for waterlife, or if it was sick and degraded. The insects flying from my home creek, said the trout, were the waterway's badge of honor.

But such romance was not everything. As a practicing trout angler with a job to do, I learned that if I looked at the underside of a mayfly against the light, I'd have a better chance of getting the color and size right. The bottom-line task was to match the hatch, or at least find a thing of feather, fur and metal in my fly box that looked like the tiny winged things on the stream that the trout were eating.

I'm proud of what the trout have taught me about flies, the real ones and the artificial ones, including how to make them from scratch. I've learned skills I never expected to possess, and at one time never knew I lacked.

Like casting a fly rod. Although I began by flinging a spinning rod, I always admired the fluid grace of a well-cast fly line. Fly casting married the best of an old-fashioned way of fishing to the advantages of modern designs and materials. The rod had changed from bamboo to graphite, but the trick was still getting the nearly weightless fly across the water by throwing the heavy fly line. The answer remained rhythm, speed and timing. Don't discard all the old ways the trout told me, and they were right.

Trout fishing is an intellectual pursuit more than a physical one, I learned, and the stream is a series of brain teasers. The question was posed: If the fast water breaks like so around the rock, where will the trout be? The trout always gave a simple, direct response, a pass/fail grade, in the wink of a rise form and a fly that vanished ... or didn't.



Laurel Hill Creek, Westmoreland County

More quizzes lay in other stream sections. Sometimes the answer was "in the shadows," "where the current eddies," or "in the deep-cut run." Reading what instream obstructions do to water motion and what that, in turn, means to the trout and my next cast became one of the most intriguing aspects of the sport.

Because I knew trout, drowned logs became not just something decaying and messy that had gotten into a stream, and maybe needed to be hauled out. They were returning nutrients to water life and the spaces between were great places for trout to hide. The log tangles were also better places to cast to than to catch a scrappy trout out of, on gossamer-thin line. What fell into a stream after a storm, I learned, was usually good for the creek and everything that lived in it.

I found the trout's schoolrooms everywhere. One day my

class was at Fishing Creek, in Clinton County. The lesson on that spring-fed stream was that even on a hot July afternoon, I could find trout rising in the dark shadows of leafy branches. I learned I could catch them if I cast quietly and accurately to the far edge of the flow. Another memorable class was on Oswayo Creek in northern Potter County, where I learned not to discount what under-bridge culverts, which I had viewed as the ugly work of man, can do for fishing. The best trout I caught all day were in the big hole that had been dug out below the tubes by the constricted stream.

Trout taught me patience, the temperament to sit back and let the swimmers have the best pool on Slate Run for the afternoon. The bathers were on the creek in the heat of the day, splashing in the icy water. I fished upstream and returned at dusk to find the swimmers gone and the trout still there, and I had my chance at this shared resource.

If you've been touched by a trout, one bonus is that you get to travel. Before going on the road, you have the happiness of

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hours of armchair journeys, going through maps, books, magazines and brochures, planning trips you'll take and dreaming over trips you won't, but having fun thinking about them all, anyway.

"Have vehicle and waders ... will travel" might be a good motto for us trout anglers. Trout have spurred me to go out and see what is best in the outdoors in my home state of Pennsylvania. Like the tumbling Lehigh River, the cliché-clear Loyalsock, the lure of the Big Pine, and the legends of Hammersley Fork and Young Woman's Creek. The fishing may not have been evenly good in all, but the scenery was all worth the miles it took to get there.

How far can you go if you've been touched by a trout? I've been encouraged to travel beyond state boundaries to try for brook trout in the lakes of Minnesota and Maine and for their near relative, the landlocked Atlantic salmon, in the wild Penobscot. Following the trout can take you anywhere in the country, or you can go cosmopolitan, to New Zealand, Argentina, Scotland, and more. If you're touched by a trout, the world is yours, and all roads lead to water.

I owe the trout for overnights when I roughed it, in soggy tents, and when I didn't. As a middle-aged angler who likes a hot shower and a pillow, I've found many comfortable bed-and-breakfasts along trout streams. But as one who hasn't given up angling adventure, I've bought new hiking boots and a pack rod, and I'm shopping for a mountain tent. I have the trout to thank, too, for my forays into after-fishing campfire cooking and for those finds of great restaurants on the road, when I didn't have to do the dishes.

"Show me the money"? Trout showed me the money that was in fishing and that what I was doing for fun was feeding and clothing families somewhere. The Fish and Boat Commission told me there are about 1.3 million total anglers in the state. Angling's total economic impact in Pennsylvania each year is a whopping \$1.3 billion. That means each one of us who fishes generates \$1,000 in positive revenue for the economy. Because there are about 875,000 trout anglers in the state, that's about \$875 million we contribute to the economy. I found out recently that if the outdoor sports of hunting and fishing were lumped together as one business, they would be in the Top Ten of the Fortune 500 companies. Let spectator sports beat that!

Yet, going trout fishing, I discovered, is a bargain. For me as a resident adult the license costs just \$17.00 plus the \$5.50 trout/salmon permit. I barely fill one corner of the grocery shopping cart for that, let alone take a family to the movies. And the one-time "admission fee" buys me trout fishing 365 days a year in Pennsylvania. I may have to travel to a special-regulation area that's open when other streams are closed, but that's an incentive to try new water.

Although economic studies of the dollar value of trout fishing take into account equipment purchases, like rods and reels, I wonder if they count all the arts and crafts, like rod building and fly tying, that the fish has spawned. Then there are the volumes on the trout fishing shelf at the local book

store that I am slowly, but surely, transferring to my home library. My mountain bike, to pedal to back-country trouting, cost \$600, and the sport utility vehicle that does the same on drivable roads neared the \$30,000 mark. You can certainly get yourself in deep over trout fishing.

Following the story of money and the trout, I was told the dark side. How streams were clean, cold and trout-filled at first, and how people's expansion and encroachment brought the taint and kill of byproducts of mining, industry, agriculture and crowded cities. Trout have led me to places where living streams died mixing with orange-stained outflows of acid mine drainage, a sad legacy of uncontrolled coal mining. But they have also taken me to creeks that have returned from this death, where clean-up of mined sites and water treatment have made the trout a home again.

I've been privileged to know some of the heroes that have helped make these comebacks happen, some in state government, like the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission and the Department of Environmental Protection, and lawmakers who instituted legislation that let the reclamations happen. In addition, I've met some heroes in the private sector, who are using conservation technologies to protect water quality while still conducting profit-making business. And, not least, I'm inspired by those volunteers for the trout, sportsmen and sportswomen who on their own and in organized groups are making a difference for the coldwater resource.

I was surprised to discover that being involved with trout has meant being involved with people. Many are folks I meet casually on the stream, a quick "Hi, catching anything?", a friendly smile and they pass out of my life, leaving a warm glow, like a comet tail, in their wake. Trout fishing has introduced me to friends, close companions I have counted on through the years, real "keepers" who exhibit their trophy worth every time we're together.

I have the trout to thank for the special times it has given me with loved ones in my family, mom and dad, brother, niece and nephew, and, of course, husband. Memories of opening day are as precious as those of Christmas morning.

Remembrances of loved ones who are gone are also wrapped up in the trout—my father-in-law with his corn-cob pipe and wry grin, knee-deep in Will's Creek's Gooseberry Hole, with a trout on. Trout have let me be there for some life stories near their end, and I've been there for beginnings as well, when a young person catches his first trout and is hooked into the brotherhood.

The trout has brought me togetherness with others, yet it has also taken me to quiet places, where aloneness is a blessing and the only words spoken are those whispered by the water and the wind. The trout has taken me, too, to a quiet place within myself, toward more peace and understanding than I had before I knew the fish and its world. Touched by a trout, I've been tapped by a magic wand, or is it kissed and awakened ... and I don't even mind the slime. □