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When Pine Creek Was Dying, Bob
McCullough Stood Up to Save It

By Dave Wonderlich

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HERO AT THE HEADWATERS

When Pine Creek Was Dying, Bob McCullough Stood Up to Save It

By Dave Wonderlich

Great trout fishing on Pine Creek didn't happen by accident. It took incredible work on the part of an individual with a dream of not only what could be but what should be. It took irrepressible stamina and willpower to persist. Oh, and one more thing—it took someone with an unwavering appreciation and love of Pine Creek and its hallowed valleys with hidden pools, runs, glides, and cold-water tributaries to bring the degraded water back to its original glory. The person who did all this, almost single-handedly, was Bob McCullough.

The whole story began many years before the decreasing fly hatches and the Babb Creek acid mine drainage problem took center stage. There was a group of night trout fishermen from back in the lumbering era who lived in Jersey Shore; Bob's grandfather was one of them. Bob related to me that, "He took me along one night, and I enjoyed it. I've been night fishing ever since." My friendship with Bob started in the late 1960s at a Susquehanna Valley Trout Unlimited (TU) meeting. The individuals at the meeting divided up into fishing teams whereby two anglers would go to the various watersheds and, along with fishing, would document obvious practices of individuals polluting the creeks. Pictures were taken and team members would witness and corroborate the occurrence. Back at the next TU meeting member lawyers would put the complaints together. I remember one infraction involved a cabin that had the inhabitants' washing machine on the back porch simply pumping the soapy water directly into Lycoming Creek! It was a very impressive group of leaders to this twenty-one-year-old—one I'll never forget as some of the names are still sharp in my mind: Horace Hand, Bill O'Connor, Justice Baum, and, of course Bob, the leader.

Not only was Bob's understanding of trout and aquatic insects legendary, his ability, in the dark, to get them fastened to the business end of his line was the stuff of national fame. And, this knowledge and skill was honed even further through his lifelong vocation and extensive volunteer work to fit the challenge

of addressing mine acid and pollution on our trout waters. Bob was an environmental planner for Lycoming County; he was a director of national Trout Unlimited and past state and Lycoming chapter president. Bob was chairman of the Pennsylvania Defense Foundation, a member of the Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Citizen's Advisory Council, DEP's Solid Waste Advisory Committee, the Heinz Foundation, where his knowledge helped the Western Pennsylvania Watershed Group, and he was chairman of the board of directors of the Babb Creek Watershed Association, Inc. Bob would not like it that I just listed all that about him—he was the first to give credit to everyone else who made it possible for him to work toward his hopes and dreams of the environment being all that it could be.

During the 1970s and 80s anglers began to notice a change in the flies present on Pine Creek below Blackwell. It was nothing you could put an exact date on, or even a particular year. It was an event that was cumulative and took a toll over ten to twelve years. Fly fishing people tend to live by the rhythms dictated by their favorite aquatic hatches. The typical seasons at that time started with the early spring stone flies and progressed through the Hendrickses, Red Quills, Quill Gordons, Paraleps, Blue-Winged Olives, and caddis. The big March Browns came on and all was well in the lives of the fishermen and fisherwomen. Coming quickly after were the Drakes: Brown, Slate, Green, and Yellow—people came from all around to experience the legendary Pine Creek hatches. There were good fall hatches as well but back then few fished after fall leaves started to change. In the first few years, individuals thought the decline in flies in any given hatch was a part of a normal cycle dictated by abnormally warm water in the summer, a bad winter with a lot of anchor ice, or just a poor reproductive season for the aquatic insects. After a few years of the cycle not reversing itself, anglers began to notice the lack of numbers of flies within hatches, they noticed a lack of peak-hatch, and they started to be aware that some hatches were actually disappearing altogether.

Gray line: Bob McCullough fishes Grays Run, a Lycoming County stream.

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Tom Finkbiner, owner of Wolfe's General Store and Slate Run Tackle Shop, used to take a short ride with Nick Niklaus around three or three-thirty in the afternoons during the Brown Drake emergence. They would look at the shade the hemlocks made on the west side of Pine; there the Brown Drakes would dance in the shadow in preparation for the mating that would occur that evening. These were Tom's and Nick's scouting trips to find out where the action would be that evening. One of those days in the late 80s, Tom went on his trip to the Dutchman Pool and stood at the edge of the water in disbelief: he saw only one Brown Drake. He told me he felt like he was observing the last carrier pigeon. It couldn't be, he thought, but the writing was on the wall for the need to act.

The meeting that really started the ball rolling was held in the Tioga District Forestry Office at the forestry building on Nessmuk Lane in Wellsboro. McCullough was his usual smiling, flamboyant self and greeted everyone as they filled the room. After the pleasantries, he introduced the purpose, objectives, and direction of the meeting. Bob then asked each of the major Pennsylvania state agency representatives to give their input on taking action to clean up Babb Creek. Some comments were: "Bob, this was studied extensively, there are hotspots we haven't even recorded yet." "This problem is so massive, you are not going to see it accomplished in your lifetime."

It didn't take long to see what the individual and group attitude was. The similar comments came from one person then another, up one side of the room then back down the other. "Bob, this has been going on for over 100 years, there is no way we can do anything with a problem so widespread." "Bob, our budgets are spread so thin, I don't see any way we can commit to a project that is so involved and encompassing." "Bob, there is just no way this is going to happen, we don't even know if there is a way to reconcile this, even in the years ahead." "It just can't be done Bob!" The comments worked their way completely around the table of agency heads without one positive response.

Bob had had no comment or facial expression during the first once-around—not one. Now everyone could see his face getting red, blood pressure rising.

Bob stood. He leaned on the table and looked at each individual with cutting-edge expectancy. He apologized and said he had made a mistake in his introductory directions to the group. He said he was very sorry, that they were going to go around the room again and every person was going to come up with something each could do to help restore Babb Creek from an acid drainage waterway to a thriving trout stream.

There was an immediate response, "But Bob..."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, gentlemen, don't 'but Bob' me," McCullough shot back, "I asked what we can do to save Pine Creek. Not one came up with a positive idea. We are going around again and everyone will come up with something your agency can do!" He directed his gaze to the first man on his right and, after some mumbling, the representative said, "I have an intern coming who could be used to monitor the acid."

"I'll take that," Bob said quickly. As they went around the group once again, it was as if new air had been pumped into the room. One individual did ask, "Where will we get all this money?" and Bob responded, "We'll get it." The attitudes not only changed, but one at a time each person appeared to be filled with hope for the possibilities. Tom Finkbiner was seated at the head table next to McCullough and just shook his head in amazement at Bob's incredible leadership ability. McCullough was masterful, and he made the difference not only for his beloved Pine Creek, but for Muncy Creek, the Loyalsock, Lycoming Creek, most of the tributaries, and the Susquehanna River.

And what happened? Let me give you a quick listing of the avalanche of events, with a synopsis of facts from *Restored: A History of the Reclamation of the Babb Creek Watershed from Acid Mine Drainage Pollution* by James Barr, the vice chairman of the Babb Creek Watershed Association:

- 1989 – Environmental Defense Foundation allowed pressure to be exerted on Wellsboro and Galeton to correct problems with sewage treatment systems.
- Foundation Legal Counsel, John E. Childe Jr., filed a complaint in Federal District Court alleging Antrim Mining punctured into
- 1990 – Antrim Mining agreed to quit mining and reclaim its mine site.
- McCullough and Jim Barr contacted Joseph Schueck, a DER (Department of Environmental Resources, the precursor to DEP) mine inspector, leading to research on the Babb Creek mine acid being undertaken (along with Schueck's colleague, Michael Smith). Penn State was also contacted and Dr. Dean Arnold, an aquatic ecologist, joined the team.
- October 8, 1990 – Bob and Jim pulled in the expertise of Dauphin County TU and PA National Guard under Captain Chris Cleaver, also Dale Schwalm, to build two diversion wells south of Arnot, using Dr. Arnold's knowledge of new successful technology from Scandinavia. Raised stream pH 4.5 to 6.
- 1991 – New lime-dosing system treated 50 percent of acid flowing down Wilson Creek into Babb. Huge immediate impact on Pine Creek.
- 1994 – Summer construction of a small diversion well to treat the Klondike deep mine discharge.
- 1995 – Tom Finkbiner noted "Sustained, prolific mayfly hatches



Mr. Clean, Mr. Clean: Through Bob's lifelong mission and extensive volunteer work, he was instrumental in removing pollutants from our trout waters.

deep mines under their strip mines, increasing mine acid affecting Babb and Pine Creeks.

on Pine below Blackwell. In May there were large hatches of Brown and Green Drakes—the first in fifteen years. The flies were back in 1996."

- Two more wells were constructed on Red Run, a tributary to Lick Run—Red Run pH went from 4.2 to 6.5-7.
- 1995 – Arnot Sportsman's Club released trout into Babb Creek.
- 1995 – Artificial Wetland System developed at the Arnot #2 deep mine. pH went from 3.5 to 7!
- 1996 – Antrim Mining completed new treatment system for Antrim #1 discharge.
- 1997 – Second wetlands constructed.
- 1998 – Large spoil pile at Klondike Mine reclaimed—now a lush seven-acre green meadow.
- Babb Creek Watershed Association (BCWA) formed to see completion and maintain into future.
- BCWA prepares to take over Antrim #1 Acid Mine Drainage Treatment Plant at Antrim.
- 1999 – Antrim Mining Co. deeded Antrim Treatment Plant and 100 acres of land to the state of Pennsylvania and \$1.5 million to cover operating costs for fifty years. April 1 BCWA began operating the plant with DEP.
- Pennsylvania Fish and Boat

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Aquatic accolade: A plaque commemorating McCullough's work and that of others can be found on a bridge overlooking Pine Creek in the community of Blackwell.

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- Commission surveyed Babb Creek and found large numbers of fish with stream-born brook and brown trout!
- 1999 – DEP removed five miles of Pine Creek, below the Babb Creek confluence, from the list of the state's impaired streams. "Fish and aquatic insect life recovered to levels similar to those in unaffected sections upstream of Blackwell." Success.
 - 2000 – Two more large wetlands constructed to treat discharge from Bear Run mine complex.
 - Growing Greener Program gets grants to help Arnot #2 mine complex and Rattler Mine Project.
 - 2001-2004 – Growing Greener Grant: \$2.2 million to treat four discharges from the Anna S mine. Seven acres of wetlands were constructed, ponds built, and sediment basins created. This formed the largest passive treatment complex in Pennsylvania.

And here we are today; Babb Creek is a trout stream once again. It has natural reproduction of both brown and brook trout and sports an ever-increasing diversity of strong mayfly, caddisfly, and stonefly hatches. Babb, in being restored, has made a huge difference in Pine Creek below Blackwell. Instead of the bad days when fly hatches were disappearing or gone, aquatic insects have not just rebounded, but are increasing in numbers beyond even optimistic dreams. Because of Bob McCullough and the army of great people behind him, we also have some flies that are showing up that have been off the radar for many anglers until now. It could be that the numbers of these particular aquatic insects were so low because of poorer water conditions that they were not noticed, or it might be that many more people are fishing now in the fall and winter and on the stream to see these flies. One example is the red stonefly (looks like a black stonefly but has a wide, bright-red ring around its abdomen). Another fly is the Nectosyche (white miller)—they are a nighttime fly, which many anglers have never seen. *Hexagenia limbata* has increased in recent years on Pine in early September—it is a very large fly and attracts the largest trout to the surface. And the last is the Gray Drake. It is a big drake that emerges like a rocket and heads straight for the treetops. Its most

important stage may be as an emerger and again as a spinner. Actually, the Gray Drake dun looks a lot like a Blue-Winged Olive in a size ten or twelve. The Gray Drake hatch is much like the Slate Drake and takes months for the whole population to cycle through adulthood. It is very exciting to watch for all these flies and add the knowledge of their habits to our bag of tricks along the stream.

I would be remiss if I didn't divulge a few of McCullough's trout fishing secrets for his nighttime success. Bob did not typically use a flashlight. I remember asking him how I was going to tie a blood knot in the dark. "If you're going to fish with me you'll learn to tie it in the dark," he said. It took some time (you use the feel of the end of your tongue to guide you), but I finally got it, and so much more—it seemed after you went night fly fishing with Bob a few times, everything he did fit together and made sense. Bob liked the bottom of riffles or runs where they emerge into the deeper water of the pools. He got to his spot when all vestiges of light had succumbed to the night (usually he fished from 10 p.m. until 4:30 or 5 a.m.). He knew where he was by the outline of the trees against the sky—he knew his favorite areas intimately. His favorite night had bright stars with no moon. Bob once told me, "A nighttime trout fisherman's best friend might be a thermometer. If you find areas where

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the water temperature is fifty-eight to sixty-five degrees, you are going to get pretty consistent trout feeding." He liked June best because, "they usually haven't dispersed out of their normal areas of feeding and there is a lot of night action with big caddis flies, hellgrammites, moths, and all kinds of things that are flying or swimming in the night." He had his fly rod rigged with huge wet flies on a six-pound tippet. When I asked him what his favorite flies were, he said, "If I had to be limited to four flies, I would take a Professor, a Royal Coachman, a Heather Moth, and a Light Cahill—all wet flies. You could replace the Royal Coachman with a Governor and the Professor with a stonefly nymph with a yellow body—there are a lot of stone flies. I go with 2s, 4s, 6s, and 8s with a long shank hook." Bob particularly liked the Green Drake hatch because it was his time to catch really large trout after dark on a big yellow stonefly. He'd cast cross and downstream and let the imitations drift in the current, sometimes slowly retrieving, and sometimes giving a twitch of the rod to produce quick, enticing movements to the fly. He'd always smile and say, "Hang on after you twitch it!"

The conservation gifts Bob McCullough gave to our region will keep giving into the distant future. By cleaning up Babb he not only recovered severely impacted water, but restored the creek to what it was meant to be. As a result, he also brought back Pine to surpass its previous status—it is now recognized as one of the finest Eastern trout streams. Bob was a guide to presidents and senators, negotiated county solid waste management plans, was a primary advocate for the Susquehanna River Flood Forecasting System, and developed the Lycoming County Flood Warning System, which was featured in the Federal Emergency Management Agency National Training Video. Bob spearheaded the cleanup of 231 roadside and streamside dumps in Lycoming County, resulting in municipalities adopting restrictive dumping ordinances. Another result was a system of municipal trash collections (green boxes) that are still used today. And Bob was instrumental in drafting legislation to regulate the drilling and closeout of oil and natural gas wells. Through his testimony, legislation passed in 1986 helped reduce environmental damage from well drilling operations.

All these actions of which Bob was a part helped to make our water and forest resources what they are today. I believe the pain I feel in my shoulder might be a punch Bob is giving me because of the recognition this article gives him; he was never comfortable receiving much credit. Well Bob, I'll just take the hit, because you definitely deserve the accolades and much more. Along with McCullough, the individuals, groups, companies, and agencies that made the resurgence of Babb Creek and Pine Creek possible were and continue to be legion in number. Thank you all, for all for the work you did, for what is still being accomplished as the result of your actions, for a brighter future in the decades to come, and for the lesson that conservation success requires hope, a dream, and a lot of work.

Former high school English teacher Dave Wonderlich is an originator and a former editor of *Shooting Sportsman* magazine and *Game Country* Magazine. He writes frequently for national magazines and produces the email newsletter for the *Slate Run Tackle Shop*.