

A Stretch of River East of Town

~ The San Francisco Fly Casters Story ~

**By Eric Palmer
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Anyone who has fished the Truckee River at the Glenshire Dr. access east of town should be at least vaguely familiar with a section generally referred to as “Flycasters”. It’s easily recognizable as you begin working your way downstream under and then beyond the Glenshire Dr. bridge where you will see ample signage informing you that you are approaching or now on private property. This is all a gentle nudge that it’s time to seriously consider making a “U” turn back up river. At this point, you are at the southern end of a 3.5 mile stretch of private water that ends to the north at the I-80 bridge at Prosser Creek, and is surrounded on both sides of the river by 334 acres of private land owned by the *San Francisco Fly Casting Club*, or SFFCC.

Anglers who frequent that area of course also know that the club plants very large trout in their water. Under today’s low flow conditions, 2-3 lb. rainbow triploids from the Mt. Lassen hatchery, and they plant a lot of them. Under more normal weather and river conditions the fish are much larger, and there are more of them. SFFCC is blessed with some deep channels and runs on their stretch and the fish know where they are.

This is not your usual run-of-the-mill fly club that most of us are familiar with. It’s a relatively small club of less than 45, shall I say, “accomplished” individuals of means who have managed to keep their club under the radar since its inception on May 4, 1894. The date is not a typo.

When I first became aware of the club’s existence some years ago, a Google search produced nothing whatsoever. Not only is there no club website, but I could find no mention of it anywhere. Does this club even exist? Maybe it’s a myth? A Google search today produces little more than a map showing the approximate location of the club’s lodge.

How do you join? You don’t. If you’re a potential candidate, I’m guessing they will find you, and there’s likely a waiting list. What’s the membership demographic? Think not just accomplished anglers and casting gurus, but prominent movers and shakers of the corporate, legal and medical world. It also helps to be active, and very generous, in charity and community service work. Underachievers and slackers should look elsewhere for fly fishing companionship.

Now I’m going to tell you a fascinating story of serendipity and chance that still has three of your fellow GBF members scratching their heads. In June, Gordon Tornberg, Don Lounsbury and I went up to Truckee to hopefully fish the river, or perhaps some lakes depending on river conditions, which were looking bleak given the drought conditions. Don and I drove up in my truck, and I saw a rule somewhere--I forget where --that says on arriving in Truckee to fish you must first stop at *ACE Mountain Hardware* for some gear or at least to browse. On this particular occasion, Don needed a new fly line, and I always welcome an opportunity to browse.

On reaching the fly shop area, Don began his fly line quest, while I headed for the fly bins for some eye candy. There’s another fellow standing there similarly browsing. Small talk ensues; he then asks “Where are you guys fishing?” I respond “We’re up here for a few days to fish the Truckee, but it’s in such dismal shape, we’ll probably hit some lakes instead.”

To this, he replies “I’m a river guy, I prefer fishing rivers.” I respond “Well, I am too, truth be told, but what are you going to do when nature conspires against you?” I’m now intrigued, assuming he’s planning to fish the Truckee with conditions such as they are, plus he looks like a savvy angler. So I ask

“What area of the river do you like?” He replies “a stretch east of town.” OK, “...how east...Hirschdale, Farad?”, “It’s a private stretch off of Glenshire.”

Now visualize lightbulbs going off over my head then violently exploding with sparks everywhere as my brain privately screams “Holy crap!” I calmly respond “You mean the private *San Francisco Flycasters* stretch?”, “Yeah that’s the place... a bunch of rich arrogant bastards [his actual words - with a wide grin] and I’m one of ‘em. You know the place?” to which I reply “Ah, yes, we know it well, it’s legendary--lots of signs.” To this he replies “Yeah, we’re trying to soften our approach on that.” I’m now as giddy as an eight yr. old boy on Christmas morning but am doing my best to maintain some level of composure and decorum.

I grab Don’s shoulder to get his attention: “Hey, Don (motioning to my new acquaintance), *San Francisco Fly Casters!!!*” As he turns, Don’s face lights up as he shares my reaction. Next come formal introductions. We learn that the fellow I’ve been chatting with is Chip Brown, a bonafide member of *San Francisco Fly Casters*. Small talk follows, and then “I’d like to invite you to fish at the lodge some time as my guests.”

Don and I exchange glances as we try to process what we just heard. We were both a little stunned, so it’s not clear who said what next, but there was a request for his phone number. He tears off a scrap of paper from something on the counter, scribbles down his number, hands it to me, and with a wave heads for the door, and he’s gone.

Don and I collected our wits after this stunning exchange, while Don finalized his fly line transaction. We then left to rendezvous with Gordon Tornberg to round out our fishing party for the next several days. We explained the ACE fly shop episode to Gordon, and he of course shared our excitement and surprise at what had just transpired. It was immediately agreed upon that we would accept the offer to fish at the club lodge. On that particular day, a Monday, the plan was Independence Lake followed by Milton. With the lack of a cell signal for most of the day, it would be late afternoon before I could get a text off to Chip accepting his offer. Chip soon replied that Wednesday worked best for him and he requested that we arrive at the lodge by 8:30 AM.

Within an hour there was a second text inviting us for breakfast at the lodge if we could arrive by 7:30. After debating this at great length for at least 3 or 4 seconds, we agreed in the affirmative and I texted Chip accordingly, thanking him for his gracious offer.

At the stroke of 7:27:00 AM of the appointed day we slowly made our way in my truck down the club’s driveway of fresh and pristine asphalt that contrasts sharply with the rotting and pockmarked old Hwy. 40 that was abandoned in 1964 when I-80 was opened. I pulled onto the tidy pea gravel parking area and parked next to a few other vehicles which indicated that we would not be alone for breakfast.

We identified the main lodge, found the entrance and entered a small foyer adorned with assorted fly fishing memorabilia and a plaque or two with the requisite statements on the philosophical merits of fly fishing. Straight ahead we see the dining room with a long table positioned lengthwise toward the door with the kitchen entrance at the far end. The table, at the moment unpopulated, is set with 14 place settings with identical bowls of fruit topped with blueberries at each setting, all in precise alignment.

Immediately to our right is the entrance into the lodge’s main sitting room. It looks every bit the way you’d expect a proper high Sierra fishing lodge to look; a large rustic brick fireplace with a good supply of neatly racked firewood on the hearth, a large rough-hewn plaque over the fireplace reads “WARM YE IN FRIENDSHIP – THERE’S MORE TO FISHING THAN FISH”. Matching bookcases loaded with books bracket the fireplace and adorn other walls. To round out the mountain lodge ambiance, there’s a beamed peaked ceiling with chandeliers suspended from long wrought iron chains.

The furniture is what I'd call "Truckee Mountain Rustic" with dark brown leather chairs and couch surrounding a rustic round table. A piano sits against the far wall next to a door heading down a hallway we would later learn leads to rooms for overnight lodgers.

Chip was standing in the middle of the room speaking with two other members, a husband and wife, as he motioned for us to join him. He introduced us with "I'd like you to meet my friends", a refrain we would hear multiple times over the course of the morning. All club and staff members we met were very friendly and appeared unruffled at the site of three errant, scruffy-looking fishermen Chip had recently met in the ACE fly shop.

Next was a short tour of the building. Heading to the back of the room towards the hallway, I spotted two large fly shop style chests with drawers loaded with any fly you could possibly want for the Truckee River. On one wall there's a large framed plaque with photos of previous club Presidents. At the bottom, in the position reserved for the current SFFCC President there's a photo of none other than our host: Warren "Chip" Brown. It was evident that Chip has also served terms as President in previous years.

After a short tour down the hall past the overnight quarters, it was back to the dining room with more introductions, as several members had arrived and were seated and chatting. Chip ushered us into the kitchen to meet the two-person morning cooking team where we were instructed to "order anything". We kept it simple at eggs, bacon and toast, but later at the table we saw that we could have literally ordered just about anything.

We would learn later that the male member of the kitchen staff is also the jack-of-all-trades and master-of-most full time caretaker and handyman. He's also the fellow who patrols the river in his pickup to roust interlopers, but I understand that he's very polite about it and does not brandish a shotgun nor use bad language.

On finishing breakfast, it was time to go fishing. Chip suggests we go out and wader up then meet him in front of the lodge. He does not plan to fish but will be our escort for the morning, and he suggests that we will probably knock off around noon since he has a later engagement.

On reconvening, Chip led us down the dirt road that follows the river almost to the Glenshire Bridge. We walked upstream a bit before turning right to the water where Chip motioned to two promising spots to start. I motioned to Don and Gordon to step in and they immediately began fishing, while Chip led me about 100 ft. farther upstream.

I had only made two or three casts before Don is into a large fish. While he's releasing his catch, I too get one to the net. But as the luck of the draw would have it - for Mr. Lounsbury anyway - he finds himself positioned at a honey hole; a deep channel that's loaded with large Mt. Lassen rainbows. He can see them all lined up like cord wood and they're all winking at him with that come-hither look. Don continues to hook fish while Gordon and I were dealing with more challenging shallow water where we had to work harder and with greater stealth. That's my plausible excuse anyway, and I know I have Gordon's full support. All fishermen need a good excuse in their back pocket.

Over the next hour or so, we worked our way upstream under Chip's direction where results varied with fish netted and lost and a few grabs here and there to keep us in the game.

So that the less-lucky can save face, let's just say that over the course of a few hours among the three of us, four 18 to 20 in. fish were netted and two lost with several hard grabs.

As we approached noon, Chip came by and rounded us up for the hike back up the road to the lodge. As we walked, Chip proposed that after we de-wader, we reconvene on the lodge porch for some liquid refreshment and a recap, and we were happy to oblige. I mentioned that I occasionally write a newsletter article, and would he mind if I wrote about our experience. He said "not at all", and so write I do!

Once settled in with our beverage of choice we shot the bull for a good 45 minutes. At some point the ISE show came up, to which Chip interjected “Oh, I used to own that”. Huh? Turns out that Chip was half owner of the ISE show before selling off his share.

As we were wrapping up and about to depart, the club’s chef came to the lodge front door and Chip introduced us. He a younger fellow who prepares the evening meals and is apparently also a Truckee River fly fishing guru, if not an actual guide. On that note, we made our exit after thanking Chip for a quite enjoyable morning at their lodge and fishing their private stretch of river.

Following that morning at the SFFCC lodge, our curiosity was of course piqued about the origins of the club. During our visit, Chip had shared a few nuggets with us, which combined with subsequent research began to complete the following picture.

It all began with the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. This is where the world first saw George Ferris Jr’s gigantic 264 ft. tall wheel conceived to rival the Eiffel Tower, along with the spectacular electric light display from George Westinghouse demonstrating the potential for 110 Volt AC current to literally illuminate the entire nation, if not the world. Another significant first, conceived by the newly formed *Chicago Fly Casting Club*, was the first known national fly casting tournament.

The casting tournament drew participants from all over the country and was a huge success. When news of this event reached San Francisco and the city’s more prominent fly anglers, it was quickly decided that the west coast needed a comparable event. The upcoming *California Midwinter International Exposition* scheduled to open January 27, 1894 in Golden Gate Park would be a perfect venue. The very first fly casting tournament on the west coast was held on May 4, 1894, attracting participants nationwide, and it too was a huge success.

On the evening of the one-day tournament, 30 prominent San Francisco anglers met to form *The San Francisco Fly Casting Club*, today the second oldest fly fishing club in the country.

Two years later on March 9, 1896 the club reopened its charter list to accept new members and began hosting regular casting contests every weekend on Stow Lake in Golden Gate Park where they’d built a small lodge and clubhouse. During these weekend contests, world casting records were routinely made, and then broken hours to weeks later. The membership would grow from the original 30 to a list of 100 with 50 associate members.

In 1903, SFFCC members concluded that a mountain property on a pristine and isolated High Sierra stream would be a great idea in order to better hone their actual fishing skills to match their already proven casting skills. One club member who was in the railroad business had access to a freight train; he was the President of the Southern Pacific Railroad (today the Union Pacific). Since the tracks parallel the Truckee River as it heads east out of Truckee, that area seemed a perfect place to begin looking. A club car was added to the end of a freight train and the search was on.

In 1892, a man named Anthony Zimmer had purchased a 160 acre plot east of town with 2.7 miles of Truckee River frontage from the U. S Government for a sanitarium. When the SFFCC members in the club car spotted this plot they knew immediately it was perfect for their lodge, and it was for sale. The location already had a train stop called *Union Mills Station* to service the nearby lumber mill in the area of the current community of Glenshire. It was an ideal spot being a relatively short train ride from the city, and the train was the only option then since this was at least 20 years before State Highway 40 would exist.

On September 23, 1905, club President Thomas C. Kierulff and Executive Committee member Edward Everett filed a deed with the County to purchase the 160 acres for \$800 using their own funds. Over the years, the initial 160 acres would grow through piecemeal acquisition of small parcels to

today's approximate 334 acres, providing 3.5 miles of private river access. Kierulff sat as president for many years following the purchase and held casting records for accuracy, delicacy, and distance.

In 1907, the club was formally incorporated under the laws of California. Early that year, and funded by generous donations from club members, the SFFCC celebrated the opening of their new mountain lodge on the Truckee River, including their own suspension bridge that crossed the river to the Union Mills train stop. In April of 1908 the deed was formally transferred from the original purchasers Kierulff and Everett to club ownership.

Thus began the annual spring ritual of members taking the train from San Francisco to Union Station to formally open their lodge for a season of trout fishing, until it would be closed each fall with arrival of the first snow. The train would remain the only access to the property until 1926 and the opening of Highway 40.

Over time the membership and the lodge's popularity grew substantially along with the waiting list of anglers eager to join the club. In October 13, 1912, the San Francisco Call Bulletin wrote: "*There is no more exclusive club in the city [...] the applicant must be a thorough sportsman, an enthusiastic and skilled angler and good company.*"

As membership and visits to the lodge grew, the SFFCC Board of Directors felt compelled to issue a set of rules regulating use of the lodge. Among the rules in 1921 were the following:

- The season opens Monday May 10, 1921.
- Prior to June 4th, members only may visit the lodge [in other words, no guests, family or associate members].
- Rates per day for a member, his wife and children will be \$4 per day each. Guests \$5.
- Neither a member's wife nor children nor a guest may visit the lodge without the member's presence.
- Cleaning of fish in or about the lodge is prohibited.
- The club will provide shipping boxes for 50 cents each.
- Members must not instruct employees nor interfere with their work.
- Tipping of employees is strictly prohibited, and any member violating this or any other rule will forfeit his right to fish the remainder of the season, and pay a fine not to exceed \$100 [About \$1,333 in 2015 dollars].

Wishing to become strong stewards of their private stretch of water, the club in 1914 constructed a small dam upstream of the lodge in what is now known as the intake pool along with two ponds, each 30 by 80 ft., for the rearing of trout fry; a large wooden pipe brought water from the river to the ponds. In November, 35,000 fry ranging three to four inches were returned to the river. By 1915, the club could boast of having one of the finest fishing preserves in the country.

In 1915 at Stow Lake, the club hosted the ninth international fly and bait casting tournament, which proved to be the greatest and most successful national tournament held to date, and would see three world records broken. F.N. Peete of Chicago cast 162 ft. in the salmon event, H.C. Golcher broke the light tackle long distance record at 116 ft., and SFFCC President W.D. Mansfield set the heavy tackle distance record of 134 ft.

In June of 1924 disaster struck as a raging wildfire in the area burned the lodge to the ground, taking the life of the caretaker H.A. Ross. The structure was rebuilt a year later and remains the basis of the current lodge and clubhouse.

In 1933, during the Great Depression, a small group of SFFCC members who preferred to focus on pure casting competitions in Golden Gate Park, more than fishing, formed the *Golden Gate Angling and*

Casting Club (GGACC). At that time, there were many members who remained active in both clubs and the parting was both amicable and generous.

During the 1930s and beyond, members of both clubs would be responsible for many innovations that would advance the sport, including:

- The major features of the “Pflueger Medalist” reel.
- The hollow fluted bamboo rods of R.L. Winston.
- The cedar center hollow construction of rods by E.C. Powell.
- The graphite rods of Jim Green who was also a pioneer in the use of boron for rods.
- Jon Tarantino who with Winston, Scientific Anglers and Hardy, developed the concept of tapered fly lines and leaders.
- In 1946 Jim Green would devise the concept of a mono running line attached directly to a weighted shooting head. This quickly became the de facto gold standard for west coast salmon and steelhead fly fishers.

In April of 1938 an epic flood took out the hatchery infrastructure along with the suspension bridge, and hatchery operations came to an end. During the 1980s, and following consultation with the then CA DFG, Trout Unlimited, and various fish biologists, the planting strategy that is active today was implemented with generous populations of trophy rainbows from the Mt. Lassen Hatchery.

The club uses this annual event as a community outreach opportunity by inviting members of the Truckee police and fire departments along with members of the local community to participate in releasing the fish to the river. There is no boat ramp from the road along the river to the water so a “bucket brigade” operation is employed with a continuous line of people handing off nets of fish to the next in line until finally reaching several people in waders in the water who slowly release the fish after giving them time to acclimate to their new home.

Today, SFFCC membership is fully subscribed at 43 members, per club bylaws. We were told during our visit that, as in the early years, the club remains committed to nurturing and improving their piece of the Truckee River. Toward that end, they have engaged the services of a prominent hydrologic scientific consulting firm to advise and recommend measures to maintain optimal trout habitat. Any proposed remedies are implemented in concert with the *Truckee River Watershed Council* and *Trout Unlimited*.

So now you know the whole story of a stretch of river east of town.