

Very early days on the Wemmer

by Brian von Holdt

Fishing had gotten into my blood from an early age. During my youthful years we holidayed at Kasouga, a small coastal resort on the coast west of Port Alfred. There my Uncle Boet and his cronies would fish the surf for janbruins (hottentot) mussel crackers and highwaters (galjoen). They'd travel up and down the coast by wagon and cart to their favourite fishing haunts (no 4 x 4's in those halcyon days). Being too junior for such macho activities, I was sent off to the blind Kasouga lagoon to indulge my enthusiasm with a Spanish reed and length of old Irish Flax 16 cord line. I caught flatties and steenbras (not too big), but occasionally was taken by something bigger, which dealt with the novice with contempt. My gut traces would part and I would have to beg for another hook to repair my tackle.

I got better at it as I grew up and eventually, in my senior school days, I fished with a wooden centre-pin reel mounted on a cane rod. I learnt to cast and was invited to join the seniors on a fishing trip to the tidal Kariëga River. My dreams were being fulfilled. Boats (clinker type) were readied; carbide lamps, scoop nets, throw nets and live bait cans were assembled. How exciting! We were to fish a lot at night when the BIG kob would be on the feed. It was also the time to scoop mullet attracted by the carbide lamp mounted at the prow of the rowboat. Live mullet were to be the bait for kob. The rowing of the boat was naturally left to the young and willing, and judging by the number of chores that came my way it soon made me realise that there was a price to pay for the privilege of being invited!

Kob, huge turtles and massive skates were caught during the nights on that holiday. Leeches would ruin some of our live bait, by attaching themselves to the outside skin of the live mullet, then sucking out the blood. Ink fish were also speared by the light of the lamps along the rocky edges of the river. They too were regarded as quality bait for kob.

In the daytime we'd catch numerous spotted grunter on mud prawn. What fun they provided on light tackle. Yes, I was being blooded into fishing in the most delightful way. Little did I know of the fly fishing opportunity that lay ahead of me.

In 1953 I was sent to Stellenbosch University to complete a B Sc in agriculture. Moving to the Cape would change my angling priorities for the rest of my life.

By 1954, I made acquaintance with Prof OS Reyneke, Dean of the Faculty of Pomology. Fruit Culture was one of my majors. He made me an offer of holiday employment on his farm. He told me to find another willing student to keep me company. This I did, and Keppies du Toit and I then presented ourselves to Prof for a briefing.

It turned out that he owned a berry farm (youngberries, loganberries and boysenberries) in the Wemmershoek Valley in the area that is now inundated by dam water. There was as yet no talk of dams to be built. These berry plantations would be due for picking over November and December up to Christmas. We would use the Prof's 4-ton Chev truck as transport to and from the farm to Stellenbosch, but would also use the truck to fetch the

labourers from Kraaifontein on Sunday afternoon and transport them to the farm. They were housed in a compound and we would stay in a small stone cottage. Our ablutions would be taken in the ice-cold clear water stream flowing past our Spartan cottage. But we were young and fit and it would be summer after all. We eagerly accepted the job as we would then have money in our pockets to take home for Christmas. Prof took us out to Wemmershoek to show us around. It all looked so exciting and beautiful. Before me rose the Wemmershoek, Tafelberg and the craggy Boland mountains virtually surrounded us. There were fourteen separate berry plantations and an H Jones Canning Company truck would supply us with empty hooped wooden barrels in which to put the picked berries. The berry truck would transport this delicious raw material to the factory in Paarl, which made H Jones's famous jams.

To reach the farm, several crossings were made over the Wemmer River. The Congregation Pool was clearly visible on the left as we entered the valley. The stream was clear and strong and thoughts of fish kept entering my mind.

Like all new brooms we swept clean in the beginning to get our pickers organised. We had to set up a system of recording. The number of buckets picked by each labourer would form the basis for calculating their remuneration. When, after a few days, the system was working smoothly, I slipped down to the nearby river to see what it was like. Imagine my delight when I spotted my first fish. The river had many smallish pools mostly encircled by dense stands of palmiet reeds, but in the clear, clear water, every pebble on the bottom was visible and so were the fish. There they were, holding station, their fins fanning ever so slightly, and the tails gently waving to give them purchase. They looked big to me and when they moved they exhibited golden undersides with scattered spotting, contrasting strongly with the dark dorsal surface.

I just knew they were trout, because they resembled the fish I had seen in Ceres town in the so-called Reflection Pool. My Uncle Alf had said that they were trout.

When I returned to the barrels of fruit, which were steadily being filled by the stream of pickers emptying their buckets, I found Keppies diligently doing the recording. I turned a barrel on its side, took a seat, and proudly related my find to him. He displayed little enthusiasm but posed the question as to whether we could catch a few to eat. I said yes we could but that we'd need to get some line and a few flies. He offered to catch the flies, if I would rustle up the line! He took some convincing that the flies for the job were artificial and made from feathers.

While back at Stellenbosch over the weekend I soon traced a trout fisherman and acquired from him three or four flies and a length of nylon line. We would have to shape our own rods from what we could find on the farm.

We returned with high hopes (or at least I did) to the farm on Sunday and on Monday morning I took along my "dipstick" and the flies. At the first opportunity, I made my way to the nearest pool, where I gently lowered the fly into the river and dangled it just a few inches from the fish's nose. It didn't move. After a few minutes my disappointment became overwhelming. The fish had shown no interest whatsoever. I decided to try it on another fish, a real beauty that favoured the palmiet, I repeated the manoeuvre, but with

the same result. In my impatience, I jerked the fly away, and it happened. My fish had taken the moving fly, but my joy was short lived as it broke me off in the palmiet. My fly was also lost, but I had been encouraged by the take. I returned to the open water of the pool to put my new-found technique to the test. I jiggled the fly near the bottom and a fish, quick as a flash, took it. I took it along to show Keppies, who agreed to accompany me to the river after knock-off time at five.

The time of the day was spot on, as the fish were on the feed. I had one of the most exciting fishing experiences of my life. Here I was plucking out fish after fish, and with Keppies also hyped up it was a red-letter day indeed. Supper was well provided for and what a feast it was! There were plenty of fish in the river, so we enjoyed many a good meal after that. We took a few along to Stellenbosch to show them to our friends, one of whom confirmed that they were all brown trout. All of our fish were caught in the palmiet-lined stream flowing from the West.

Our job was turning out for the best. The berry crop was a bumper one and the Prof was delighted. We had no serious hitches, the lorry kept going, H Jones was fetching on time, and my newly discovered fascination with "fly" fishing was great fun. An incident that ruffled the routine, took place when we moved our berry picking team to a new plantation. It was situated at the top of the valley and, as such, was quite remote. We had on previous occasions encountered baboons amongst the berries, having a real feast, and if the barking and shouting that went on after we had chased them away, was anything to go by, then they were mighty annoyed. On this occasion the baboons scattered on our arrival, but with poor grace, muttering all the way to the krantz. We proceeded with our truck right up to the grove of oaks, where we normally parked in the glorious shade of the trees, and down leapt a leopard, whom we had now disturbed in his efforts to lay low the baboons, one of his favourite meat-pies. The staff on the truck shrieked with fright and, to a man, refused to disembark for duty. It took time, much persuasion, and the acquisition of a stick each, before they agreed, albeit nervously, to resume work.

Keppies and I remained for some weekends at Wemmershoek. We explored the valley above the last berry plantation up to the darkest corner. We discovered a cave on the mountainside, where fugitives sought refuge from the law. We learned that it was called "Drosters Nes". We also caught trout that were in evidence for a long distance up the river - all of them brown, and we saw the leopard again.

Then one day we decided to fish the river that flowed out of the Eastern mountains. How surprised we were to find that far less palmiet reeds were in evidence, and that the river was more open and approachable with riffle-type runs to be found. The pools were somewhat bigger and, lo and behold, we caught our first rainbow. In fact this branch of the river was populated with many rainbows, more so than browns. Someone had given me a "Mountain Swallow" fly, a garish lure, but it caught the rainbows very successfully. Other flies that I used, I discovered, were the March Brown, Butcher, Connemara Black, Thunder and Lightning and Invicta, but they all caught fish. So much for matching the hatch!

When offered the job again the following year, I grabbed the opportunity with both hands. My partner was to be Robin Clark, an agricultural colleague of mine. The procedures were to be the same. I had in the meantime acquired an old hand-me-down split cane rod



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Two fly fishing warriors from the Eastern Cape and founder members of FOSAF. The late Fred Croney receives a citation from the late Brian von Holdt.

and reel with line to boot, I spent a bit of time on the hostel front lawn teaching myself to cast and by the time we left for Wemmershoek, I could hold my own.

Great was my shock when arriving at our destination to find the bulldozers hard at work. Dam construction had begun and there these huge McAlpine trucks were, carting clay and soil to and fro. Congregation Pool was still there, but only just. The plantations of berries being well removed from the wall site, were unaffected but this would be the last year according to Prof Reyneke. A pall of gloom overtook me. It seemed unthinkable that so much of this beautiful valley would disappear under the rising waters in as little as a year or two. I would make the best of my last opportunity to enjoy to the full my six to seven weeks of the job. My new partner was a serious sort of fellow, who did his job very well, but refused to accompany me on sorties to the river. He preferred reading to the outdoors, so I fished alone. I think it is the only sport one can still enjoy alone, if you must. I didn't catch any leviathans, but coming steadily to grips with trout fishing, had set new horizons for me.



"Minor trout streams are outstanding schools for the cutting of first teeth and remain forever as the wells of instructive memories. Timid though they may appear, these brooks teach us humility too when we mistakenly assume that their conquest will be easy or their inhabitants naïve."

William C Black, Creek Craft, Pruett Publishing Company, 1988.