



ATTENTION: © Copyright Western Washington University Libraries Special Collections. "Fair use" criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. The following materials can be used for educational and other noncommercial purposes without the written permission of Western Washington University Libraries Special Collections. These materials are not to be used for resale or commercial purposes without written authorization from Western Washington University Libraries Special Collections. All materials cited must be attributed to Western Washington University Libraries Special Collections.



This interview was conducted with Trey Combs at his home in Port Townsend, Washington, on March 22, 2014. The interviewers are Tamara Belts and Paul Piper.

**TB:** Today is Saturday, March 22, 2014. I'm here with Paul Piper and Trey Combs, and we're going to do an oral history with Mr. Combs. So our first question is always: How did you get started with fly fishing?

**TC:** My grandfather took me fly fishing when I was about five years old. I guess actually, when he came back from fly fishing, he had a wicker creel, and he'd get the rainbow trout and he'd put them out on the counter, and it was like magic. So when I was about five years old then, in those days, at five years old you couldn't even wear long pants, you had to wear shorts. When you were like, I guess, ten years old you wore long pants, I don't know.

Anyway, so I'd get to empty his creel and look at the trout. And then he took me fishing, and I saw the flies. And [I was] just like [entranced], that was from that point on, I was entranced with fly fishing and entranced with my grandfather, who took that kind of time to show me what fly fishing was about. At the time we were down at Quilcene, at the Quilcene National Fish Hatchery, which was in operation half a century ago. So, yes, he was an amazing individual. I just finished writing about him in an article in *The Drake Magazine*. From the earliest time on, I wanted to live his legend, as it were.

**TB:** Just very briefly, how did he get into it? Because I think fly fishing is-- I mean I know it's both ancient, but it has still gotten much more popular more recently.

**TC:** Tamara, he was, trying to think, his last name was Cotton, very English, and he was just an incredible sportsman. He hunted upland game. He went to the Dakotas each year to shoot pheasant. He was kind of indifferent to big game hunting, but he would shoot an elk. He fished for steelhead back when I had never even heard the term. He fly fished. I guess you could say he was kind of a proper English gentleman. I've got similar pictures when I was-- Oh, well he had Cotton Engineering and Shipbuilding Company. It was the second largest employer in Port Townsend after the mill, after the paper mill. He had a tinsmith working for him. He turned me over to the tinsmith, who took me salmon fishing when I was five or six years old. My earliest pictures of a winter blackmouth that I caught on a plug were with this gentleman. So Grandfather nurtured my interest in birds and in fishing. And God bless him for that, yes.

I have got a picture of my brother when he was in diapers, and Grandfather would take his pointer and set it out beside the playpen and no one could get near it. I don't remember the picture being taken, but I remember those at that time.

**TB:** In one of your books you mentioned, I think its *Steelhead Fly Fishing*, that by twelve you were really reading a lot and really became a great scholar of steelhead fly fishing.

Trey Combs Edited Transcript – March 22, 2014  
*Fly Fishing Collection*

1

**TC:** I started the research on steelhead and the people who participated in it, way back in college, and that book *Steelhead Fly Fishing and Flies*, which before there was computers and before there was editors, I just had a manuscript that was three times that size. It was a history of the whole west coast fishing, and it took me almost a year to edit it down, using carbon paper. I just finished writing about that in the *Drake*. I'll show you the article. In fact, you can take it back with you, and you can take the article back with you and I'll see if I can get another issue. But it talks about my early years because I had no interest in school, none whatsoever, and I all but flunked out of high school. I think they passed me with D minuses just to get rid of me.

**TB:** Wow!

**TC:** All I did was read about Joe Brooks and Jack O'Connor and all my hunting and fishing heroes. School was torture for me. I just had no interest in it. You know, it's kind of a wonder that I went from high school to getting an appointment into the naval academy, and then taking the entrance examination and passing it. It doesn't add up. But school's a lot more interesting today. But in those days it was just dreadful. It was to me anyway.

**TB:** You must have had an innate sense because, I mean, you just became such a student on your own of things.

**TC:** I love doing research, like you. And when I began thinking about getting this book done, all the old timers who started steelhead fly fishing, most of them are still alive, and I was able to run them down. Al Knudson was, he survived this, but he got very ill. When I went to visit him, I was told that he was in the hospital. He was one of the fathers of steelhead fly fishing in the State of Washington. So I went to the hospital, figuring I'd better get it down now, like you guys. I'd better get this information before he dies. Actually he got out of the hospital and lived for another year or so.

But it was kind of a pivotal time, because all these people were getting very elderly, and I came along and no one really cared one way or the other who these people were. It wasn't that I had some fantastic idea of how the future would unfold, but it's where my passion was. These people were available to me, and I wrote about them. I wrote about them because I was so interested in what they did and about the game fish they pursued. So a lot of these people are well known today because I first wrote about them more than 30 years ago. I guess that book came out in 1976, so it would be a quite a while book. It was in print for 29 years. So I've had a lot of people tell me, even though it's not well written, the big book is I think, but the paperback is kind of, the prose is kind of muddy in places a lot. But a lot of people adore the book. It's just such a personal story of who the people were that started the sport. I've had people tell me that they, you know, thus and such, read it 'til they died in the hospital. They had it by their bedside,' and that's really incredible.

**TB:** You did interview some amazing people, could you tell a little bit more about Al Knudson, maybe just some of your memories of him or your sense of him. He's not alive now to tell us his story, and I know you talked specifically about him, and you actually met him. I think he was kind of a shy man, I have heard.

**TC:** Yes, he was, and maybe it was the fact that of journalist. I mean, I had written *The Steelhead Trout*, which is an obscure book today, but it was the first book ever done on steelhead, and it was the first. I was the first person ever to write about where steelhead went when they migrated to the high seas. A result of going through the High Seas Fishery Commission records and working with the University of Washington, and I finally [built] it out, and I was extremely proud of that. So I had that, and so when I went-- And as I said, it's very obscure today, but it was kind of a big deal when it came out because it was the first book ever done on steelhead. So I had some sort of record to go on. And Al had a, he had a really great story to tell because he was a latecomer to Washington State, where he won his fame. I dug some of these names out, including Knudson's name, not where he lived but from the *Field and Stream*, annual *Field and Stream* fly fishing contest. So I would see a name and it would ring a bell, and then I worked on trying to find out where they lived. And, you know, Bill Shad, Al Knudson, Ralph Wahl. A lot of those guys had fish in the *Field and Stream* fishing contest. In those days it was way back when, there was no division for steelhead, it was under rainbow trout. But anyway, Al was in there for a steelhead of 19 pounds or something. But yes, he was shy. But he had been just a working stiff, tying flies for a living down in Grants Pass. He came out of Oregon and he sat there on a bench and tied flies for years, sold his flies. And I still have one fly left

Trey Combs Edited Transcript – March 22, 2014

*Fly Fishing Collection*

2

©Western Washington University Libraries Special Collections

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**

of his, but he gave me a wealth of materials. Two flies he gave me in little plastic boxes are full dressed dry flies, tied on #20 hooks. It's like a pinprick, it's not even, the whole fly's not even an eighth of an inch long. It's in a little plastic box that's sealed forever, you can't get to it. But he gifted me a lot of things like that. Some of the flies that he loaned me for the photographs in the book, he wanted back because he wasn't tying very much, he was elderly. He was going fishing. But yes, you got it, he was a shy, very unassuming guy. I think when I met him he was working doing some custodial work.

That's what makes the book so interesting as opposed to the Atlantic salmon fishing, which is such an aristocratic sport. And even back then it was-- I never thought I'd ever fish for Atlantic salmon. It's just too expensive. But these guys were blue-collared fly fishers, and I don't think they would have ever thought that they were in any way remarkable. They just happened to follow a sport that I loved. All of them, Ralph Wahl a little different, he was a photographer, and—

**TB:** You mentioned that inspired you too, his photography. Was that kind of how you got into your photography?

**TC:** It did. Yes, I really got into photography, and I worked professionally at it. I worked in Alaska for a whole summer up there for a big lodge, working with the guides and guiding, and I had to re-photograph their whole, update all their slides. And I had a very difficult time adjusting from film to digital, even though the lenses are interchangeable. And last year I broke down and bought a digital camera, and now I've got to find out how I can download it in my computer. I mean, I just resisted the whole digital thing. But magazines, I mean, no one's doing film today. I went down and asked what my cameras were worth and the person said they're worthless, donate them to the school photography program. And I thought, these are my Nikons, I packed them all over the world. It was the latest in Nikon technology when I bought them. But anyway, I've got a digital Nikon now, so, and I've got a whole bunch ready to download and to send to Quinault program, which I mentioned at lunch time, the fly fishing program on the Quinault. They're going on a website for lots of people to see soon, yes.

**TB:** Anybody else you want to talk about, the earlier guys I mean, because you've really been recognized. I mean, Berryman also quotes you a lot in terms of having used your research in his books, because you met Wes Drain. You can even talk about Roderick Haig-Brown, you must have met him, right?

**TC:** I did, and he was bigger than life. He was the idol for everybody. And he was such a brilliant writer. And I was in my late 20s I guess, and I was down visiting Frank Amato. And Frank and I, Frank Amato Publications – Frank was a giant. And Frank was working in a grocery store, bagging groceries, and trying to raise money to do the first issue of *Salmon Trout Steelheader*. And I just happened to see it on the newsstand, this little thin little black and white thing, and I had been doing research on steelhead flies. That's the other way, I mean, you can go to the angler and find out what flies he tied, or go to the flies and find out who the angler was. But I called him up, I was just stuttering and stammering, Frank, you know, Frank, is this Mr. Amato? Yes. And he was just a kid working in the stores, bagging groceries, and I said, "I've got more information than you can imagine on steelhead flies." [He said], "Why don't you write me up a quick article." And I went, "Okay." So I typed out this article and he published it, and he sent me a royalty check for \$5 for the article. But Frank and I talked. I had all of Haig-Brown's books. I bought them secondhand. I went to book people who dealt in classic books, and I spent a lot of money getting, running down all of his books. And so I had this little column with Frank about kind of the fly of the month, and it was a steelhead fly and its history. So Frank invited me, he said, Haig-Brown's coming to Portland, and he's our guest, and it was some sort of conservation group. So I was like star struck. This was Hollywood for me to meet, to actually meet Haig-Brown or see him. So Frank introduced me, and so I started talking to Haig-Brown. I couldn't believe I was actually talking to him. And he bent over and said, "Do you think you could join me for dinner?" I went, "Oh yes, I'd be happy to." And he says, "Well, I want to talk to you about your column in Frank's magazine. The only reason I buy the magazine is to read your column."

**TB:** Oh, nice!

**TC:** And I thought -- I was over the moon. And Frank's so-- In fact, I got two flies from Haig-Brown, and the Haig-Brown Fly Fishing Society in British Columbia doesn't have even one. I gave one to Frank, and the other is in

Trey Combs Edited Transcript – March 22, 2014

*Fly Fishing Collection*

3

©Western Washington University Libraries Special Collections

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**

the museum in Manchester, Vermont, fly fishing museum. But Frank held Haig-Brown on such high esteem that his wife, when the dinner drew to a close and everybody was getting up to leave, she took Haig-Brown's cigar butt and she had it set in a block of plastic, which just killed me. I just went, Wow. But I don't know whether Frank's got that original Haig-Brown pattern. It was a dry fly pattern that he popularized fly fishing the dry fly under tension. But yes, he was my idol, and I was dumbstruck when he passed away at such an early age from a heart attack. An interesting spinoff from that was General Noel Money, this kind of comes up in the big book, General Noel Money had long since passed away when I began doing research. He was fishing with Haig-Brown down in 1940s on the Stamp River, and the only really good pool on the Stamp is called Money's Pool. And I can see why they fished it because it's perfect. And much of the river is not perfect, but this particular area was, and Money had a cabin. It took me days to figure out that they fished from the other side of the river, because the cabin's long gone. But anyway, I was able to run down General Noel Money's son, who had been gassed in World War I, and he had a terrific lung condition, and I don't think he lived six months after I talked to him, and he knew he was very ill. So I asked him about the famous game books that General, his father kept. Every day he went fishing, he'd put an entry, whether he was hunting for grouse, fly fishing for steelhead... And of course I was interested to see whether there was an entry in there somewhere among these game books with Haig-Brown. They had fished together. And then Haig-Brown had written about those experiences in the book, *A River Never Sleeps*, and he dedicated the book-- Oh, no, excuse me, *The Western Angler*, and he dedicated *The Western Angler* to General Noel Money. So, I had Tri-X film, which in those days was pretty hot stuff. You could shoot indoors with it without a flash. And with just a lamp like this, and I was turning the game book pages as fast as I could go, Boom, there it was. It was like seeing your heritage laid out. I went, I don't believe it, and there was a picture of Noel Money and the entry, Fished with Haig-Brown, da-da-da, you know, caught these number of steelhead. And I started shooting pictures, it was down on the Rogue River fishing, and I took as many pictures as I could cram in in the short time I had with his son. And that, the picture that I got that day is pictured in the book here, of General Noel Money's game book. It's in the section on the Stamp River. That was really cool stuff. I was very excited about that.

**TB:** Oh, yes. Just continuing then. Can you just kind of chronologically then talk a little bit more about everything that you've done, your steelhead writing, and then you've gotten all into saltwater fishing? It's kind of hard for me to ask, I mean, you know.

**TC:** Sure. I wanted to move to Washington, and my wife was Danish and wanted to stay, and her parents were from Solvang, which is a Danish community. A beautiful Danish girl, and we got married, and then we had a baby before I had finished college. We were both pretty broke, trying to get through college.

We called them the Mexican barrio, had an emergency need for a teacher, and they couldn't fill it, and the teachers were in short supply. I went down and talked to the administration and said, "Hey, I'm just a junior in college." "Well, we can't hire a college student to be a public school teacher. But if you take courses X, Y, Z this summer, we can hire you in the fall under an emergency credential." That's how I got into school teaching. And so I taught school during the day, and I went to college early in the morning, and then after school at night. And I'd been working regular jobs at the Whittier College anyway. So the pay was astronomical compared to what I'd been getting as a busser in the cafeteria or as a, I did all the lab prep for the microbiology departments. And yes, it was amazing, so. I got my credential down there, my teaching credential, and that would get me into Washington schools as well, and I would have to go back and get a fifth year or master's degree in education, which I did, but not hard. Yes, Tamara, after all the biology and geology classes, when I switched to education, academically, it was like, it was so easy compared to the -- because I was in all the pre-med classes. I mean, most of the school was, I took all these classes. I was in the pre-med. Boy, the competition was dreadful.

So I came to Washington with my wife and a little baby. And I couldn't get her to move to Port Townsend, so we got as close as we could, we got to Tacoma. We bought a house, and I continued with my research on steelhead and on the anglers, and began... I wasn't even fly fishing at the time, I was learning, teaching myself. So I began running these people down.

Research is interesting, as you well know. You have a thread that leads you to another thread, and if you're really into it, it's engrossing. So I can remember spending weeks in, well, first Tacoma, then Steilacoom, going through

Trey Combs Edited Transcript – March 22, 2014

*Fly Fishing Collection*

4

©Western Washington University Libraries Special Collections

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**

thousands and thousands of high seas fishery records. They had a column called *Incidental Catch*. Steelhead was an incidental catch. They would put the latitude and longitude and the time of the year and the date of the incidental catch. Of course they were targeting salmon species because the International Fisheries Commission is, you know, Russia, Japan, people involved with salmon, but not steelhead.

So after months of making all these little maps and the times of the year, I could see the migratory pattern, which was just like, Wow!

**PP:** Yes, no kidding.

**TC:** Very, very, it was electrifying.

**PP:** How many hours do you think you put into that?

**TC:** A lot. And I first thought it was due to river currents, or not river currents, ocean currents. And I didn't know the term isothermic sea surface, isothermic temperatures, but there's temperature gradients in the ocean, and they're not just north to south. There's actually blocks of temperatures. And when I got into ocean racing, sailboat racing, I sure got into this. But that's how steelhead migrate, by temperature. So they actually follow a temperature band that they're comfortable in. And the biologists at the University of Washington told me, Hey, go back and reevaluate all your findings in terms of ocean temperature. And I did, and then I had my pattern. It was a no brainer. And now everybody knows about it. It's one of the reasons all the Taiwanese boats have big numbers on their roofs. They're not supposed to go to areas, and they can be spotted by plane by their numbers, so, anyway.

**TB:** So, this is a question that Danny had, your steelhead fly fishing on the Skagit, and if you were involved with developing the Skagit systems. Does that make sense to you?

**TC:** The Skagit steelhead fisheries?

**TB:** I guess.

**TC:** Yes.

**TB:** And then Spey rods and specialty lines for use on a large river. I guess what he's saying is: What's your involvement with the Skagit River, the steelhead on the Skagit. I mean, I know he knows that you've been to Rockport a lot. He's seen you up there, I think, at times, and so...

**TC:** Yes, Rockport. Yes, there's a Howard K. Miller State Park, I think, right there.

**TB:** Right.

**TC:** And I'd stay at what we called the bunny cabins.

**TB:** That are at the park too, right?

**TC:** They're just above, yes.

**TB:** Yeah.

**TC:** And it's called the bunny cabins for good reason, because there's domestic rabbits all over the place.

**TB:** Oh, okay.

**TC:** I mean, you could get up in the morning and look out on the lawn, and there's 50 rabbits running around.

But yes, the Skagit was my favorite steelhead river just because of the beautiful water that I fished, and a few of the pools were just classic. I think sometimes, people don't say, this is my favorite river, so much as they've got a couple favorite pools that happen to be on a certain river, and that river becomes their favorite river because of the pools. And pools or runs, drifts, whatever you want to call them, that lend themselves to fly fishing are not the same, I mean, almost any part of the river can be fished by gear guys, pulling plugs and stuff. But fly fishermen have to kind of edit the river in terms of certain water. And the Skagit had a lot of that. And I had a small jet boat, and I could go there by myself, either go down river rowing the boat like a drift boat, then I could motor back to the launch. I was totally independent. I didn't have to, you know, thumb a ride to be picked up. And so I loved going up there. And I think one time I was up there almost a month.

**TB:** Oh wow.

**TC:** I took a leave from the school district without pay. And they took 1/80<sup>th</sup> of my annual salary for every day I was gone.

**TB:** Oh. Okay, that would be costly.

**TC:** Well, it was really under the labor negotiators, sounds like, I know, I'm not trying to be a -- it's just I was. And we thought of ourselves as a very forward leaning, forward thinking school district. One of the things we didn't have was a leave policy. Let's say that your significant other is a, you're gay, and/or a close friend passes away, can't get off to go to the funeral because it's not -- we had a family leave policy. So I negotiated a leave policy with no questions asked, if you're willing to give up part of your annual pay. And everybody equated this to, you know, your sister -- I mean, not a sister, but a non-relative being sick, and that sort of thing. For me it was just like, now I can go fishing when I want to go. So I then could go to Canada and fish, and I did. And it affected my retirement, still does.

But anyway, back to the Skagit. When we started, we made our own lines. The control of the -- they talk about the control of the fly and control of the water and how you manage your fly. It's so much easier with a long rod with two hands acting as a fulcrum--

**TB:** Okay.

**TC:** --than one hand. And I was fly fishing so much that I had bursitis, elbow problems. I had shots in my elbow. And I was constantly going through rehab things with my elbow because of the fly casting. And I had got a two-handed rod, and I motored up there with my jet, and loaded a gas tank, I popped my elbow that I'd just had fixed. And I picked up my two-handed rod and -- it's the only way I was going to fish while I was up there, and I just never looked back. Everybody fishes two-handed rods now. In those days, you know, you'd look up river, it would be unusual to see somebody with a Spey rod.

**PP:** Yes.

**TC:** Today, it would be very unusual to look up river and see somebody with a single-hand rod. It's just unheard of. I mean, I've yet to see a guy with a single-hand rod on a steelhead river in years, unless you're down in Oregon, you know, where they've got the little, the little small steelhead. So yes, we started off making our own lines. And the first rods we fished with were horrible. They were made by the Orvis Company. They were just, you didn't even want to use them to beat a dog with. I mean, they were just horrible. Today, they're awesome.

**PP:** Can I interrupt you--

**TC:** Sure.

**PP:** --to just kind of get a clarification on the dates that you're talking about, when you started this?

**TC:** Oh, dates, let me think about this. About the mid to late Eighties, I was fishing a two-handed rod, and by the time this book came out in 1991, I was on the pro staff of the Sage Rod company, which was close to here, just on Bainbridge Island. And then after that, I was with Sage for years, and then I had a huge opportunity to get well paid to go to Thomas and Thomas, they are in Massachusetts, and they flew me back and I signed with them, and then I was with them for a long time. They also made superb rods. Then they temporarily went out of business, and I signed with the Burkheimer Rods down in Washougal. That's who I'm with right now.

**TB:** Did you know – I mean, you must have known them, but Denise and Mike, is it Maxwell?

**TC:** Oh yes.

**TB:** Because he was a big Spey rod guy.

**TC:** Yes, he taught me how to Spey cast.

**TB:** He did? Okay, okay.

**TC:** And yes, he's an old ex-tank commander from World War II.

**TB:** Yes.

**TC:** Hard as nails. And he had Denise in tears at times trying to teach her. She became the world's distance fly casting champion. Nicest lady you could imagine. And Mike put the fear of God in you when he was teaching you how to Spey cast. And if you had a football field behind you, you still had to Spey cast, no overhand casting.

**TB:** Okay.

**TC:** A funny story... I was on the Bulkley River, and I knew how to Spey cast. If you want to get overly technical, but I didn't use classic Spey lines. I used lines that were shorter, and they were great fishing lines, and they were easy to overhead cast, they didn't Spey cast terribly well. When I was on the Bulkley and trying to reach a distant run and I could only reach it by overhead casting, it was a long way out, like 100 feet, and this guy was downriver shooting video. I didn't see that it was Mike Maxwell at first. Well he looked upriver and saw this guy overhead casting and he recognized me. So he grabbed his video camera and his tripod, and he raced upriver, and he got about halfway, and he slipped on the rocks and fell in. So I met him a couple hours later. There's places in the Bulkley where you can wade from bank to bank. So I said, Mike, what were you doing chasing after me with a video camera? I knew what he was doing. And Mike said, I was going to, I wanted to get a picture of you on video overhead casting so I could show all my students what not to do. Thanks, thanks, Mike. It must have been bad karma that you were giving off that had you fall in the river. But yes, he – in fact, I wrote the foreword for Mike's book on Spey casting.

**TB:** Okay. We have a copy of that, yes.

**TC:** Yes, I did the foreword for that, and he gave me a limited edition, which I have downstairs.

**TB:** Nice, nice. Okay, I think we kind of talked about this, but what criteria did you use in choosing the names listed in your 1976 book on *Steelhead fly fishing and flies*, you acknowledged many noted steelhead fly fishermen, of which, actually, Danny had interviewed Warren Erholm and we do have his. But what criteria did you use in choosing the names that are listed? Which I think is, that's also, I think, where I got the names that we're starting to talk about, like Tommy Brayshaw, Wes Drain, Haig-Brown, Al Knudson. I think those are all mentioned in your book. I think you answered in a sense with saying you had went through those magazines and you found all the names of people and that's how you proceeded. So I'm reading Danny's questions, but I think you did answer them actually, but...

**TC:** I had a different answer to, hang on a second, let me... Oh, I know. I had a – there was a company, that you may remember, Paul, called Herter's.

**TB:** Oh yes, yes.

**PP:** They're in Minnesota, right?

**TB:** Yes.

**TC:** Yes, exactly.

**TB:** Waseca or something.

**TC:** Yes.

**TB:** Yes, yes.

**TC:** And I don't know whether, I don't think they're in business any longer. There was a time when they even had an outlet down in Olympia. But there was a paperback book that Herter's had, and, you know, it showed you how to bone out a moose, and how to cook Dutch oven bread, and everything. It was just like, and it was, parts of it were kind of silly. But there was a section in there on steelhead flies. And the book was published probably in the early 1940s or something. And the steelhead flies they had in there, like the eel river optics with the big fat head. Those flies that they had in there were, you just don't seem them anymore. But I read that list over and over and over again, and then like picking a thread, Tamara, you know, you start with something, and I began crossing it, and I found that Jim Pray, who developed the eel river optics, he had passed away. But a guy that was, had advanced that series, Lloyd Silvius, was still alive and worked at a fly shop in California. So I got in my car and I called him, and I got in the car and drove down to meet him. Then a lot of the shops, the old shops, you know, they would have a picture on the wall of Jim Pray, or somebody like that, you know. And I had my camera with me, and I could get close enough to shoot a picture of it. And then I'd interview them and make notes.

And there was another thing. When I came to Washington, I went to the public library and asked whether they had any, you know, any old magazines and stuff that would take me back to these times. And they said, "Well, we've got *Forest and Stream*, and it was the predecessor for *Field and Stream*, but it was a newspaper. It came out, I think it came out like every couple weeks. And it literally was a chronology of every single fly club. And they would send in a little monthly thing. And now, you know, they'd say, Okay, what's the news? And the members of the fly club will stand up and say, Well, I was out at Lake Kapowsin and I caught some nice rainbows. I was up in this river and I got a steelhead. Well, this magazine, or this *Forest and Stream* newspaper, had every fly club from Southern California, or every fishing club from Southern California all the way up to Oregon, hardly nothing, hardly anything from Washington, and then from Campbell River, where Haig-Brown went and caught his giant tyee salmon. So these clubs would explain what they were doing. I was just like, I went crazy. And we didn't even have Xerox machines back then. Xerox was not white paper with black print, it was the opposite it was a negative. It produced a black image with white print, Tamara, if you can—

**TB:** I can remember that actually.

**TC:** Can you?

**TB:** Yes, yes, yes.

**TC:** And you had to put a dime in there or something to get a sheet out.

**TB:** Yes.



**TC:** Well, I went to the library almost every day, every weekend for a year, and I read every single one of these *Forest and Stream* newspapers, and it gave the early history of Northern California steelhead fly fishing, with John Bend, *Bends Coachman*. I mean, the early flies, like they say, *Bends Coachman*, made no sense, no one could have, no one had a clue as to who John Bend was, or Sumner Carson. I knew the Carson House and the empire that the Carsons built, from the Redwood Empire, cutting down. And they had huge sawmills down there. It took me a long time to figure out that Sumner Carson was the old man's son. He liked to fly fish, and he came up with a fly called the *Carson Royal Coachman*, and you could read that a hundred times, you'd never figure out what the connection was.

But I started with the Herter's book, and then got in this *Forest and Stream* stuff, and I began isolating the names and crossing them with the few references I had, and from there I just went right into the present. And I had John Shewey recently contacted me and said, "Did John Bend really retire in Eureka?" And I said, My source – I threw all my Xerox pages out years and years ago, wish I hadn't. But I went in and read the section in there, and I went, "That's the source I have." And he said, "Yes, I had a similar indication that that's where he lived, but he never showed up on a single census. So people think that he changed his mind at the last second." Well, if someone who is as academic as Shewey is, running down John Bend, trying to elaborate on the early history of steelhead fly fishing, then, you know, I got it right, to be able to give other writers a stepping stone.

**TB:** Oh, and Berryman quotes you over and over again, yes, in his book. Let's go back to your, I guess your steelheading. I think you kind of talked about this at lunch, but you kind of stopped steelhead fishing and got a little bit more into the warm saltwater fishing, and you've been, I think that's where you're also doing the trips down to California. Is that right? I mean, that's kind of when you're doing for the marlin, is that right?

**TC:** Marlin? In Mexico?

**TB:** Well, isn't that really considered-- I'm trying to ask Danny's question here, but I'm guessing that he's talking warm saltwater fishing, I guess that's what-- I think is where your *Bluewater fly fishing*, came from too, could you put that all in perspective?

**TC:** Yes, the-- I've been fly fishing in Costa Rica for years for sailfish, since the mid-Eighties, 1980s, and I was on the show circuit, giving talks about fly fishing for sailfish. And I didn't have the money to just travel all over the world and fly fish for all these various species of blue water fish, especially billfish. I mean, going out on a boat for billfish can run easily a thousand dollars a day, and you can spend weeks doing it, trying to find a billfish. And I was a retired school teacher, writing articles and stuff, and so I didn't have that kind of money. I was asked by Frontiers, which is an international booking agency, for fish and game fishing, hunting, and African safaris and stuff, to go down and check out a lodge on the west coast of Columbia. In those days, the cartels ran Columbia. It was Bahia Solano was the shipping point for drugs out of Columbia to Panama. In those days, Noriega was picking them up on the Panamanian beaches and hauling them across the isthmus and then spreading them through the Americas on the other side, so it was dicey. So, but anyway, I had a buddy who ran the largest leather business in the Americas, called Boots and Bags, and he lived in Bogota. So I met him at this lodge, and they were coming down, checking out the lodge, and met him and began going down to this lodge annually. In fact, we almost ended up buying it.

But so, there was a couple French guys in camp, and I had not fished with them, did not know who they were or anything, and I was on the boat down from the lodge, going down to Bahia Solano, and there's a landing strip near there, and there's a shuttle flight called Acais, that would take me back to Bogota, where I could fly home. And the planes were, you know, six passenger, that sort of thing. So anyway, I kept fussing because I knew when my flight was, and so when I got there, the two French guys said, "Well, let me ride in with you." So they just happened to come in with me, and the flight was – I missed it. So they said, "There won't be another flight for like six hours." So they said, "Oh, we'll stay with you, and we're staying down here, but we'll stay with you." So we started talking, and this guy ran a huge company just outside Paris, in Versailles, a recycling plant, a very wealthy guy. So he said, "You know, we're going to make a movie about the fly fishing for sailfish in Senegal. Would you like to go

with us? We could get you a free flight, Air France.” I wasn’t sure where Senegal was, but I went, “Sure.” I went, “Yes.”

**PP:** You were willing to go anyway.

**TC:** “Okay, yes, count me in.” And his name was Patrick Guillanton, and he looked like Tarzan, bigger than life. But anyway, so I had run into another guy who lived in Durban, South Africa, a chance in a million. I did not plan on this, and I was leaving teaching, and this guy said, “Hey, we’ve got a deal” – I mentioned this at lunch – “got a deal to do a bunch of videos for this hotel chain, very exclusive hotels in Mauritius” and Mauritius is an island in the Indian Ocean, and it’s in African Republic, but Europeans refer to Mauritius much in the same way that we refer to Hawaii. That’s where you just go to hang out, except they run around half nude. You know, right in the bars, it’s kind of shocking. So I went, I’m all over this, when I can pull something like this together. And at that time, bear with me for just a second, at that time, for the first time due to, a large part due to the commercial fishing interests worldwide, we were beginning to find out where small billfish were and where the greatest concentrations of billfish were, all over the world. And it’s like, you know, following Moby Dick. You know, they’re here and it’s here and it’s here and here, and we understood that there was a certain area off Australia where small black marlin could be found. And another place, La Guaira Bank, off of Venezuela, where white marlin concentrated, where baby blues could be found off Puerto Rico, and on and on and on. And it was kind of a bar thing, you know. If you had a million dollars to burn and you could go to all these places, you could catch all these smaller billfish for fly rod, but it was obviously not within the realm of possibility because it would cost you a tremendous amount of money. So, I ended up fly fishing for Atlantic sailfish off Senegal, which is probably the – West Africa is the best place for Atlantics in the world. Florida’s got some of the smallest. West Africa’s got some of the largest. And then, we went to Mauritius and I caught, not on fly, but I caught an enormous blue marlin in Mauritius. It was the largest take in the Indian Ocean that year. It was almost 900 lbs.

**PP:** Geez!

**TC:** So I was kind of beginning to think, you know, maybe this is possible. Then I went down to Venezuela with a friend and we got into white marlin, and I already hooked a bunch of blues in Mexico. I was beginning to see that I could connect these dots. The big one was going to Australia. And I had a severance package from teaching, \$14,000, and I set up a package where I would fish Australia for blacks, and then go to New Guinea and be in New Guinea for a couple months, went up into the interior New Guinea, and then fished the Bismarck Archipelago on the north coast for dogtooth tuna.

But when I got back from New Guinea and Australia, I kind of boxed the compass, and then I realized I’d been able to just accidentally fall into-- And it also came at a time when the international carriers were intrigued by this whole thing. So I wrote letters of inquiry to Australia, and they flew me first class to Australia and back. Air France flew me. South African Air flew me around the world for \$500, business. I had a friend in Bogota, which I had mentioned, who was connected with the national carrier for Columbia, Avianca, and he flew me, I fished with him. And once I fished with him, he flew me back and forth to Bogota first class. And I’d come on board with shorts and a t-shirt, and they’d put me in first class with a wine person and the whole bit, you know, and it was like, “Who are you?”

And after years of this, I just was, I couldn’t believe that maybe this was possible. There was some little minor stuff. I had to go up to Canada’s offshore islands in Langara. They’re not called the Queen Charlottes anymore. They’re given the Haida name now. But anyway, that’s-- And I had to go back and fish off Cape Cod for little tunny. And there was some little holes to fill. But compared to having to go to Australia to get a black, and the black I got was a world record—

**TB:** Nice.

**TC:** --so I got to, have this huge feast with all the legendary Australian captains and stuff. We ate crocodile and that sort of thing. So you know, looking back on it, I couldn’t do it again, even if I had a bank roll to do it.

Trey Combs Edited Transcript – March 22, 2014

*Fly Fishing Collection*

10

©Western Washington University Libraries Special Collections

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**

Physically I couldn't do it. But moneywise it would just be profoundly impossible. But at the time, it was just the front edge of offshore fly fishing, and the countries were anxious to cash in on what they didn't -- they had no idea how big it would become. So I flew everywhere, and I almost never had to pay for the flight. It was just amazing.

**PP:** With the, in terms of the flies that you used, did you find that you were creating new patterns to fit these situations, or were there already established patterns that people were using?

**TC:** There were patterns, and most of them were pretty awful. And I don't say that, you know, that mine were somehow better, because it was a long process of developing the patterns. Essentially, I was told years ago by Chico Fernandez, you know, I said, "What are your favorite patterns, Chico?" And he's a legendary saltwater pioneer, and he said, "Well, for saltwater, anything white. For freshwater, anything black." Which is amazingly true. But most of the patterns that we fished, they weren't head heavy, so they had to be constantly stripped, and if you didn't strip, they just sank in a lifeless way. And so the flies that I tied were head heavy in that we took a lot of epoxy and stuff at the heads and we put eyes on them and stuff. But the thing we found was that the less organic materials, like feathers and fur that you could use, and the more synthetic materials that you could involve and put inside the fly, the fly would shake off most of the water on the back cast. So we were able to cast some large patterns that were cast-able. And having said that, I was on one of my own charters when I built this gigantic marlin fly—

**TB:** Oh my gosh.

**TC:** --made of chicken feathers and everything else, and I put it over the side and dipped it up and down to fill with water, and then I couldn't cast it, it weighed so much, which was kind of embarrassing. But you know what some of our flies look like, you know. Some of them have, you know, either the front hook is down and the so-called stinger hook points up, and I found out that -- this is kind of a throw away aside -- but I found out that if your fly was bone dry and you have a marlin coming in on the teaser, and you get one shot at it, you cast out that fly, it just lands on the surface and floats and the fish doesn't even see it. And if it does see it, it's not swimming properly. So I took to putting my fly in a glass of saltwater, and it would sit there, sometimes for days. And when I was in Australia, we fished for four days before we rose the first black marlin. And cold weather had eliminated all these baby blacks. And the one that came in was, oh, about 100 lbs, a yearling, not a juvenile, not a baby of the year. And I'd been sitting there with that damn fly in that water for days, and I picked up-- The marlin overran the teaser. I took the boat out of gear, picked up the fly, cast it. The second the fly hit, it was swimming across-wise, the marlin made a U-turn, it was like an arrow, hammered it, and we got it.

So, if you want fish stories, you're going to have to buy a lot of tape.

**TB:** This is great. Well, why don't you tell us some of things that you're most proud of. I mean, I could try to pull these things out of you, but you know your life story best, and so just, it seems I have things all over the map of things that you've done. Danny seems to be interested-- Again, this gets back to the Maxwells, but up on the Bulkley River, some of your experiences up there. You know, Bill McMillan, and he of course is probably from, I mean, he's over at Rockport or Concrete, in there somewhere I think too—

**TC:** I don't know where he's moved to. When I met him he was down in the Washougal.

**TB:** Yes, no, he's up by Concrete now. We did an oral history with him. So you're not still friends with him? I mean, he did the cover of this I noticed, so...

**TC:** Oh, it's not that I'm not friends with him. I just haven't seen him in years. He's involved with the Native Fish Society.

**TB:** We did do an oral history with him, and I know he came over from Concrete then. He's a big friend of John Alevras too, and Bill Kindler, and they all came together.

**TC:** Yes, Bill's involved, heavily involved in the steelhead conservation and the preservation of wild fish. And yes, that's a book unto itself.

**TB:** Again Danny's question, but he kind of had a question about your opinions about the environmental aspects of wild steelhead recovery, and so I was kind of equating, knowing that you'd had some relations with Bill McMillan, based on the cover of the book.

**TC:** Yes, no, I greatly admire the work that he's done and their efforts. And it is-- Thirty years ago I was talking to Fish and Game about wild steelhead, as opposed to hatchery fish, which I'm just-- The Quinault fish that we talked about, a little different breed of cat, and that is the Quinault Indian Nation. So, I've almost got to take the Quinaults out of the equation. You can talk to Fish and Game guys, and rivers like the Skagit that are open to the public per se, you can set forth a pretty good argument, as Bill has, as many others have, for the restoration of wild runs, when it should be done. They're so diluted in many rivers right now, you'd have to virtually close the river for years. The gene pool has been so diluted with hatchery fish. But yes, I think it's been a, it's a tragedy.

Two sides to it. One is that the public who buys licenses are not all fly fishermen. The majority are not. And they want fish that they can bonk on the head and take home. So purely from a democratic standpoint, they buy the license, they have their say, they want more hatcheries and more fish dumped in the rivers.

Fly fishermen, in the minority, and the Quinault River fish, they're less than 5%. They want the restoration of wild fish at the exclusion of all hatchery fish. Totally understandable, I agree with them. The problem is how to implement it, and the best way would be, in some rivers, to shut the whole river down for ten years. And if you were going to provide any sort of – well, you just, it kind of becomes very technical, but the hatcheries, except for this Quinault program, the hatcheries do the opposite of wild fish. They concentrate the run timing. They concentrate the life histories. That's because all the fish are raised and sent to sea after one year. I mean, they're pellet fed, they've got an accelerated growth rate that sets them for a shorter time in the ocean. The fish come back smaller, then they're bred to other hatchery fish, and the whole downward spiral is recycled. And some guys call these steelhead donut holes because they get so small they swim through a donut. And all the robustness in size and the tremendous variety of life histories on a northwest river with wild fish, you could probably identify 12-15 different life histories, everything from a fish that spent one year in the river and four years in the ocean, to the opposite, a four and one, and everything between. Then you have fish that are coming back and spawning for the second time, females mostly. The survival rate among males because of what happens to them in the rivers and their combative nature and so forth is very, very low.

So yes, I think it's been catastrophic for runs of fish, and it all goes back to, you know, the Elwha River, the dams that they had and the law that says as mitigation for the loss of runs due to industrial, god knows what, we can build a hatchery and make up for it. And they didn't understand in those days what the implications of the hatcheries were. Well, carrying that forward, mitigation can be anything. It can be pollution in the river, the loss of entire runs, dams, anything that would degrade the natural environment could be mitigated for with hatcheries. Native fishing, which is a bone of contention with whites almost everywhere. My home river is the Klickitat. I work down for The Evening Hatch and The Steelhead Ranch, and I host groups. That is, I mean, they have nets down on the bottom of that river that come out of the Columbia, and the steelhead go and run in the nets before they make it up into the river.

So, you can discuss— I think Washington's got a terrible track record, because of that. Early on that was the standard, was that hatcheries were okay because they could mitigate against losses caused by electrical power, irrigation, whatever you want to call it. And they never, it's like borrowing money or running a credit card. When you max it out, you get another one. You never have to live within your means. And the State of Washington has not had to live within its means. And it also, I think it spoils a lot of fishermen that believe that because they buy a license, they can go down and knock a couple steelhead in the head and take them home. And that would not be possible probably if we were trying to preserve a native run of fish, maybe on a lesser level, but...

So you've got, you know, you have a huge difference in opinion. I read recently the other day that a guy wrote a letter to the editor and said, "All people should be required to fly fish and fish a fly, barbless hook. They have to release all fish, and all hatcheries should be shut down," and on and on and on. And you know, 90% of the

Trey Combs Edited Transcript – March 22, 2014

*Fly Fishing Collection*

12

©Western Washington University Libraries Special Collections

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**

fishermen out there, gear fishing are going like, “Who is this guy? Are you kidding me?” But I appreciate where he’s coming from. Essentially I feel the same way. It won’t get me anywhere. But yes, I think-- Oregon’s not much better. I think California is making some serious inroads on the restoration of some of their steelhead runs. And British Columbia, they have tremendous issues with the offshore netting off the Skeena, and I mean, the best steelheading on the planet. They have huge issues with that, but they’re not building hatcheries up there to mitigate for these losses. They’re trying to live within those losses. And I wish we had the same.

The other thing is, you know, I’m not trying to beat the subject to death, but every time you take the natives to court - I got into a disagreement with a friend of mine, who was saying that they’ve got a court case coming up, and that they were absolutely 100% sure that they would lose the case against the natives. Their lawyers had done X, Y, Z, and the judge wouldn’t even hear it. I said, “You’re not going to win. I’ve never known a federal case to go to a federal court that was counter to Native Americans and their rights to fish or whatever, that you didn’t lose.” He didn’t like that at all. But the judge wouldn’t even hear it. He threw it out. He said, I’m not even going to discuss this. So, it’s an uphill battle. So guys like McMillan and other people who are part of the Native Fish Society— I just had a client who was involved in the preservation of the Deschutes, and we talked a lot about this, the terrific difficulties. So my hats off to them. I have great admiration for their efforts.

**PP:** You mentioned this at lunch, and then you mentioned it again just by name, but could you talk a little bit more about the Quinault Hatchery Project that you were talking to us about.

**TC:** Yes, you go back, it was 40 years ago, and the Quinault had one hatchery, halfway up the river, halfway up the lower river. There is a Lower Quinault that’s Indian, Upper Quinault that’s state, and then the headwaters are in the national park. And the Quinault were, for a variety of reasons, were seeing a loss of their giant fish. These are fish over 30 pounds. And part of it was the loss of habitat, part of it was interception on the high seas, but the greater loss was caused by the Indians themselves. They were over harvesting. It only takes one giant steelhead mating with a bunch of females to maintain a huge advantage to the gene pool, put a 30 pound steelhead mating with large female steelhead, and the progeny from that are going to be remarkable game fish. So the Quinault built, along with and they were funded by the federal government, a hatchery on a tributary called Cook Creek. And the tribal biologist in coordination with Marty Figg, who was a non-Indian, they began taking, collecting brood stock from their own river, not borrowing from any other source, and mating them and raising them and releasing them. And when the fish came back to the hatchery, these fish were only mated to wild fish. And that went on for many years. And then the Fish and Game Department got involved and contracted with the Quinault the new regimen whereby the hatchery fish that came in would be mated with other hatchery fish. It was very cost effective. You didn’t have to go down and cut monster steelhead out of the nets. You just stood there at the hatchery, when they came in you mated them, and away you went again. And of course the size of the fish began shrinking. But at the same time, the Quinault had built this pen rearing facility on Lake Quinault, on the reservation. As you go up the Quinault, it would be on your left, there’s a little bay in there. And sensibly this was, they’re going do a pan fish with small steelhead and salmon, and sell them to market where they were like this.

And Marty Figg moved from the Cook Creek hatchery, where they were putting out these donut holes. He moved up his whole operation up to Lake Quinault. This was years ago. And he went back to selectively breeding monster fish with, I mean, he told me on the phone, I’m bringing big to big. He netted a 35 pound wild steelhead in Taholah, and they cut it out of the net very much alive, it wasn’t gilled. They took it to the hatchery, put it in a special tank, and they mated that fish repeatedly with three-year ocean female fish, which those fish are 35-36 inches long anyway. Well you can imagine the results. He did that and has done that for generations, two human generations, and I don’t know how many steelhead generations. So the fish are now coming back, and the average fish is a three-year ocean fish. So they’re out in the ocean for a whole year longer. More than half the hatchery fish come back after one year in the ocean, and they’re like 23-24 inches. So they’re smaller because of the hatchery program, and they’re smaller because they’ve only spent a shorter time in the ocean, where the Quinault hatchery, they’re coming back after three years, and they’re big fish. And, you know, when I have a group of Japanese, and the smallest fish we get in six days is 34 inches long, those are serious fish.

**PP:** Yes.

Trey Combs Edited Transcript – March 22, 2014

*Fly Fishing Collection*

13

©Western Washington University Libraries Special Collections

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**

**TC:** The lead Japanese guy, who was a real expert fly fisherman, he put on a 20 pound tippet, that's pretty heavy, and the first fish he ran into snapped his tippet like thread. It was probably in the high 20s, low 30s fish. Another guy hooked a fish that was so big that as he was trying to beach it, the hook straightened. So fishing has tended to be slow, much slower than I experienced the previous year, but I'm not saying that this hatchery system-- Many people are death on any kind of hatchery, whether it's Indian or white, but if you're going to have a hatchery within the boundaries of the Quinault Indian Nation, and they're free to do what they want, and you've got a hatchery program like this-- And by the way, this was not developed because of a government grant. It wasn't developed because the Quinault wanted to develop a super sports fishing program. It was developed out of Quinault pride. They just wanted the biggest steelhead around. It was a matter of, it was part of their tribal thinking. And so it's there, like it or not, and people who are death on hatcheries would not want to be part of anything like this. But I've told people who've criticized the fact that I'm fishing on the Quinault Reservation for hatchery fish, I say, "Well, you know, there's dozens and dozens of rivers throughout the State of Washington that have hatchery fish that average six pounds, and you're welcome to fish those rivers if you don't want to fish the Lower Quinault." And I'm not being sarcastic, that's the way it is.

So, what's your time, Tamara?

**TB:** It's like 2:30. We've got like a half hour.

*Short Break*

**TB:** Okay.

**TC:** I've met him (Ralph Wahl) at get-togethers, dinners. When I met him, he was quite elderly and no longer fishing. And but you're right, his photography-- I was really into black and white, even printing my own pictures in the lab. I used the high school lab for a while. And I had geeky friend who taught me how to burn and dodge and play with photographs, and Ralph was the one that put me on to the slow film and tripod and cable release. That's how I shot these guys, most of them, with a fine grain film. I think I've got the negatives still, had them an eternity. But yes, he was, I think, my all-time favorite guy other than Haig-Brown, was Tommy Brayshaw.

**TB:** Talk about him because we've got some of his rods. And, oh, his original art work. We've got 13 original Tommy Brayshaws.

**PP:** Yes.

**TC:** You're kidding. How did you—

**TB:** McKenzie Club down in Oregon had them, because of Skip Hosfield, somehow, he has some connection, and then when they went over to the Federation, and then the Federation sort of pulled down their Discovery Center, and they donated them to us. And then we have a rod that he did. We don't have any of his fish, but we have a rod that he made. I think that might be it. So that would be great to talk about him.

**TC:** I think Haig-Brown put me on to Tommy, and he was in his mid-80s, and he wasn't fishing any more, but he had, in fact, the last of his flies were in a sheepskin wallet, and my regret is that I donated those flies to the Museum of Fly Fishing in Manchester, Vermont, because they put them in their archives, still in the glass that I glued them to from my fly plates, pretty crude back then. But they sat in the archives for 20-some years. And I recently read a book by a guy who lives back there, and he went up to the museum and asked about it, and they let him down in the basement, and there's the flies, Brayshaw's flies, still in glass, still glued and not even displayed. What a waste. I mean, they should be-- At the time, there was no fly fishing museum out here. There ultimately was one down in Florence, Oregon, and that's a whole other story, because that guy who set it up, he and I went way, way back. But I visited Brayshaw at his place in, let's see, it would be Victoria I'm sure. I'm trying to remember, I'm not sure if it was Victoria or Vancouver.

Trey Combs Edited Transcript – March 22, 2014

*Fly Fishing Collection*

14

©Western Washington University Libraries Special Collections

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**

**TB:** His son, I think, is in Victoria, so it might have been Victoria.

**TC:** Yes, he still had a carved fish, and he fished the Coquihalla a lot, in Eastern British Columbia, for steelhead. It's on the big highway running north to south. But yes, what a gentleman. He was fascinating. And he was into golf when he wasn't fly fishing.

**TB:** Oh, okay.

**TC:** And he, last I talked to him, he was getting ready to go to Hawaii. When he came back, he passed away.

**TB:** What about Van Egan? Did you know Van Egan?

**TC:** Van Egan.

**TB:** Because he lives right by Haig-Brown. He was a big friend of Haig-Brown, did a lot of his, so he might have been later. He's written several books about, you know, the tyee and, okay.

**TC:** Van Egan. Boy, that rings a bell.

**TB:** He was the next door neighbor of Roderick Haig-Brown. He just died about, within the last 3-5 years. And he's just another person that, you know, of course if you think of the people that have died before you ever got a chance to do an oral history or really meet with them, and I think Van Egan was another kind of quiet guy. And so sometimes it's nice to get somebody else's perspective, if they've met him, about him and hear a little bit of his story.

But that takes me to, did you ever do any of the Tyee fishing in BC? I think, it's a little bit like trolling, but a lot of them were real into it. If you do it, I think, you become a member of the Tyee Club of BC. It's a special kind of fishing they do.

**TC:** A Tyee is a salmon over 50 pounds, Chinook salmon. And the Campbell River fishing club gave you a, I think it's a bronze button that you could wear on your felt hat if you got a salmon over a certain weight. Then if you got a salmon over another weight, you got a silver button. And I think you got a gold button if you got a Tyee. And any salmon 50 pounds or better was a Tyee, and anything less than that was called a spring.

**TB:** Okay.

**TC:** And today, we tend to call spring salmon, Blackmouth, in the United States we do. They're just immature Chinook salmon. But I did fish – I had a sailboat and I would take it back and forth from here to Alaska and British Columbia and stuff. And the Campbell River was tricky, the fish, especially in the old days because just north of Campbell River was Seymour Narrows, and supposedly it was widened to reduce the tidal flow through it, and it was supposedly the largest non-atomic blast ever done in North America.

**TB:** I've heard of that before, yes.

**TC:** They built a tunnel underneath the Seymour Narrows then blew it up. But the tidal run is so severe through the narrows today that there's a light there, red and green—

**TB:** Okay.

**TC:** --and I'll never forget my -- took my Ingrid down, Shearwater was the name of the boat, and it was a red light and there was a strong tidal current running, so we just kept the motor running and held in the current. And a pod of killer whales pulled up alongside the boat and they had youngsters with them. And they just parked right beside the

Trey Combs Edited Transcript – March 22, 2014

*Fly Fishing Collection*

15

©Western Washington University Libraries Special Collections

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**

boat just breathing. And they knew the drill, because when the light turned green, it meant the current had dropped down to only a couple miles an hour, and we put the boat, accelerated through the narrows, and the killer whales came right along with us and all the other boats came through, which was really cool. It would have been dangerous at its maximum flow for a killer whale. A killer whale could go through there, but its youngster probably could not. We're talking about nine, ten, eleven knots. And I think when, in the old days, I think when the Tyee Club was running the show up there, those fish were coming out of Campbell River. That must have been a huge tidal flow through there, and those boats were being rowed. So my feeling is that I'm betting that those guys with those giant Tyee salmon-- Zane Grey went up there a lot. He's pictured in some pictures with these salmon, 60 pound salmon. But I'm betting they did it on the slack tide, you know, an hour before or hour after the slack tide, because I had a Zodiac off the mothership. Even trying to fish in the Zodiac was tough because of the huge amount of flow there. Of course, everybody's got motors today. But yes, they put a dam on the Campbell River, and that run a giant fish, just like the Elwha, the giant fish in the Elwha, they were pretty much taken apart.

**TB:** Okay, the last two questions maybe are, again, I would really like you to think about some things you'd like to brag about and tell us that. And the other thing is I really would like you to talk a little bit about your sail-boating; because that's something I never knew that you were a sail-boater, and I just think that a complete picture or a more complete picture of some of your doings, I think is kind of nice.

**TC:** Yes, I'll be real quick about it, but I built this Ingrid, 38-foot Ingrid, and there are a lot of boat builders in Port Townsend. I had bought this package with this guy, and he was supposed to give you a boat that was rigged, engine, ready to motor around, with just bulkheads in it, and you could finish the interior. And I took out a loan. In those days the loan was twice what I made annually as a teacher, so it was quite a bit of money. And the guy took everybody's money and put it into his own boat with the idea that he'd sail off and leave everybody high and dry. So the boat was seized in a federal bankruptcy. And I was so upset, because they wanted still more money, which I didn't have, for me to buy my own boat back, to increase the assets in the bankruptcy court. And so I broke the locks on the Skokum building down there, crow barred them and got some bolt cutters, got access to it and opened up the doors, and then got the crane in the yard to pull the whole cradle with my boat in it out into the middle of the yard, and then I covered the boat with plastic and set up a wood shop underneath it. And then I hired a couple guys to teach me how to build boats. And I worked, I took two days off in three years, and the boat was, I got to tell you, the boat was absolutely stunning. I really learned how to build, to do the interior of a boat. When the kids got sick of it and didn't want any part of it anymore, I sold the boat to the son of the guy who started Nike, and he paid me, it was back in the Seventies, he paid me \$91,000 for that boat. It was a lot of money back then.

**PP:** So that wasn't the boat that you took from Victoria to Maui.

**TC:** No, and this is a little controversial. But one day I woke and I thought, you know, if I have to teach school today I'm going to go crazy. So I called a buddy of mine who was really into sailboats. And I had just sold my boat and was shopping for another boat, and I said, "Let's go to Seattle and look at boats." And he said, "Okay, we'll call in sick." So I (*coughing sounds*), "Sorry, I can't make it today."

**PP:** You might have not wanted to sign that thing after all.

**TC:** So my buddy and I went over to Seattle, and I was walking along the docks, and I had a friend over there who was a yacht broker. So I asked him, you know, "What's going on? What do you got for sale?" And stuff like that. And parked away from all the other boats was the sleekest 40-foot race boat you've ever seen. It was like beyond what any teacher could afford. Back then it would've cost you a quarter a million dollars to have bought. And I said, "What's the story on this boat?" And he said, "Well, it was seized in a bankruptcy." And I went, "I know all about that." So he said, "It's up for bids." And so I said, "Well, do you have any idea what the bids have been?" And he said, "Kind of, but I can't discuss it, you know, its secret bids by the bank that owns the boat now." So I went down to the boat and looked at it, opened up the hatch, and I looked inside. And from the galley all the way to the floor peak, it was filled with brand new jibes and North sails, thousands and thousands of dollars' worth of brand new sails. They'd never even been run up. I couldn't believe it. It was all teak. It was a Canadian boat. And it was a race boat. So just to be a jerk, I wrote out a check for \$70,000, and I knew I would never get the boat, but I wrote

Trey Combs Edited Transcript – March 22, 2014

*Fly Fishing Collection*

16

©Western Washington University Libraries Special Collections

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**



out the check. And I told my friend, I said, Here, I'll make a bid on it. I had \$500 in my account, so highly illegal. So about two weeks I got a call from the yacht broker, and he said, "Trey, you'd better sit down." I said, "What?" And he says, "Yours was the high bid."

**TB:** Whoa!

**TC:** "You got the boat." I said, "I have no money." So, my Ingrid had been caught up in a bankruptcy, as I had mentioned. And Bank of America down here, I knew the president, and he financed that boat. Even though the Feds had claimed it, and I had it documented, it was a US documented vessel, and it was un-seizable. It was a catch-22 the government had put its self into. So the FBI came out to the school and they wanted the boat. And I said, "I don't own the boat. Bank of America owns it, better go down and talk to them." And he said, "What did you do? It's a US documented vessel now." It means the numbers are chiseled in and you can use it in war time, and the FBI just threw up their hands in total disgust. And my boat never did get seized.

So I had a history with the bank president, so I went down and I made an appointment the next day. You're not going to believe what I did. And I had just finished building a new house. And he says, "What did you do now?" I said, "Well, I've got \$500 in my account and I just wrote a check for a new boat for \$70,000." He looked at me like, you know, that's fraud, but then he started laughing. I said, "Is there any chance you can make the check good?" And he said, "Yes, but I'm going to put a second on your house like you can't believe it." I went, "Far out." So, a couple weeks later, I drove back to town with this fabulous race boat. People assumed that my family had died and left me a bunch of money. And he did take a second out on my house. But, to make a long story short, after a couple years of racing, I sold that boat and bought this slightly smaller boat that was lighter and faster, and ended up racing my original boat in the Vic-Maui in the Transpac.

**PP:** Okay.

**TC:** Port Townsend was a place where everybody got into boats. I mean, every Sunday there was 25 sailboats out there racing around the buoys and stuff. It's kind of died off now. But it was the mania, because we had the Wooden Boat (building) Festival. We had the Wooden Boatbuilding School here. Port Townsend was like something out of Maine, you know, where boats were built the old fashioned way, you know, screws, glue, ribs, instead of fiberglass things coming out of factories.

So, yes, and then offshore racing got to be increasingly high tech. Motorcars went through the same thing. As a kid, you know, you'd just put duct tape over your headlights and you raced it. And sailboat racing was far more advanced than that when I was in it, a lot more. But it got so that I couldn't even afford to go out and practice and destroy a sail, I mean, the sails were costing us thousands of dollars. And the Vic-Maui cost a fortune, it cost me \$25,000 just to equip the boat for it, with the special radios and life rafts, and all the other stuff that went with it. But I don't regret a penny I spent, because we smoked them.

**PP:** And you made a record.

**TC:** Yes, I did. I think it maybe still stands. We ran off about 700 miles in 72 hours, almost a physically impossible boat. I mean, it's way above the boat's full speed, but the boat surfed. When you caught a big ocean wave, you surfed on it, and it's like a surfboard, and the front end would go underwater, and then it would pop up and away you'd go, and, you know, you'd watch your mount meter run up right through 20 knots, and you had a huge rooster tail off the back of the boat, and that's a scene you know, if 30-40 knot winds at two in the morning. And the whole boat is off hanging on the back pulpit to try to keep the nose from going underwater and submerging, which we did once. We submarined the whole boat, and the rooster tail was coming off the mast. It sounds impossible to have happen, but we did. So everybody would get on the back because, you know, the wind would drive the spinnaker down, then it would catch the wave, and then it would come up, and you'd surf like crazy. But to keep from submarining it, we'd have everybody hang on the backstay, and the back, the stern pulpit, and everybody would hang on for dear life, and it was fun.

But yes, at the end of that Vic-Maui, I had an opportunity to get a one-tonner, a two-tonner rather, 40-foot boat, and campaign it. And a Japanese computer firm asked if I'd co-skipper an 80-foot carbon fiber boat. And my goal was to do the, be on the Whitbread Round the World, do the southern ocean thing. I was 44 years old, 74 now, but I was 44 years old, and the kids ... and stuff, you know, they were a foot taller than I was and they're 20 years old. The Vic-Maui, the whole fleet was full of Olympic guys, guys who had sailed in the Olympics.

**PP:** Wow.

**TC:** And I was just running out of years that I could do this kind of stuff. So, it sounds just totally egocentric, and I just decided physically it was just ridiculous for me to try to do this, and I thought about for years about writing a new book about steelhead. And my girlfriend was the ultimate grammarian. She was an English major, and she knew everything about editing you could imagine, so it was a good combination. So I started doing the research on this book. So that was, 1984 was the Vic-Maui, and the book came out in 1991. It was a four year, really in depth, 4 ½ year project.

**TB:** So is there anything we haven't asked you that we should ask you? I mean, I know there's a lot we haven't asked you that we should, but is there some other big, big thing that you're proudest of? I keep saying that word, but something that we haven't gotten that we should really get?

**TC:** I've still caught the largest wahoo ever caught, still in the record books. I've had world record striped marlin, black marlin, wahoo counted as tuna records.

Tamara, when you go fishing offshore and you're looking for a world record, you're allowed twelve inches of shock tippet, which can be any test you want. So if you've got a 100 pound shock tippet, and this length of twelve inches was set up when guys started tarpon fishing for records, back in the 1960s. And it didn't occur to anyone that anyone might try to catch a billfish with a spear on a fly. So they set the 12 inches as the length. So it's a little tricky because if you're fighting a marlin, and the marlin turns even just halfway around, he's going to – I've been clipped off by blue marlin. I've hooked twelve, have been clipped off every one. But anyway, I've taken more than a hundred billfish, where I've actually landed them. And some of them are bills out of a skiff on a fly, including probably 75 Pacific sails. But all IGFA, all 12-inch shock tippets. And if I get a chance, I can send you an email, but we figured out a way to get marlin, exhaust them quickly, by never giving them a second to rest, and it's been a fight throughout the Americas. It's now adopted everywhere, but we figured it out on the Royal Star. And we were getting 125 pound striped marlin, to the skiff, 10-15 minutes, and then billing them by hand, and they were very docile. And they weren't beat to death where they were black and so stressed out they just sank to the bottom. And essentially when the, you know, on a billfish, you got a couple minutes, so. When a billfish jumps, all over the ocean, when it finishes jumping, it's out of gas. And the first thing a captain does in the Americas is begins backing down on the fish. And you're with a fly reel going like this and there's slack line all over the ocean, and the fish is resting. And then the captain backs right over the fish and sends it down, so you have a completely revived fish, you've got a fly rod in your hand, it's fresh, and you got to now derrick that fish up with the fly rod. And that's how the captains fight marlin with gear, but not on a fly rod. If you can keep that— as soon as the fish finishes jumping all over the ocean, if it immediately comes under stress, we made them tow the skiffs. And they would kill themselves sometimes that way. They'd pull it until they went down and died, and, I mean, you had to be really careful when you put the screws to them. And that came out of the years on the Royal Star with the marlin.

Yes, I would say getting-- That book, I'll never write anything as good—

**TB:** It is good.

**TC:** --or that complete, in terms of the various rivers. I got too many guys in there with too many flies. And Steve Raymond, I think, in a review of the book, said, Combs has got an opinion that if he includes enough people, and everybody in his book buys it, he'll have a bestseller.

**TB:** That's such a great resource, yes. I mean, we've interviewed Lemire and Alec Jackson, but these people, it's just like go to this book and you'll find out something about them to get you started. No, it's awesome, it's awesome!

**TC:** Yes.

**TB:** Yes, no, it's a great resource. And then obviously we've talked about Berryman several times. He's just picked up all this stuff from you and regurgitates in his little articles that are great.

**TC:** It was hard to get some of the guys, like Harry Lemire, to stand in the river with a fly rod in their hands—

**TB:** Really?

**TC:** --and then set up a tripod and a cable release and Panatomic-X slow film, and to shoot picture after picture after picture, until you'd burned up a roll on him, and then going through and picking the best one. He's a pretty private guy. But he fished with me, and then I fished with Harry a good deal. In fact at his celebration of his passing, I brought a big photograph that I'd taken of his collie and Harry sitting on a log—

**TB:** Oh sweet.

**TC:** --and I gave them to everybody, and gave them to his wife. And then she ordered more and gave them out too. But anyway, yes.

**TB:** Yes, very nice. Okay, this was great, terrific! And thank you very much.

**PP:** Thank you.

**TC:** Tamara, my pleasure. Paul, thank you, both.

**PP:** Oh, it's been an honor.

**TC:** Glad to get some of this done, so that people can one day use me as a stepping stone.

**PP:** I told my friend in Montana, who's gotten into steelhead fishing, Spey fishing in the last few years, that I was going to do this interview, and he wanted to kill me. He said, "That's my Bible."

**TC:** I don't do interviews. When my close friend sold the international fly fishing exposition business, I said, "I'm done." I don't like giving talks. I don't do clubs anymore. I would, if I had a new book. I'm working on a new book on steelhead. But when the book comes out and a fly club wants me to come and autograph copies and sell them, I'll do that. But yes, I was never really happy about giving talks at the shows, and I've given hundreds of them. So, yes, this was fine for me. Tamara talked about this a long time ago, and when I got back from the Quinault, it was on my list of things that I'd like to do before I had to go back.

**PP:** Well, we feel honored.

**TB:** Yes.

**TC:** You know, Paul, that's simply great. I enjoyed both of you very much.

***The End***

