

American Fly Fishing Literature

2018 Exhibit Annotated Guide: An Addendum

Harry Middleton

The Paul and Mary Ann Ford
Fly Fishing Collection

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In June, Paul and Mary Ann Ford made a wonderful mid-year addition to their annual donation of books, these focused on Harry Middleton (1949-1993). As always Paul Ford provided annotations and text .

—*Tamara Belts*

Harry Middleton

Middleton's first book, *The Earth is Enough*, was a brilliant flash across the face of late twentieth century fly fishing writing. His *Starlight Creek Angling Society* (already in Western Libraries Paul and Mary Ann Ford Fly Fishing Collection) was an abbreviated and wondrous elaboration of the lifestyle portrayed in that first book. And then Harry's life "soured" when this nationally recognized magazine writer was fired in 1990 by a "friend," his boss at *Southern Living Magazine*. Why was he forced out? We don't know.

Harry's dad, also named Harry and his mother Donna came from separate dirt poor Southern locales, but each knew there was no hope for advancement in life by staying at home. So Harry Sr., a "by the books" chap enlisted as an Army "non-com" at the end of WWII and advanced to Colonel by the onset of the Viet Nam conflict where he fought at least two different deployments despite his contention that US politicians were unwise in their conviction that North Viet Nam could be defeated. Harry's mother, Donna, had left her birth home and traveled to Washington D.C. where she was a secretary in the War Department, and met and married Harry Sr. Harry Jr. was born in Germany and he and his sister traveled with their parents to worldwide military installations. BUT NOWHERE was home. On base in Okinawa, staging area for the US assault on North Viet Nam, Colonel Middleton decided Harry needed "a drastic change of scenery" and sent him back to the Deep South to live with his Grandfather Emerson and Uncle Albert. So begins our story of a thirteen year old flying 33,000 feet over the Pacific in a military transport and feeling some trepidation at entering the Ozarks—home of the trout and Old Men.

Middleton, Harry. **The Earth is Enough—Growing Up in a World of Trout & Old Men.** Simon and Schuster, New York. 1989. Pp. 269. First edition. First printing. Unclipped. Perfect dust jacket under protective mylar sleeve. Red and light green boards. Rare signed copy. Mint throughout. This is the story of how a youngster grows up on an Ozark's foothills farm. It is a place called Trail's End where his Grandpa Emerson and Uncle Albert want to be left alone from the world's complexities to fly fish Starlight Creek's rainbow trout; cultivate a garden on their hardscrabble land—a garden that will provide sustenance year around; shoot quail and grouse; keep their cabin spic and span; maintain a library of the world's great literature; spend winters tying trout flies from exotic materials like rabbit fur—flies that Harry claims never caught a trout. (*But this statement about the Old Men's fly tying does not quite ring true. That's because just after Albert dies and minutes after he is buried, Emerson insists that he and Harry fish Starlight Creek in celebration of Albert even though rain pelts down. Soon after they arrive on the creek, Harry hears a great bellow from Emerson and he runs upstream to find Emerson with a great brown trout being landed with a fly made from yellow chicken feathers—surely one of Albert's flies. After some discussion, the men name the fly **Albert's Fancy**.) It is a place where the mad Sioux Indian, Elias Wonder, who has returned from war with shell-shock, occasionally makes outrageous or even sage pronouncements and concocts his "tantalizing nectar." And there is Cody the dog who acts as if he has no ambition whatsoever as he stretches flat on Cody's rock overlooking Karen's pool on Starlight Creek only to pounce on a grand rainbow trout and then parade his catch before anyone who'll yield him a glance.*

There is much to be said about Starlight Creek. For it is a spring creek that bubbles from the earth and then is joined by other spring creeks. It is a natural creation of the earth. So the earth is enough; it is everything. And most of all it becomes a part of Harry's bones as he follows in the footsteps of the Old Men who raise him. Harry writes that he has found family in the Old Men and he has found home.

_____. **Tribute edition.** Pruett Publishing Company. Boulder. 1996. Pp. 206. Limited to 96 unnumbered copies. Foreword by Russell Chatham. The *Tribute edition* title page was letter press printed. Cover art by Russell Chatham. Book housed in Green linen slip-case. Mint. Signed by Chatham and the likes of Thomas McGuane; Bill Trego, who published the limited edition (500) of Middleton's immensely successful *The Starlight Creek Angling Society*; Steve Bodio and Nick Lyons. Jim Pruett, the book's publisher has included a transmittal letter describing the editions' production attributes under the front cover. We leave it to the reader to assess those attributes. The *Tribute edition* was published to raise money to establish a trust for the higher education of Harry's two sons.

_____. **On the Spine of Time—An Angler's Love of the Smokies.** Simon & Schuster. New York 1991. Pp. 257. First edition. First printing. Unclipped, perfect dust jacket. Dark green quarter cloth with light green boards. Rare signed edition. (This Simon and Schuster edition has a mountain scene on its cover as compared with the Fireside edition of 1992 which has an angling scene on its cover.) Mint throughout. This is Harry's venture into the Smokey Mountains and beyond in a beat up VW wagon away from toxic urban life and a "sour love" in search of self and the mountainous creeks, lands and country people and the life he once lived. Trout are his addiction and we meet some very different people along his edifying venture.

_____. Ibid. above but unsigned.

_____. **Rivers of Memory.** Pruett. Boulder. 1993. Pp. 89. Foreword by Nick Lyons. Cover art and interior decorations by Margaret Donharl. First edition. First printing. Unclipped. Green cloth boards. Very attractive cover art. Rare signed edition. Mint. Harry's travels of geographic distance and in memory to satisfy, through fly angling, a lost part of his past. He died in August of 1993 not long after completion of these essays.

_____. Ibid. Unsigned.

_____. **The Bright Country—A Fisherman's Return to Trout, Wild Water and Himself.** Simon & Schuster. New York. 1993. Pp. 304. Cover fish is probably the blind brown trout alluded to in the book. First edition. First printing. Unclipped. Blue and white boards. Mylar cover. Mint. The depression continues. Harry has the strange experience of coming across a large but blind brown trout and he seems to see a symbolism there—but it's not clear what the blind trout's appearance means, even though Harry finally catches and releases that great fish. Harry is treated by Swami Bill and Dr. Lilly Mutzpah, Holistic Healers. His travels take him to *Baja* and beyond in search of the Bright Country and healing of his Meat Bucket Blues. (Perhaps he did not understand what he said in *The Earth is Enough*.) A very touching last few pages. We were told by a prominent bookseller that Harry died too soon to sign any copies of his Bright Country.

_____. Ibid. Unsigned.

Endnote: This genius writer, at least of his first two books, died at age 44 of a massive heart attack or brain aneurysm—a garbage collector on Birmingham, Alabama Garbage Truck #2.

But how could this end have come to Harry? And here we speculate. One lovely afternoon in June 1990 Harry was forced out of his position by a man he called a “friend” who was his boss at a major Southern journal and it appears from what Harry relates that his friend did not believe that Harry fit into the niche required of him. And we are reminded that Harry has commented late in *The Earth is Enough* that neither Albert nor Emerson fit into the niche demanded of them by “society.”

Despite this occupational setback, Harry appeared to have a great future. Yet he turned to travelling in search of trout to satisfy his “addiction to trout.” He travelled to far off places like the *Baja*, but no trout there of course, and nothing else to salve his “Bucket Blues.” The “Blues” were paralyzing periods of his so called “genetic depression.” Catching that one grand blind brown trout on the South Platte middle fork might have sated his depression. But no. Neither the fish nor the Rockies was enough. Perhaps he belonged elsewhere.

We have thought that returning to the Ozark country and settling near Starlight Creek, and the earth that was home might have helped Harry. But when he visited the graveyard where the Old Men rested, when he drove by that hardscrabble where the Old Men had hidden out from “life’s complexities,” he turned away. Why? Could he have bought land near Starlight Creek and lived on—in his own niche—fly fishing, growing his garden and writings his books? Harry is our mystery.

—**Paul Ford**

Paul and Mary Ann Ford

Professor Emeritus Paul Ford joined Western’s Department of Education in 1970. He served the University as teacher/scholar, college administrator, and vice president for academic affairs. A life-long fly fisher, he writes of the sport, and shares with his wife, Mary Ann, a love for searching out fly fishing titles.

Mary Ann Ford received her M.Ed. and Principal’s Certificate from Western. She has served as a public school teacher, curriculum director, and principal. She is an astute judge of fly fishing literature and art, and a gifted needlework artist whose pictures include the fly fisher’s world.

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www.library.wvu.edu/specialcollections/Ford

