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## Rod Tip Up!

*Clark S. Monson*

**T**he figure of a well-known and beloved fisherman is missing from the Provo River. When I turn off U.S. Highway 189 in Provo Canyon, Utah, and cross the bridge to enter Vivian Park, I look upstream and downstream for him, but he isn't there. A few feet past the bridge, I cross a familiar double bump in the road—the tracks of the Heber Valley Railroad—but no person I might see walking along the weathered railroad ties walks with a stride I recognize. Sometimes I see numerous fishermen on the river, but they're outfitted in modern gear—GORE-TEX waders, rubber mesh nets, canvas creels, and Cabela's caps. They don't have the vintage rubber waders, nylon net, wicker creel, and long-billed cap of the fisherman I'm looking for. Nor do they catch as many fish.

Old habits are hard to break, and some are worth keeping. For these reasons, I continue to look for my late father when I cross the bridge into Vivian Park. Dad passed away in 2018, but I've been unsuccessfully looking for him on the river since 2002. That's when he could no longer climb unaided up the steep banks of the river to the train tracks, so his angling became confined to bait-fishing over the sides of boats on local reservoirs.

Every boyhood day of Dad's idyllic summers—from Independence Day to Labor Day—was spent on the Provo River. He was determined to learn to fish, but fishing is a sport—or, if you're serious, an art—that most boys learn from their fathers. Dad's father wasn't a fisherman, so he was taught how to bait-fish by his uncles John Nielson, Speed Carter, and Raymond Kirby, for whom fishing was a sport. He learned how to fly-fish by studiously observing a handful of expert fishermen

who frequented the river, including Paul Buttle, Bob Curtis, and Henry Crosby—for whom fishing was an art.

I spent hundreds of hours watching my father fish the Provo River. He was almost always within a quarter mile, upstream or downstream, of the Vivian Park bridge. To our family that meant Dad was usually somewhere between “the swimming hole” and “Frog Island.” Although Dad had fished many sections of the Provo River, the half-mile stretch of water through Vivian Park was the one he loved most.

Dad could, in the words of Henry Van Dyke, drop “his fly on the water as accurately as Henry James places a word in a story.”<sup>1</sup> But like Christ’s disciples of old, this latter-day Apostle quite literally left his net in 1963 to become a “fisher of men.” For this reason, my mother was convinced that when Dad had the occasional opportunity to take leave of his church responsibilities in Salt Lake City and take up his net on the Provo River, the Lord rewarded him by filling it—and not just with fish. My father was indeed a fisher of men, and on more than one occasion he fished them from the Provo River.

Eighteen days after my father died, one of my BYU mentors, Dr. Alan Grey, also passed away. Following Alan’s funeral, I expressed my condolences to his daughter and son-in-law. A friend of theirs accompanied them. When I introduced myself, he asked, “Are you Thomas Monson’s son?” “Yes,” I said. “I met your father many years ago while fishing on the Provo River. I wasn’t a member of the Church then. Your father took a break from his fishing, and we had a meaningful conversation concerning some questions I had about the Church. After our visit, I knew I needed to be baptized. That conversation with your father on the Provo River changed my life.”

Dad didn’t mind a pause from fishing to change a life. He was less inclined to leave the river when it was time to eat. Many summer mornings, my cousin Bob and I went out from the family cabin to the river to let Dad know that breakfast was ready. Sometimes we’d find him already walking back along the railroad tracks. “How did you do?” we’d ask. “Pretty good,” he’d say. “Here, take a look.” Dad would lift the cover of his fishing basket so that we could peer inside. The creel was always full of long, German brown trout bearing crimson spots and golden bellies. Bob and I longed for such fish. Our own fishing for the morning had usually produced only a couple of rainbow trout, or, as many people called them, “planters.” Planters were raised in narrow concrete

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1. Henry Van Dyke, *Little Rivers* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1903), 30.

raceways at the Midway Fish Hatchery. Catching planters didn't prove your ability as a fisherman in our family.

Dad's skill at casting a fly didn't mean he was above bait-fishing—a fact that I once lied about. At a small, private reservoir in Rich County, Utah, Dad and I accompanied several other guests that our host had invited for a pleasurable day of fishing. I was seventeen years old at the time. A damselfly hatch was on,<sup>2</sup> and trout weighing up to four pounds were feeding almost exclusively on them. Dad looked through his metal fly box and removed an elegant fly tied on a long-shanked hook. Called a "blue doctor," the fly bore a reasonable resemblance to the abundant blue-colored damselflies the fish were taking.

Dad rowed the only boat out a short distance from the shore and commenced casting. Soon he was catching one big trout after another. An acquaintance of my father's was fishing next to me on the shoreline and observing Dad's artful casting and fishing success. "Look at your father," he said admiringly. "He's a real purist, isn't he?" Not wanting to tarnish his perception of my father, I nodded in agreement and replied, "He sure is," but I knew otherwise. As much as Dad loved fly-fishing, he would have baited a hook with a glob of Velveeta cheese if he thought it would produce more fish than the blue doctor.

Velveeta is indeed what we used when we fished from rowboats at Utah's Strawberry Reservoir. We also used three-way swivels at Strawberry. Three-way swivels permitted us to have two leaders and two cheese-baited hooks at the end of a single line. On several occasions Dad began reeling in a fish that, as he said, "had a different feel to its fight." When he had reeled in most of his line, we discovered that there were actually two fish, one on each hook. The fight of the two fish felt "different" because they pulled in opposite directions from each other as much as they pulled on Dad's fishing line. Of our family fishing group—usually comprised of my cousin and me, our fathers, and our great-uncle—Dad was the only one who sometimes caught two fish at once.

Catching a lot of fish was important to Dad. As a youth, his fishing kept his family in meat during summers at Vivian Park. And once he was responsible for catching much of the food for his scout troop during a camping trip.

Dad's ward Scoutmaster was unconventional by contemporary standards. He was an avid cigar smoker who took a hands-off approach to

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2. Although commonly referred to as "hatches," the damselflies, more accurately, had recently metamorphosed from their larval stage to their adult form.

Scouting leadership, allowing the boys opportunities to learn things on their own. One day, early in the summer, he drove the Scouts to Silver Lake in Big Cottonwood Canyon southeast of Salt Lake City. Rather than staying with and supervising the boys, he merely dropped them off with their camping gear. “Tom,” he said, “you catch fish for the boys. I’ll be back to collect you kids at the end of the week.” Dad made sure his friends didn’t go hungry.

Given Dad’s early responsibility to feed his family and friends through fishing, the modern concept of “catch and release” was utterly foreign to him. In the mid-1970s, fishing regulations on the Provo River changed drastically, and “catch and release” became popular—except with Dad.

Fishery biologists had decided to manage the Provo River exclusively for the difficult-to-catch brown trout, which reproduced naturally in the stream. Easy-to-catch rainbows would no longer be planted. The new regulations also forbade bait-fishing. Fishing on the Provo River was now restricted to artificial lures and flies. Fearing the river’s browns wouldn’t be able to sustain the pressure of the traditional eight-fish take in the absence of hatchery fish, the daily limit was reduced to just two fish. As a further conservation measure, brown trout measuring fifteen inches or larger were to be immediately released when caught. The larger fish were prolific spawners, so their survival was important.

Dad ceased keeping fifteen-inch browns with the rule change, but he did sometimes return to the cabin with what he called “fourteen-and-three-quarters-inch fish.” He never went onto the river with a measuring tape, so anytime he caught a questionably large brown, he was sincerely confident it was “a tad under fifteen inches.” Browns sixteen inches and larger were rare catches. They were also clearly longer than fourteen and three-quarters inches, so whenever Dad caught one, he released it, but it pained him to do so. The largest fish I ever saw Dad bring back to the cabin was a twenty-two-inch, five-pound brown, but that was before the keeping of large fish was prohibited. And when Dad was a teenager, he caught a twenty-four-inch, six-and-a-half-pound brown on the Provo River.<sup>3</sup>

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3. Like many fishermen, my father had a dramatic story about a big fish that got away. The day before he caught the six-and-a-half-pound brown, he had a larger fish break his tackle after he followed the trout down the middle of the river for a quarter mile. He compared the sound of the fish’s splash to that of a boat oar slapped against the surface of the river.

One morning, some years after the new fishing regulations were in place, my mother went out to call my father back to the cabin for breakfast. While she was watching him fish for a moment, a big fish took Dad's streamer fly. After several line-stripping runs, Dad managed to play the trout out. He netted what he estimated to be an eighteen-inch brown. Rehearsing the exhilarating experience to the rest of us back at the cabin, Dad concluded his story, "And then, being the law-abiding citizen that I am, I placed that eighteen-inch fish back in the stream, and off he went!" Dad looked to my mother for confirmation



Tom and Frances Monson at Vivian Park, Provo Canyon. Photo taken about one year after their marriage.

of his version of the events. "I released him, didn't I, Fran?" "Yes," she said, smiling, "but that fisherman watching you from across the river made it easier for you." Dad smiled too, adding with a wink, "Well, that may have had a little to do with it."

Of the many fishing experiences I shared with my father on the Provo River, one stands out. I was fourteen years old, and I was fishing with my father and brother, Tom, at Frog Island. It was 9 p.m. and twilight in the canyon. Dad was fly-fishing nearby and told me to put a night crawler on my hook. I did as instructed, but reluctantly. The feeling of a worm's wriggling movements between my fingers when I pierced its skin with my hook always made me squirm. "Cast your worm into that riffle against the far bank and let it settle into that nice hole below," he said. "I'll bet you catch a big one!" My expectations were high. I knew from experience to trust my father's words.



Clark Monson holding trout in front of family cabin in Vivian Park, Provo Canyon, 1969.

In a few minutes, a fish took my bait. The tip of my fishing rod bent hard. “I’ve got one, Dad!” I yelled. “Good!” he called back. “Hold onto him!” Turning to watch me in the fading light, he anxiously instructed me with the words I’d heard many times when I had a fish on, “Rod tip up! Rod tip up!” I didn’t understand that by holding my pole at a 45-degree angle it would absorb much of the stress on my line. Dad had learned through heartbreaking experience as a youth to let large fish fight against the rod—not just the line.

My brother called out as he prepared to net the trout, “Oh, it’s a big one!” “Don’t miss it!” Dad warned. In fishing, nothing was more important to Dad than having a capable person handling the net. Sometimes a wily trout would dart away from the net just as we attempted to lift it from the water. At the failed attempt to secure the fish, Dad would holler, “Hey! Stop horsing around and net that fish!” In this case, Tom deftly netted the big brown on his first try. I was relieved. There would not have been a second opportunity because as soon as the fish was safely in the net, my hook dislodged from its lip. This was precisely why Dad demanded good netting skills.

Dad came over to inspect the biggest fish I’d ever caught on the river. Admiring my catch and congratulating me, he said, “You may never catch as fine a fish on this river again. What do you say we take it to a taxidermist and get it mounted for you?” The expense of having a fish mounted was not a luxury that boys of my time were normally afforded, so I was elated. The nineteen-inch, three-pound brown trout cost my father \$57 to mount. It hangs in my home today, and I am reminded of a priceless memory with my father every time I look at it.

Another memory I have of my father on the Provo River concerns not a big fish, but a big dog. The event took place just after dark, when Dad had stopped fishing for the night. I wasn’t accompanying him during the experience, but I remember hearing the clap of the spring-loaded



back-porch door closing behind him when he entered the cabin to join the rest of us. Dad didn't immediately remove his squeaky rubber waders like he normally did because he was shaken and anxious to relate to all of us a frightening and bizarre experience he'd just had.

Dad said he was returning to the cabin, walking along the shoulder of the highway heading east toward the bridge. He was passing a lone yellow cottage, slightly illuminated by a streetlight, on the opposite side of the highway. Unexpectedly, a large "police dog" there broke free of its chain and charged him.

My cousin and I knew exactly the dog Dad was talking about—a fierce German shepherd. (Dad always called German shepherds "police dogs.") Several times Bob and I had walked along the highway on the side closest to the cottage while the menacing dog lunged powerfully against its chain, barking and snarling at us, teeth bared. "I sure hope that chain holds," Bob would nervously say. For us it always did.

Even though Dad was now safe, it was unsettling to think what might have happened. I wondered how he had escaped serious injury. "As the dog charged," Dad said, "I figured my only defense was to jam the butt of my fishing rod into his snout and hope that that might deter him." Bob and I knew full well that Dad's fly rod, even the heavier reel end, would have had no effect against the vicious German shepherd. As the dog sprinted across the highway toward him, Dad reversed the direction of his fishing pole and prepared to take aim by the dim glow of the streetlight. The dog was nearly on him when a speeding vehicle hit the dog, sending the animal cartwheeling. The car never slowed but continued rapidly up the canyon. The dog wasn't killed, at least not initially, because Dad said it recovered sufficiently to hobble back to its home. That speeding car was the only vehicle to pass Dad during his walk of nearly a quarter mile along the highway that night.

Given today's high traffic volume in Provo Canyon, a dog running across the four-lane highway at 10 p.m. stands a reasonable chance of being hit. But traffic on the old two-lane highway in the 1970s was light late at night. So, for us, it was a miracle that a car had come at precisely the right time to abort the dog's attack. "The good Lord was looking out for me," Dad said. We believed him.

We never again saw the German shepherd chained on the property of the yellow cottage. Although the dog had returned home after being hit by the car, we presumed it succumbed to its injuries.

Now, when I walk past the place where the dog was chained, I seldom think of my father's miracle. That's because the yellow cottage, like so many things I used to know in Provo Canyon, is no longer there.



Further, most of the rustic cabins on the other side of the river in Vivian Park have been torn down and replaced with expensive homes. It's easier to preserve memories of places when they don't change. But like the passage of time, change is inevitable.

I still fish the riffles and eddies along my father's favorite stretch of the Provo River, but the setting is different than it was when I used to accompany him. The noise of vehicles rushing up and down the canyon is unrelenting. The largest old cottonwood and box elder trees that once shaded the riverbanks have died and toppled into the water.<sup>4</sup> Cherished places and structures along the river, including the Chalet Café, River Bend Trailer Park, and the fruit stand at Frazier Park are gone. There are, however, two constants. First, the familiar mountains still stand firm; second, the fishing remains blue-ribbon quality. But when I wade the cold, green waters of my father's stretch these days, I'm not just casting for trout—I'm fishing for memories. And while I don't see my father's figure on the river, I do hear his voice each time a fish hits my fly: "Rod tip up! Rod tip up!"

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4. While the Provo River is still lined by large trees in most places, the stretch of river immediately above and below the Vivian Park bridge is now largely devoid of trees. Some trees were damaged by railroad operations. Others were adversely impacted by erosion, possibly due to excessive foot traffic. The loss of mature trees has not been compensated by new growth, unfortunately.