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A little bit of bike, a whole lot of spey rod. Carolyn Sells checks her six before motoring down the road to the next hole on her 1980 Honda 110 motorcycle—with her 14-foot two-hander secured in a milk crate, of course. Photo: Amanda Monthei

BLUE BASTARDS, WHATSITS AND THE GRANDMAS OF THE GRANDE RONDE

Words: Amanda Monthei



“What in the hell are you eating canned chicken for?”

“NO ONE AROUND HERE eats half of anything, and I don’t want any leftovers,” Barb said, throwing another biscuit on my plate next to the half-eaten one I’d already been working on.

“Besides, we need to bulk you up a bit. You’re practically skin and bones!” she continued, delivering another scoopful of sausage gravy.

Barb has been catching steelhead in southeastern Washington state since before my parents were born. She’s old enough to be my grandma and my relationship with her has been built almost exclusively on a strong foundation of home cooking.

In 2016, I happened to park next to Barb’s crew at a campground on Oregon’s Grande Ronde River. I was forced to introduce myself when I realized I needed a can opener for my dinner of quick rice and a can of chicken. She happily lent me a can opener but was otherwise insulted.

“What in the hell are you eating canned chicken for?” she asked when I returned her opener, meal in hand. “That looks like cat food. There’s chili on the stove in my camper. Why don’t you come eat some real food.”

Not one to turn down a free meal, I accepted the offer and grabbed a bowl before heading to the fire to engage in the first substantial human interaction I’d had in three days on the river. Barb, her husband’s son Aaron, and another woman were sharing a story about the 40-inch wild buck Aaron had caught earlier that day, but stopped and stared at me as I walked up.

“And who are you?” the unnamed woman said kindly, giving me an up and down before slapping the seat of the folding chair beside her, a gesture more of curiosity than anything else.

I sat and explained myself in elevator-pitch fashion: I’m Amanda. I’ve never steelheaded, but I heard about the Ronde from a coworker and decided to go on a solo weekend mission to check it out. I’d come equipped with my 7-weight and (I’d realize later) some misplaced confidence in my ability to hook and land a steelhead with it. I was winging it. I’d been sleeping in my Subaru, fishing whatever water I could find that looked fishy and easy to wade. As I devolved into nervous rambling, the woman stopped me and said, “Welcome to the Ronde, kid. I’m Carolyn.”

THE NEXT DAY, when I woke up at 7:30, Carolyn was already a few hours into her day, organizing a trailer loaded with fishing implements: a raft and frame, firewood, coolers and, most notably, a 1982 fire-engineered Honda motorcycle with a milk crate on the back for her 14-foot spey rod. I asked her about it.

“I’m having a little problem with her carburetor—I think she’s mad at me for using the raft so much on this trip,” she said, adding that she often uses the motorcycle to get from hole to hole along the road. “She usually gets a little more action, but the floating has been too good to pass up.”

We started rigging up, and—being sympathetic of my 7-weight single-hander—she handed me her steelheading setup before patiently teaching me the fundamentals of spey casting. We didn’t catch anything for the next two days, but when it was time to leave, she hugged me and told me she’d better see me next year so we could continue our casting lessons. Before I left, she asked for my mailing address. I didn’t yet have a place to live, so I gave her my parent’s address.

Three weeks later, my mom forwarded a package from Carolyn—in it was a CD labeled “Grande Ronde 2016.” The ensuing slideshow was filled with blurry images of mule deer and bighorn sheep, mostly taken by Barb with her point-and-shoot, along with the occasional steelhead grip-and-grin. Group photos of Barb, Carolyn, Larry and their array of visitors filled the gaps—a few shots of me even made the cut. I was honored.

I have three CD slideshows now. I didn’t grow up in a fishing family, and I have a borderline-obsessive habit of moving every six months, which rarely gives me a chance to learn or develop a love for any particular river. Four days on the Ronde with Carolyn and Barb every fall is the closest thing I have to a fishing tradition of my own, albeit one created long before me, and one that will surely continue in spite of me.

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Larry and Barb Brown assume the post-dinner position at the campfire as a full moon rises over the nearby foothills of the Grande Ronde basin. Not pictured: the bottle of Barb’s blackberry brandy making its rounds. Photo: Amanda Monthei

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When you go steelhead fishing on the Grande Ronde with Barb Brown, you can expect to be well fed and rarely sober. Just a drop of her huckleberry brandy will thaw your cold, wet soul—and instigate some weird and rowdy campfire antics. Good thing there's never a shortage. Photo: Bridget Moran

"Carolyn Sells plays a steelhead just minutes after I caught one myself—my first—a few yards upstream." Photo: Amanda Monthei

ON THE FIRST MORNING of my second trip to the Ronde, I rolled out of my car to find Barb taking photos of deer on a nearby ridge. It was 7 a.m. and 33 degrees outside. Barb wore a baby blue robe under Larry's orange camo jacket, and the piece de resistance—camo slippers. Peaches, her big-boned chihuahua, hobbled along next to her.

"Oh, come look! Big ol' six-point out there on the rock outcropping," she said to no one in particular, pointing aimlessly while continuing to look through the viewfinder of her point-and-shoot. "He's a lucky fella; made it through another hunting season."

That afternoon, while fishing with Barb and Carolyn, a couple of gear fishermen low-holed us and Barb let out a moderate-decibel "cocksuckers" before realizing I'd heard her. I looked at her with a mix of astonishment and admiration.

"You'll have to forgive my language—I grew up in logging camps," she whispered, giggling.

Barb's been steelheading since Nixon was president and she's been married to Larry for about as long. The logging-camp childhood comes as no surprise. She cooks like Paula Deen and always outlasts Larry at the campfire. Entertaining stories about her and Carolyn abound. She ties her own flies for the Ronde—enormous things comprised of copious amounts of marabou, to which she gives names like "Barb's Blue Bastard."



She's the resident camp cook and proudly proclaims, "We can't fish worth a damn, but at least we eat good!"

Barb and Carolyn met about 15 years ago when Carolyn ended up in this campground—the same campground that Barb and Larry and their guests have occupied every October since the 1970s. Barb recognized Carolyn from a fly-tying show Carolyn co-hosted on Spokane, WA's PBS affiliate at the time and promptly introduced herself. The two have been steelhead buddies ever since. They complement each other well. Barb is larger than life and somehow always has a handle of homemade blackberry brandy close by. Carolyn is soft-spoken but irrepressibly energetic—she's in her 70s and fishes more than most. She also has one of the most effortlessly beautiful spey casts I've witnessed. I've seen her load and hook up her trailer, row a raft all day, ride a motorcycle, chop wood, and land, kill and clean a steelhead. She's as independent as they come and it comes out in her teaching—she'll never rig your rod for you, but she'll give you what you need and the space to do it yourself, with as little help as necessary.

SINCE MY FIRST YEAR on the Ronde, Carolyn and I have developed a habit of spending a few hours every morning sipping coffee, tying flies and talking about fishing in her camper. Mostly, it's a one-on-one seminar about fishing the Ronde—she ties a "Carolyn's Whatsit" while I ask every conceivable question about her life spent catching steelhead on the river just a few steps outside the camper door.

Eventually, class moves to the river; the sun rises over nearby foothills and we emerge from the camper into the warming autumn sun, ready to slip on waders and get moving.

One morning during my second year, Carolyn and I finished a morning Q&A session on nymph rigs for the Ronde, and walked to the hole just downstream of the campground—a long pool with plenty of submerged rocks waiting to steal a fly, the locations of which Carolyn seemed to know like the back of her hand. She pointed them out as soon as we got there: "Watch out for that boulder at your 1 o'clock, and make sure you start stripping before it can reach that boulder at your 4 o'clock. It's right below the surface. Can you see it?"



"Barb's been steelheading since Nixon was president and she's been married to Larry for about as long."



“My first steelhead, caught on a Carolyn’s Whatsit, alongside Carolyn herself.”

I didn’t see it but pretended I did, and then I began casting while she walked downstream. We were a few hundred yards away from each other, and I was daydreaming and entranced by her spey cast when I hooked up.

Having never fought a steelhead, I promptly freaked out. Carolyn was unconcerned and walked with the pace of a woman who has definitely seen this kind of amateur show before.

“All right kid, just keep your slack in and play him a little bit,” she shouted while I floundered.

After some coaching that would have sounded like a birthing clinic in any other environment (“Breathe, O.K., calm down, breathe...”) I managed to bring a 24-inch hatchery hen to hand and, once again, freaked out. My first steelhead, caught on a Carolyn’s Whatsit, alongside Carolyn herself.

I’VE NEVER HAD A yearlong lease, never hung art on the walls, never called a place—or a river—home. I do keep a Tupperware bin labeled “House Stuff” in the back of my Subaru, which contains a twin bedsheet, a towel, two camp pots, a Buck knife and a picture frame that displays a rotating series of photos of places I’ve loved and since left: Utah, Idaho, Michigan and Washington state.

Notably, that bin now has a can opener. If I’d had one when I first came to the Grande Ronde, I never would have met the duo of 70-year-old women who helped me catch my first steelhead and, more importantly, taught me that it helps to have homemade blackberry brandy on hand, that three helpings of biscuits and gravy is a perfectly acceptable post-steelheading meal, and that actually catching steelhead isn’t necessarily the point. ☞



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Carolyn Sells (right) knows every bend, bank and submerged rock on this 30-mile stretch of the Grande Ronde River better than the back of her hand. So, when she tells you to set on what you could have sworn was just a rock, you do it. Amanda Monthei (left) figures that out the hard way. Photo: Bridget Moran

The annual Grande Ronde steelhead crew, complete with all the camo, waders, flannel and hunter-orange you’d expect. Gene Erwin, third from right, is in his 90s and has earned the officially unofficial title of “Mayor Gene” at the campground the crew inhabits during steelhead season. Photo: Amanda Monthei