

By Carlos R. Martinez

Dewitt Clinton Booth



Dewitt Clinton Booth started in a business career; to become a true pioneer in fisheries conservation.

A native of the New York's Mohawk Valley, Dewitt Clinton Booth was born in 1867. After attending the state's public schools he pursued an education at the Colgate Academy, later to become Colgate University. Booth went on to obtain a wealth of business experience in the Chicago headquarters

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of one of the nation's prominent railway systems, which led him to an appointment in the United States Treasury Department. At the time, positions within that department were viewed to be among the most desirable within the federal government. During the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, he was assigned to a detail with the Treasury Department's Customs Division which oversaw some of the most interesting exhibits of the Expo. It is believed that his experiences at the event made him realize an outdoor-related career was more appealing than the office work he had grown accustomed to in the Treasury Department. Booth actively sought, and successfully obtained, a position in the U.S. Fish Commission.

Booth, who insisted on being called "D.C.," started his fisheries conservation career with the distinction of being the first federal Civil Service employee in the Fish Commission. His first job took him back to his home state of New

York. While at Cape Vincent, New York, he obtained experience in the commercial fisheries of the Great Lakes. With a move to the coast, he gained knowledge about the marine varieties of fishes of the Atlantic Coast at Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Later yet, at Leadville, Colorado, Booth learned about and cultured fishes in the Rocky Mountains.

In 1899, D.C. Booth became the youngest superintendent in the U.S. Fish Commission when he was promoted to head of the new fish cultural station being built in Spearfish, South Dakota. It is here that he established himself, a former businessman and Treasury Department worker, and then flourished into a well-respected authority and true pioneer in the field of fisheries conservation.

The Spearfish Fish Cultural Station was originally founded to establish fisheries in the Black Hills of South Dakota and Wyoming, a territory largely void of fish. The few populations that existed were considered undesirable native fishes, principally suckers and minnow species. Booth's leadership and oversight of the station would eventually encompass a land base that was arguably the largest of any other National Fish Hatchery. Under challenging and primitive conditions, Booth engaged in the propagation of a variety of species to include brook trout, brown trout, rainbow trout, cutthroat trout, steelhead, lake trout, and land-locked Atlantic salmon. During his tenure, millions of eyed eggs and fish were distributed to numerous destinations including distant lands such as Alaska and the British Isles.

Perhaps the most notable of the programs that he developed is the Yellowstone National Park fishery, located 400 miles west of Spearfish, South Dakota. In 1901, with the assistance of four U.S. Army soldiers, Booth investigated the fish cultural possibilities at West Thumb, in Yellowstone. As a result, the Spearfish hatchery began to operate a substation inside Yellowstone National Park. The station's original purpose was to collect "black-spotted trout" eggs and ship them to Spearfish. After their subsequent incubation and hatching, the product was strategically distributed.

In a day with few roads and minimal mechanized equipment, overland expeditions to gather fish eggs in the wild were complex and arduous. The journey began in Spearfish via rail. By the time fishery workers arrived at Yellowstone, the railroad train had morphed into a wagon train, overflowing with specialty equipment to include boats, nets, egg crates, and troughs. To support the endeavor, a hatching building was eventually built on Little Thumb Creek, the first in the history of Yellowstone National Park. In the development of this fishery, Booth made 13 annual trips to Yellowstone National Park, spending 10 summers there. During that time he harvested, shipped, and stocked millions of eggs from the Yellowstone stocks. Ultimately Booth's efforts resulted in the world's largest trout egg collecting station creating new fisheries throughout Yellowstone, the U.S. and foreign countries, many of which are still enjoyed today.

Booth turned the Spearfish operation, in what originated as a subsidiary to the Leadville National Fish Hatchery, into a prominent center for federal fisheries conservation.

He was the first to experience and solve many problems in early trout cultivation related to disease and nutrition. Although considered stern, tough, and stubborn, Booth was still a well respected leader.

In 1933, after forty years of public service, D.C. Booth retired in Spearfish where he lived out the rest of his life. After a temporary closure in the early 1980s, the Spearfish National Fish Hatchery was reopened with a new mission and a new name. Today the D.C. Booth Historic National Fish Hatchery and Archives preserve our nation's fisheries history and heritage. In 1986, the Fish Culture Section of the American Fisheries Society enshrined Dewitt Clinton Booth into the National Fish Culture Hall of Fame. Booth's foresight and contributions from a century ago remain a legacy. ♦

Carlos R. Martinez is the Director of the D.C. Booth Historic National Fish Hatchery and Archives in Spearfish, SD. He contributed a story about another "Pioneer," Dr. Livingston Stone, in the Spring 2011 issue of *Eddies*.



Shadowed by daughter Katharine, Booth pushes a wheelbarrow at the Spearfish facility, ca 1908.



The Spearfish Fish Cultural Station Superintendent's house was built in 1905. The Neo-Colonial Revival style home served as the Booth family's living quarters for almost 30 years. It has since been restored and renamed the Booth House. Decorated with period furnishings, the home serves as a popular tourist attraction.

Family Photos DC Booth Archives/USFWS

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