

SPORTS MAY/JUNE 1971

# THE DAY I FISHED WITH I K E

*Even a slow day  
on the water can net  
wonderful results,  
especially when the  
fisherman is President  
of the United States.*

*by Ben Schley*

**I**n 1955 I was manager of a National Fish Hatchery on the west slope of Vermont's Green Mountains. Constructed in the early years of this century, its ponds and raceways were cracked and broken, its equipment antiquated. Most of the brook and rainbow trout we raised eventually found their way into the cold streams or deep lakes and ponds of the nearby national forest. Furnace Brook, one of the state's most popular trout streams, tumbled through the hatchery grounds.

Winter was reluctant to leave Vermont that year. It was the second week in May, yet old snow lay in deep hollows in the dark woods and on north-facing mountain slopes. Days of cold rain and occasional sleet followed one another and streams were opaque with blue-gray meltwater.

It was well after quitting time, and the knock on the office door startled me. One of the men was as tall and lean as a basketball pro, the other short and broad with a seamed face and battered nose. They were identically dressed in dark suits and white shirts. When I opened the door, the shorter of the two showed uneven teeth in a brief smile and flashed a badge. "Secret Service," he said. "Can we come in outta the rain? We want to have a little talk with you."

My heart raced. "Yeah sure, come on in."

"I'm Wilson," said the heavy-set man. "And this here's Agent Foosbinder."

He took off his hat and brushed water from the brim. "Can we sit and have a little confidential chat? It won't take so very long, but it's got to be just between the three of us. Nobody else. Understand?"

I waved Wilson into the room's only chair ... Foosbinder pushed my in-basket out of the way and sat on the corner of the desk. He shook a cigarette from a crumpled pack and lit it. I watched the smoke curl up into the still air and wondered what in Christ's name these guys wanted with me. "Nope, no one else here," I said. "They all quit work half an hour ago."

Wilson pulled a notebook from his pocket, leafed through it briefly, then looked up. "Says here the Old Man is coming to Vermont to speak at some kind of a dairy festival next month. And he wants to go fishing, dry fly fishing for trout, that is. We want you to help us."

"Well, I don't know. Who's this old man you're talking about anyway?"

"Well, it's Ike. It's President Eisenhower, of course. Who else? And he wants to do some fly fishing while he's up here. Surely you've got some big trout you can put in a creek

somewhere around here so he can go and catch them out. You work for the Feds same as we do, and he's your big boss. Right?" Wilson paused for a moment and chewed on a thumbnail. "Well, how about it?" he asked.

I looked at the cold rain streaming against the windows. Furnace Brook was out of its banks. "Well, I suppose I could do it, but the weather is going to be a problem. If spring doesn't get here soon, he won't be able to fish with a fly, not around here anyway."

Spring finally arrived. Late on a moonless night in mid-June, Harold Blaisdell, a local outdoor writer, and I loaded 160 lunker rainbow trout into a tank truck and scattered them in the darkness along 500 yards of Furnace Brook a mile or so upstream from the hatchery. Though the stream was home to a large population of wild trout, they grew slowly and few were large enough to provide the kind of fishing I thought the President of the United States would be expecting. Releasing the fish at night was necessary as the stream was open to public fishing and, if it were known, hordes of locals would take most of the trout before Eisenhower had a chance at them.

It was mid-afternoon of the following day when the President stepped into the tail of a shallow pool in Furnace Brook. The water was clear and bright. Conditions seemed ideal. Eisenhower flexed his 6 1/2 foot Orvis Battenkill rod, a gift from the State of Vermont, made a couple of false casts, then flipped a tentative cast

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to the head of the pool. His fly, a local pattern called Spirit of Pittsford Mills, rode the current like a living thing. As the leader straightened a rainbow trout grabbed it. Ike gave a mighty heave, and the tiny fish flew into the air and over his shoulder. Holding the leader he hoisted the shimmering, wiggling six-inch fish above his head. Flash bulbs exploded as photographers crowded the shore. "This is Rhode Island," he laughed. "The next one will be Texas."

The President moved slowly up the stream while Milford Smith, a Vermont judge, and I followed, occasionally helping him over swift and rocky areas or suggesting places to float his fly. Sherman Adams, Presidential Assistant, and the only other person carrying a fly rod, cut on ahead, presumably to try his luck farther upstream. Jim Haggerty, White House Press Officer, and countless others followed at a discreet distance.

The big, newly-stocked trout were everywhere but darted for cover or slowly sank into deeper water as we approached. The President was not a particularly good caster and often got his fly caught in overhanging tree branches. Nor was he adept at wading. Despite the felt soles on his hip-length waders, he slipped and slid over the cobbled stream bottom and only our efforts prevented him from getting a wet rear end. "It's this bad knee I've got," the great man said. "Hurt it in football and it wants to double back on me. I always have a hell of a time wading in rough streams."

We looked in vain for rising fish, but only spotted a few tiny wild trout sipping midges in the shallow runs. Except for some craneflies bumping through the froth at the head of the pools, there were no insects juicy

*Ike was one of America's most avid fishing presidents.*

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enough to bring large fish to the surface. Furnace Brook was not a rich stream, though usually there were a few caddis or mayflies maneuvering over the water in mid-June.

After half an hour or so the President looked tired. He sat on a large flat rock and handed me his rod. Milford Smith worked a couple of knots out of the leader tippet and I handed the rod back. Eisenhower dug a bottle of Mucilin out of his jacket pocket and daubed his fly with the floatant. Later, a newspaper reported this as an indication of his ability to look after himself. "The President even oiled his own fly," the story read.

In a few minutes Sherman Adams came blundering downstream and sat beside Eisenhower. On the end of his leader was a large tandem-hook streamer more suitable for landlocked salmon fishing than the pursuit of trout in a mountain stream.

"You know," I heard him say to the President, "I don't think they put any fish in this damn stream. There's nothing here but little ones."

From my position I could see three rainbows of two pounds or so lying just about where we had planted them the night before. I tried to point them out to Adams and, for a while, he couldn't see them. But eventually, he spotted one of them and started casting to it. We left him there and moved upriver, the President floating his fly through pockets in the swift-flowing little stream.

Eventually, we came to a long, deep pool. At its head, the water tumbled between two boulders, surged against



*Ike shows his fishing form.*

the roots of a leaning spruce, then spooled out into a conflict of currents. In the middle of the pool a four- or five-pound rainbow was deliberately taking something from the surface. We watched as the big fish surfaced a half dozen times; then we positioned

the President so he could cast to it with minimal drag.

Eisenhower's first cast was way off. His fly landed well above the fish and began to drag immediately. The fish ignored it and continued to rise. His next cast was no better. We moved a bit closer. He cast again and his fly landed on top of the fish. The current

quickly took it away. The trout dropped down a foot or so and stopped rising.

The President stripped in his line, looked closely at his fly, took off his glasses and wiped them with a tissue. "Damned tri-focals," he said. "I just can't seem to get used to them. Sometimes I can't even find my fly out there on the water. Is the fish still there?"

As soon as the trout started to rise again the President began casting. But every cast was too direct, his leader too straight. He seemed unable to throw S-curves in the leader so the fly could float in a natural manner. The trout continued to rise, apparently taking something off the surface too small for us to see. After a dozen or more casts the President's enthusiasm waned, but he continued to cast mechanically. A small bird landed on the end of a branch only a few feet from his head and fixed him with a jewel-like eye.

The President was fascinated. Turning to me, Eisenhower asked, "What kind of a bird is that?"

"Sir," I replied, "it's a cedar waxwing. The local people call them cherry birds."

Again the President cast. But his eye was on the cedar waxwing. By accident his cast was perfect, his

*By accident his cast was perfect, his leader falling on the water in a half-dozen S-like loops. The fly floated like a full-rigged ship. The big trout surged out of the water and nailed it. "My god, Mr. President," I yelled. "Set the hook."*

leader falling on the water in a half-dozen S-like loops. The fly floated like a full-rigged ship. The big trout surged half out of the water and nailed it.

"My god, Mr. President," I yelled, "Set the hook."  
Eisenhower leaned back on the little rod as hard as he could and his leader broke with a loud snap. For a moment he said nothing, but I could see his face turn red. He took off his cap and slammed it on the water. "Hell and dammit," he roared, "I was looking at the goddam bird instead of my fly." Then he picked up his wet cap and put it on his head. Several long strands of hair, which he normally combed carefully over his nearly bald head, hung down his back like a queue. "I guess it's time to go," he

said. "Where the hell is Adams?"  
As we walked back along the stream I told the President I was sorry the fishing had been poor. "Oh that's alright," he said, "it was a hell of a lot better than sitting behind a desk at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue."  
Later, Eisenhower walked around the hatchery grounds and looked at the thousands of small fish crowded together in the cracked and broken

raceways. He pointed at a leaking pipeline and said, "I can't understand how you can raise so many fish in such a dilapidated old hatchery. How much do you think it would take to completely rebuild this place?"

I was caught completely by surprise and had no idea what it would cost. Then, off the top of my head said, "We estimate a complete rebuilding job would cost about \$365,000, sir."

Eisenhower nodded to an aid who quickly pulled out a notebook and made an entry.

Two months later the Congress approved a supplemental appropriation of \$360,000 for reconstruction of the Pittsford, Vermont National Fish Hatchery. I never knew what happened to the other \$5,000. ➡

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