

Levi Pennington

People

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Levi Pennington Writing to James Kjelgaard, June 24, 1946

Levi T. Pennington

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June 24, 1946.

Mr. James Kjelgaard,
4273 No. 24th. Place,
Milwaukee 9, Wisconsin.

Dear Mr. Kjelgaard:--

Your letter of the 20th. is just received, and it was good of you to reply so fully to my letter, which was written for the editor, though I might have known that he would send it to you. And I'll say this for you; you make as good a defense as one could make for some of the improbabilities in your story -- I did not say that I did not like it. I did enjoy it, and read it to my wife; but I am so interested in fish and fishing that when a thing appears in print, even in a fictional story, that seems too improbable or even impossible, I sometimes so far forget myself as to put my thoughts down on paper.

A case in point. While I was visiting in California, I saw an article in the out-door department of one of the metropolitan dailies there, praising the Pacific Coast rainbow; and for some reason the writer, a staff man on the paper, thought it necessary to disparage the eastern brook trout, and called it a carp-like fish. I could not let that pass, and I wrote him such a letter that he remarked in his reply that he thought I was lucky to be alive, for I must have worked up a very high blood-pressure when I wrote that letter. But I could not let it go -- carp-like fish indeed. Why I wrote once an article or something called "Salvelinus Fontinalis -- a Rhapsody" that told what I think of the eastern brook trout. (I followed that with "Micropterus Dolomieu -- and Appreciation", and intended to finish the trilogy with "Oncorhynchus Tschawyt-scha -- a Tribute", but never got that one written. (My biggest chinook was only 46 pounds, anyway.)

You make a good defense, but it is unconvincing -- though of course you are under no obligation even to try to convince me. You say that Uncle Lawrence knew that the big fish was there for two months, but as long as he kept away from it -- how did he know it was there if he had not been there? Did somebody tell him? And how probable is that? And I can't imagine a man as keen about fishing as he was never once going down to the stream after the day's work was done -- he couldn't get tired enough so that he'd not even try one single time for two whole months. And I still maintain that the man who has been so careful to obey the law for 56 years would have taken an hour off at some time during that two months to try for that trout rather than violate the law at a time that seemed no more propitious than any time during the preceding two months.

I still doubt that any farmer in Pennsylvania or Utopia has 200 assorted bucktails and streamers besides five plastic boxes of dry flies, but you've fished in that state and I've not. But if you do ever find a farmer -- or anybody else, for that matter, with 200 bucktails and streamers and five plastic boxes of dry flies, please count 'em and let me know the exact number.

Maybe suckers do abound in trout streams in Pennsylvania in August. My memory seems to tell me that in Michigan they came up the streams much earlier than that, and the streams where we fished for trout were well clear of them by August. But I can't be positive on that point.

But how you do tax my credulity with 139 flies tied on in one night's fishing! Time yourself the next time you tie on a fly in four seconds, and then send me the fly and the leader -- I'll pay anything reasonable for them. And even if that were possible, or likely by day or by night, selecting the fly, caring for the box or book from which it was taken, getting out the line again and making the proper try for the trout and then retrieving the line and tying on another fly -- 139 times -- count 'em -- well, my credulity is so strained that I doubt if it will ever be itself again.

The final catching of the trout, which came away up the stream to gobble that gob of worms, while Uncle Lawrence was fishing for suckers, on the bottom, with a bobber, which is intended to hold the hook off the bottom, and with his line slack the fish jerked the tip of his cane pole down, and then he heaved it clear over his head where it dangled -- probably on a sky hook -- till he let it down on the rock -- very gently, as was appropriate after the way he had heaved it over his head, as so expert a fisherman would hardly be likely to do -- well, maybe a man who would and would do all that would toss fish and equipment into the stream after landing the big trout, though I still do not see why.

And really, how big was that trout? Of course Uncle Lawrence could not tell, for he heaved it back into the water. But you can, for you made it. How big was it?

I am sure some trout fishermen would say the story was all right. My brother, who fishes a great deal in Michigan and Wisconsin, said, "Either the author is a screw-ball or he thinks his readers are."

But why should we quarrel about petty details, quantitative things like 200 bucktails and streamers, 139 flies tried on one fish, and such matters? You and I both love the great outdoors; we both love fish and fishing; we both have written fish stories (and you've got more for one of yours than I got for all three of mine, "Old Star-Nose the Rainbow", "Old Muskie the Rogue" (that one went into the Harvard Junior Classics) and "The Big Bass of the Little Blue." Write some more. I'll be looking for them, and any time I see your name under the title of a fish story, be sure I'll read it. For I do love fishing, though the biggest bass I ever caught was only a few ounces over five pounds, my biggest silverside salmon weighed only 23 pounds, my biggest chinook only 46, my biggest steelhead less than 15, and the only time I ever hooked a marlin sword fish I lost him after half an hour's fight -- the hook tore out -- he didn't break anything.

Sincerely yours,

Levi T. Pennington.