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LAND-LOCKED SALMON OF WALLOWA LAKE

by

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George Rogers, variously game warden, state game policeman, and now Sergeant Rogers, with a record of twenty-two years of service in Wallowa County, got in the front seat of our car a short time ago at Enterprise. He was escorting us up to Wallowa Lake - upon our invitation. Silent and official he looked in his uniform. Squinting sidewise at his face, I thought I saw a slightly skeptical expression. He might have invited himself if we hadn't. It was fishing and hunting time, and some of the nimrods and red-hats had been rather restless over a closed season on account of fire hazard. But it was a sensible Governor and Game Commission who held the door tight shut until rain came, as the situation in the farming and grazing valleys like this one was critical. Down in the big valley around Baker, large areas were blackened and fires could be seen burning in dry pastures and stubble-fields.

We were amused as the veteran kept his eye on our crowd, Bill Smith, Bill Finley, and wives. He glanced at two projectors, camera boxes, and a big screen for showing pictures, squinted about the car and down at the floor. There lay a rifle at his feet. He remarked dryly: "I see a gun, but no feathers. Guess you meant it when you said you were interested in saving the steel-heads of us anglers, and you wanted to see our little "yanks" in the lake, the best pan fish anybody ever put in his mouth."

Under lofty peaks and hidden canyons, we drove slowly up the green valley past early landmarks, Chief Joseph Hotel in Joseph, and further on a-top a little mound a stone column bearing the inscription, "To the Memory of Chief Old Joseph, Died 1870." Why the Old in the middle of the name, I asked. Our guide informed us that there were two Chief Josephs, father and son, and that was their way of putting it.

Turning a bend in the road, there was the lake, deep green and dark with a bluish sheen, silent and almost melancholy as if holding the secrets

of early days, the clashes of Indians and pioneers. Traveling a narrow road hanging on the edge of deep water, and bordered on the upper side by a bare, low ridge, we stopped short in sparse timber near the upper end of the lake. The water was alive with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of mallard ducks with a sprinkling of canvas-backs and a few grebes. By Christmas the lake would be scummed with ten thousand mallards, the guide volunteered.

Continuing on under the trees into a grassy glen near the Lodge, we got out and walked down to the shore. The water was shallow, cluttered with sodden logs and fallen trees. At the mouth of a choked, swift little stream, we stooped down to discover in the black water the shadowy forms of scurrying little fish-- the yanks themselves. They were alert and fast like slim, dark submarines, undramatic in size and color. For all that, their history and origin were so unique that they were bigger than the lake itself in interest.

Senator Zurcher and Mr. Horner informed us that no one knows when the blue-back or red sock-eye salmon that came up to spawn in Wallowa Lake became land-locked. They were there when the first settler, a Mr. Bramlette, came into the valley. The metamorphosis of a sizeable red fish into a midget salmon must have been going on when the Nez Perce Indians came to make their fishing camps on the borders of the lake.

This magic change of the size and temperament of a fish is an eery thing to ponder. Looking at the bottled-up formation of the north end of the lake, it might indicate a glacial slide some time in the past that imprisoned a normal run of five to six pound red fish. When white settlers came, they found "wallowas" below the narrow outlet of the lake. These were structures of stakes set in triangles, used to support a network of willow sticks called "la-ka-las" across the narrow stream for catching fish. The name "wallowa" - early Nez Perce Indian name "way-le-way" - signifies fish-trap.

Some time between 1910 and 1920, the State Fish Commission built the present dam across the outlet of the lake, a sturdy structure with a heavy wire netting covering the whole upper side, thus blocking the exit entirely for

migrating fish. A large pipe on one side below the dam supplies water for power. On the other side is an irrigation ditch that serves the farmers. There is no fishway for up-stream migrants, but there could be one for the situation is perfectly feasible.

The lake has both rainbow and eastern brook trout, more of the latter than the former, but the little yanks are the most popular fish. This local name comes from a tackle formed by a big hook attached to a stout wire or stick to "yank" the fish out of the water. "Yanking" was stopped about three years ago. Even now the little fish in spawning time pile up in lurid, reddish masses against the wire mesh across the dam, fevered to fulfill the destiny of their race, for they are real salmon, living out their four-year cycle, then spawning and dying even as the great Chinook. Failing to get down stream, they surge back to the other end of the lake and go up the little streams to spawn, their dead bodies coloring the water.

Wallowa River is closed all year from the south end of the lake up to the falls to protect the spawning beds, and the lake, a ten-mile refuge, is closed to fishing for yanks on August 1. The lake freezes up about February 1, and the ice breaks up some time in April. Two specimens of yanks were caught and photographed, the female eight and a half inches, the male eight and a quarter inches long. A twelve inch fish is the largest one can hope for, and they are rare. X Gray-haired, calm George Rogers has consistently fought the battles of these diminutive fish from the wallows of the Indians to the dams of the white men. Catching fish in other streams not dammed, he has brought them back in buckets to plant in his lake and watch over them. So has he protected the other game of his valley, the elk, the grouse, the pheasants. Why shouldn't he be skeptical of suspicious strangers?