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RAMBLINGS OF A CATSKILL FLY FISHER

## Clem Fullerton, the ‘Complete Tangler’



RR photo by Tony Bonavist

**Clem and Barb looking over the "Home Pool," 2014.**

Posted Wednesday, January 13, 2021 9:39 am

By **TONY BONAIVIST**

This week’s column was supposed to be about the new trout stream management plan released by the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) last November, but it is not. Instead, it’s about my old and dear friend, Clem Fullerton, and his wife, Barbara. We all called her Barb.

Those who have read the pages of **River Reporter** over the years will recall that Clem was the paper’s fly fishing columnist. In fact, if it were not for Clem who, upon retirement as a writer, recommended that I apply for the position, I would not be writing these words today. The title of Clem’s column was The Complete Tangler. His prose was much more fluid and less technical than mine, and I enjoyed reading his words very much.

I met this tall, rangy man a very long time ago along the banks of Amawalk Outlet, a small trout stream located in northern Westchester County. At the time, I was a fisheries biologist working for the Conservation Department (now the DEC) and was assigned to survey that river, which was being managed through special regulations.

When my team arrived and began unloading equipment, Clem appeared, black stetson and all, and introduced himself. He explained that he was a member of the Croton Watershed Chapter of Trout Unlimited (TU) and was working on streams to improve the habitat for the river’s trout. He called his group the “Amawalk Rock Rollers.” My team managed the Amawalk until 1972. During that time, I met with Clem and other TU members to discuss regulation changes as required. While the conversations became heated upon occasion, I was always treated with respect by Clem and the other chapter members.

In 1973, I was assigned new responsibilities by the DEC and no longer had to manage the Amawalk, attend TU meetings or meet with Clem. By 1980, I was headed to DEC’s central office in Albany, where I was asked to run the Bureau of Fisheries’ federal aid program. During those years, I completely lost contact with Clem. It wasn’t until sometime in the mid-1990s that we became reacquainted. At that time, I kept an RV at the Peaceful Valley Campground about five miles below Downsville. One evening, while walking toward the head pool where I planned to fish, I heard voices coming from the river and saw a black stetson through the streamside vegetation. I immediately recognized one of the voices and said, “Clem Fullerton, is that you fishing my pool?” Clem responded, “Tony Bonavist, what are you doing here?” We shook hands and caught up after all the years. It was at that time I learned that Clem and Barb had sold their home in Westchester and purchased a cabin on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware River near Equinunk. Clem told me they used that cabin for their summer fishing in the Catskills but had another home in Texas near family where they spent winters.

In 2005, we moved our RV from Peaceful Valley to the Catskill Mountain Campground. Soon after, Clem, Barb and several other angling friends met there almost every week to talk fishing. And each year, shortly before the season ended, we would have one last get-together. On that day, Clem and Barb would pick up a variety of wursts from a German butcher in Pennsylvania. We would grill those sausages and serve them along with German potato salad. A fitting if somewhat sad end to another Catskill trout season.

We continued those “meetings,” as Clem called them, until June of 2015. That’s when the Fullertons sold their cabin and returned to live in Texas full-time. I stayed in touch with Clem by phone and we spoke almost every two weeks. Sadly, Barb passed away in 2018 after a long illness; they had been married for 70 years! Those two did everything together, and Barb was quite a fly fisher.

In November, Clem’s daughter, Susan, called me to explain that her dad had been hurt at home, briefly hospitalized, then on to physical training for rehabilitation. After that, Clem moved to an assisted living facility. On December 31, Susan called again, suggesting I leave a message for her dad. She told me that he would hear it. I did at 5:30 p.m. At 9:01 that evening, Susan emailed me; her note read, “Dad’s with Mom.” Those three words said it all; Clem had passed away.

Looking back, I realized that Clem was one of my oldest friends. We met in 1968! He was a devoted husband, father and a truly loyal friend. He was also a staunch conservationist, the best ally to all trout and trout streams. We fought a lot of battles together, not the least of which was the adoption of the Water Releases Legislation in 1976. Clem played a major role in that effort.

In July 2015, during Clem and Barb’s going-away party, the New York State Council of Trout Unlimited awarded the Fullertons the Distinguished Conservation Award for their commitment toward the preservation of New York’s cold water fisheries resources. A fitting testimonial to the couple’s lifelong dedication to trout and their habitats.

Rest in peace, my friend. We all will miss you and Barb. The camp will feel empty without you.

*Those who knew the Fullertons can send their sentiments to Susan Edstrom, 269 Oak Hill Dr., Trophy Club, TX 76262.*

*[Read more Ramblings of a Catskill Fly Fisher.](#)*

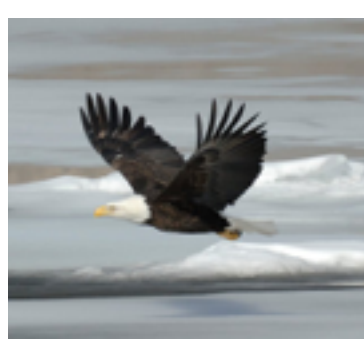
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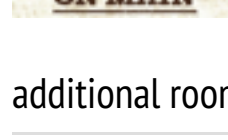


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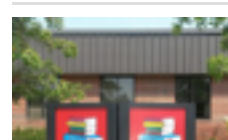
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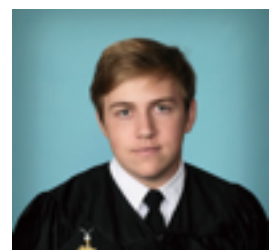
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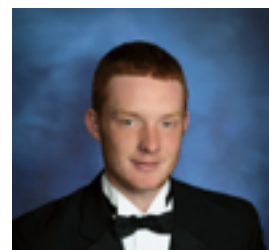
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