The Center of Things

IN 1972, AN ARTIST MOVED FROM NORTHERN CALIFORNIA TO MONTANA'S PARADISE VALLEY AND FOUND WHAT HE WAS LOOKING FOR.

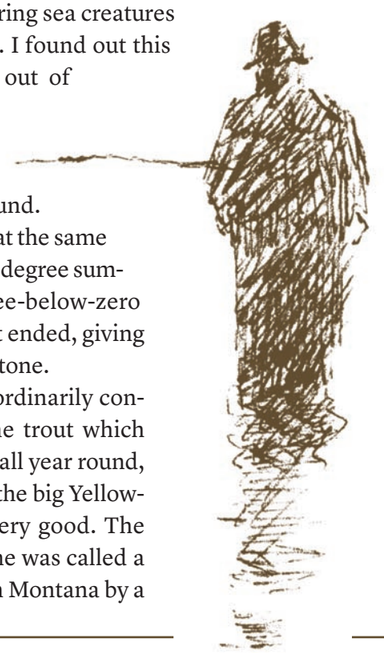
BY RUSSELL CHATHAM

When I first saw the house at the head of Deep Creek it was in October, 25 years ago. The light of a warm Indian summer afternoon bathed the rooms in a friendly light, telling me there was promise here. A week earlier I had driven into Montana, passing through Yellowstone Park. It was around Labor Day, and it had been snowing hard, making me wonder if the fishing would still be good.

I had been told about a small creek nearby which only a few locals sometimes fished. It offered a change from the big Yellowstone, they said. The rancher didn't object to fishermen, and you could just drive in, park, and go fishing.

There on the creek I discovered a small world unto itself, a world unlike that I was used to, one seemingly as large as the cosmos, bearing sea creatures whose realm was half the globe. I found out this stream didn't form like most, out of trickles coming together high in the mountains. Rather, it sprang full blown right out of a fissure in the ground. Because of this, its water flowed at the same 55-degree temperature on a 100-degree summer day as it did on a 30-degree-below-zero winter day. And two miles later it ended, giving its life over to that of the Yellowstone.

This creek provided an extraordinarily congenial mini environment for the trout which lived in it. They fed contentedly all year round, growing fat and healthy. Out on the big Yellowstone nearby, the fishing was very good. The most famous fly in use at the time was called a Muddler Minnow, popularized in Montana by a man named Dan Bailey who had moved to Montana from the East back in the '30s to get out of the rat race.



The Muddler Minnow, made of deer hair and turkey feathers, was an inch or more long, and was designed to imitate the sculpin, which is one of the main items on the Yellowstone River trout's menu. As Dan himself explained it in the simplest terms, "You just throw it out, and then—*pop*, *pop*, *pop*—you bring it back in jerks."

It didn't take me long to learn that on the secret creek this would never work.

There, the stable water conditions created lush underwater growth which in turn supported vast insect life. These trout fed almost constantly, mostly on minutiae. A friend had shown me some of the flies you needed. They were tiny imitations of mayflies and other smaller bugs, some of them seemingly as little as the head of a pin.

When my wife, two-month-old daughter, and I moved from California to Montana the following spring of 1972, there was a lot of work to do. The house required cleaning, repairs and painting. And in addition to this, I set about converting one of the old log buildings into a painting studio.

At first, the unfamiliar Montana landscape defied my efforts. To paint the inner life of nature you must love it. Moreover, to study the landscape with an eye toward understanding it, you must spend a great deal of time out in it.

The creek lay only about a 15-minute drive from the house. I fished it every few days in those first years, usually only for an hour or two. But that short drive put me in visual touch with all the elements of the Montana landscape.

First, I left the house at 5,500 feet, descending 1,000 feet along the wooded creek bottom. Then I passed for a time along a sloping bench on which were hayfields and pastures. Soon I was dropping down through scattered fir, pine, and junipers until entering the band of cottonwoods bordering the river. Crossing the river, then climbing slightly to the broad valley floor, as far as the eye could see, fields and stands of cottonwoods stretched into the distance. On both sides of the valley sharp peaks rose to 12,000 feet. And above all of it was the volatile, ever-changing sky.

Arriving at the creek, I entered yet another dimension, one of quiet intimacy.

The water gurgled softly over shallow riffles, but more often glided silently past watercress-lined banks. Cottonwoods grew here, but the ground was protected and quieted by dense stands of willow and wild roses, home to many cottontail rabbits which were always silently appearing and disappearing.

The fishing itself was slow and deliberate, but best of all, it was solitary. While I was kneeling by the creek, half in it, half out of it, the rest of the world ceased to exist. It was a salve that mended the soul's tears and abrasions.

As the years passed by, my familiarity with the creek itself grew, along with a more general appreciation of the landscape of the Northern Rockies. At some point in time, perhaps seven or eight years into it, I felt an easy familiarity with the creek, and my paintings were reflecting the spirit of their motifs with an increasing accuracy.

Some have argued that fishing is merely an escape from reality. My father used to tell me I had to get used to doing things I didn't like because that was the definition of work. I didn't believe it when he told it to me 35 years ago, and nothing since has caused me to change my mind.

The dark, silent water flowing past waving tendrils of moss, sometimes revealing the olive-colored forms of trout, is haunting. We reach out to it with our fishing rods, and by connecting ourselves to living things, we affirm that we ourselves are alive, not just in our clumsy bodies, but in our hearts and souls.

Just the other day, in the midst of a mild Montana winter, I walked up the hill behind the house at Deep Creek, following two sets of fresh lion tracks. From up there I could view most of the Paradise Valley as it lay under a light skiff of snow. I could see clear to Yellowstone Park 50 miles to the south, and over into the Gallatin Range.

Behind me rose the terrible ramparts of the Beartooths, the Absarokas, which I have promised myself to never again enter on foot or horseback. Before me lay the essential quadrant of my life at home.

The sun was falling behind a cloudbank to the west and here and there the river reflected the sky. Far off to the right in a heavy stand of trees, I knew the secret creek lived its quiet life, and that far from representing an escape, that it was the true center of things.

Editor's Note: In another essay, Chatham writes more about the Livingston area during the early 1970s: "My new home at the head of Deep Creek was less than 10 minutes from the Yellowstone River, about 5 from Nelson's Spring Creek, and 15 from Armstrong and DePuy spring creeks, waters that were completely deserted most of the year and very lightly fished during the season. In those days, there was only one tackle store, Dan Bailey's. There were two or three guides who hung around the store in the mornings, but mostly they waited in vain for an inept sport to show up with money to burn."

Russell Chatham *was a renowned landscape painter as well as an accomplished writer and avid angler. He also ran a publishing company and owned a fine restaurant, both in Livingston. His fishing buddies included novelist Thomas McGuane, writer and poet Jim Harrison, and singer-songwriter Jimmy Buffett.*

Chatham died in 2019 in California at age 80. While going through his papers, his daughter, Lea Chatham McCann, found this unpublished essay about her father's early years in Montana. The following year it ran in Montana Quarterly. *Used here with permission of the Chatham family.*