

## ESSAY

## Fishing to her own drummer

BY KAYE MACDONALD

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There are so many colorful characters along the river here in what I like to call the "Last Of The Wild West." The North seems to attract people who are funnier, more interesting and freer of spirit. I am lucky to call many of them friends.

One of my favorites is Stella, a laugh-a-day, chubby little woman on the far side of 75. Stella likes to say it is the "way far side" as she stands talking to me in her waders, Red Wings ball cap and dangling golf club earrings.

Her husband has been gone for many years, and she keeps the tiny summer cottage they shared but lives in the city to satisfy her children, who have mistaken her for an old lady. She is not, despite her age, an old lady.

Stella and the Brown trout make their appearance at the river at exactly the same time. Somehow, one hundred miles away, she knows when they will be here. She has waded our river for 50 years, knows every bend and fallen tree and trout lurking hole, and she is proud of tying her own flies to match the hatch.

Her arm is admirably supple, her cast accurate with a very good old rod that she cares for like a baby.

Stella doesn't so much brag as tell, over and over, of her fishing feats, relishing the telling. She speaks quickly, softly, with many hems and haws and small laughs, her brown eyes sparkling up at me from under the bill of her hat.

She is a non-stop talker, always about fishing or food. And therein lies

Stella's fatal flaw as far as the Orvis crowd is concerned.

Stella *eats* her fish! It is legal. She has been doing it for 50 years. She will not succumb to the politically correct and release her catch back into the river. She fries them in butter and smacks her lips and tells the men how delicious they were. How crass! The joy for them is in the catching. For Stella it is the catching *and* the eating.

When she comes out of the brush along the river in the early morning, she is already talking.

"Boy, the Browns were rising this morning. Got two nice ones down by the cedar hole. Trout fillets and butter-milk pancakes! Mmmmmmm!"

The collective frowns are nearly audible.

At night I hear the whistle of her line going out in the dark and the slap of her waders in the current. When she calls it quits, I hear her chattering, "What a hatch there was tonight! Tomorrow, grilled fillets and watercress salad."

Stella is a small eating machine, discovering tiny new asparagus cut at secret spots. Mushrooms plucked on the first warm damp days and sautéed in real butter. Fresh blueberries with thick cream and brown sugar. Just-picked strawberries on hot buttered bis-

cuits. Venison stew.

Dandelion greens dressed with vinegar.

But mostly fish. Smoked fish pate. Bluegills breaded and fried crisp and brown. Trout fillets fried in an iron skillet with butter and lemon or garlic.

Like Pavlov's dog, I salivate when Stella goes fishing. I try to be a snob about it, but I am not a fisherman. *All* the fun is in the eating for me.

One day, however, Stella



amazed herself and the trout-fishing elitists as well.

I heard her go past when grey light was just breaking on a wet spring morning. I couldn't hear her words but she was talking as usual. More than an hour later as I was greeting the day with a cup of coffee on my deck she came down the path through the trees.

When she stepped out into the open I first noticed she wasn't talking. Then I saw that she was soaking wet, Red Wings cap missing, her white hair spiked like a teen ager's dream. A suspender on her waders was hanging loose, mud smeared one cheek and

twigs and greenery stuck to her plaid shirt. Her eyes were wide and she clutched her rod in a death grip.

Her eyes swung toward me while her mouth worked wordlessly. Somehow she gasped: "It, it was a ... a ... , uh ... It was a ... a significant fish!" Shoulders hunched, head bent, she scurried on.

I stared at her disappearing back and looked around to see if anyone else had witnessed the scene. Across the

river I could hear other neighbors stirring on their deck, so I clutched my robe around me and hurried out to the river's edge. Sure enough, Jerry and his wife were at their railing looking in the direction Stella had gone.

Excitedly, Jerry yelled,

"Wow, you shoulda seen that. Stella had a fight with a Brown I ain't never seen the likes of."

"It must have been 30 inches at least!" his wife added.

From Jerry: "Never seen anything that big on this river. It was a beaut."

"Did it pull her in?" I asked.

"Sure as heck did. It was all over and so was she. In the river. Out of the river. Under logs. Over logs. Through the brush. She chased it right down the river, and that little woman was movin'. I never seen anything like it. What a show!" He was grinning and bouncing up and down in delight.

"And then she lost it?"

"Heck, no. She didn't lose it. Hauled that lunker right up on the bank finally. The two of 'em just set there, getting their breath. Then Stella, she reached over and kind of petted it. Then she gets yo and puts him back in the river, gentle you know, like puttin' a baby to bed. Can ya believe it? Stella puttin' a fish back?"

I left him shaking his head in wonder.

I didn't see Stella the rest of that day, but the next morning she was coming back from early fishing with her creel heavy on her hip, smiling and talking to herself. I stopped her and she had a fresh bruise on her cheek and her knuckles were scraped raw. She started up with a new story of the four small rainbows she had taken and how they were going to be grilled with bacon and hashbrowns and a little onion.

"Stella," I stopped her, "I shouldn't even ask, I know, but was that Brown 30 inches yesterday?"

She ducked her head and was silent a moment, then nodded, looking at the ground.

"Did you really turn him loose, Stella?"

She looked at me very directly and gave a small shame-faced grin.

"Don't be telling everybody now, but, yes, I did. And I won't admit it in the future. But he was beautiful. So beautiful. I don't own a recipe that would have done him justice. He just didn't deserve eating."

Stella is one of my favorite people. She fishes to her own drummer.

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