

# Reflection: HFF's 35th Anniversary

by Mick Mickelson, M.D., President of the Foundation from 1985 - 1992

*Dr. Mickelson is one of the founders of the Henry's Fork Foundation and the organization was run out of his office in the early days. Above are his reflections of the beginnings of HFF written in 2018.*

## From Adversaries to Allies...The Early HFF

Death threats over catch and release, near fist fights on the river bank, dewatering Mesa Falls? All part of our early and adversarial history.

Jamie Laatsch of HFF asked me, as one of the HFF founders, to answer some questions about the early years of HFF. Here's my best attempt to relate our encounters, successes and failures. Rather than answering her specific questions, I'll try to relate our first decade, it was a wild one!

We met in Jim and Joan Lansche's cabin in Pinehaven in 1984. Bill Manlove incorporated the organization and we were off, unfortunately we lost Bill too early. We were upset about the degradation of the river bank by unrestricted cattle grazing. HFF was born that evening, and already we were in a fight to change nearly a century of cattle grazing history in the Railroad Ranch, now Harriman State Park. The riparian habitat was destroyed which affected siltation, spawning, and overwintering of juvenile fish. Changing the attitude of cattle grazing permittees was not easy, or fun. The Harriman State Park personnel and the Idaho State Parks and Rec Department were initially reluctant to allow fencing. The cattlemen were understandably unwilling to restrict their cattle from water; how would the cattle survive? Fortunately, two scientists and innovators, Dr Bill Platts and Ed Chaney, had extensive research and experience in stream restoration. After many long negotiations and long hours of work, we were allowed to install one of the largest solar powered riparian projects known from Box Canyon to Pinehaven -- the ENTIRE world famous flat water section of the Henry's Fork. Water gaps and off site water allowed the cattle to drink. Slowly the sedge grasses recovered and deepened the entire riverbank. It took several years of nasty meetings, negotiation and sweat, but in the end we had our first, and very visible success.

Then came the hydro developers. In the 80's extensive financial and tax benefits came to individuals who constructed hydroelectric plants. Suddenly there were seven or so hydroelectric proposals from Riverside to Warm River and some would have dewatered Mesa Falls by diversion! Think of that.....no don't!

One of our HFF members, Nick Ifft, was well acquainted with the Idaho Senior US Senator James McClure and informed the Senator of our dilemma. A week later Senator McClure and his wife Louise flew to the Henry's Fork and spent the weekend. Mike Lawson floated them through some of the controversial water, and I took the McClures on a tour of Last Chance and the Ranch. We explained the lack of facilities for fishermen/tourists. A week later Senator McClure attached to a federal bill legislation which prevented ANY FURTHER hydroelectric development on the Henry's Fork from Island Park to Ashton AND \$ 750,000 to build the Last Chance Fisherman's Access site and facilities. Another home run!

The Island Park Dam hydroelectric facility was exempted from Senator McClure's legislation, but Ralph Moon, Mike Lawson and I met many times at FERC meetings in order to make sure the project was safe for the river. Fortunately, FERC instituted regulations of water quality which must be met to operate the hydroelectric plant. Just last season, the dissolved oxygen parameters were not met, and flows had to be changed to save the fishery. Hurray!

## **Part 2: Kill Fish...or..."Catch and Release"?**

In the early 80's there was a noticeable decline in Ranch fish numbers. We had little clue about causes, but the beginnings of the mantra that "a fish is too valuable to be caught just once" was becoming popular. Then, the current regulations were a "slot limit" allowing harvest of three fish under 12" and one over 20". With increased fishing pressure and improved angler skills, it just didn't make any sense to kill any fish in this renown river. Again, fortunately we had allies, the Idaho Fish and Game Commission. The IDFG Commission Chairman Lou Racine, our friend and champion promoted the catch and release regulations for the Henry's Fork. The new catch and release regulations were enacted after an ugly and vocal struggle. The opponents argued for a fish harvest: "How can I have fish for a meal", "My children/grandchildren can't fish anymore", "We've always done it his way". I sincerely hope now that people understand the necessity of careful fish handling and release, especially with the immense angling pressure currently.

The HFF members soon realized that we knew far too little about the basic ecology of the river. Research was the obvious answer. Professor Jack Griffiths of Idaho State University soon was able to fill that void in our cause. Jack and his grad student researchers spent nearly a decade focused on the biology of the Henry's Fork Watershed. They studied habitat, flow regimes, radio telemetry tracking of adult and juveniles, vegetation, and invertebrates. Much of the early research serves as a base for current HFF research work. One of the most important and dramatic findings was that juvenile trout survival depends on adequate winter flows, and when those flows are too low, the young trout can't find habitat and do not survive. One of the ongoing goals of HFF will be to ensure adequate flow in the depth of winter.

## **Reorganize HFF...or Quit?**

For the first decade of HFF's existence, it was run much like a military organization .....identify an objective and assign a task force to deal with it. That's the way Colonel Manlove organized the group. We had a President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer (we had very little money). Members with a capital "M" were recruited with various areas of expertise to take on objectives. By the early 1990s we had accomplished a lot, but realized that if the organization was to survive, we needed professional help. Dr. Jim Lansche and wife Joan again came to the rescue and championed reorganization, with hiring an Executive Director, major fundraising, and a Governing Board. Fortunately, our first Executive Director Jan Brown provided just the expertise and leadership that was needed. Jan and the new Board are responsible for many accomplishments, far too numerous to list. By far the biggest accomplishment though was to turn the organization from an adversarial one to one working with, not against allies. The Watershed Council was and is an amazing concept and has born great fruit. It brought together all the necessary groups and individuals in the watershed to carry out meaningful and constructive work with the common goal being the welfare of the river and its people. My hearty congratulations, that initial work has laid the foundation for the immensely successful organization we know as HFF.