

A Letter from Mike Lawson

Gary LaFontaine caught his last trout just a few hundred yards upstream from my home in St. Anthony, Idaho on the day before he was diagnosed with the debilitating and fatal disease known as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease. During the last year of our Traveling Fly Fisherman seminars, Jack Dennis and I knew Gary was struggling with muscle strength and coordination.

I didn't realize how serious the situation was until the last evening we fished together. Even though there were hundreds of greedy trout rising all across the river, Gary couldn't fish. Instead, he took pictures and laughed every time I would hook up. After about an hour of coaxing, I finally talked him into taking my rod and making a few casts. He struggled to lay out a few sloppy casts until he finally put the fly in the feeding zone. He hooked up and the fight was on, but my heart sank as I realized how hard it was for him to maintain control of the rod, reel and line as he battled the fish. After he finally brought it to net he smiled and said, "That's all I need!" as he slipped the fat rainbow back into the river.

When the phone call came the next day with the news of his diagnosis, I fought to hold my composure until I hung up. Then I crumpled to my knees and sobbed uncontrollably. I had already seen ALS take away my beautiful mother-in-law in the prime of her life. I knew what was ahead for Gary.

When I look back over my life as a fly fisherman, there are a few men who have had a more positive influence on me than Gary LaFontaine. I loved him the first time I met him, at a fly-fishing conclave in the early 1970's, when he walked up to me and introduced himself. After that our paths crossed often as he worked as a guide on the Big Hole River in Montana and spent a few summers as an instructor at the Fenwick Fly Fishing School near West Yellowstone.



I marveled at his knowledge and understanding during his weekly visits to Henry's Fork, where he collected caddisfly samples from the back of our fly ship. Sometimes I accompanied him to the river and helped him collect caddisfly larvae and pupae. When he finally put his research on paper, the resulting books, *Caddisflies*, immediately became the ultimate reference on these incredible complex aquatic insects.

During that time, Gary and I spent a few days producing an audio tape entitled, "Fly Fishing the Henry's Fork". It was part of his "River Rap" series of audio tapes about some of the top flyfishing waters in America. The tapes didn't sell very well but they contained a wealth of information. Later, I was honored when he decided to transcribe our tapes into a book titled Fly Fishing the Henry's Fork.

Gary and I really became close friends after I joined him and Jack Dennis to form the Traveling Fly Fishermen. At first I felt out of place with them. They had both earned strong reputations in the industry as a result of their many books, videos, articles and speaking engagements; I was just a hayseed from Idaho. Both Jack and Gary helped me with the confidence I needed, reminding me of the years of practical experience I had gained on one of the most difficult trout streams of the world.

One of the greatest things Gary did for me was to help me learn to believe in myself. I didn't always have the confidence I needed to stand before a group and give a quality presentation, and Jack and Gary were a hard act to follow. But Gary often pointed out to me that I'd had the best fly fishing instructors in the world - my grandfather and those big rainbows of the Railroad Ranch - and that I'd been a fly fisherman since I was old enough to pick up a rod. How many people had that kind of background? With the help of Gary's perspective, I knew I had something to contribute. It was fun.

We worked more than a dozen years together presenting programs for sports shows, fly fishing clubs and other groups. Gary and I frequently disagreed on fishing related issues. We had some hot, friendly debates. I sometimes called him "the mad scientist of fly-fishing" because he seemed to always have a scientific reason for everything. For me, one of the attractions of fly-fishing has always been its mystery. Yet Gary always had a way of bringing out the best in me, helping me realize how important it was to defend my position with facts.

When our time finally comes and our dance is over, our memories are some of the few things we can take with us. Boy, did we share a lot of them together. Like the time he got tossed out of his hotel room in the middle of the night because he was keeping the people in the adjacent room awake with his snoring.

Or the time he showed up at a sports show to present a program entitled, "Dressed to Kill." Gary's presentation was all about what makes a fly effective, but when he walked into the room, he found it packed with nothing but camo-clad hunters. None of those guys had ever fly-fished in their lives, and Gary had never hunted. But he wasn't intimidated in the least. Instead, he scrapped his prepared program and gave them an excellent presentation on stealth and how to stalk game. He maintained his audience for the full hour, and those guys left that seminar believing they had just learned something from one of the great minds of big-game hunting!

Gary was a man who always saw the glass as more than half full; he was the eternal optimist. He never failed to brighten my day. Few people know of the adversity and gloom he faced throughout much of his life, and I won't discuss it now. One quality he had, which I've rarely witnessed in others, was that he always seemed more interested in listening than talking about himself. Whenever we met he would start by asking about my family, my work, what I'd been doing and so on.

My greatest memories of Gary were the hours we shared, sometimes staying up most of the night, talking about fly fishing. He eventually persuaded me to write a book about fly fishing

spring creeks. At first it sounded intimidating. But he said, "All you need to do is just write down all the things we've talked about." He could make me believe I could do anything! We sat up night after night dictating into a small recorder. We eventually got the entire book outlined.

That was about 10 years ago. After that, every time I met him the first thing he would say is, "How is the book coming?" I had every excuse in the world. There were always so many distractions. Even though I wrote a number of magazine articles, filmed a couple of fly fishing videos, and co-authored the Henry's Fork book with Gary, I couldn't seem to concentrate on the spring creek book.

The last time I saw him he again asked, "How is the book?" I hated to report that it wasn't any further along than the last time we talked. He reminded me how you have to dedicate the time to write. Gary never let anything get in the way of his writing. He made me promise to finish the book. It is a promise that I intend to keep. When my spring creek book is finally published, it will be dedicated to Gary LaFontaine.

Gary taught Jack Dennis and me a final lesson during our last visit with him. We talked and laughed for several hours, recalling all of the memories we had shared together, but Gary knew we were both struggling. It is impossible to describe how helpless we felt. We had driven to Missoula on a cold December day to try and comfort our dear friend in his hour of need.

Instead, he comforted us. He reminded us not to feel sorry, or to be angry over what had happened to him. His words weren't much different than those of the man for whom ALS got its name, the great Lou Gehrig.

"Life has been so good to me," Gary explained. "My dreams have been fulfilled. I came to Montana to be a fly fisherman. How many men can say that they could go fishing every day?"

"I've done more in my life and had more fun than most people who live twice as long. I don't think I'll make it more than a month or two. Don't feel bad for me. I'm one of the most fortunate people in the world. I've had a great life and I don't think I would change anything if I had it to do all over again."

The other day I thought of Gary when I heard the song entitled, "The Dance," by Garth Brooks . . . And now I'm glad I didn't know the way it all would end, the way it all would go . . . I could have missed the pain, but I'd have had to miss the dance.

Whenever I walk along the river above my house, I stop at the spot where Gary caught his last trout and I think how glad I am that he shared his dance with me.

-- Mike Lawson