

NELSON'S A NEW

Rekindling friendships along a famous Montana spring creek

BY MYERS REECE PHOTOS BY GREG LINDSTROM



In the roiling waters of my childhood memories, Nelson's Spring Creek occasionally flashes to the surface, though not the fishery itself. Of the many hours I spent there growing up, I never fished the famous stream. Rather, it gurgled past us, just outside the barn door, while Tucker and I played endless hours of basketball inside, banking shots off a homemade plywood backboard on a court strewn with dust and straw.

Today, Tucker is the third generation of Nelsons to run the spring creek fishery and fourth to operate the cattle ranch, both of which are in Paradise Valley, Montana, sitting along the Yellowstone River just south of Livingston. Back then, he was a boy whose fishing and business interests were still dormant, suppressed in favor of childhood pursuits: riding motorcycles, slumber parties, trying to convince friends to pee on electric fences, and, of course, hoops.

Tucker and I were friends from third grade through high school. We traveled to out-of-state basketball tournaments and camps together, not yet aware that the odds of professional basketball were slim for a sturdy ranch kid and spindly Asian boy from rural Montana. The dull thumping of leather on wood was the heartbeat of our youth.

I fell under fishing's spell at a young age, but I didn't fish with Tucker. The older I grew, the

harder those spring creek waters tugged at me. But amid the shifting tectonics of adolescence, girls and social obligations joined homework and basketball as diversions from angling, at least as an activity with Tucker. Even as I budgeted more time to fish as a young adult, sprinting through a checklist of Montana waterways, Nelson's Spring Creek remained a mystery.

I carried that history with me to Nelson's this past October when, finally, Tucker and I waded into the creek together for the first time. And perhaps it was that towering backdrop of anticipation that caused me to launch my first cast directly into the opposite-bank willows. I'd waited years; I guess I could handle waiting another minute to tie on new tippet.

Tucker invited a photographer and me to spend a weekend at his ranch. My best friend, Justin, joined us, bringing with him a refined brand of beer-soaked storytelling ideal for riverside fires. I hadn't seen Tucker in nearly 10 years, yet in the space between we had kept loose tabs on each other, enough to know that we now shared the bond of flyfishing, much like we once shared basketball. He had agreed to host and guide me, and he admirably postponed judgment as I assured him that subsequent casts would land in the water.

Tucker's Montana roots go back five generations to David R. Shorthill, a Civil War veteran who arrived in Paradise Valley with a frontiersman's quota of gunshot wounds. As a private in the 125th Pennsylvania Infantry, Company F, Shorthill had been shot in the stomach and left behind by his fellow soldiers who believed he was dead. He crawled to a farmhouse to save himself.

Given his recent history of belly crawling back to life, it was clear that Shorthill wasn't cut out for mundane post-war civilian life. So he headed west and arrived in Paradise Valley in 1864 via the third wagon train to cross the Bozeman Trail, making him one of the Yellowstone region's earliest white settlers. Along with David Weaver and Richard Garrett, he discovered gold in Emigrant Gulch near modern-day Chico Hot Springs.

Shorthill gathered his family from Pennsylvania and homesteaded up Strawberry Creek, near Pine Creek, where he died in 1906 and is buried in a cemetery bearing his name. Meanwhile, nearby in the valley, Andrew Nelson was laying down his own roots, which would inevitably become intertwined with Shorthill's.

"Back then, there were maybe three families in the valley," Tucker said. "So that's who you got with."

One descendant of the Shorthill-Nelson lineage

was Edwin Nelson, Tucker's grandfather, who took over the family's cattle ranch along a stretch of cottonwood-lined river bottom and an adjacent grassy bench. It just so happened that a series of natural springs bubbled up along the property, with the main headspring on neighboring land. The stream these springs produced flowed at consistent temperatures year round, providing ideal trout habitat laden with nutrients and insects. But Edwin had more practical concerns; he saw it as a wonderful watering hole for his cattle.

Around the same time, legendary flyfisher and author, Joe Brooks, was frequenting the region's streams and struck up a friendship with Edwin. Brooks saw the creek's angling potential and would stay in a cabin there for extended periods, splitting his time between writing, fishing, and duck hunting. But Brooks wasn't the only one to discover it. Eventually, rod-wielding visitors outnumbered the host stream's carrying capacity.

Brooks suggested a pay-per-rod system modeled after similar ones in Europe. The concept baffled Edwin, but he gave it a shot and, in 1958, started charging \$5 a day per person.

"It was more of a way to control the number of anglers than it was a business," Tucker said. "Back then, it was like, 'Who would want to

NELSON'S SPRING CREEK IS A TRIBUTARY OF THE YELLOWSTONE RIVER, FLOWING THROUGH SOUTHWESTERN MONTANA'S APTLY NAMED PARADISE VALLEY. TODAY IT'S STILL OPERATED BY THE NELSONS—A SIXTH GENERATION RANCHING FAMILY, WITH ROOTS THAT STEM BACK TO CIVIL WAR VETERAN DAVID R. SHORTHILL.

NELSON'S ANEW



FEEDING TIME AT NELSON'S OUTDOOR TROUT HATCHERY, WHICH REMAINS THE ONLY PRIVATE FREE-FLOWING, OPEN-WATER HATCHERY IN MONTANA. AKA, NO CONCRETE RACEWAYS AND STRICTLY PALEO-APPROVED PELLETS.

come here and pay to go fishing? My grandpa thought it was crazy.”

Over time, Edwin fenced out his cows and began managing the stream more as a fishery, with Brooks as a valuable resource. To this day, among the stream bank's tall grass, is a wooden bench with a plaque paying tribute to Brooks—the man who first saw blue-ribbon promise in a cows' drinking fountain.

Tucker's father, Roger, became the third generation of Nelsons to run the cattle ranch while building on Edwin's contributions to the fishery, paying closer attention to habitat restoration and sediment removal. Roger also continued operating the outdoor trout hatchery, which Edwin started in 1967 as another way to capitalize on the oxygenated water's constant temps. It remains the only private free-flowing, open-water hatchery in Montana; rather than sterile concrete buildings holding troughs of fish, there are raceways and ponds utilizing diverted, not pumped, water.

These days, the 750-acre ranch runs 500 cattle, as well as working horses and hayfields. Roger still wakes early to tend to cows in the pastures and rainbows in the ponds, but he is gradually handing the ranch keys over to Tucker. On the fishing side of the family enterprise, however, the keys have already been passed, and Tucker and his wife,

Jacquie, are using them to open unexplored doors for a constantly evolving business.

The husband-and-wife team is ushering Nelson's Spring Creek into a more angling-focused era, in which marketing and branding are as tangible of concerns as cow poop and fish food. They built a fly shop onsite, on the heels of the family constructing a new main lodge wing in 2006 to complement the existing cabins, and their guiding services take them to rivers around the region. Emblazoned on hats and shirts inside the shop are artfully rendered logos, including a depiction of the family's cattle brand. There are also nifty gadgets from product innovators they met at a fly fishing show in Los Angeles, where they were giving a presentation on spring creeks, alongside rows of tiny, delicate flies.

We all discover fishing at our own pace, or, perhaps, it finds us when we're ready. It found Tucker in college, when he was studying agriculture at Montana State University in Bozeman, a short jaunt over the same pass that his great-great grandfather traversed well over a century ago. When Tucker wasn't nose deep in textbooks, he was reading water on the Gallatin, Madison, and Yellowstone rivers, a longtime dabbler in the angling arts now trying to become a full-time artist.

He took a guiding job the summer of his senior year and stuck with it. With a base of angling, guiding, and formal education in agriculture under his belt, Tucker returned home armed with a vision: the future would be threaded with hackle and rollcasts, and the future was now.

Yet, both economics and family values told him that those horizons would still include the cattle ranch and hatchery, incrementally refined to meet modern realities. For example, the hatchery continues stocking its rainbows in ponds for recreational fishing, but it also raises trout to be eaten at restaurants as a Rocky Mountain delicacy. A Montana-based company called Trout Culture processes the fish and distributes the high-quality meat to eateries both local and across the country, including The French Laundry in Napa Valley, which *Restaurant Magazine* and Anthony Bourdain, among others, have called the best restaurant in the world.

Additionally, the ranch has computerized its cattle records and improved irrigation, although Tucker says his dad has always been careful not to let the business fall behind the times.

“He's always been pretty progressive,” Tucker said, noting that generation-to-generation transfers in agriculture, with competing belief systems and methodologies, aren't always so smooth. “In some families, it's the old way or the highway. My dad has always been very open-minded.”

Altogether, the separate parts of Nelson's Spring Creek ranch combine to create a venture capable of enduring economic tides.

“One reason we've made it is we're so diverse,” Tucker said. “If the cattle market is down, another part of the business picks up the slack.”

Tucker met Jackie at MSU, where she was also studying agriculture, which gave the couple a strong foundation in resource management that would later inform their philosophies at the ranch. The two married shortly after graduating, and Jacquie landed a job as the Park County Conservation District Administrator and Upper Yellowstone and Shields Valley Watershed Coordinator. In 2010, she won the Montana Farm Bureau Federation Young Farmer and Rancher Discussion Meet, earning a trip to Atlanta for a national competition.

All the while, Jacquie was sharpening her flyfishing skills. When she moved from Washington to Bozeman for college, her ample outdoors background included hunting and snowmobiling but not flyfishing. She bought a \$50 rod and reel from Walmart and started the difficult process of self-teaching.

“I didn't really learn how to do it until I met Tucker,” she said. With Tucker's tutelage, she quickly learned the ropes; many of her lessons took place on the creek, a tricky place for even experienced anglers. Nelson's is renowned for technical fishing that offers sweet rewards, as are Depuy's and Armstrong's, the valley's other two celebrated spring creeks on the opposite side of the Yellowstone. Tucker and Jacquie guide there as well.

“It's the greatest flyfishing classroom there is,” Tucker said

of spring creeks. “You can see everything. If you can catch fish there, you can catch fish anywhere.”

That Tucker uses the language of education is not surprising. He approaches his guiding duties much as a good teacher envisions his role in students' lives. He is patient and thoughtful, caring deeply about both the customer and the resource. Similarly, Jacquie says she narrates everything she does with clients, explaining the reasons for tying on a new fly and the type of knot used.

Tucker and Jacquie both believe fishing takes precedence over other outfitting adornments. They provide lunch and other comforts typical of their profession, but they're also willing to fish until dark if the client asks. They don't end the day at happy hour or abandon a thick caddis hatch for dinner. They employ one other guide, and perhaps more during peak season, but they do most of the heavy lifting themselves while raising two kids. For a while, basic human functions such as sleeping and conversing were reduced to scarce luxuries.

But they found time to reminisce around a fire our first night, as Justin showered us with tall tales. We laughed deep into the night, which is no small thing in this world. Out in the blackness, an owl joined in.

I awoke to filtered sunlight pouring over the eastern mountains. The day would prove bright and sunny, but autumn was in the air as surely as it was in the willow leaves, which flanked the creek in an impressionistic mosaic of fiery reds, oranges, and yellows. When I trudged into the main lodge's kitchen for my morning caffeine fueling, I heard Tucker's parents, Roger and Mary, speaking with his sister, Trish, their voices as familiar and comforting as they were ethereal; my childhood was whispering back to me.

The phrase “family-run business” is often loosely applied, but the Nelsons epitomize it, with every member playing a role. A few years ago, Mary retired from her career as a schoolteacher to commit more time to spring creek duties: booking and cleaning rooms, making breakfasts for anglers, and overseeing rod reservations. Now she has a partner in Trish, who recently moved nearby from the Bitterroot Valley. Trish makes the guide lunches, and she collaborated with her mother on a delicious breakfast each morning I was there. For our lunch, Tucker cooked moose burgers, courtesy of Justin, streamside on a portable grill, washed down with beer. I've had worse meals on a river.

Having the whole family on hand disperses domestic responsibilities as well, which is useful with four children running around, including Tucker and Jacquie's daughter, Morgan, and son, Ander, a wild man in diapers who relishes the freedoms of ranch life. On the first night, I watched the 2-year-old destroy a cardboard box by repeatedly smashing it with a wrench, shouting, “I big boy!” He had apparently used the same technique with a hammer on a wall during remodel demolition.

THE FUTURE WOULD NOW BE THREADED WITH HACKLE AND ROLLCASTS, AND THE FUTURE WAS NOW.

NELSON'S ANEW



TUCKER NELSON AND HIS WIFE, JACQUIE, HAVE BEEN BUSY USHERING THEIR NAMESAKE OPERATION INTO A MORE ANGLING-FOCUSED ERA, WITH THE ADDITION OF AN ON-SITE FLY SHOP, EXPANDED ACCOMMODATIONS, AND SOME FRESH WHEELS.

And once, after he wrecked his Power Wheels in a ditch, he left the upturned vehicle there and ran home. A visitor spotted him a half-mile from the house, his little legs scurrying over rugged terrain.

The all-family effort has resulted in a more sustainable balance of work and play, in which Tucker and Jacquie even get opportunities to talk to each other at the end of the day, maybe enjoy family dinner while there's still light out. It's worth noting they're all incredibly nice, which counts for something in my book.

"It's so great that it's all family," Jacquie said. "We can be working together and sharing responsibilities and really just doing everything together."

With Tucker guiding me much of the time, I caught 12 fish that Saturday, mostly rainbows with a few browns, and lost a number of others on my thin tippet. A few were in the 16- to 18-inch range, with broad shoulders. Tucker told me that's a good day on his stream, particularly in fall without any notable hatches. But zero fish would have been fine, too. Ours is not a blood sport, and the semantics of fish statistics mean even less when friendships are being renewed.

In the evening, Tucker and Jacquie left to attend

a fundraiser for the Catholic elementary school he and I both attended. I joined Justin and Greg, sans camera, for a final run at those crimson Nelson rainbows as nightfall approached, riding the wings of a rainstorm. Earlier, I had spotted a fish feeding in a narrow opening between dense algae. When I returned, I saw him nose the surface. Now fully acclimated to my long leader, I placed a cast on the outer edge of his expanding ring. The microscopic midge pattern barely landed before the fish struck. It was my final rainbow.

Indeed, there was no letdown in those waters. After all these years, not even the silt of built-up expectations could muddy them, and I watched as they flowed crystal clear past my feet, all around me, no longer just in my imagination.

Walking back to our cabin, I paused to locate the barn. Through the fading light and falling rain, I deciphered its exterior walls, which once sheltered a childhood wonderland of dirty floorboards creaking under the weight of hoop dreams; I saw a small boy hoisting jump shots as his friend repeatedly hauled in rebounds. Even in the dark, I could still trace the edges of those memories. Some things you see forever. 🐟

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