



# Pioneers & Legends

## Lee Spencer, 1950–

A life Dedicated to the Art and Science of Watching/By Don Roberts

**T**he truck probably got him the job. Or, at the very least, helped instigate the process. That's not to say there weren't numerous other persuasive attributes in his résumé. In fact, it would have been hard, if not damn near impossible, to find anyone more eminently qualified for the particular and, well, peculiar, job that awaited Lee Spencer in the spring of 1999. But hold on; lest the story of the truck and the job get ahead of itself, perhaps it makes more sense to begin at the beginning.

Lee Spencer was born in Portland, Oregon, in September 1950. His father, Donald Spencer, was an English teacher, specializing in theater and speech, while his mother, Dorothy, taught elementary school. The Spencers weren't outdoorsy people and had little or no interest in fishing, camping, or scruffy forays in the woods. However, they let Lee and his younger brother run free. And since the '50s were a good time to be a kid in America—relatively safe, lots of undeveloped land and open fields, and few “NO TRESPASSING” signs—the Spencer boys more or less roamed the countryside on their own.

In the meantime, their father's career required moving the family frequently around the country. During part of Spencer's early childhood spent in North Dakota, his uncle took him under his wing and taught him how to fish with good old-fashioned bait and tackle.

In due course the Spencer family ended up in Castro Valley, California, where Lee attended four years of high school. He didn't graduate. “Nominally, the reason I didn't graduate was because I didn't take driver's ed,” he explains. Even though it was a required course at the time, Spencer reasoned, why take driver's ed if you already know how to drive? “Besides,” he concedes, “it didn't really matter, because my grades sucked.”

Instead of taking the conventional route and enrolling in a host of remedial courses, Spencer decided to drop out of school entirely and join up with a buddy to hitchhike and hop freight trains across the West, with their sights set primarily on Montana and North Dakota.

Eventually, of course, following that precocious bout of wanderlust, Spencer went back to school, knuckled down, and earned an undergraduate degree in anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley. This also

happened to be when he procured the aforementioned truck, an already well-used and not-a-little-abused 1962 Chevy half-ton pickup that would serve as his go-anywhere wheels for the next 30 years. Spencer then went on to the University of Oregon, where he attained his master's degree in anthropology, specializing in field archaeology, with the northern Great Basin as his area of expertise. For the next 25 years, Spencer worked as a licensed practitioner in field archaeology. He recalls, "I easily put on more than a million miles and went through two engine rebuilds on my Chevy pickup, going from tiny town to tiny town off the beaten path from Patagonia to Paradise Valley [Arizona] and from Midas to McDermitt [Nevada] ... and endless obscure points between."

### A Life Measured in Dogs

While, by his own admission, Spencer has experienced a checkered past with women—long-term relationships, yes; marriages, no—he makes no bones concerning his long-abiding affection for dogs. He likes smart dogs, alert dogs, high-energy dogs, work-oriented dogs, dogs that require as much of Spencer as he does of them—thus, his affinity for Australian cattle dogs, aka blue heelers.

"I'm enough of a dog person," says Spencer, "that it would not be much of an exaggeration to claim that much of what I've done career-wise and otherwise has been in the interest of also giving a dog a good life. Of course, in pursuing field archaeology, you're out in the middle of nowhere a lot of the time, and no one questions taking a dog along.... That's not something you can do in your average office cubicle."

During decades of provisional lodging (often just earth and sky) and traveling from site to site in the Southwest and the Great Basin, Spencer was never without canine companionship, a succession of willing and exceptionally obedient cattle dogs, including Mam, Chicka, Muchacho, and Sis.

In the early 1980s, a friend by the name of Gary Foulkes first introduced Spencer to Oregon's famous North Umpqua River, but it wasn't until many years later, with Sis riding shotgun in the '62 Chevy, that Spencer returned with the full intention and steely determination to catch a steelhead on a fly. In his words, "When I started



PHOTO COURTESY OF LEE SPENCER

*Having attained his master's degree in anthropology, then-22-year-old Lee Spencer specialized in field archaeology; here he takes notes by a cave site he discovered in northern Nevada (above). For almost 30 years, Spencer haunted the North Umpqua in his highly recognizable, multihued 1962 Chevy half-ton pickup, on which he had stenciled a Krishnamurti quote, "Truth is a pathless land" (below). At a 12,000-year-old Native kill site—found in 1977 at Christmas Valley in eastern Oregon—Spencer (right foreground) discussed with colleagues a broken obsidian spear point clearly associated with a scattering of bone fragments (left). Photo courtesy of Lee Spencer*

fishing here I had no idea this was supposed to be a difficult river. It took me seven years of learning—learning to read water, learning something about the habits of steelhead, and learning the basics of fly presentation—before I hooked my first steelhead on the North Umpqua."

After such an extensive—some would say brutal—initiation period, the intricacies of the North Umpqua resolved into sharp focus. "This is the only river I know," Spencer notes. But it is a depth of knowing few other people even begin to entertain. "I've risen a lot of fish on this river," says Spencer, his enunciation atonal, matter-of-fact, egoless. Along the way in his quest to understand and deceive steelhead, his tackle and his technique evolved to accommodate his convictions and, ultimately, his compassion. He boiled down the whole shooting match to one rod, a 15-foot two-hander bought in 1988; one line, a floating Spey taper with a 25-foot leader; and one fly, riffle hitched—a Muddler he named Burnt Toast. Yet, despite such self-imposed restrictions, his very effectiveness became an issue.

In 1998, Spencer made enough money as an archaeological consultant that he could afford to spend over 100 consecutive days on the river. He raised 77 fish to his skated Muddler, landing about half of them. But, to his great dismay, three of the steelhead he landed subsequently died, and in another instance,



PHOTO BY LEE SPENCER



PHOTO BY LEE SPENCER

following a thrashing take, he reeled in an eyeball impaled on the hook. He says, “I realized by then that I knew how to catch them, but decided that the consequence of possibly killing and maiming fish was just too much.”

His solution? He went through his cigar box of flies and meticulously snipped the point off every last Muddler in his arsenal. “Then I spent a month adjusting to the fact that I was never going to land a steelhead again,” he says.

As it so happened during that fateful summer of ’98, atonement was about to take another path.

## The Hired Eye

Big Bend Pool on Steamboat Creek, a major tributary to the North Umpqua, bears the dubious distinction of being situated far from both the auspices and the polite constraints of civilization. The spectacle of several hundred steelhead congregating in a single emerald-green pool in an isolated mountain stream proved too tempting for the local outlaw sector to resist. All the usual poaching methods came into play, the most reprehensible of all being dynamite. Following the construction of logging roads into the upper watershed, every year poachers dynamited Big Bend Pool, and every year they managed to elude the authorities. The annual bombing of the pool continued unabated for three decades. Plenty of suspects. No arrests.

Finally, out of desperation, an advocacy group called The North Umpqua Foundation (TNUF) attempted to establish protections through a system of volunteerism, calling upon members to spend blocks of time babysitting the steelhead at Big Bend Pool. Juggling schedules became an organizational nightmare, and it soon became clear, based upon blood splatters found on the rocks, that gaps in patrolling spelled an open invitation to scurrilous poachers. TNUF realized that what they needed was one full-time, totally committed watcher—someone undeterred by scant pay, austere living conditions, and woody isolation. But who could do something like that? Cue Spencer’s beater ’62 Chevy pickup truck.

To say that his truck gave off vibes would be an understatement. Any attempt at a comprehensive description

would require a lengthy dissertation beyond the scope of this article. However, a fractional list of its most gnarly features would have to include a kelly-green paint job touched up with varying shades of green and blue Rust-Oleum (and, in later years, stenciled steelhead silhouettes); headlights secured with bungees; no speedometer; no turn signals; driver’s-side door held closed with an eye-bolt, rope, and bungee cord; an array of plastic and rubber dinosaurs and other curios on the dash; a toy sea turtle attached to a vintage salmon lure dangling from the passenger-side visor; and, audible from over 100 yards away, dieseling and wheezing like a dying rhino right after its engine was turned off. But even more than its fishy cosmetics, the constant presence of Spencer’s truck at turnouts along the North Umpqua revealed the inveterate inclinations of its owner. Here was the answer to TNUF’s dilemma of finding the right person for the FishWatch position: someone who was apparently spending all his time on the river anyway.

The fact that Spencer’s focus had already shifted from hooking and landing fish to, well, not hooking and landing fish, to a strictly visual encounter—provoking a rise and counting coup—clinched the deal. Starting back in 1999, each year Spencer takes up residence on Big Bend Pool in mid-May, about two weeks ahead of the arrival of early-run summer steelhead. Then he stays on-site more or less continuously—with breaks to run errands, resupply, check messages left for him at the Steamboat Inn, or maybe even engage in a sunrise bout of casting a pointless Muddler over a favorite riffle—until mid-December, when the last adult steelhead typically vacate the pool and ascend to secretive, gravel-strewn spawning beds higher up in the system.

Though temperamentally Spencer has proven to be almost perfectly suited to the role of watcher and caretaker, the mild-mannered archaeologist-angler downplays the whole river-keeper enforcement concept. “I’m not a cop and not a cop wannabe,” he explains. “The first few years on the job I had to deal with the paranoia that goes hand in glove with the idea that ‘Oh my God, I’ve got to deter the bad guys.’”

Actually, law enforcement responsibilities fall to the Oregon State Police. If Spencer detects any suspicious activity, he’s authorized to contact the on-duty state trooper via a two-way radio supplied by the U.S. Forest Service. “As it stands now,” he says, “simply having a warm body here at Big Bend Pool is deterrent enough.” Modesty aside, Spencer’s presence greatly transcends the notion of a warm body. Rather than enforcement he practices engagement—a pastoral form of public relations, if you will—as he and his current canine companion, Maggie, meet and greet every visitor (up to 1,500 people a season) to Big Bend Pool.

## Spiral-Bound

That Western cultural trope called boredom is not now, nor has it ever been, an affliction Spencer can relate to. Rather than an avenue to angst, his quiescence functions as a mode of operation, a stance from which to continually puzzle out the intricacies of the natural world. In short, he sits still and takes notes, filling one spiral-bound notebook after another with the observed behaviors of the wild steelhead holed up in Big Bend Pool. Many of these field notes are posted under the “News” tab on TNUF’s website, <http://northumpqua.org>, as “News from Big Bend Pool.”

Spencer’s notations average around 800 pages, or approximately 300,000 words, a year. To date that brings the total count to somewhere in the neighborhood of 5 million words. One of Spencer’s longtime friends, Jim Van Loan, the owner of the Steamboat Inn and a board member at TNUF, quips in his usual deadpan manner, “Lee Spencer has more useless knowledge about steelhead than anyone on earth.” He then adds, “But it might be of use to a behaviorist at some point.”

Although Spencer’s logs are based on anecdotal information, he has come to some compelling conclusions concerning the innate nature of the beast. For instance, in one of his compilations Spencer notes, “After watching and documenting over one-thousand steelhead as they approached items in the flow over the last six seasons at the pool, it is clear that curiosity, or whatever an analogous response to stimuli is in steelhead, is the driving force behind 85% of the approaches observed ... the primary way that the steelhead display their curiosity is when they rise to new items that show up in the pool.”

Besides the usual parade of leaves, twigs, and plant debris, Spencer has watched steelhead rise to, chase, and sometimes mouth the occasional hapless merganser, beavers, spiders, a ring-necked snake, insects of every size and description, a bat, and once even a low-flying kingfisher. He believes that curiosity is the main factor at work when steelhead jump. “There have been only two instances in 16 years when I’ve seen a steelhead jump to take an insect,” he says. “I think they mostly jump to see what’s above the water and see what’s going on in the world.”

While Spencer is consistently upbeat and introspectively optimistic, the one sour note in his reportage concerns the role of hatcheries in fisheries policy and management. When asked what he perceives as the single biggest threat facing wild steelhead populations today, he replied, “The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife [ODFW].”

Although Spencer has written extensively about the risks and failures of hatchery supplementation in the Umpqua and, indeed, rivers throughout the West, many of his postings, viewed as too inflammatory, have been taken down. Without going into a lengthy discourse, his argument can be boiled down to two essential points. First, “How can anyone read the preponderance of scientific literature and subsequently have anything positive to say about hatcheries? ... Yet for some reason ODFW stopped paying attention to the science and have devoted most of all their resources to hatchery production.” And second, if they’re unwilling to change policy, then “the best thing that could be done for wild steelhead would be to completely shut down ODFW ... that would not only be the best but the cheapest solution to the problems facing native steelhead populations.”

Roughly 10 years ago, Spencer started noticing tremors in his hands. But more alarming still, as he recalls, “in 2004 my timing went all to hell and I lost my cast for three or four years. I spent several years dealing with the things that happen with Parkinson’s, but wasn’t diagnosed until five years ago.” Since that time he has retained a neurologist in Roseburg, and the prescribed medication has mitigated his symptoms. In fact, he has totally reclaimed the sweet, rhythmic fluidity of his Spey cast.

It’s not surprising that Spencer has taken a defiant attitude to living with Parkinson’s, refusing to let it—or, more precisely, the public perception of the disease—define him. On the other hand, he foresees an end to his tenure at Big Bend Pool. Having served as caretaker for 17 years, he thinks there’s a kind of symmetry in serving three more years, completing his FishWatch reign at a roundly satisfying 20 years.

Though it might be a scramble, TNUF and the coalition of other agencies that support FishWatch will certainly find another caretaker, no doubt someone who will bring his or her own style and way of doing things to the job. After all, in light of his unique skills and charming idiosyncrasies, Spencer could never be entirely replaced. Such an effort would be both foolish and futile. The FishWatch consortium will, however, have to find someone of a similar ilk. Qualifications for the job would have to include compassion, curiosity, intellect, perseverance, and perhaps a touch—just a touch, mind you—of madness. And perhaps a ’62 Chevy pickup truck. ➤

Don Roberts is an Oregon-based freelance writer and angling historian.



PHOTO COURTESY OF LEE SPENCER

*As is customary, Spencer confers with Maggie before again swinging a so-called Pointless Muddler on one of the many famed pools on the North Umpqua (above). A characteristic pod of steelhead holds comfortably high in the water column at Big Bend Pool (left).*