

The Jerry Bartlett Angling Collection presents Sporting Legends of the Catskills. The Catching of Old Bess and the History of Rainbow Lodge, Saturday, October 14th, 2017, at the Phoenicia Library. Made possible with funds from the Catskill Watershed Corporation, in partnership with New York City DEP.

Beth Waterman:

Today's program is the first in the series we are calling Sporting Legends of the Catskills. And the first one is really a treasure, I think, because it's the story of Old Bess, the legendary fish that had been in the Esopus for four or five years, before she was finally caught. Joy and Bob Decker will tell the story of that event in 1955 which made front page news. Bess lay in state in the freezer in Folkerts for people to view. And then on the same roster, we have the story of Rainbow Lodge, which is of the same period and a lot of the same characters. Ed Kahil, who is the son of Dick Kahil, the owner; and Bob Decker, the son of Larry Decker, who caught the fish, will be our speakers today. And I think we'll start with you, Bob...

[applause]

Bob: Well, folks, thank you for being here. My name is Bob Decker, Robert Decker. And I've got a few items here I'll pass around. When dad caught Bess, everybody says she's old Bess, I guess she was 5 or 6 years old according to the biologists that looked at her. He caught her on live bait, and these are some of the flies that my dad had made in 1949 and '50, that's how old they are. And these are the hooks and stuff for live bait that he caught it on. He purchased at Folkerts, right next door. This reel is the automatic reel. A lot of people misunderstand what an automatic reel does. As you touch it, it automatically spins and picks up the tension on the line so that when you actually have a fish on, as you do this, you touch it, it holds the line nice and tight. You see a lot of people fly fishing, always have the line in their left hand and down through their finger. Well this is what he caught it on. There's no line on it now. Just the idea that that is an automatic reel, and that's what it does.

In 1955, I was 11 years old, and we were at a camp, which my uncle and my dad, and my other uncle, his other brother, had built down by 3 Star camp. It was on their property that we got from Theresa O'Donnell. When the cabin was constructed, everybody would come up on a Friday night and stay at 3 Star camp, because the cabin wasn't done yet, so we had a place to stay and sleep and eat and cook food. And then we'd all go fishing. Well, since I was only 11, my dad and his brother Uncle Ted would go fishing. And they always would take a drive uptown and then they would fish the whole stream on down, and then somebody at camp would pick them up and take them back up and get the truck and stuff, get some food, whatever it was. I remember it was nice and sunny, and my uncle Ted had a 1951 Ford flatbed truck that he used to haul all

the lumber and everything in to build the cabin with. And it was sitting in the driveway right here, the cabin was in back of us, it wasn't finished yet, it had rough pine on the outside. And we heard all these horns, and these cars, and we didn't know if it was the President, or what. I mean, I was only 11 years old. Right? So you've got to understand my point of view here, you know. My mom and my aunt Mag, who was uncle Ted's wife, came out of the cabin, "What's all the ruckus, what's all the noise?" We don't know. And they all pulled in the road, came up to camp, and stopped. They're blowing the horns, and people are getting out, and talking all this and that, and we're like, what is going on here, right? And finally, dad in the 3rd car, gets out, and he comes over. "Dad, what's going on?" My mom, Larry asked, "What's happening?" He says, "You'll never believe what's just happened to m." Not knowing what all the horns are for, and not wanting to really ask any questions about what just happened, mom took him over to the side and ... I hear, "Oh, nothing like that, nothing like that." He comes over and says, I caught this fish! Well, okay. But then he went back to the car, and he got the fish. And he brought the fish out, he got the fish out of the car, and this is what we were confronted with. So ... with tears of joy, and everything else you could think of, this is Old Bess here. You have to bear in mind that you'll see a couple of wrinkles on Old Bess. That's not because she was old. It's because it was in Folkerts freezer, Mr. Folkert, Herman, and his brother, what was his brother's name, do you remember? ... Dick... Herman said, let's put it on a board, and we'll display it, and people can come and see it. Well, that's where they had been. They had it in the freezer up there for about a half an hour, and then dad couldn't take it anymore, so he says, let's go. And he grabbed the fish, and away they went, and everybody followed them, and they all came down to camp, and they all blew the horns, and everything else. Come to find out, all these people that were blowing the horns and following dad down the cabin, were alongside the road watching him for almost an hour, catching the fish. And a gentleman, I've got another picture of him here someplace, we don't know... there he is... this is naturally from a picture. But this gentleman here, who we never found out who he was, was on the bank, and he said, I'll net the fish for you. So dad said, alright, give it a try, do it by the tail, get him tail first. Well, the net that he had, as you'll see, was a little aluminum net, and it really wasn't big enough for Old Bess. She was kind of robust then. And he hit the tail of Old Bess three times, and she took off downstream like you know what. And dad right behind her chasing her, keeping tension on the line and everything. So he didn't lose it. And then finally, after about two tries, I think it was, dad told him, thank you very much. But if I lose this fish, I want to lose it on my own, not because somebody else did, because I'll regret it all my life. So the guy backed off, and there was a bunch of people on the bank that were with him, and those were the ones that were watching him, and they all got in their cars, and when he landed the fish and he walked out on the opposite bank with the fish, they all started blowing their horns and raising Cain, and you know, carrying on. And those are the same people who came down to the cabin after dad had showed it to Mr. Folkert, and they put it on the bottom. He had also

caught a 20-inch brown just before he caught Bess, on the same thing, with some live bait. And there was a gentleman that lived here in Phoenicia, and maybe during this I can think of his name, which I can't right now, but he was the one that told dad how to fish the live bait... he said, you have to understand the stream. If the water is high, you have to go down deep, because that's where they are. And the water is low, he says, you'll get up to the top, and they'll be searching. So dad put on 7 split shot, and three or four different swivels and everything, so nothing would get tangled, and he would flip it, and the bait would go out and drop in the water, and instantly sink, and he'd throw... so that when it came down, he could feel it, ticking off the bottom, the weights touching off the bottom. And he said when Bess hit the bait fish that he had, he said she smacked it and then give it a pull, and he said I didn't have to set the hook, he says, I picked the rod up, because he had his fly rod, and he said, I picked the rod up, and nothing happened. And he said, I waited, he says, it seemed like eternity. It was probably about 10 seconds. And nothing. He says, so I gave it a little twitch, and nothing happened. And then all of a sudden, he says, all H-E-L-L let loose. Downstream went this fish [makes zipping noise] down came the line and everything, he went, oh my God, right? And he's in water, There's another picture, about up to here, so he backed out and got in some lower water, and then he could chase the fish downstream.

Joy: Here he is in the deeper water that day... and this is the fellow who tried to help, and they put him on Outdoor Life, but then they also did Pop, when Pop told them to get lost.

Bob: He didn't tell them to get lost, now, geez... well, in a way, yeah, I guess...

Joy: And we'll pass this around for you. But Pop was featured in Outdoor Life actually catching the fish. Here we go. Here's the guy that tried to help dad, and here's dad actually hooking Bess in Outdoor Life's issue. So we'll pass that around.

Bob: But after that happened, he chased up and down the stream two or three times, and it come to just about an hour, because the first half hour he said he really didn't see the fish at all. The fish never came up. Bess always went down deep and stayed by the rocks, and would go upstream on him, and then cut across and go back into him to loosen up the line. And that's where the automatic reel came in. Thank God... the minute I could see the distance between the fish and me, he said, to loosen up, he said, I just touched the reel, and it would take the line right up without yanking it reel hard. So he said, that's how it stayed on the hook, and he says, that's they way it was. And then all of a sudden he said, the fish came right up out of the water, and went back down, and he said, that's when I lost my heart. I couldn't believe it. He said, the sweat just came right off me. He said, Oh my God, you know, and then he says, about ten minutes later, this fellow tried to help him net it, and that didn't work, and

that chased the fish down deeper and faster. So downstream he went, and then came back up, and when he told the fellow, he says, look, if I lose it, I'll lose it on my own. You know. And he said, okay, so they backed up. And everyone was, well, move to the right. Move to the left. They're yelling at him... came off the street, the road right there. They're yelling, go down! Go down! We can see, he's heading down! Because they're looking down through the water. But he's level with it, so he can't see. So after about an hour, about 3:30, he said he had the rod up, and he could feel no more of this jumping. And it sort of like, went down with an easy pull, he said. I looked, he said, and the fish was coming right toward me. He said, I put the net in the water, and I held it there and held it there, he said, and the fish just turned a little bit, I didn't want to hit it in the tail, and just as she turned, he said, I scooped her, and her head went right down, because he had a net about that deep, and then he just bear hugged, you know, walked backwards, kept looking where he was going until he got out on dry land, he said, which is emotional for me, because all the people up on the street and everything, they all started hooting and hollering, blowing horns and everything, and that was just before he went to Folkerts, because he had to take it up there right away. And of course, you would too, you'd have to show it off, right? Let's face it. And then after about a half an hour at Folkerts, he brought it down to the cabin, and all the people following him. And so that was, that was basically the big catch of the day right there.

Joy: And what was the fame after that for dad?

Bob: Oh, well, he got quite a few people from the Sports Illustrated, and the magazines. And Genesee beer sent him a case of Genesee beer and a congratulations. He said, second worst beer I ever had in my life.

Joy: He got a letter from Genesee.

Bob: Free is good, you know, free is good. Then he talked to these, two or three different people, and I think it was your dad, Dick Kahil, Mr. Kahil. I was 11, so everybody was Mr. and Mrs., and that's the way it was in my house, so Mr. Kahil had mentioned to him about this taxidermist fellow that lives up by I think Gloversville... and made contact and talked to him, and he said that he called the biologist in to look at the fish when he was getting ready to mount it, because they cut it actually on the side, you know, so the side that you cut would go against the fish board, and not in the stomach, and he said the meat was absolutely pink, like a big salmon, absolutely delicious. Dad didn't need to hear that. So he left that out of the column. And he said the biologist took some internals and tested them and said that Bess had spawned a minimum that he could prove two times, and maybe even three. And that she was between 5 and 6 years old, which means 5 1/2 to me. But then he changed it to between 4 and 6, so that would be 5. So I was thinking that Bess was 5 years old. And they said that she was in great health, had no problem... with eating or anything like

that. And there was a gentleman, I don't know if it was Mr. Gilligan, but he was fishing about, maybe a mile downstream, by Hoffman's old diner, which was on the side of the brook there, and he was fishing there, and he was using wet flies, and he caught anywhere between 8 and 10 beautiful, nice trout, rainbow and some brook, and he heard all the horns, and for the life of me, couldn't figure what the devil was going on. So he literally came out of the stream and he was tying on a dry fly, standing right there by the road, and everybody went by, and they're all waving and the horns are blowing, and he says it was some kind of parade, he said, but I didn't see the governor or anybody else, I didn't know who it was. I said, it took me half an hour later when I found out when I went up back to Folkerts that dad had come back up there, and they had the fish laying out, and they had weighed it and measured it, and they put it on a board, and they had stored it in the freezer, and that's why you see some wrinkles on the fish right here, because Bess was a little bit frozen there, the wrinkles were right here, but right here, you can't see it, but there's a piece of silver. There was a gentleman that was the, I guess you'd call him game warden, something like that to the effect, gave dad a set of handcuffs. And dad looked at them, right, and he said, put this on, put that through the gill of that fish when you go get your picture taken in the water. You lose that fish, he said, you're going to lose everything. So he put the handcuffs on... he put the handcuff right through the gill, and then put his two fingers over on top of the handcuff, so you couldn't see it. And when he came out, he sort of like held it like, and then like, pretended to drop it and actually didn't, and everybody [gasps]... ah, the handcuffs, which was really something, the way that happened. When things finally calmed down, the family got together, we went up to Folkerts and we saw the fish, what it was and everything else, and how it looked...

Joy: And the map, dad. They printed placemats after that, and they officially named it Decker's Pool, where dad caught the fish. We're donating all that to the museum.

Bob: There was a placement.

Joy: And every restaurant and diner ...

Bob: And it says Decker's Pool here. And it used to be Mother's Pool, so they changed it to Decker's Pool. I think Al from Al's restaurant had a lot to do with that, because dad would take it and put it up there behind the bar for a couple weeks of fishing, you know, and then Mr. Kahil had, he had it down to his place, too, you know, so ...

Beth: So once it was mounted ...

Bob: It made the tour, oh, yeah.

Beth: Do you still have it?

Bob: It's in the family, yes. I don't personally have it in my hand right now; it's in the family.

Joy: And gets passed around...

Bob: In good keeping.

Joy: But dad ate free off it for many, many years. And drank free for many, many years off of that fish. The other thing, Bob, tell them what E.F. Payne said after you contacted them.

Bob: Oh, about the rod.

Joy: About... Campbell, you're 27... about 20 years ago, I said to my husband, you know, maybe we should contact E.F. Payne. Your dad caught the fish on a Payne rod.

Bob: Yeah, so we went on the internet, right, and pulled up E.F. Payne fly rods and stuff, and there's a picture of dad fishing coming out of the stream with, you know, a Payne rod in his hand.

Joy: But we hadn't given permission for that.

Bob: And we didn't know where the devil he got this picture from!

Joy: Right. And they were located at the time up in Highland Mills, when dad caught it, in New York.

Bob: Right, and these people had bought the rights and everything from Mr. Payne, and they moved to ... Sisters, Oregon...

Joy: So the young fellow who was now the owner of E.F. Payne, didn't realize that I was a lawyer, and I said to him, where'd you get the picture of my father-in-law, and you're using it as your primary marketing photo. And he said, well, we knew years ago that this fella had caught the fish on this, and we somehow had gotten a hold of a photo, which it had been in Outdoor Life, it had been in Rod and Gun, it had been in ... you know, and back then nobody knew copyright. So I said, well, we could call it even if you could find it in your heart to come up with some sort of gift for my husband, in exchange for use of his dad's photo. No problem, he said. About a month later, we get this beautiful box in the mail. He had created a prototype fly rod, titanium, for Bob, and had Bob's name engraved on it, along with E.F. Payne, and the metal case, and the strap. And Bob has been fly fishing with that rod ever since. But that was our monetary

compensation, which we wouldn't change for the world, by the way, because I don't think anybody else has that fly rod.

Bob: No, I don't think so either.

Joy: And it's very personal.

Bob: With my name on it.

Joy: And to this day, you will see Bob's photo on the E.F. Payne website.

Bob: Yeah, it's still on there if you want to look it up...

Audience: I just want to comment, your father was a very handsome guy.

Bob: Well, thank you very much. A lot of people say I look just like him [laughter]... well, anyhow, if there's any questions that I can't answer, don't ask them. And if there are any questions... sir...

Audience: How long was the fish?

Bob: 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ " long.

Audience: And what was the bait?

Bob: It was a number 2 minnow they called them, on those hooks that I passed around.

Audience: Like a double hook?

Bob: Right, it's called a universal, it was made in Germany, and that's why Mr. Folkert had it. It's made out of German steel, and the one that he had is basically like this one right here, about this size. This is number 2, number 3, and there's a longer one here, that's a number 4 for a shiner. Alright? And you take it and insert this with this little clip off through an anal cavity, and then right out through the mouth, put the clip back on, add a couple pieces of leader, and then a swivel and everything, so that the fish doesn't die. The bait doesn't die with that kind of a hook, alright, because it's right up through a tube. It goes right through there, and the fish will actually stay alive. And if you fish it properly, it will start swimming. And it will move and swim. So that's why he got those hooks. But the one that Bess had, she had one in her mouth, in her lower jaw right here. And the other one was completely straightened right out. Just pulled right out. And then the shank in the center here, where this all, bronzed together... it was actually pulled apart. And it was almost like somebody up above said, alright, Bess, give it up. Because another maybe 20 minutes or

something like that, it would have been gone. So she'd have just had that thing in her mouth, and it would have rotted away, rusted away, been gone. But that's what caught it. Mr. Folkert, Herman, I remember, he came over and called dad Larry, you know. Oh, Larry, look what you caught... German accent or whatever it was, you know, and he said, what happened to the hook? He said, I sold you a good hook. Look what you did to the hook! He said, I didn't do it. He said, that did it! So. But some of these flies, wets and dries, and these are like '49 and '50, maybe '51 they tied these. But my uncle Marvin Bush was in the war, and when he got discharged in 1945, my dad and uncle Ted and his younger brother, Donnie, who was in the war also, he was an electrician's mate on some destroyer. When they found out that Marvin—married to dad's sister—my aunt, and that he was getting discharged, and he was coming in to Chester, New York, they went down. Dad had a ... '45 or '46 Ford or something like that, a sedan. And the three of them got together, and they went down, and they grabbed Marvin off the train, never took him home to see his wife. Oh, man, you don't even want to hear about that story. But anyhow, they took off, they came right up here. They came right to Phoenicia in this old Ford, because they did it all the time, and they parked at 3 Star camp, and Theresa and Joe O'Donnell and everybody else was there, and what's going on, hi Marv, you're back and this and that. He was in the back taking his uniform off, with the big trunk up, you know, and putting on regular waders and everything else. Half an hour later all of them were in the stream fishing! And they stayed there, and they went someplace after hours, I have no idea, and had a few toddies, and stayed overnight, and fished early in the morning, and then they went home. And my aunt Jean was ... [laughter] ... you know, like, where is he? I haven't seen him in three years. Where is he? And these guys kidnapped him. You know, and they literally just took him up there, because that's ... he said he wrote one letter to dad about a year before the war ended, and he said, if I ever get out of here alive, take me fishing. And that's the worst thing he could have told dad. So... because dad loved to fish, and so did uncle Ted, who at the same time, while dad was fishing, he caught Bess... uncle Ted was maybe down the backside of where the iron bridge is now, down on the other side of the iron bridge, before it was like reservoir property and all this and that, and he had caught two or three nice 20-, 24-inch brown trout. So he was bragging about those, you know, goes sloshing up the stream, look what I caught and everything else, and dad says, yeah! Check this out! That's basically the way it was, and 60-, 70 years later...

Beth: Here we are!

Bob: Yeah!

Mark Loete: Do you know what size the fly rod was, what weight the fly rod was?

Bob: It was a 4.

Mark: Four weight!

Bob: Yeah, 4-weight. All bamboo, split bamboo, made by Payne. Yeah, and it was a 4-weight.

Mark: Probably 7 ½ foot?

Bob: Yes, it was, it was a 7 ½-footer, that's right.

Mark: Wow, amazing.

Bob: Very nice. if you did it just right, and then let it down gently, so the fly lands. He said, now pull the fly back out again. He said, tease him. You know they're there. Two or three times with the fly in the water, tease it, and then let it sit...

Audience: Where's the fish now?

Bob: It's in the family, and it's up at my brother's house?

Audience: How'd it get the name?

Bob: Well, now, there's the good questions. Who named Old Bess?

Joy: Okay, so according to Gilligan, who wrote the articles, he wrote once a week for Rod and Gun, I think it was, it was a weekly publication, and he would come up and fish here as well, and he would go back to Manhattan, put his article out every week. According to him, he said that when dad pulled the fish out, somebody on the bank called it Bess. And Gilligan turned around and said, how do you know it's not Bill? And he said, we are native Phoenicians, and we know it's Bess. And sure enough, the biologist proved that it was a female. Other people, they tried to catch Bess over the couple of years.

Bob: They said she was hooked twice. They could tell by her right jaw.

Joy: And then Gilligan also estimated that by dad catching Bess, it saved the stocking fees, and the loss of smaller trout, something like \$30,000 a year. Bess was eating all the smaller fish.

Beth: So it was a benefit to the taxpayer...

Joy: It's in the article.

Beth: Well, for people who want to follow up on the story, it's about 3 pages in this book by Ed Van Put, Trout Fishing in the Catskills. And he tells the whole story, including the part about the benefit to the taxpayer.

Joy: And that was done for free, by the way. Bob had shared this for the last 62 years at no cost, except for that special rod he got. And I have to say, we lost our cabin. We don't have the Decker cabin anymore. When the hurricane hit, it lifted the cabin. It breaks our heart...

Bob: Irene took it away...

Joy: The only thing we have left is this story. We don't even have the land anymore. The water took everything, everything. There was no insurance, anything.

Beth: Well, I really appreciate your family and your connection to Phoenicia, to fishing, and the generosity of donating this to the library.

Joy: Thank you for accepting us so warmly, because it means a lot to the third generation here, as well...

[applause]

Beth: For those of you who don't know, this is the second time the Deckers have donated this to us. We did this in 1998, 19 years ago, but the material that they donated was lost in the fire. And so they've returned with new materials, and to tell the story again, and this time we've recorded it, and it will be posted on our website with photos

When we adjourn, we'll go down the hall to the Angler's Parlor and find a place to hang this photo of Larry Decker and Old Bess.

This presentation is supported through a grant from the Catskill Watershed Corporation, with support from New York City DEP, and that allows us to pay for the services of our professionals here who are recording and photographing today.