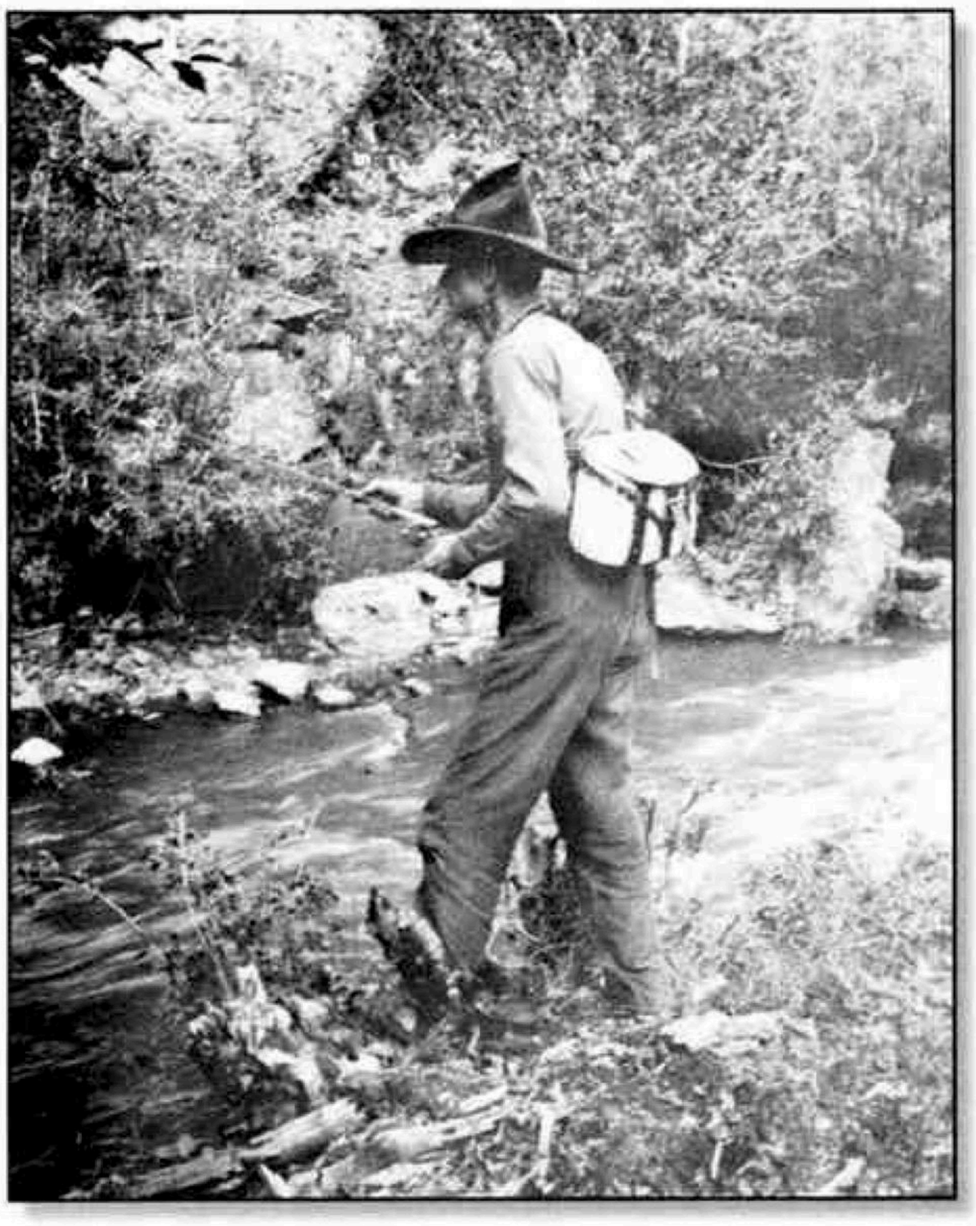
Angling in the Pecos River Headwaters: The Development of Fly Fishing in Northern New Mexico

by Merideth A. Hmura and G. William Fowler



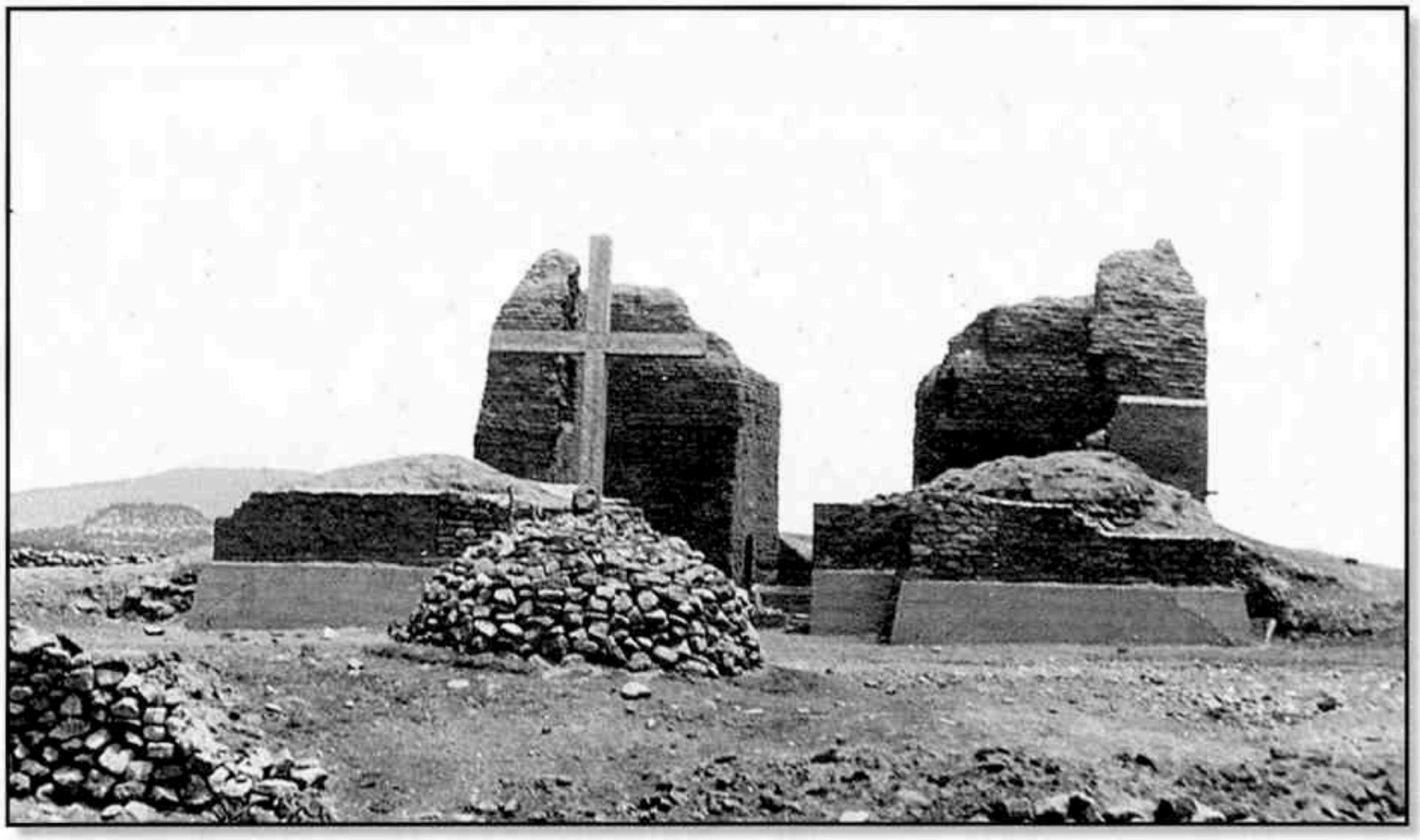
George "Skipper" Viles fly fishing in the Pecos River near Cowles, New Mexico. The beaver cowboy hat, point up, was his signature.

THE DEVELOPMENT of fly fishing in the Pecos wilderness area of northern New Mexico is representative of the history of angling in the western United States. The Pecos River headwaters were fished for centuries by Native American Indians.[1] With the advent of European exploration in 1540 and subsequent colonization, the first Anglos had the opportunity to fish the area. Additional fishermen appeared in the 1800s because of American military expansion and colonists settling in the west. When the Santa Fe Railroad was completed in the 1880s, Easterners came to experience the mountain lifestyle of the dude ranch. They brought with them the fly-fishing heritage of Europe that was evolving in America.

EARLY HISTORY

The Pecos River begins in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of northern New Mexico in the Pecos wilderness. It is a high-gradient river with several snowfed streams and creeks. Tributaries in the high country include Panchuela Creek, Jack's Creek, Winsor Creek, and the Mora River. As it flows south out of the high mountains, it passes through deep, narrow box canyons, open meadows covered in wildflowers, and down the only waterfall on the river. Magnificent views of mountain peaks can be seen from every turn in the river. It travels almost fifteen miles through the wilderness before it is first touched by civilization: a forest road to Jack's Creek Campground. The Santa Fe Trail passes just to the east of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The mountains were thought to be impassable—therefore, the Santa Fe Trail went around them. More than 175 years later, there are still no roads across the high country, and the

Photographs from the Mattie Viles collection



Pecos Indian Pueblo, about 1915.

Fishing at the base of Pecos Falls, about 1920.

mountain summits are preserved as they were. When the Pecos River leaves the wilderness near Cowles, New Mexico, there are cabins and campgrounds along its banks. Once the river passes the Pecos National Historic Park, home of the Pecos Pueblo ruins, it continues for another 750 miles before it reaches the Rio Grande River in Texas.

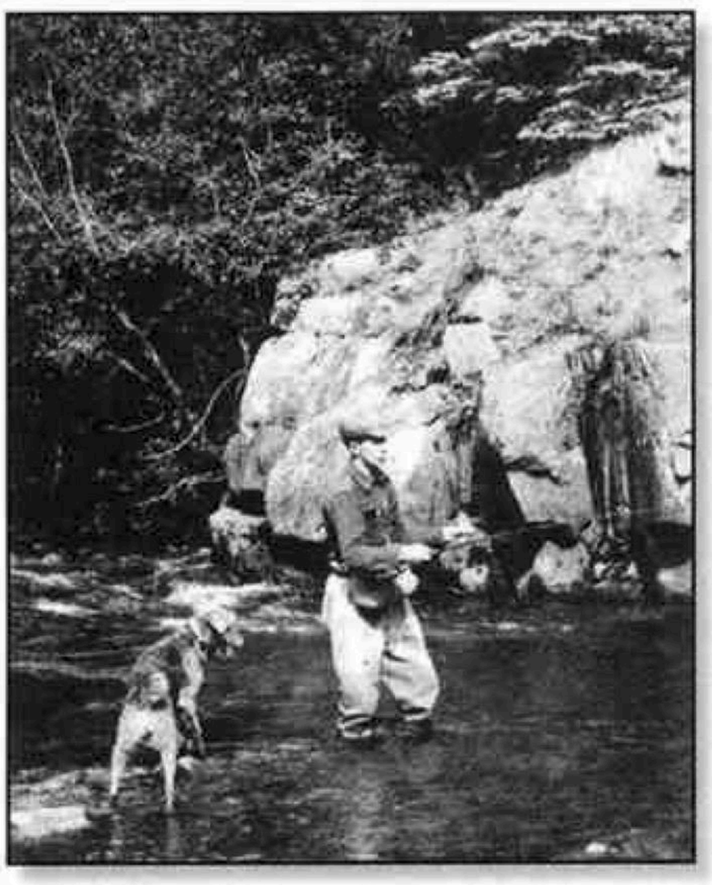
The Pecos River valley was inhabited for hundreds of years by Native Americans, but it wasn't until the anthropological timeframe of the Rio Grande classic period (1325–1600) that large populations began living in pueblos. Primarily farmers and hunters, the pueblo inhabitants apparently left no physical evidence of fishing activities.[2] European contact was made in 1540 by Spanish explorer Francisco Vasquez de Coronado. Pedro de Castaneda, traveling with Coronado, reported "there were very good trout in the upper Pecos."[3] The Rio Grande cutthroat (*Oncorhynchus clarki virginalis*) is native to the Pecos River.[4] With the conquest of Mexico, the king of Spain granted large tracts of land to Spaniards who traveled to this new world. The Spanish began to populate the lands, choosing sites for their communities near the rivers. While the United States Constitution was being drafted in 1776 in Philadelphia, a Franciscan monk was making a detailed report to the Spanish government on the spiritual and economic status of New Mexico missions. Fray Francisco Dominquez reported on the Pecos River: "Along the small plain between the Sierra and the Pueblo a very good river of good water and many delicious trout runs from North to South."[5]

During this time, the southwest was under Spanish rule. In 1848, with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico ceded New Mexico to the United States. Military forts, wagon trains, and the Civil War brought American settlers into the wilds of the southwest. In 1880, the Santa Fe Railroad crossed New Mexico, further opening the state for settlement. Early visitors to the Sangre de Cristo Mountains were prospectors hoping to find gold, silver, and copper. The high, dry mountain climate was also believed to be beneficial for those who had tuberculosis. By 1890, there were tent cities erected for "lungers" who wanted to improve their health. Many of these people regained their health and stayed to make the mountains their home. Homestead acts opened vast areas of New Mexico to people willing to pioneer remote lands. Homes were built and improvements made on 160-acre tracts, and Anglo families began to populate the upper Pecos valley.

Among the early settlers in the upper Pecos were the families of Henry M. Winsor and Charles A. Viles. Joined by marriage, these families lived in the upper Pecos for more than fifty years. Winsor had nine children, five of whom lived near the small community of Cowles. He worked for the Sante Fe Railroad as it headed west from Kansas to New Mexico. Winsor and two of his sons, Martin and Isaac, were early prospectors and homesteaders. His daughter Carrie married Viles, who settled at Cowles because he had tuberculosis.[6]

Cowles is located on the Pecos River

Main Lodge at Mountain View Ranch, about 1925.



An unknown Mountain View Ranch guest and his dog.

Mountain View Ranch

about twenty miles north of the town of Pecos. Cowles had one general store and post office; no main street, governing body, or hospital; but there were three resorts: Mountain View Ranch, Los Pinos Guest Ranch, and the Winsor Cabins. In the early 1900s, each catered to wealthy eastern guests who came to hunt and fish. Long before air conditioning, city residents fled the heat of summer for mountain lodges. One contribution the west has made to America's fly-fishing heritage is the dude ranch. It was the cowboy version of the eastern fishing camp.

Largest and oldest of the ranches in the Upper Pecos was Mountain View Ranch. Charles A. Viles filed a homestead application in 1887 for 160 acres at the junction of the Pecos River and Winsor Creek. He built the main house out of local pine logs, and it had a large stone fireplace. Viles had left his wife and children in Kansas while he built their home. He traveled back to Kansas to move his family to New Mexico, but did not return to Cowles until 1895, so he did not fulfill the homestead requirements. Unfortunately, Viles died of tuberculosis in 1896.

Charles A. Viles's brother-in-law, Henry D. Winsor, took over the homestead and began a boardinghouse that he called Winsor Ranch. In 1915, the president of the Rock Island Railroad, Henry U. Mudge, bought the boardinghouse. It was renamed Mountain View Ranch. Mudge hired Viles's son, George "Skipper" Viles, to manage the ranch and to guide guests—called *dudes*—on hunting and fishing trips.

In 1930, Skipper Viles purchased Mountain View Ranch from the Mudge family. Through the years, as the ranch became more popular, new cabins were built, and the main lodge was remodeled. The road up the canyon from the town of Pecos was almost nonexistent until the Works Progress Administration improved it in 1934. Cars traveled the rutted dirt path at their own risk. Modern inventions like electricity, indoor plumbing, and telephones were slow to arrive in the high New Mexico mountains. Kerosene lamps, wood-burning stoves, and outhouses were accepted as a part of dude ranch life. Skipper Viles sold Mountain View Ranch in 1945, and it was purchased in 1976 by the National Forest Service. It is the policy of the agency to return land to its original status. In this case, all of the ranch buildings were torn down, and the site is now an open meadow. New building sites along the river's edge are not permitted, and camping is limited to specified areas.

The meals at Mountain View Ranch were provided from local gardens and game harvested nearby through hunting and fishing. Dandelion leaves made excellent salads, fish caught during the

Skipper Viles displaying a string of trout caught in 1915.

Skipper Viles fishing from his horse in the Pecos River. Being a colorful character was part of his job as the proprietor of the dude ranch. He did have certain obligations to his guests and a reputation to uphold!

day was pan fried, and dessert might have been wild berries in season. If the fish weren't biting, there were steaks from cattle or wild game. On Sunday, Skipper's wife, Matie, fried ranch-raised chicken. Staples such as flour, sugar, and lard were brought in by buckboard from town. Occasionally a peddler and his donkeys would pass through piled high with boxes of fruits and vegetables, pots and pans, and other household goods.

The dudes who came to Mountain View Ranch for the summer loved to spend part of their vacation camping under the open skies. Horseback and fishing trips lasting from several days to several weeks were a popular activity. The territorial game warden in 1910 was Thomas P. Gable. He said:

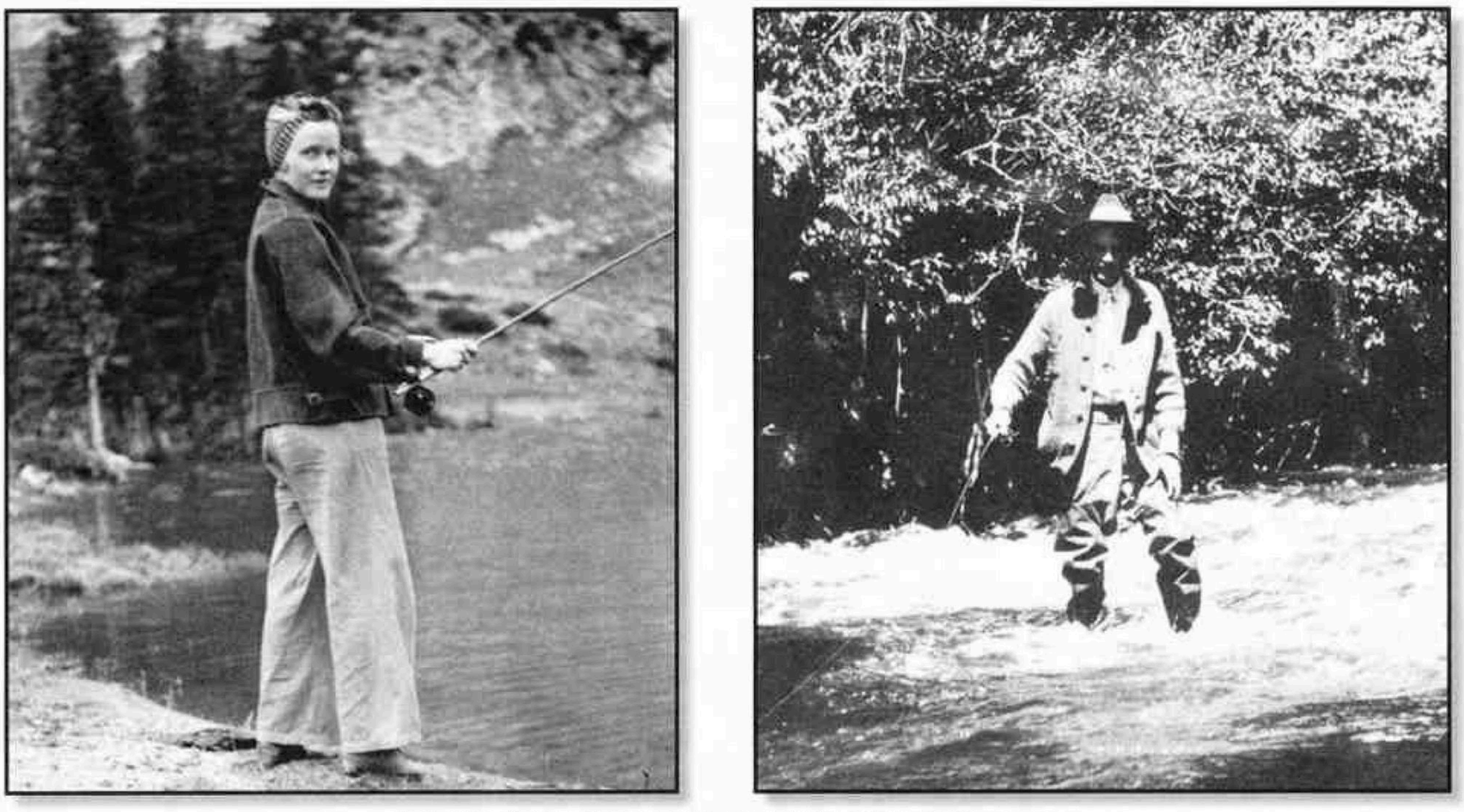
> There is something awry in the construction of a man to whom there does not sometimes come a longing for the camp fire by the rippling brook, within the shaded wood, with a frying pan over the glowing coals, from which steals out of the soft summer air, that alluring odor of speckled trout, fresh from the stream, growing both crisp and tender as they sputter in the bacon grease until they reach just the perfect turn.[7]

Little documentation has come to light about early fly fishing in the Pecos wilderness. After 1900, fishing stories began to circulate. One of the better fly fishermen of the Pecos Valley was Skipper Viles. Apart from his other interests, Skipper was an avid fly fisherman in his early days, and his exploits were well known by his guests and friends. In fact, part of the romance and mystique of staying at Mountain View Ranch was the opportunity to interact with him in this role. Raised in the mountains surrounding Mountain View Ranch, Skipper Viles was very familiar with each stream and lake in the area. His expertise is illustrated in the following story told by Milton C. Nahm.

An unknown Mountain View Ranch guest displays his trophy trout.

> One day I had been sitting on the porch of Skipper Viles's ranch at Cowles. Viles was the owner of a magic wand which stood at my side, a Hardy Special (fishing rod), length nine and a half feet and weight about five and three-quarter ounces. Viles's ranch was at the top of the road up the Pecos Canyon and provided plain cabins and fine country-style food to guests such as those coming in off the river. But these guests gave every evidence of frustration. All had had a long and weary day

A picnic lunch of trout in the 1930s.



Whether fishing in a stream or a lake, the popular sport of fly fishing lives on in New Mexico.

of fruitless fishing. Viles listened to their complaints without saying a word. He picked up the rod which at the end of the oiled silk line had a six-foot leader and tied to that a No. 8 Royal Coachman fly. He walked seventy feet from the porch to a ledge overlooking a deep pond. It had been fished all day by every stray searcher for trout. The children at the lodge had paddled in it. The saddle horses and cows had gone to drink in it. Viles leaned over the ledge, made one cast, and landed a fourteen-inch trout.

I remarked that evening to Viles that fishing in the Pecos was good if you know how to do it. Viles denied this. In the old days, he said, there was real fishing but it was all gone now, what with the Texans and Oklahomans so crowded on the stream that they caught each other's ears on the backcast. Course, he made his living out of them, but he'd rather have the old days back, even if he had to make a dollar the hard way. He minded the day when he and a fellow by the name of Llewellyn had supplied Elk's parties in Vegas with barrels of trout. The pair used, in fact, to stage trout races—see how many each would catch in half an hour or within a quarter of mile of stream, which, either way, meant a lot of scrambling around. Llewellyn always won, Viles said. "Fewest I ever caught," said Viles, "was 110 but Llewellyn caught 126 that day. No fishing like that now. Too many Texans and Oklahomans." I suggested that with a couple of fishermen like Viles and Llewellyn there was no need to blame it on the outlanders. Viles denied this.[8]

Skipper Viles kept a personal diary for almost forty years.[9] In addition to relevant information about his ranching operations, the weather, and wildlife sightings, he reported some of the trout fishing activities of the region.

July 6, 1913: Went to Mora Creek with Ranger Tom Stewart.[10] T. S. and I caught 150 trout.

June 7, 1914: Went fishing with Tom Stewart on Mora. No good. 14 between us.

August 9, 1915: Went to Mora with Terrell and Levin. Got 100 trout.

June 14, 1917: Went to Spirit Lake with Glazer. Caught 7 rainbow trout with naked hooks.

July 15, 1918: Caught 9¼ pound below house in p.m. Light shower.

June 18, 1923: Trout rising to fly good.

October 1, 1926: Tony got 10 trout with coach before noon.

May 15, 1944: 7½ pound trout taken at hatchery.

Skipper Viles was a man of very few words, as reflected in his diary entries. The descriptions in his diary will not compare with those of the many eloquent fly-fishing writers or even Nahm's recollection of an afternoon spent with him. How can the story of catching a 9¼-pound trout on 15 July 1918 be left to a mere description of size and location?

Conservationist H. D. Walter was with a group of men surveying the upper Pecos watershed about 1945. While fishing in a small lake named for Ranger John W. Johnson—Johnson Lake—Mr. Walter reported, "We fished with wooly worms for less than an hour and the count showed we had taken seventy-one fish averaging over eight and a half inches long."[11] This, in a lake that wasn't discovered until 1943 and was stocked once with 5,000 fingerlings by Ranger Johnson.

Management of Sport Fishing

As more people began to populate the remote mountain valley, gaming laws and wildlife management became necessary. Copies of game laws were distributed in English and Spanish. The Forest Service had been active, with rangers stationed at Panchuela Ranger Station by 1903. In 1910, Warden Gable recommended making a detailed study of game and fish conditions and setting aside a game reserve in the Pecos forest. Before New Mexico statehood, the territorial governor appointed game wardens to enforce game and fish regulations from 1897 until 1912. These wardens were similar to sheriffs, but enforcement was not a top priority. New Mexico's Department of Game and Fish was created in 1912.

By the turn of the century, travel writers had extolled the virtues of the Pecos wilderness, and fishermen were coming in increasing numbers.[12] This pressure

Fly fishing was, and still is, a popular pastime on the many rivers, streams, and lakes of the upper Pecos. There are many deep pools where the fisherman can cast his line and reel in a native trout.

almost depleted the native fish population in the river. Stocking became an accepted practice to satisfy the demand. Fish for stocking were shipped by rail to Rowe, a town about thirty miles from Cowles. The fish fry were then transported to the streams and lakes on horseback in clean milk cans or barrels. Rangers and ranchers alike volunteered to plant fish in local streams and lakes. Forest Ranger Johnson reported packing 50,000 fry per trip into the wilderness in 1922.[13] The New Mexico Game Protective Association helped distribute 1.1 million fish in the state at a cost of $80 in 1918.[14] In 1922, the first state fish hatchery at Lisboa Springs was built between the town of Pecos and Cowles. The hatchery was initially funded with $30,000 from a state gasoline tax. The first year it planted two million fish eggs.[15] Volunteers could not keep up with the increased number of anglers who continued to deplete the fish population in the rivers and lakes in the upper Pecos.

By today's catch-and-release standards, early twentieth-century fishing exploits might seem abusive. Keep in mind, however, that at the time, fish caught in mountain streams and lakes was a primary food source for residents of the area and tourists alike. For many mountain residents, fishing during specified seasons was a hardship because they depended on daily catches for their meal.

Trout fishing in the upper Pecos is still a popular pastime. The anglers of today can enjoy the area knowing that the upper Pecos has a long proud history with colorful characters such as Skipper Viles. A long hike to a remote lake or a small cold stream in the wilderness, though, can bring back memories of fishing in days gone by. The days of catching large numbers of fish may be over, but the pristine beauty of the Pecos River remains. One can still sit on the river's edge and envision Skipper Viles and his friends casting their lines into a deep pool and pulling out that elusive 9-pounder!

ENDNOTES

1. Pecos is possibly a Towa Indian word, predating the Spanish word *pecos* that means "place where there is water."

2. "No fish bones came to light here or elsewhere at Pecos, although trout were abundant in the nearby river and as far as I know there is no taboo against eating fish at any Pueblo." From Alford Vincent Kidder, *Pecos, New Mexico: Archaeological Notes*, vol. 5 (Andover, Mass.: Phillips Academy, 1958), p. 123. The Native American's contribution to our American fishing heritage is more important than physical archeological remains. Their attitudes toward fish as prey and the environment have contributed greatly to our present activities. See Mark Browning, "Upstream: The American Fork," in *Haunted by Waters: Fly Fishing in North American Literature* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1998), pp. 41–57.

3. The narrative of the expedition of Coronado is found in Pedro de Castaneda, *Spanish Explorers in the Southern United States, 1526–1543* (F. W. Hodge, ed., New York: 1907). Erhard Rostland reports Castaneda's statement is presumably "the earliest reference to western trout by a European." From Erhard Rostland, *Freshwater Fish and Fishing in Native North America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), p. 357.

4. James E. Sublette, Michael D. Hatch, and Mary Sublette, *The Fishes of New Mexico* (Albuquerque, N. Mex.: University of New Mexico Press, 1990).

5. Francesco Antanaso Dominquez, *The Missions of New Mexico, 1776*, translated and annotated by Eleanor B. Adams and Fray Angeleco Chavez (Albuquerque, N. Mex.: University of New Mexico Press, 1952), p. 213.

6. Merideth A. Hmura, *Mountain View Ranch: 1915–1945* (Lockport, Ill.: Leaning Pine Publishing Co., 1996), p. 5.

7. Jeff Pederson, *A Look at 75 Years of Game & Fish History* (Santa Fe, N. Mex.: New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, 1987), p. 25.

8. Milton C. Nahm, *Las Vegas and Uncle Joe: The New Mexico I Remember* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), pp. 273–74.

9. George A. "Skipper" Viles, personal diaries, 1912–1950, in the possession of Merideth A. Hmura.

10. Tom Stewart was the forest supervisor and an avid and excellent fly fisherman. From Elliott S. Barker, *Eighty Years with Rod and Rifle* (Santa Fe, N. Mex.: Sunstone Press, 1976).

11. John W. Johnson, *Reminiscences of a Forest Ranger: 1914–1944* (Dayton, Ohio: Brown & Kroger Publishing, 1976), p. 122.

12. John Carnifex, "Fishing Along the Pecos," *New Mexico Outing Magazine*, July 1891, reprinted in *Fishing North America 1876–1910*, compiled by Frank Oppel, Castle Publishing, 1986.

13. John W. Johnson, personal diaries, 1914–1943, in possession of Merideth A. Hmura.

14. Pederson, *A Look at 75 Years*, p. 26.

15. *Ibid.*