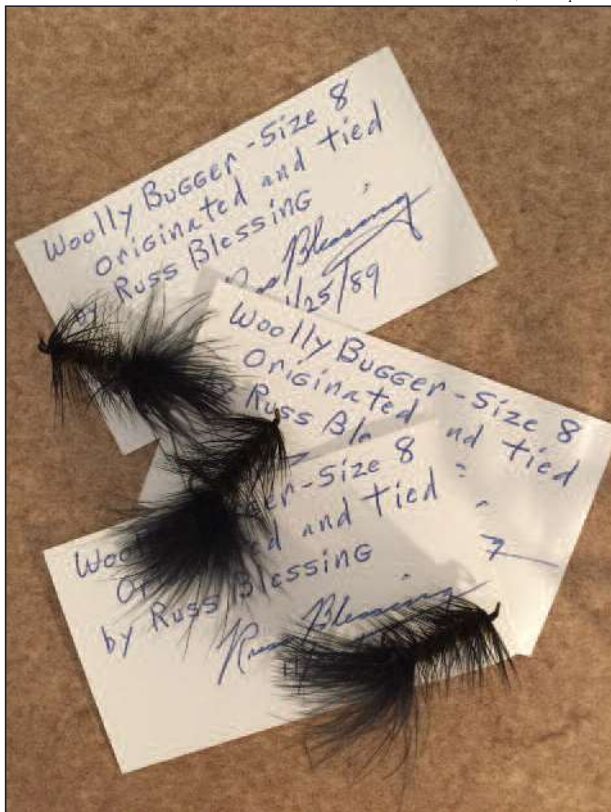


The Woolly Bugger Story

by John Capowski

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Russell Blessing—tied Woolly Buggers with signature cards. From the author's collection.



One of three photographs Blessing included when fulfilling a request for Woolly Buggers. The back of this one was inscribed "Bernie, Thanks for the interest in the Woolly Bugger. Best wishes, Russ Blessing 12/11/89." From the author's collection.

IF YOU FISH STREAMERS, you've likely fished a Woolly Bugger or one of its variations and have some in a fly box. Created in 1967,¹ the Bugger was initially invented as a smallmouth fly,² and the inventor's son views the archetypal Bugger as having a green chenille body.³ Woolly Buggers are now tied in a wide range of colors and styles⁴ and used for species from brown trout to bonefish and permit.⁵

The Woolly Bugger is a popular and almost ubiquitous fly for several reasons. First, it is extraordinarily effective. Some suggest that it's simply "a Woolly Worm with a tail,"⁶ but that long tail adds movement to the fly, and that movement adds effectiveness; the Woolly Worm seems a pattern of the past.⁷ The Woolly Bugger is also effective because it's both an attractor pattern (taken by many species because it looks like some undetermined

food or provokes an attacking response) and an imitative pattern. To many fly fishers, it imitates a leech or hellgrammite.⁸ The fish still aren't talking, but when they take the fly in environments where leeches and hellgrammites exist, they make their preferences known.⁹

In addition to its effectiveness, the Woolly Bugger's descriptive and somewhat amusing name likely adds to its popularity. More on that later.

The fly is known by virtually all fly fishers, but—based on my own informal survey—few know its origins and, unlike many of his contemporaries, that may be how its inventor, Russ Blessing, wanted it.

Russell Blessing was a true South Central Pennsylvanian. He was born in Harrisburg and died there approximately seventy-four years later. He graduated from John Harris High School and worked

for the former AMP, Inc., an electronics company then based in Harrisburg. He retired as an administrative manager.¹⁰

Some stories about Russ, as friends and family called him, tell a great deal about the man and his character. I had the pleasure of meeting him on Manada Creek, a favorite of Russ's near Harrisburg.

An example of Russ's character is a letter he wrote following a request for Woolly Buggers with signature cards. In his response, Russ included six Woolly Buggers in size 8, one each in sizes 16 through 4, signature cards for the size-6 flies, and three photographs of himself at his tying desk.¹¹ Rather than asking for payment, Russ wrote, "If you care to send a donation, please send it to Contact Harrisburg."¹² Russ provided the address of the group, explained that it was a referral and emotional support helpline, and,

to give the request context, wrote he was a volunteer there.

To the degree that fly fishers know of Russ, it is for inventing one fly. They may think of him as a streamer fisher, but Russ was an innovator in many ways and loved fishing dries. On a humid summer day—the kind that brings out mosquitoes and gnats—a friend of Russ’s, Bob Pennell, saw Russ on that stream he fished so often, Manada Creek. From where he stood, Bob noticed something strange about Russ’s hat, which was usually an olive floppy-brimmed New Zealand type. As Bob approached Russ, who must have noticed Bob’s quizzical look, Russ simply said, “Fly paper.”¹³

Manada Creek was Russ’s home water, but in April and May he would travel to North Central Pennsylvania to fish Pine Creek and its tributaries, Cedar Run and Slate Run. He stayed at the cabin owned by a fishing friend, Warren “Dutch” Fetter. On one of those trips, Russ and

Dutch were fishing for brook trout on a small feeder stream when another fly fisher approached them. The fisherman, whom Dutch described to me as a “blow-hard,” bragged about the wonderful flies he had designed. By then the Woolly Bugger was well known, but Russ never mentioned the fly. Dutch told me that Russ was laid back; he had no need to compete.¹⁴

In an interview for *Fly Life*, Russ’s son Fred summed up his father’s character. “First, that he was a dedicated family man, a man of strong faith, someone who was generous, honest . . . I could go on and on. . . . Second, that he was a pretty good fisherman.”¹⁵

In addition to being a pretty good fisherman, Russ was a fly designer, and in 1967 he created the Woolly Bugger at his tying desk at home in Harrisburg. Russ had modified a smallmouth bass fly he had designed to imitate the dobsonfly, prevalent in the Susquehanna River, by

adding the marabou tail.¹⁶ Russ’s daughter Julie was seven years old when he created the fly, and when she saw it said, “It looks like a Woolly Bugger.” The fly was then both created and named.¹⁷

Because of his humility, were it up to Russ, the fly likely would never have achieved its current status. In August 1967 Russ was fishing the Little Lehigh and catching while others were not. Barry Beck was fishing nearby, became curious about the fly Russ was using, approached him, and asked. Russ gave Barry a Bugger, and Barry started catching fish too.¹⁸ Barry and Russ later became friends, and Barry wrote an article on the Bugger in *Scientific Anglers Fly Fishing Quarterly*.¹⁹ The fly was slow to catch on in the East, but when Beck introduced the fly to Doug Swisher, he popularized the fly in the West.²⁰ A later article by Beck in *Fly Fisherman* was the springboard for the fly becoming especially well known.²¹

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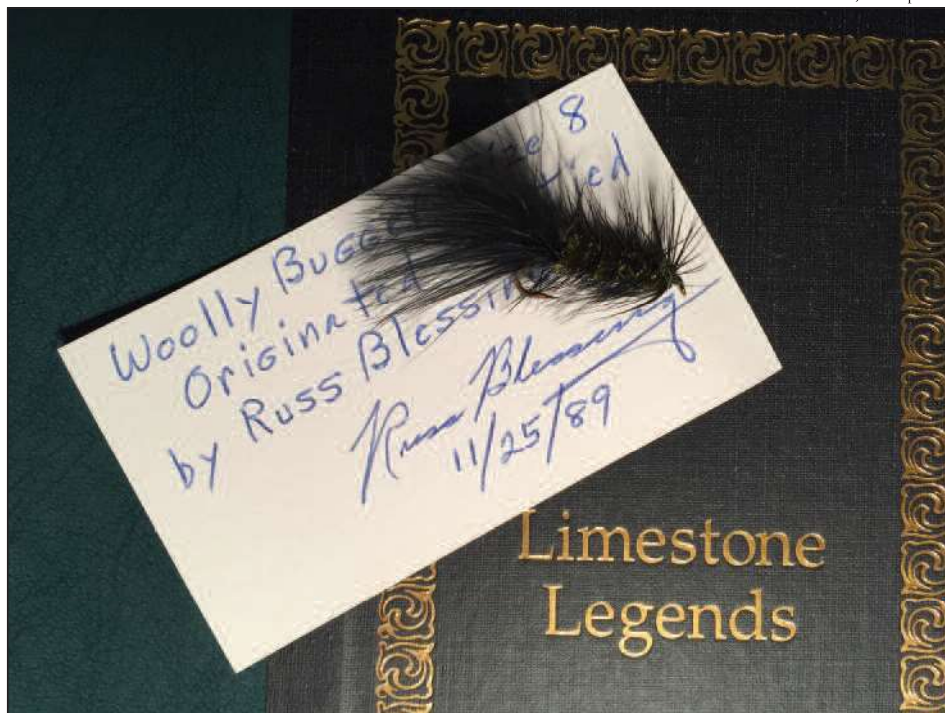


Manada Creek, Russ Blessing’s home waters and where the author first met him.

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Russell Blessing—tied Woolly Buggers with Barry Beck article from *Fly Fisherman* magazine (May 1984, vol. 13, no. 3). From the author’s collection.



Russell Blessing–tied Woolly Bugger with signature card. From the author’s collection.

Russell Blessing “never wanted recognition for inventing the Woolly Bugger—he was just happy he created something that could give a fly fisherman an opportunity to catch some fish.”²² The Woolly Bugger has a place in fly fishing’s history. Its inventor deserves that too.



ENDNOTES

1. Ted Leeson, “The Modern Era: Milestones,” *Fly Fisherman* (October–December 2018, vol. 50, no. 1), 71.
2. Kirk Werner, “Where Did the Best Fly Ever Invented Come From? Russell Blessing Remembered,” *Fly Life* (2 March 2017), <https://flylifemagazine.com/of-interest-where-did-the-best-fly-ever-invented-come-from/>. Accessed 3 March 2020. [Ed. note: The last word in the URL appears to be a typographical error, but it is accurate to the source and connects to the correct web page.]
3. Werner, “Where Did the Best Fly Ever Invented Come From?” and an undated letter in the author’s collection from Russell Blessing to an individual named Bernie referencing the dark-olive-bodied Woolly Buggers that accompanied the letter. Photographs that Blessing included with the letter are dated 11 December 1989.
4. See, for example, page 79 in *The Fly Shop’s 2018 Catalog & Travel Digest*. Examples in the catalog include a Bead Head Crystal Bugger in silver, an Egg Sucking Crystal Bugger in purple, a Chilean Rubber Bugger with legs, and a Bead Head Bugger.
5. Chris Stewart, “Woolly Bugger Tenkara: In Defense of the Woolly Bugger,” <https://www.tenkarabum.com/woolly-bugger-tenkara.html>. Accessed 3 March 2020. I have my own Woolly Bugger variation, the Muddled Bugger. It has both a black deerhair muddler-style head and black marabou wing. In large sizes, the fly has taken some large San Juan River rainbows for me.
6. Fall 2019 telephone conversation with longtime fly-fishing and upland game author Richard L. Henry of Lebanon, Pennsylvania.
7. Reading through the recent catalogs of major fly-fishing companies (e.g., Orvis, Feather-Craft, and the Fly Shop), I didn’t find a single Woolly Worm listed among the offerings.
8. Paul Weamer, *The Bug Book: A Fly Fisher’s Guide to Trout Stream Insects* (Boiling Springs, Pa.: Headwaters Book, 2017), 96–97.
9. Datus Proper, *What the Trout Said About the Design of Trout Flies and Other Mysteries* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1982). Proper suggests that by their behavior, trout are letting us know which flies are the most effective imitations.
10. Russell Blessing was born 14 October 1935 and died 28 October 2009. The cliché “he was dedicated to his family and community” wasn’t cliché when applied to Russ. He was married for nearly fifty-four years and had one daughter, Julie, and two sons, Andrew and Fred. He was a Sunday school teacher and coached both midget basketball and baseball. In addition to his focus on family and community, Russ (like another fly creator, Chauncy Lively; see John Capowski, “Chauncy Lively: 1919–2000,” *Pennsylvania Fly Fishing Museum Association* newsletter [Summer 2000, vol. 3, issue 1]) played trombone, and he was active in two Harrisburg area bands. Obituary for Russell Blessing, Trefz & Bowser Funeral Home, <https://www.trefzandbowser.com/memorials/russell-blessing/353466/obituary.php>. Accessed 3 March 2020.
11. Letter, flies, and photographs in the author’s collection.
12. Undated letter in the author’s collection from Russ Blessing to an individual named Bernie. Photographs that Blessing included with the letter are dated 11 December 1989. Contact Harrisburg, now Contact Helpline, is a twenty-four-hour service that provides telephone counseling.
13. Quoted in Bob Pennell, “Recollections of Russ Blessing,” *Hatches* (Winter 2020), 2. *Hatches* is the newsletter of the Doc Fritchey Chapter of Trout Unlimited.
14. Telephone conversation with L. Warren “Dutch” Fetter, 23 January 2020.
15. Werner, “Where Did the Best Fly Ever Invented Come From?”
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. Barry Beck, *Scientific Anglers Fly Fishing Quarterly*. I spoke with Cathy and Barry Beck in early 2020 about the article; neither have been able to find a copy, nor has Scientific Anglers.
20. Barry Beck, “The Woolly Bugger,” *Fly Fisherman* (May 1984, vol. 13, no. 3), 44–48.
21. Werner, “Where Did the Best Fly Ever Invented Come From?” In this article, Werner quotes from his interview with Russell Blessing’s son, Fred, who said, “Barry [Beck] did an article on the fly in 1984. It became well known after that.”
22. Werner, “Where Did the Best Fly Ever Invented Come From?”