

*Alfred Jones*  
Fred's

## Steelhead and Salmon Migrations in the Salinas River

The Salinas River had an annual migration of steelhead trout and chinook salmon. These anadromous fish fought their way up the river to streams where they had been born several years earlier in order to lay their eggs and continue their populations. I grew up listening to tales of spearing and shooting fish in the river and its tributaries. Nacimiento Dam was built in 1956 and within several years, these migrations died out and today in 1995 very few fish return to spawn in their ancestral pools. I began a dream this spring to interview old timers in the area and learn about these magnificent fish that once were in the river by the hundreds. I trust the reader will gain an insight into the fish that once thrashed their way up the Salinas River. I was born in 1937 and have a few recollections of Dad spearing steelhead in the river at San Miguel.

Did the Salinas River have a migration of salmon? In the summer of 1957, Dad and I harvested some oats for Al Johnson

in Atascadero who farmed on the east side of the Salinas at the junction of River Road and Highway 41, one mile north of the Salinas River bridge. Al was about 80 years old having been born on the place in the 1880's. He related to us stories of his father telling him of spearing salmon up to 35 pounds in the river with a pitchfork in the 1870's and 1880's when he homesteaded the land.

Al remembered a few salmon he speared when he was old enough to handle a pitchfork in the water, but by the turn of the century the salmon runs were pretty much over that far up the Salinas. My grandfather, Abe Claassen, arrived on the Godfrey Ranch along the Nacimiento River in Adelaida in 1896 with his parents from West Prussia when he was 24 years old. He married my grandmother in 1902 and their house on the Winchester Place was just above the "Big Hole" on the Nacimiento River where the dam now stands. I remember him telling of stories of dropping dynamite into the Big Hole and stunning fish, but he didn't talk of getting fish that large. They must have been steelhead.

In my interviews I have learned that a few salmon did come up the Nacimiento

River and in the very wet winter of 1941 a measured 42 and 48 inch salmon were shot out of Las Tablas Creek as well as several salmon "longer than a 32 inch gunny sack" were taken in 1941 in San Francisco Canyon on the head waters of Jack Creek in the Willow Creek area. A large salmon was seen in Santa Rita Creek about 1941 or 1942. I believe these were chinook salmon. I did not interview anyone that knew of salmon in Jack Creek or the Nacimiento since the early 1940's.

Probably all the rivers in the central California coastal area had salmon at one time. Robert Mains was my principal at Georgia Brown School in 1968 for one year. He was born about 1905 and grew up along the Santa Ynez River near its mouth at Lompoc where his Dad farmed. He told me that when he was a boy he remembered spearing salmon up to 70 pounds. That was in addition to steelhead that migrated up the Santa Ynez. The salmon run seems to have ended about 1915 or so.

Todd Tognazzini, a game warden in this area raised in Cayucos, told me this May that when he was in college there was a salmon enhancement project in

the Ventura River and that in the early days salmon had run up that river. This summer there was a heavy run of salmon off the coast in Oxnard and Ventura and that some salmon had been seen in the Ventura River. It had been 104 years since they had come up that river.

But steelhead trout is a different matter. Hundreds of them came up the Salinas River and its tributaries. Many families have their stories of steelhead.

As a little boy I grew up hearing about the gigging of steelhead on the Salinas River and Jack Creek on my Grandfather's pasture portion where Jack Creek flowed through it. It was always an exciting time when it rained enough to take the Salinas River water out to the ocean through the sand bar that formed across its mouth. This was usually in November or December, depending on the rainfall. Steelhead would come surging their powerful way up the rolling waters.

Most of the fish passed up when the waters were higher. But when the water dropped and cleared some, Dad and Uncle Wes would stealthily sneak up and peer into holes under river bank willows and cottonwood trunks. I have a vivid

recollection being with my father looking for fish at San Miguel when I was probably six or seven years old. Dad and Uncle Wes had bought the Range Place of 60 acres just east of the San Miguel Mission over the railroad tracks. Over a half mile of river flowed along the place.

Dad spied a steelhead in a hole under a willow and speared it with his 5-pronged spear or gig. He pinned the fish against the bottom so it wouldn't wiggle off the spear. I'd been watching and waiting from the top of the river bank. He motioned me to come quickly and I grabbed the pole, pushing with all my might to keep the fish pinned against the sandy bottom. Dad quickly peeled off his clothes and slipping his hands down the wooden shaft until he felt the fish in the three foot deep water, clasped the fish by its gills, and lifted it out of the water. I don't remember how big it was, but I can still feel the jerking of the struggling fish on the end of the spear.

Talking to Uncle Wes, January 14, 1995, he said the average fish was probably 6-8 pounds, 24 -30 inches long. I know that Dad weighed the biggest steelhead he ever got and it weighed 12 pounds and was 32 inches long. He got it

in the river at San Miguel.

In the spring, Dad and his brother, Wes, didn't need much of a reason to head out to Jack Creek to look for a fish. Uncle Wes said they usually would just get one apiece, as the wardens, Milt Botts and Oren Philbrick, were on the prowl and you wouldn't want more than one if you were caught! They were never caught, but they played it safe. Then, too, often you wouldn't see any fish and you were skunked.

One night, Dad and Uncle Ernie were coming back from fishing up on Louis Bergman's with Louis. Spying light in the willows near the bridge below Grandpa's place, they snuck up to see who it was. Unsuspectedly near, one of them called, "Game Warden, who's there?"

The person was so scared and surprised, he fell into the creek and fled up the bank and away. My, they sure got a laugh out of it. It turned out to be a neighbor, Bill Dyck!



January 22, 1995 Edgar Wiebe

I was at a potluck dinner at the Mennonite Church in Paso Robles last night. I talked with Edgar for about an hour about steelhead. Ernest Claassen listened, too, and told some of his experiences. When I initially leaned over the table and quietly asked Edgar if he ever speared any steelhead, it immediately brought a reminiscent beam in his eyes and his face broke into a grin as many memories flashed by from those years. That is a common response to whoever I asked that question!

"Edgar," I asked, leaning closer to him across the table, "Did you ever spear a steelhead in Jack Creek?"

His impassive face instantly changed as he stated flatly, "Lot's of 'em!"

"Tell me about them!" I begged.

Edgar was about the same age as my Uncle Ernie "Ernest" Claassen, graduating in the same class in 1937 from Templeton High School. He and Uncle Ernie did lots of fishing together growing up on the portion of Jack Creek flowing through Grandpa's pasture. Fishing means either spearing (gigging) or shooting steelhead. He never did catch

a steelhead with a hook and pole, although he did fish a few times in the ocean with a pole.

The best place to fish was along Jack Creek on Grandpa's part. He fished on Jack Creek from below the Hidden Valley Ranch at the junction with Santa Rita Creek, all the way up San Francisco Canyon at its head waters.

The fish came up beginning about the third week of January and lasted until the end of February, although if it was a wet year, there could be fish into March. The fish were larger at the beginning of the run and towards the end were smaller.

Both Edgar and Ernest stated the average sized fish was 6-8 pounds, 24 - 28 inches long. Edgar's biggest fish he ever got was probably around 8 pounds. Ernest's eyes danced with excitement as he related that his biggest steelhead was a 32 inch, ten and one half pounder he shot in the head with a .30/30 rifle one night when the rest of the fellows were at choir practice a mile away at the Willow Creek Mennonite Church on my Grandfather's farm. He got it on Grandpa Claassen's just above the picnic area at the bend of the creek near the county road. Edgar said that above the picnic

area to the Deep Hole at the Bergman line fence was the best area to spot a fish as it had lots of perfect riffles of ideal gravel for nesting and spawning.

Edgar Wiebe lived along Vineyard Drive with his folks about three miles from the church, still his present home. He related to me how one afternoon about 4:30, he spotted old Milt Botts and Oren Philbrick driving back to town past their place headed towards town from checking Jack Creek- the best area around the country for fishing.

"Dad," he said, "Botts and Philbrick just went by on the way to town, let's go get some fish!"

Grabbing his 22 rifle and their gigs, they drove over to the creek in their truck. Driving slowly where the creek swings near Dover Canyon Road above the picnic area, Edgar spied two fish on the six-inch deep riffle, their top fins breaking the surface as they spawned in their swirling courtship. It's probably 20 yards from the road from where he was looking out the open window.

"Stop, Dad. Stop! There's two fish on the riffle!"

Jumping out with the 22, he ran over and shot both fish. Wading in and

grabbing each fish by the gills, they were home in 45 minutes, total time!

Their gigs had 3 tines with a 4 inch spread. Everyone usually used spears hand made in the forge they had on their farm for repairing machinery and making iron tools. Handles were round wooden poles about the length and diameter of a garden hoe. Edgar's spear shaft was 5 feet long, although others made their shafts 7 or 8 feet long. Bergmans had several sections of one half inch pipe with couplings at the spear head so it could be disconnected and thrown in the brush in a hurry.

One moved stealthily up to the fish while they were on the riffle in water several inches to several feet deep. Spearing the fish, one had to pin it to the bottom as it thrashed about wildly, usually shaking loose if one tried to bring it up impaled on the tines. It was a wet thrill to fish as you had to go in and gill the pinned fish! Edgar's wife shook her head in disapproval recalling how sick Edgar once was and insisting on going fishing as it had been about 5 days since a course, he came home soaking wet and the water was perfect for fishing! reminded her, though, that he had



gotten any worse for doing it. In fact, fishing helped a sick, hen-pecked fellow get well!

Shooting was another popular fishing method, but loud and announcing to all the countryside what you were up to! Edgar used a .30/06 with military jacket bullets. It was WW II and Army bullets were easily available. Ernest used his .30/30. Grandpa and Uncle Ernie used their .303 Savage. The .22 worked, too, if the fish were on the surface.

One didn't have to actually hit the fish with the bullet. Being on the bank, you were shooting at an angle. You always shot under the fish as diffraction made the fish appear higher in the water than it really was. You undershot with the spear, too, more the deeper the fish was under the water. The shock would stun the fish up to about 3 and a half feet deep. Deeper than that, it didn't work to shoot. The fish would float to the top in dizzy circles as they drifted downstream. One would run below the hole or riffle and wait for the fish. If one shot in too deep water and the fish drifted into a deep hole, it would wiggle enough to not come up and be retrieved, drunkenly keeping deep.

Lots of fish were not taken or they

spooked and escaped up or downstream into deep holes under roots or banks to safety. Steady or intermittent rains every couple of days kept the water too high or too muddy to see them and they spawned and headed back downstream for the ocean. You had to see the fish in order to get them. Fish laying in holes five or six feet deep, or deeper, were hard to spear, if at all. They were wary and spooky, moving away when you tried to position your spear to get a jab at them. A night with a flashlight, the fish were not so spooky, but the risk of getting caught was greater.

As more houses were built and people moved into the area, it became riskier to fish. Like Edgar, Ernest, and Uncle Wes said, the wardens were "friendly" as long as you were a local person and only had one fish. Of course, you tried real hard not to get caught! It was all illegal and against the law. I didn't talk to anyone that had been caught with a fish. I think the talk about getting by was not a reality, actually.

The day before Uncle Ted Claassen was drafted into the Army, he, Grandpa, and Uncle Ernie were at the creek on their property looking for fish. They had spotted one, but it got away. Walking back to the

picnic area, they were caught red handed by Milt Botts and Oren Philbrick. Grandpa had his .303 Savage, Ernie his .30/30 and Uncle Ted had Ernie's spear. Uncle Ted was all wet from trying to get the fish, and they would have cited him, but didn't. He was leaving the next day for the Army during WW II. His spear was taken but not the gun.

In the 1950's, there were fewer and fewer fish and more people. Mel Hammons, now the warden, wasn't as "friendly" to a local or an outsider. Edgar fished several times in the Hidden Valley Ranch area, getting a couple of fish. It was sparsely settled in that area. He parked the car along Vineyard Drive by where the school now is or at Bob Bergman's house near there. No guns; just silent spears and a sparingly used flashlight.

"It was sure fun," Edgar reminisced thinking back at it from across the table from me. "Got two one time out."

"Another time Rudy came over. It was in the late 1950's or early 1960's. He wasn't very busy and we'd had supper. So we went fishing. Had two when we spotted a light briefly upstream. Worked out way up to check one more riffle. From

the moon shine on the slick riffle's surface, I spotted a disturbance of a fish working just under the surface. Here came a couple of people as we hid. It was the Emery kids! They said there were no fish."

"Huh," I snorted, "There's a fish in that riffle there! I'll go get it for you!"

"No," they replied, "we've checked it closely already!"

So I snuck over there, found it, and speared it! Right in front of their eyes! Those kids just didn't know what to look for! I tell you, I was no novice!"

It is over today. Bass and bluegill ate the steelhead fingerlings, I believe. Edgar had no knowledge of steelhead since the 1960's and Nacimiento Dam being in.

To scale the fish, according to Edgar, you laid them on the kitchen sink and poured a trickle of boiling water on their mid side strip. When you saw the scales come loose, you just proceeded slowly up the fish, pouring the scalding water until the scales rose. Then a few scrapes of the back of a knife, and it was cleanly scaled. Never better eating then freshly fried steelhead steaks!

February 4, 1995, I stopped by Edgar's house about noon time and took some



pictures of he and his old trusty steelhead spear. He knew right where it was and grabbing it, said he could be ready to go after steelhead in one second!

His father, Henry Wiebe, was a good blacksmith and he had forged this spear from a 3-tined pitchfork in the 1920's, most likely about 1925. The spear was surprisingly short-tined and stubby looking. The 3 tines spanned 4 inches wide and each tine was 4 inches long. It wasn't really all that sharp on the points as the barbs were nearly on the point's tip. The points and barb were quite flat, rather than round. With the hoe handle wooden shaft, it had a total length of 5 feet 3 inches from points to the end of the wooden handle.

"You didn't need more than that," Edgar quipped as he held the points about a foot above the ground at an imaginary fish. "I've got many a fish with this here very spear. Didn't need real sharp points. You'd move the spear real slowly to about a foot or so above the fish. Then you slammed it down hard, driving the tines through the fish and pinning it against the stream's bottom. Boy, you have to really hang on hard as the fish thrashed and fought like crazy, hurling

water everywhere with its broad and powerful tail. It was a wet sport!"

"Of course, you mainly did it at night

The fish spooked real easy in the daytime as they'd spot you right off and swim up off the riffle into the protection of the hole. We mostly shot them in the daytime. At night they were not so spooky. In fact, they'd have a tendency to drift into the center of the beam of light. Of course, you were still real careful in your movements and tried to be as stealthy as possible. You didn't need a longer handle as Jack Creek wasn't that wide. Those were fun days!"

April 14, 1998 A conversation with Cecil Smiley.

Cecil laughed when I asked him if he ever got a steelhead. As a boy on the Kentucky Ranch, he got steelhead in the small creek that came up to the ranch, called Dyck Creek today. After moving out of Willow Creek in 1932 when he was 12, he still came back in the winter in the 1930's occasionally. He got steelhead at Abe Claassen's "picnic grounds" area on Jack Creek along Dover Canyon Road. They always fried the fish.

He said most of the fish were 16 to 18 inches long. He used a pitchfork as well as a three-tined gig Fred Cuendet had made. With tines about five inches long, the two outside ones had a barb on the



inside of the point, while the center one was a smooth, barbless tine.

He said he probably got 8 to 12 a year. He doesn't recall any that were particularly big. He used to run around in the late 1930's as a teenager, being born in 1919, with Milt Botts. In fact, Milt taught him where and how to gig steelhead in Jack Creek. This led to a funny story.

In 1941 or 1942, Cecil was coming out of Abe Claassen's picnic grounds to the Dover Canyon Road at night. It was about a quarter mile out to the county road and one had to go through a couple of deep dips that were overflow channels when the creek was flooding. He had three steelhead in the car with him. Coming into the last dip, here was the game wardens sitting in their car with the lights off, waiting. They had seen the darkened car parked alongside the creek. He stopped at their motions and they asked to check his trunk. It was state warden Paul Turner and San Luis County warden Milt Botts! His old buddy!

I asked Cecil what happened as he stopped telling the story at that point and was lost in a big smile.

"Nothing!" he replied.

When they asked him to get out so they could have him open the car and search for fish, he had quite a time as he was on crutches with his whole leg in a clumsy cast. When asked, he told them his horse had fallen with him and busted up his leg badly.

They found the three fish he had in the trunk. Paul growled a bit and warned him, but they didn't cite him, or even take his fish or spear. Cecil figured they felt sorry for him and knew he needed some food.

However, when he was getting into his

car and Paul was walking back to his car, Milt, his old buddy, whispered to Cecil to be careful when he drove around the hill to pick up his companion! Obviously, he had had to have someone do the spearing for him, seeing he was all busted up and not able to get around. Cecil had suspected trouble ahead and his helper was walking around, just in case. They had a hunch someone might be prowling around that popular fishing area!

Cecil got his last steelhead in 1942 or 1943. He was working for Shorty Woods at his machine shop and J. I. Case dealership on the west bank of the Salinas River at the 13th Street bridge across from the Paso Robles Water Works. Ivan Lichti had taught Cecil to weld and he was a welder in Wood's Machine Shop. He had gone down early on that cold winter morning in January or February to open up the shop and get a fire going.

Looking down into the river from the bank at the side of the building, Cecil spotted two steelhead finning in a hole below him in the clear water under the bridge. He grabbed a pitchfork in the shop and crept down to the water's edge. He ended up getting four fish, tossing each up the bank under the bridge approach. Looking up, there was Shorty Woods watching him silently.

All Shorty said as Cecil came scrambling up the bank lugging those four nice steelhead was, "Two are mine!"

January 23, 1995. A telephone conversation with Gene Bergman, son of Louis Bergman.

I asked Gene if he remembered any stories told by his father or uncles about steelhead. He told me about his uncle, Alfred Bergman, who shot a fish with his .30/40 Krag. He attempted to grab the stunned, belly-up fish by the gills but he cut his finger on its teeth. He let go and then grabbed it again successfully. Upon examining the gills, the bullet jacket was embedded in the gills and he'd cut his finger on it.

One winter evening Lou, his father, was driving in the milk cows by horseback at their farmyard on Jack Creek. Crossing Jack Creek below the barn, his horse about bucked him off when he went to pitching and stomping when a big steelhead swirled out of the cow path they were using crossing the creek.

Hurrying through milking, Louis and his father each got a pitchfork and a light, it now being dark, and fished until nearly midnight. They got several fish and had a feast at midnight.

Gene remembers as a little boy, in the

spring of 1958 at their cattle gathering, when a lot of the relatives were gathered working the cattle. Some of the fellows looked the creek over and got a couple of fish. That was about the last time they had steelhead as Nacimiento Dam had been built in 1956 and the steelhead head run dwindled off rapidly within a couple of years. But that last fish feast was a dandy.

Dodds had put in a dam stocked with bass and bluegill about that same time on the Marsh Creek fork of Jack Creek that joins with San Francisco Canyon fork to make Jack Creek at their farmyard. When the spring rains overflowed the lake, bass and bluegill swam into Jack Creek and in several years ate all the small trout and steelhead. That pretty well eliminated the annual migrations of fish. However, there were some native trout in holes up San Francisco Canyon. There are probably still a few in holes up there with trout.



January 23, 1995 Talking with my mother, Hilda Franklin.

Mom told me how Dad would spear for steelhead with Art Buchanan at his concrete pipe plant one hundred yards south of the 13th Street bridge on the east bank in Paso Robles. I can remember dropping Dad off at Art's plant with his spear after dark so he could fish. Dad would be all excited and eager. I was 6 - 8 years old so it was about 1945.

Art and Dad would stand in the moonlight facing the reflection of the lights from the water work's lights in riffles 6 inches to a foot deep. They'd watch for the tell-tale moving wake of an ascending fish or the thrashing sound of their tail flailing water as they pushed over the shallow bar, driving upstream. In the deeper water, the glint on the water would show a "V" wake moving upstream. They'd quietly scurry over to the fish and try to spear it before it spooked and dashed upstream on its way to some spawning spot in a tributary of the Salinas River. They would have a flashlight, but they used it sparingly as they didn't want to call attention and maybe get caught.

On night, old Jim Rude, who took many a fish by standing directly under the 13th

Street bridge out of sight, was silently working his way upstream, searching intently and fully concentrating on any slight tell-tale presence of a fish. Dad and Art had been standing absolutely still, engrossed in their own stealthy work. However, the faint glare in the water revealed his dark form slowly working upstream along the opposite bank. They on the opposite side, blended in with the dark unlighted area behind them.

He was nearly beside them only several yards away before he suddenly became aware of some dim, ghost-like motionless forms- one big and tall and one short and thin - Art, the 6' 2" huge one and small Dad at 5' 7"! Jim instantly broke into a water-flinging charge across the river, kicking sheets of water everywhere in a mad dash to freedom!

It made for a great laugh for the jovial Art and Dad as it was retold many times later. Jim later learned or realized who it was. Such was the intense attraction of pitting one's bravery and daring to break the law and enjoy the chance to "fish."

There was a circle of men in the area that really enjoyed spearing steelhead for a fresh fish dinner. They rarely talked to

each other about it but all knew pretty well who the others were. I remember Jim as having a very scared and disfigured face from skin cancer. I thought they were burns, before learning the truth when I got older to understand those things. Jim was a excellent fisherman and fished legally all over the area in season for trout. He knew the "secret" places as well as any native

At their farm in San Miguel, Dad and Uncle Wes flood irrigated the flat, level land below the house and barn. Opposite where the pear orchard ended, the electric lines terminated and a centrifugal pump sat on a concrete pad, canted at an angle so the intake pipe would be under water in a hole dug and kept deep enough to draw irrigation water up over the low river bank and into a stand pipe to feed a system of underground concrete pipes for irrigating the land. This deep hole was a favorite haunt for resting steelhead. It was regularly checked day and night for fish when the water was clear, along with other favorite and likely fish hideouts.

Mom recalled how when Aunt Lydia was going to have Elaine, their mother, Grandma Claassen, came over a couple

of days early to help with the baby. Elaine was born March 19, 1939. They were living in the Grange House at San Miguel. Someone brought in a steelhead speared in the river along their place. It may have been Dad, Uncle Wes, or even Duane Hall, as he came over often, even after Dad and Mom moved back to the Smith place in 1940.

The steelhead was put in the kitchen sink. It was just as long as the sink, a single one. The nose and tail just fit in it, being probably about 24 inches long. Grandma scalded it in her usual way by pouring boiling water over it and then scraping it with a knife. This removed the outside layer of skin with the scales, but left the inside skin with its flavorful fat lining. She cut it into steaks and fried it in butter. It seems that almost everyone fried their fish; our fish was always fixed that way when I was growing up.



January 23, 1995 A telephone conversation with Jim Hall about 4 PM.

"Hey, Jim, this is Harold Franklin. I'm writing about steelhead in the Salinas River. Can you tell me some things having grown up along the river?"

He became really excited, a typical reaction when I asked the old timers about those days. Jim, (James), was born in Blythe, California, in 1918. He was 5 or 6 when the Duane R. Hall family moved to a 30 acre berry and Jersey dairy farm on what is today Oak Lane on South River Road just south of Paso Robles. There were five children - Duane R, Agnes, David, Jim and Norman. Duane "Old Man Hall" raised Jersey cattle, a bull once goring him viciously in mid-life and leaving him quite crippled. He saved himself by rolling out of the bull's pen under the bottom board, seriously injured. I recall him as very crippled from extensive pelvic damage. When I was about 6, 1944, Dad took his Allcrop harvester there to combine flower seed he'd raised to sell. A mouse ran out from under the pile of stalks and up my pant leg. Boy, did I yell and stomp, grabbing and squeezing him when he was nearly up to my belt through the material.

I have known Jim and his wife Marjorie most of my life, they having lived on the Smith place in the back house when I was in the first grade in 1944 and they were first married. He worked for P G and E for many years, moving out of the community and now returned and retired in town.

He started out by remorsefully saying how those exciting days are over, unless some steelhead eggs and young fish from the coast or Arroyo Seco, a major tributary of the Salinas at Greenfield, make it into area streams. Maybe, if we'd get three or four weeks of high water, some fish would make it up to keep a remnant population alive. The Arroyo Seco still has a steelhead run.

Jim said that it would take about 7 days for the steelhead to reach Paso Robles after the river came up enough to bust through the bar at its mouth and spill into the ocean, allowing the waiting fish to begin their journey up the river at Castroville. They traveled up the river day and night, pausing to rest along the banks where the swift running water gouged out holes of quiet eddies in which they'd rest and recuperate. The run of fish.

started in January and ended in March, depending on the rains. Heavy late rains could bring steelhead upstream as late as May.

One would peer quietly into these holes along the bank and if the fish didn't spook, you could get the spear positioned just under the surface to eliminate the refraction difference and then "stuff it to him!"

You could never bring the fish up impaled on the spear's tines or he'd flop or shake off. You pinned him against the river bottom and held him there as you eased into the water and got him by the gills. You kept your fingers out of the mouth as their teeth are razor sharp and wickedly long. Jim stated that most of the fish were about 6 - 8 pounds, up to thirty inches long.

The Halls used a fence to fish in the river that was the western boundary of their place, about a quarter mile long. You had to wait several days after a rain for the water level to drop and the muddy water to clear reasonably well so you could see into it. Also, when it rained and the river rose, lots of sticks and debris would float down and entangle the fence, if it was up, building up against it and

washing it out. People upstream regularly would cut down trees and trim off the limbs so it would float down and take out fences placed in the river when they believed fellow rogues downstream were holding back their "share" of fish. Poachers thought ill of the unfair poachers down river. Fences strung up across the river only happened when the water had dropped a lot and channels were created where the water ran 20 - 30 feet across and 12 to 18 inches deep. That was ideal; sometimes they put up 50 feet or more of fence if the channel was that wide.

First, four or five foot long sections of 1/2 inch or 3/4 inch galvanized pipe would be driven into the sandy bottom about 6 or 7 feet apart. Then, stucco or chicken wire about 30 inches wide would be rolled out along the upstream side of the pipe posts, the water holding the wire in place against the pipes. All of this was done after dark for secrecy, as wardens, nosy neighbors and local poachers closely patrolled the river to spot these fences blocking the fish.

Often they hung a lit kerosene lantern from a pipe in the center or main channel. The fish would push their noses



vigorously into the wire, shaking it. The lantern, if being used, would jiggle, signaling a fish attempting to push through the wire. If the water were shallow enough, the fish thrashed their powerful tails as they pushed against the wire making a lot of splashing that alerted the watchers on the bank waiting.

My mother said that Mrs. Hall had a system of signals prearranged with their back porch light that faced the river behind their house on the river bank. She'd watch for any car lights on South River road one fourth mile east on the front of their farm. If cars stopped suspiciously and turned off their lights, or turned into their driveway or a neighbors, she'd signal the boys down fishing. It was risky business and wardens were well aware of those riverside farmers that were most suspect, as word got around. Dad was invited over a few times to fish and he driving in caused some fright until identified, which I remember him chuckling and grinning about when telling about doing it. There was a risky humor in the whole attitude of the folks that fished. They sure kidded and teased those caught or badly frightened by real or suspected close calls.

When you thought a fish was on the wire, you moved out with a flashlight and spear and "stuffed" him down, gilled him, and returned to the bank. In deeper water they'd attempt to jump over the wire. You never fenced in the Salinas when the river was deeper than two feet as it was just too swift and the fence wouldn't stay standing up. The Salinas in this area drops about 35 feet to the mile and the water flows deceivably swift. The water's force pushed over the wire.

When you were through fishing for the night, the wire was rolled up, the poles pulled out, and everything was stashed in the riverside bushes. Jim insisted they never left the fence up unattended as it was wrong to just block the fish. But I remember my dad complaining that in reality no one was that conscientious, really. A common complaint of everyone was that the fish were being blocked by downstream fences.

Jim said that he and his brothers also used a fence on Jack Creek at Oliver Harris' place just above where the present Highway 46 crosses Jack Creek. But they never left the fence up. The Hall brothers also fished with the Bergman brothers up Jack Creek lots of times.

Jim said that often when the fish were running they would get 12 or more fish in an evening. Uncle Wes told me today that several times he and Dad were invited down to Halls to fish but they never got a fish any of the times they went. Jim said they never shot fish. Ricochets were too dangerous. I asked Jim about how many steelhead they actually took in a typical year and he just chuckled in a noncommittal intimation and said, "We caught fish every time they ran up the river! We watched the river pretty closely and pretty well knew when to expect fish."

I asked him if they caught very many spawned steelhead returning downstream to the ocean. He couldn't ever recall having ever got a "slinker."

Toward the end of the run in March, 12 - 18 inch "egg eaters" came up the river. They'd "stick'em" in the holes under the overhanging willows.

Jim said that Jack Creek with the Santa Rita Creek tributary had the most steelhead, but Graves Creek- one quarter mile south of Pase Robles Creek's mouth, Atascadero Creek, and Tassajera Creek had lots of steelhead, too. Some steelhead worked up the Salinas River to the Pozo area.

Everyone believed that what few steelhead they took didn't affect the total population and that "everyone" on the river and tributary streams fished.

Did he have any stories and memories?

"Yep! Lots of them!"

"Any you care to share?"

"Nope! I'm keeping them!"

"How'd they taste?"

"Excellent! We usually fried them, but they were good barbecued, too. We never baked them."

Our conversation was over. "Thanks, Jim."



January 23, 1995 Conversation with Wesley Franklin, my uncle born in October 29, 1914, two years younger than my father, Harold J. Franklin.

My father had died February 27, 1994, from the results of a stroke he had September 18, 1981. Dad's next younger brother by two years was Uncle Wes. They had farmed in a partnership from 1937 until 1962. They had hunted and fished together all those years, too. Now I had to use Uncle Wes for information about my father.

"Uncle Wes, did my Dad ever shoot steelhead with his .30/06?"

"Yes, several."

He then explained that Dad usually used a spear, only rarely his deer rifle. I had never heard Dad telling us about using his rifle.

I queried Uncle Wes as to about how many fish he and Dad got in an average year. He began by saying they didn't go that often, really. Mom, of course, claims they went quite often; too often, when there were lots of good fishing days! Choir practice was Wednesday evening out at the Willow Creek Mennonite Church and they would go after practice was over, if the fishing conditions were right. Usually

they weren't. The water would be too high or too muddy, or the rains had been infrequent and a run hadn't come up the river. He supposed they probably never got more than 5 or 6 a season; maybe a dozen or more if it had been a long, wet winter. Some dry years the water never did flow much. Then the Fish and Game personnel would fence the Salinas River at the mouth of the Nacimiento River and force all the fish up that river as it flowed more water in drier years.

In May, 1939, while my mother was very pregnant with my brother Donald, Uncle Wes' wife, Aunt Lydia, was poking along the river bank below the pump at the San Miguel place where both families were living, having moved there in the fall of 1938. Aunt Lydia had had Elaine in March. She spied two steelhead stranded with the receding water in a hole near the pump. She got my father and she, with a pitchfork, and Dad with his gig, climbed out on a willow tree and each speared a fish. Dad got his in first, and then Aunt Lydia's steelhead. That was the only steelhead she ever did spear. Checking some other holes, Dad found another

steelhead and got it, too.

Dad and Uncle Wes actually did a lot more fishing at Jack Creek as there was too much water at San Miguel as the Estrella River emptied into the Salinas at their place. They often went with Louis Bergman as he was always game to go at the drop of a "spear!" Lou's brothers were not as avid fishermen as Lou.

Louis' trademark was a particularly bright gasoline lantern which he carried when looking for fish at night. It lit up the whole countryside and the stream, allowing them to spot the fish in the water, not just wakes on the riffles.

In March near the end of the steelhead run, lots of 8 - 12 inch "egg eaters" came up the river. Dad and Uncle Wes caught lots of them by wading out into the channels at San Miguel and catching them with rod and pole, using salmon eggs for bait. They really fought hard and pulled like crazy, jumping and cart wheeling out of the water.

One time Duane Hall, their good buddy, and his friend each dressed up like wardens. They snuck up on Dad and Uncle Wes out standing in the river fishing with pole and line, but before trout season opened. It sure did give them a

fright until Duane walked in roaring with glee! Then they all went in fishing. There wasn't enough water at the Hall place up from Paso Robles a mile.

During trout season, that opened the last Saturday in April, Dad and Uncle Wes trout fished in Jack Creek and Dyck Creek, a tributary that ran past Bill Dyck's house up past Uncle Gus Claassen's house. They caught lots of trout and a few holed-up steelhead, legally. I caught my first trout in Jack Creek just below the Bergman's line fence on Grandpa Claassen's above the Deep Hole. I was probably about 8, which would make it 1946. I was with Dad. I was fishing with one of Dad's old steel telescoping rods with a broken tip. I was really proud of the eight inch beauty! I clearly remember feeling the bite on my worm, jerking it out on the northwest bank and breaking my line in several places as I chased after the wildly flopping fish before getting a final grip on the prize. It was the only one I caught that day. Those trout were all young steelhead, including my trout.

The only other time I ever caught trout in Willow Creek was in Dyck Creek below Bill Dyck's house about 1949 when our family was eating a Sunday meal there.



LaVern, Delbert and I each caught several trout apiece that day.

February 5, 1995 A telephone conversation with Johnny Whitner.

"Hello, Johnny," I said on a Sunday after lunch, "I'm trying to get some stories about my Dad steelhead spearing in the old days. Did you ever go out with my Dad?"

There was a brief pause as some quiet, deep chuckles escaped as one of Dad's old fishing and hunting buddy's mind quickly went back more than fifty years to a spring day in 1938 or '39, before Johnny and Irene were engaged and married in 1944. I could just picture in my mind the wide grin that must have been on Johnny's face as he recalled those fond memories.

"Yep! Twice, in fact! The one time we searched up the creek from the Dover Canyon Road Bridge across Jack Creek on your Grandpa's place up to the Bergman line fence, but we didn't see a fish. But the other time was quite a day's adventure before it was over!"

Dad drove up Peachy Canyon and picked up Johnny after morning chores had been done, mainly milking a couple

of cows in the Smith Place barn where Mom and Dad lived. I was just a baby one year old. The two of them drove on through past Summit School and over to Grandpa Claassen's corral at the Pasture. They parked just inside the gate.

Dad carried his .30/06 with a pocketful of Army metal jacketed bullets and Johnny had his frog spear in his back pocket. As was customary, a shoelace was tied to the hole in the sleeve into which it was stuffed. They each carried a gunny sack. They walked briskly up the road to Louis Bergman's place and furtively kept out of sight along the creek, turning up the San Francisco Canyon branch of Jack Creek as Jack Creek forks at the Bergman farmyard, the other branch being called Marsh Creek by the locals. It swings north into the Klau Mine area and Dodd's.

Crossing the Burk place, they entered Nick Marquart's place. Where one breaks out of the pepperwood trees and chemise brush where the 7X Ranch corners on Nicks, there in a nice hole they spotted a huge fish finning in the quiet water.

Dad got his rifle ready as Johnny hurriedly cut a nice willow limb with his knife and whittled a tapered point. He

jammed the make-shift handle into the hollow socket of the spear. A couple of grooves were cut into the willow handle near the spear and the shoelace securely attached the spear to the handle. Even if the handle slipped out of the socket, it would still be attached to the handle by the shoelace.

Dad leaned out over the water and fired nearly straight down into the water, hitting near enough to that monster to damage its air bladder and make it drift upward to the surface where Johnny managed to spear it as it spun crazily around, stunned.

Johnny said he could see it in his mind as if it were only yesterday. It was not a silvery steelhead but was at least 36 inches long, red and black, dark, blocky and square shaped. It had to be a salmon. His father had moved to the Oak Flat area just west of Paso Robles when he was 7 in 1890 and he told stories of salmon being in Jack Creek. Jim Rude also talked to Johnny Whitner of salmon being in the Salinas River that he had speared around 1900.

Not wanting to carry that big fish upstream with them and then having to return that way later anyway, they stashed

it in a big, old gnarly hollow sycamore tree nearby beside the creek. About five feet up off the ground the tree had a big hole in the trunk with a nice bed of leaves just below the opening where they could retrieve the fish on the way down. They planned to more closely examine and study the unusual fish then. For now, they wanted to push on up the creek for steelhead.

They worked on up into the open canyon on the 7X Ranch where Jack Creek actually begins as a series of dandy willow lined spring-fed holes about waist deep. The steelhead were thick in those series of holes. Dad would shoot as straight down as possible where he saw a fish. Sometimes up to three fish might float up. Johnny, who is 6' 2", tall and lanky, would wade into the water up to his waist and spear the fish. The fish didn't have to be hit directly with the bullet; it only had to pass close by. It did something to their air bladders or equilibrium as they would lay on their back, gradually floating up and then skittle and wobble all over the surface all crazy-like.

"Funniest thing you ever saw!" Johnny chuckled.



They were really nice steelhead, too, all 24 to 28 inches long. They worked the different holes until they each had as many fish in their gunny sacks as they could manage to carry. Figuring each fish weighed 4 to 8 pounds apiece, I suppose they must have had 6 to 8 fish apiece making a 50 or 60 pound load to heft up and carry out.

By now it was getting along in the afternoon and it was hard work carrying that heavy load of fish. Arriving at the sycamore tree where they had stashed the salmon, they couldn't believe their eyes! It was gone! But there in the soft mud all around the base of the tree were the telltale pug marks of a mountain lion. There were a mess of tracks, too, where it had circled a bunch of times homing in on its supper. Johnny still thinks that maybe that old rascal of a thief had been secretly tailing them unnoticed and just helped himself to their prize and an easy meal. It was a real disappointment to lose that fish. The moon was already out by the time they crossed the fence into Lou Bergman's place and it was a real chore carrying those heavy sacks. Then to top it all off, Louis Bergman was cutting firewood by moonlight on a big, old, fallen

oak beside the creek in that narrow canyon. Dad declared that if Louis caught them, he'd for sure turn them in with those stuffed sacks of fish. So they clawed and scratched their way as quietly as possible up the steep, brushy, poison oak covered hillside around Louis. His dogs kept barking at them and Louis would "sick'em" on to what was bothering them up on the hillside. But the dogs didn't come up and Louis didn't hear them as they felt their way as quietly as possible along the side hill. They finally got far enough past Louis and returned to the road, finally arriving near their parked car.

When only about a hundred yards from the car, they happened to glance over on Jack Creek near where the church picnics were held where they spotted a quick, furtive flash of light from a flashlight turned on and then off. Sneaking over silently towards that area, in the moonlight Dad spotted a lone figure with a poised spear perched precariously on a leaning willow tree trunk over a deep hole. Dad whispered to Johnny that he had a hunch that it was Bill Dyck, from its outline.

They stashed their sacks of fish and

the gun and pussyfooted it quietly over towards the unsuspecting figure. When close enough, Dad growled out in a gruff commanding bark to the totally unsuspecting figure," Come out of there! You're under arrest!"

The startled man jerked spontaneously from surprise and losing his balance, flopped headlong into the deep hole. Spitting and sputtering, out came scrambling Bill Dyck. Recognizing Dad and Johnny when getting to them, he turned as mad as a hornet when he realized it was Dad that had yelled at him and not the warden. Johnny said they just about had a fight on their hands. Bill had a well known bad temper and this was a hard situation for him to handle. Johnny was a big lanky guy and Bill knew better than to force the situation too far. Dad and Johnny sure did have a good laugh about it on the way home. It wasn't too long until most everyone in the community had heard about the event, along with embellishments that rumors tend to generate.

Johnny went fishing at least twice with Ernie Claassen along Jack Creek on Ernie's father's property. They always had bad luck and didn't get a fish either

time, although one time they did locate a fish. It's a wonder one of them wasn't hurt. Ernie had a .30/30 and Johnny, the flashlight. They spooked this nice fish out of a hole and Uncle Ernie would shoot at it as Johnny attempted to keep the light on him. They chased that fish through several holes and across a couple of riffles, before it finally hid and they couldn't locate it.

That Ernie, Johnny commented, could ride anything with hair. He was absolutely fearless and the animal could sense it. Whether it was some old plug or an unridable high-spirited unbroken horse, he commanded it. Seemed like his legs were just glued on its back as the animal moved any-which-way. "Best rider I ever saw in my life!"

Johnny claimed that Jack Creek was the best steelhead creek in the country. He fished it different times alone, out of season with a spear and in season for trout with a rod and hook. In the 1930's Johnny went through the Bergman's to fish. One time Louis and Bergie (Irwin) Bergman stopped him and said he couldn't go on through across their property. Johnny said he looked them over and there were two of them and one



of he. He said they could try to stop him and he started walking. They didn't touch him! "I was different then!" Born in 1916, he was a rough challenging big 20 year old. He caught lots of nice trout over the years in San Francisco Canyon - blocky, husky trout up to 12 inches long in those 7X Ranch holes.

In fact, Johnny figures he about fished every creek in the county that had trout and steelhead, along with his close buddy Duane Hall. "One just can not realize how the country has changed in just my lifetime," Johnny lamented several times in our conversation. "People probably think I am lying, but it is the truth. There used to be so much more water in the creeks and holes up the canyons with springs. Especially since the time my Dad came into the country in 1890."

William (Bill) Whitner came here when he was 7 years old with his parents, moving from the Smoky Mountains on the Tennessee-Georgia border area. All the folks there were with making whiskey or fighting. The Whitners settled first in the Oak Flat area. In 1898, it didn't rain a drop and young Bill claimed he was the one that chapped down nearly every tree in

Oak Flat to feed a few cattle on the leaves, moss, and twigs the cattle chewed on to survive. Johnny remembers his dad saying he worked so hard doing that to where it "stoved him up" for the rest of his life. Bill loved fishing, and Johnny remembers way before he was old enough to fish himself, being with his Dad as he fished. They then lived in Peachy Canyon where the family still lives. They started out there with 58 acres.

Bill, and Johnny's uncle, Bob Scott, fished all the creeks and stream lets in the Peachy Canyon and Kiler Canyon area. Steelhead came up the creek at the junction of Highways 101 and 46 West. Beside the road where the creek crosses Peachy Canyon Road on Albert Sauret's old place, there are a series of big springs for nearly a half mile called Merritt Springs, or Sand Springs, as the sand boils as the spring water surges up out of the ground. This canyon was the favorite secret trout fishing spot of old Doctor Wilmar where he would go to relax, just a couple of miles west of Paso Robles. Johnny, being too young to fish yet, recalls following his father as he fished all the way down that creek to the Salinas River. Jim Rude claims to have speared

the last steelhead in Peachy Canyon in the spring holes below the road below Chases' house in the mid-1920's, a nice sized fish too.

Bill Whitner also fished the creek that comes up crossing the 101 Highway at Los Robles Mobil Home Park at the old Gatland place and crosses Highway 46 at Bethel Road and Hope Winery. That drainage goes up past Floyd Schroeder's place to springs by the Araujo place. In wet winters, it was unbelievable where steelhead managed to migrate. The numerous houses in the area with their wells have greatly reduced the flow of the springs.

Claude Booker told me July 20, 1996, that Albert Anderson told of catching trout when he was a young boy in the stream that runs down from Booker Brother's house along Highway 46, the Black place on Bethel Road, and into the Salinas River just north of the Templeton Sales Yard, Little Toad Creek. Albert was born in 1895 to Charles Anderson who lived just northwest of the Booker Place a mile. Claude did not see or catch trout there since he lived there beginning about 1920.

In May, 1998, Ray Nelson and I were

talking along his driveway beside Little Toad Creek and Highway 101 and Templeton Main Street and he told me of different early people catching trout in Little Toad Creek along his place, as well as in Big Toad Creek that flows through Templeton.

Mr. Peterson and Mr. Dougherty told Claude of catching steelhead in the creek running past the Hope Winery. They were pioneer settlers in that area and neighbors when Claude was a boy.

Steelhead came up San Marcos Creek several miles south of San Miguel to year-round springs on the old Joe Tidrow place, now owned by High Blythe.

Clarence and Albert Sauret, when young barefoot kids at the turn of the century living in Oak Flat, walked over to those springs from Oak Flat and caught trout. Even up into the early 1930's, Johnny caught trout in those same spring holes.

Carl Linn remembers his father talking of steelhead coming up the San Marcos, but he never mentioned getting any.

Johnny went on to talk about salmon in the Salinas and Nacimiento River watersheds in the early days. Jim Rude claimed he speared salmon out of the Salinas River. For years, Jim owned and



operated a service station at 13th and Riverside Streets when that was highway 46 east. Unmarried, a rough, whiskey-drinking fishing and hunting fool, all he did as much as possible was being out of doors. I remember him in the 1940's as being horribly scarred and disfigured in the face. I thought he had been burned, but Johnny informed me that it was skin cancer. He was red-haired and very fair skinned and had had many procedures for the cancer that left him so scarred. If anyone knew steelhead, it would be Jim. If Jim got salmon, he did. He knew the difference, that is for sure.

Johnny continued with his stories by telling about this old cabin along the Nacimienta River in Hunter Liggett where Nigger Creek runs into the Nacimienta River. The creek got its name from the fact that in the early 1920's, coming from an unknown area, a single older Negro woman lived in an old abandoned cabin along the creek near its confluence with the Nacimienta. She subsisted almost entirely on fish she got from the surrounding waters that she dried and smoked. She mysteriously disappeared about 1930, moving on somewhere else. Anyway, in the 1930's, when Johnny was

in his heyday roaming all over the countryside fishing and hunting, Old Billy Fellman told Johnny that he, along with Hearst Ranch cowboys, Joaquin Wellman and long time Hearst cattle foreman, Tony Vasquez, were over in the Nacimienta River area looking for stray cattle. It was dinner time and they stopped at that black woman's cabin. She invited them to come in and eat. She had a big salmon she had gotten out of the Nacimienta River. They all looked at and examined it, commenting on its large size. It was definitely not a steelhead. She then commenced to cook half of it and they had a grand feast of it.

Eli Wright was an early pioneer in the Nacimienta River area living up by the Catenas. He fenced the river and took enough fish to can and smoke to last them a year. He got salmon, too. That would have been by the 1880's and 1890's and on. The Lynch's were the first settlers along the Nacimienta, settling in the Bee Rock area in 1859.

On August 30, 1995, I talked to Ray "Bunch" Dodd and Ray DeBois about steelhead in Adelaida and Los Tablas Creek when we were both getting gas at the Fast Gas service station. Both were

born in 1915 as neighbors in Adelaida and still live on the places they were born, their fathers coming to the area as quicksilver miners.

They had stories to tell about steelhead and salmon. In February, 1941, there was a tremendous amount of rain. Bunch was working in the Buena Vista Quicksilver Mine and went down one day to the Las Tablas with his .30/30 carbine and a spear. Between the first and second bridge on the 7X Ranch, there was a deep hole alongside the road with a big rock jutting out into the water. He spotted a big fish laying in the water and he shot into the hole. This big fish came drifting up and he speared it. It was huge, mostly black with spots. He measured it when he got to the house. It was 42 inches long. It had to have been a salmon. His wife cooked it and they had a big feast on it. He speared many steelhead, but never a fish that large. Steelhead rarely went over 32 inches long, if even that long. They were not that color, either. That is the only time in his life that he saw a fish of near that size.

That same winter and within a couple of weeks, another fellow working at the mine, Jake Knuckles, speared the

biggest fish Bunch ever saw in his life out of the Nacimiento and its tributaries. It was from the same area on the 7X Ranch where Bunch had gotten his salmon. It was measured with a ruler at 48 inches long. That had to be a salmon in the 60 pound class when it left the ocean. (Editors note: In July, 1997, I caught a 48 inch male chinook salmon in the Klutina River one mile above Copper Center on the Copper River near Glennallen, Alaska. It had swam about 200 miles upriver from the ocean and it weighed 46 pounds. I would suppose it was very similar to this salmon) It was huge, blocky, and dark colored. Ed Knuckles in Paso Robles was a cousin to this Jake.

Bunch went on to say he was not much into fishing; in fact, he never has fished much in his life. But he did spear steelhead. His older brother Errol did most of the fishing. He remembers his brother getting a fish whose tail stuck out the end of a 32 inch gunny sack. One time Errol went in the creek running through their yard below the house, Wyss Creek, a side branch off the Las Tablas, and he got seven fish in one sack, several of them had their tails hanging out the sack. They were bigger than the average, for sure.



Both Ray DeBois and Bunch talked about all the trout that were in all the streams, even tiny ones that ran only in the winter. There were trout up to 18 inches long in the smallest rivulets, where they'd work up in the running water. Undoubtedly they were stock from the steelhead.

Ray DeBois mentioned they had lots of steelhead from the creeks around their place, too. Both men mentioned their fathers getting fish to eat, spearing or shooting them. They never weighed or measured the steelhead, but agreed that most were about 24 - 28 inches long and weighed 6 - 8 pounds. They had no measurements on the largest or longest steelhead in their experience. They agreed that it all stopped as soon as Nacimienta Dam was built in 1956. Gone, but the memories are not forgotten.

It seems very few fish ascended the Estrella River. Johnny Whitner said that a reliable story is told that John Inglekey, up Gillis Canyon three or four miles, 8 miles east of Shandon up the San Juan River, got a salmon in the canyon below his house in a real wet winter during the late 1920's or early 1930's. Johnny stated it is a reliable fact, if in fact almost

unbelievable.

Johnny said that his kids and grand kids go up to Northern California on the Fel and Smith Rivers and they get salmon that look just like the one Dad and he got that day on Jack Creek up San Francisco Canyon. In the late '30's, Nick Marquart checking cattle on his place in San Francisco Canyon, shot two salmon, their tails hanging out of a gunny sack tied to the horn of his saddle. They were dark and blocky-looking.

Johnny had other stories, too. One time in the 1930's, Duane Hall and Johnny went on a fishing trip with Wes Wimmer and Dillard Aykers. They drove up above the Catenas to the Nacimienta River, where they parked their car. The river was up, so they had to take off their clothes and wade the deep water holding their clothes up above their heads to keep them dry. They like to have nearly drowned as in spots they had to bounce along on their toe tips. They hiked up Burnett Creek, camping just below the Blue Slide.

The water rushes down over the big, bare, smooth rock on the Blue Slide, but the potholes were full of nice trout. Their

camp was where Tobacco Creek empties into Burnett Creek. They stayed 4 or 5 days, living on fish. Tobacco Creek was full of nice steelhead which they got with their frog spears they had carried in in their pocket. A shoelace tied to the hole in the socket was stuffed inside the socket. You just cut a willow pole, whittled it to the right taper, stuffed it into the hollow socket, and tied the pole securely to the spear head with the shoelace wrapped in several grooves cut into the pole.

Wes and Dillard needed their whiskey. When they were getting ready to leave, Wes stashed a pint of whiskey into a rock cairn marking a mine claim. Johnny supposes that whiskey might still be there as he never did return as WW II came on and that is now in Hunter Liggett Military Reservation.

"Yep, those were quite some days. Trout were everywhere where you don't even have water much anymore. People don't believe you as the country has changed so much. They think you are lying. I've lived long enough to see a lot of change."

"Jimmy Hall and I did a lot of hunting and fishing together. We were the same age. He was the best quail shot I ever did

see. Him and me had many a contest, but he always beat me. He once got 26 straight before a miss. My record was 19. Neither one of us passed up hard shots; they all had to be taken!"

It is an interesting side note that my Dad mentioned many times the crack shots all the Hall brothers were, as well as Johnny Whitner. Johnny only had one eye, but he was still drafted into the Army in WW II in 1944 and participated in some ferocious fighting in Europe. He had to go even though his father was blind and dependent on Johnny to run the farm up Peachy Canyon. Bill Whitner became blind when he was viciously kicked in the side of the head by a super skittish horse while untangling harness straps when he was about 40 years old, 1925. He suffered greatly, often crying in extreme agony, holding his head. It caused a tumor that pressed on his optic nerve, destroying his sight. In 1939 he went to Berkley where it was determined that the tumor was so extensively intertwined in the brain that removal would be extremely dangerous and probably not successful. He had been strongly opposed to surgery all along and returned home, to die 76 years old in



1959. He was a quiet man and very Godly, according to Wilma, Johnny's sister born in 1912. Sister Hilda Lockyear was a year younger than Johnny.

Thanks, Johnny, for your memories and sharing your experiences. You were a good friend and hunting and fishing buddy of Dad. You went to Modoc with Dad in 1939 and 1940 when Dad got his big 8 pointer and you got a dandy 4 pointer. Lots of cherished memories.

January 26, 1995. A telephone conversation with Eldon Bergman.

Eldon was born to Alfred and Neet Bergman in 1933. He told me his love for the outdoors came from his family- Father, Uncles Lou (Louis) and Alvin Bergman.

Eldon has many memories of steelhead stories told by his family, as well as friends like Duane Hall and numerous relatives in the Willow Creek area. The demise of the steelhead run, he feels, came with the building of the Nacimiento Dam in 1956 and the Salinas Dam at Santa Margarita in 1940. Also, bass and bluegill in farms ponds, especially along feeder branches of

upper Jack Creek, like Dodd's pond above Louis Bergman's place, swam into the creek during high water runoffs and they ate the young trout and steelhead. Water pumped by ever more wells being drilled for all the additional houses along the drainage dried up the springs that kept water in pools in the creeks during the long, dry summers where the small fish waited for the winter rains that enabled them to migrate back down river to the ocean.

As a boy growing up at several different locations in Willow Creek, Eldon had various fishing adventures. Uncle Lou always declared it took 9 to 10 days after the Salinas River came up and broke the bar at the mouth for the migrating steelhead to reach their place on Jack Creek up Dover Canyon. In 1944, Eldon clearly remembers his father telling how in about a 250 yard stretch of creek above the barn, he and Lou counted 22 steelhead on the riffles spawning or in the holes, preparing to spawn.

Most steelhead were 4 - 8 pounds, 24 - 28 inches long. The largest steelhead the family ever got was a 10 pounder Lou and Alvin speared in 1939. Alvin stuck it with a pitchfork, but it shook loose. Lou

then speared it. They got another one just a tad smaller in the same hole.

When I asked Eldon when he saw the last steelhead in Jack Creek, he said in 1959 he and Uncle Lou went looking with Lou holding the lantern, as it was night. Eldon speared the only fish they saw, about an 18 inch steelhead. He thought that probably a few fish still came up after that as there were trout in the upper parts of Jack Creek in San Francisco Canyon in the 1960's and 1970's. During those years, Lou built a pond and Eldon netted small fry and carried them into Lou's pond. In three years they were catching up to 18 inch trout in the pond. Eldon says there are still a few trout way up San Francisco Canyon now, although it has been three years, 1992, since he was last up there and saw some small trout.

Eldon said that when he was visiting with Duane Hall in the summer of 1993- Duane passed away April 17, 1994- Duane was driving along North River Road just below Stemper's concrete batch plant when he stopped and walked over to the Salinas River there and looked in a deep hole. He spied 2 logs in the bottom that moved- two nice steelhead!

When Eldon was 4 or 5, they were

living up Dover Canyon- 1937 to 1939- at the home place in the old house. It was late winter and his mother was frying up a big mess of steelhead steaks from a fish his dad had speared that morning below the barn. About the time they sat down to eat, in drove the game warden, Walt Bathrick, from Atascadero.

His father, Alfred, went out to greet Walt who declared he was just "checking up on things in the area."

It was dinner time and Alfred asked him if he had had dinner. If not, would he like to come in for dinner? They were just sitting down to eat and there was plenty to eat.

"No, I haven't eaten. Yes, it's right plumb nice of you. I'd love to eat with you folks."

Mom could hardly believe her ears when she heard Dad invite Walt for dinner, and then to hear him accept! Their main dish of fish was very evident what they were eating. Father just gave her the high sign that all would be OK to Mom as they walked in.

Walt was a big feller and he hungrily waddled right in the house, washed up at the sink and sat down at his offered place. Dad gave the blessing, thanking



the Lord for the food, and everyone pitched right in. Walt ate more than his share of the steelhead, wolfing it down, along with the rest of the food. The whole time he kept up a friendly banter of conversation and visiting all friendly-like. Dinner finished, prayer was again offered in the usual Mennonite custom. Walt got up, said his proper thank you, got in his car and drove off. Not once did anyone mention what the main course meat was, but it was sure tasty and good!

Along with Walt, Milt Botts and Oren Philbrick were the local wardens that kept an eye out on the fishing and hunting in the area. Fred Hecker, out of King City, also checked the area. Later, in the 1950's, Mel Hammons was the area warden when Milt and Oren retired.

When Eldon was in the second grade at Summit School, the family moved to Los Angeles where his father worked in an airplane factory building parts for the P38 Lightning twin-engined, Allison-powered fighter plane. Moving back after two years, they lived at Rev. F.F. Jantzen's place, next to Uncle Gus Claassen's place up Dyck Creek.

Eldon's daily chore, typical for any 8 - 9 year old boy after school, was getting in

the milk cows each afternoon. It was a wet winter with lots of water running off the land. Crossing little Dyck Creek one afternoon, Eldon spooked a 24 inch long steelhead in the small ditch-like creek. He chased the fish into a knee-deep hole, eased up carefully and the fish soon swam over his immersed hands between his knees. He grabbed the fish and flipped it onto shore, eggs spewing everywhere from the engorged female's distended belly. He was sure proud when he flopped that prize trophy into the kitchen sink.

Eldon recalls seeing other steelhead that high up Dyck Creek, nearly all the way to the Kentucky Ranch fence. Trout were caught in that small ditch-like drainage above the Kentucky Ranch to the Willow Creek Ranch. Eldon caught trout up the creek alongside Jensen Road up as high as Uncle John Claassen's house. In fact, Eldon once lost his Kabar pocketknife by Uncle John's place after unhooking an 8 inch trout from his hook. Eldon also caught trout up Summit Creek to below Summit School as a kid. Even the creek in front of his present house along Vineyard Drive, Sheepcamp Creek, had native trout he caught in it after this family

moved there in 1946. Even my father and Uncle Wes Franklin caught trout in that creek in the early 1940's. My mother would drop them off by Alfred Bergman's and they'd fish the creek up to where the road crossed it and then walk on over the hill to Grandpa and Grandma Abe Claassen's house. Willow Creek up past Uncle Herman Claassen had trout in it.

Now those steelhead swim in countless retold stories around the table and winter fireplaces when the rains come hard and the creek rises and then falls and clears up after 4 or 5 days. Exciting memories for knees now weak and shoulders stooped. Like Eldon says, they never took that many fish- maybe 2 or 3 at a time- on a good outing, if they got any. There were lots of dry runs. A couple dozen fish in a season, generally, if there was a run of fish. There were years the river never came up and no fish migrated to their birthplace. But usually at least some fish made it up and put glows of excitement in bright, searching eyes and thumping hearts.

January 30, 1995 I talked to Phyllis Bergman about my project and if I could

come out and talk with her and Louis, her husband.

"Fine. Any time would be OK"

She told me about the only steelhead she ever speared. It was sometime in the early 1930's and Louis was determined that she would at least get one steelhead. They were still living in the old house, from which they moved in 1933. The kitchen window looked out over the nearby creek below the house. Louis' sharp eyes spied the telltale wake of a fish in the riffle.

They both hurried down to the creek with a pitchfork apiece. Her eager husband pointed out the fish laying in the shallow water drifting back and forth in the slightly cloudy water. Lou went to the bottom of the riffle in case she missed the fish. She jabbed at it hard and pushed down, holding the impaled fighter to the bottom. Louis hollered at her that she had missed and he stabbed the fish shooting down past him.

"No!", I yelled back at him. "I have my fish on right now! Come get him!"

It turned out there were two fish. They managed to get both of them. It was the only steelhead she ever got.



January 30, 1995 A telephone conversation with Jack Greer.

Jack Greer was born October 15, 1910, in Southern California. He was five in 1915 when he moved with his family to a ranch he still lives on at the junction of Jack Creek and Santa Rita Creek about three miles west of Templeton.

Both creeks had a good run of steelhead from as far back as he can remember. He claimed the fish spawned mainly on Louis Bergman's place on Jack Creek and on George Jewell's place on Santa Rita Creek where old Creek Road and Highway 46 meet.

"Yep! I sure did have a lot of fun getting steelhead," was his instant reply when I asked him about those days. He still has his 5 tine spear with about a 12 foot long wooden handle. He'd gig the fish, go in for them, remove them from the spear, and toss them up on the bank. There, his boys, when big enough, would be there on the bank and club the fish on the head.

Sometimes he'd take some steel posts and chicken wire and block Jack Creek. Then there'd be a bunch of fish in the Santa Rita. He'd not leave the fence up, though, as fish had to go up Jack Creek.

He claimed he'd only take a few fish in the course of a season, maybe a dozen, or so. You'd only get what you could eat, as one fish made several meals. He never weighed any big ones he got, but they must have been 7 or 8 pounds.

The demise of the steelhead run began when the Salinas Dam was built in 1940 at Santa Margarita, cutting back on the flow of water in the Salinas. Nacimiento Dam stopped all the steelhead run within two years of its being built in 1956. He said he still checks the creeks often, just in case he could at least see a steelhead. He has not seen one since then. He believes there are no trout in Santa Rita Creek. Those were the days and they are gone! Too bad!

And the band-tailed pigeons! Why, there used to be so many, and now they are practically gone. He and his boys would hide under a live oak next to a big, tall bare-limbed white oak the pigeons liked. Year after year, they used the same trees, it seemed. One or two lookouts would land and soon 50 to 100 would be all over the tree's limbs, cooing in quiet talk with some grunt-like sounds. Bam!

Bam! Pigeons would rain down, maybe a dozen or more, if you could find a thick concentration sitting tightly together for a pot-shot. Good eating, too!

Lowell Adams taught me how to trap lions and bobcats. I got lots of them over the years.

April 8, 1998 Visiting with Jerry Greer. Jerry told about his father, Jack, and John Martin, a neighboring farmer, bored a hole in a 2 foot by 12 inch diameter oak log. The charged it with some black powder and fuse and floated it over a big hole at the fork of Jack and Santa Rita Creeks. When it shot off, two steelhead floated up. This was about 1940. He remembered that late in the 1940s five men- Jack Greer, Lowell Adams, John Martin and two other friends built a big bonfire beside Jack and Santa Rita Creeks junction.. the stayed up all night, watching the creek. They got 13 steelhead that night. Jerry remembers measuring some big steelhead at 30 - 32 inches long. Most were 22 - 28 8 inches long. Jerry was born in 1937.

Only one time did his father take a bigger fish. Jerry was little - like 1943 -

1946 and his father brought in a huge dark fish and laid it in their kitchen sink.

The single sink was 36 inches long. That fish's head and tail were both curled upwards. It was the biggest fish his dad ever got. It was probably a chinook salmon, being so dark, as steelhead were silver.

Jerry said that none of their family has speared a steelhead since 1949. They have seen them as they check the creeks, but not taken them. One time in the 1940s, the Santa Rita Creek overflowed its banks onto their hay flat by the driveway. When the water receded, several steelhead were stranded in a low spot. Jerry believes that his father would get 12 to 24 steelhead total in an average year.

I talked to Jerry on March 26, 1998. Jerry said that he went down to Jack Creek and he spied 13 nice 24 inch + or - steelhead in one hole several days earlier. This was a heavy rain year and lots of water was coming down Jack Creek. His brother works on the Eagle Ranch and he saw steelhead swimming up over the water fall on Atascadero Creek. In March he saw 3 steelhead spawning in a small creek up on the Eagle Ranch above the falls.



April 8, 1998. A visit with Fred Salgado in Templeton.

Fred was born in 1928, a fourth generation Templeton resident. He was born on the old Carl Klever place on El Pomar and Lupin Lane Roads. He moved into Templeton as a baby and lived there all his life. He worked for and is retired from the SLO County Road Department. His father was a full blood Chumash Indian and his mother was 3/4th Chumash and 1/4th German. He is as native as one could be.

Fred speared many steelhead with friends Jesse Bennett and Grany Fruita from Templeton. He worked the Salinas River banks from Templeton up to the junction of Jack Creek and Graves Creek. Best place was just inside Jack Creek up to Santa Rita Creek junction. Also got fish up Graves Creek, the first mile up was the best place on it.

Fred has a spear head he got about 1940 from old Joe Cresho, the longtime Templeton blacksmith from before 1900. These spears were Joe's trademark. It was small and unusually shaped, made from 3/8th inch square stock. It was 2 1/2 inches wide with four tines 3 1/2 inches long with a 2 inch crowned handle-base.

The tines were 5/8 inches apart, very gradually tapered to barbless points not very sharp.

Fred never did shoot a fish. He usually used a pitchfork to spear with. He usually went at night using a flashlight discreetly. Not only were the fish less spooked at night, but the light mesmerized the fish and even seemed to attract them. Thirty inches was probably the longest fish he ever got, although he never weighed or measured any fish he got.

April 29, 1999 Visiting with Mr. Franks in Atascadero on Graves Creek.

Mr. Franks was born in about 1930 beside Graves Creek about two miles from its mouth on the Salinas River. It was a perennial stream from their place to its mouth. In the mid 1940s his father hired Hugh Baker to do some work for him. Hugh spied two steelhead in a hole and Hugh speared both of them. One was 28 inches long and the other was 32 inches long measured on a yard stick.

Another time Mr. Franks recalls the stench of rotting steelhead when Graves Creek dried up stranding a bunch of fish in the 1940s.

February 16, 1998. A visit with Frank Hatch in Blake's Plumbing.

Frank's father, Everett Hatch, arrived as a young man with his family in 1891. They farmed on the place two miles north of Paso Robles on the west side of the present 101 Highway behind what is today Joe Brown's Motorcycle Shop where a red barn still stands. He built that barn. The Stockdales were their neighbors on the south side and the Exlines on the west, present Exline Road.

Later they moved to Cholame where Frank was born in 1928. He clearly remembers his father talking of taking a wagon down to the Salinas River below their place, opposite where the Huero Huero River enters the Salinas. They caught chinook salmon, along with some steelhead. They would make it a picnic event, with their neighbors Stockdale and Exline joining them. They would put a

chicken-wire fence net across the river and spear the salmon with pitchforks, loading them into the wagon. They would be salted down in barrels and provided much needed winter food. It was not hard to get a wagon load. Frank has no idea how long or heavy the fish were.

Frank recalls that as a young man in the early 1940s, coming in from Cholame and spearing steelhead. Frank, now seventy, was born in 1928. He and his friends would spear steelhead in the Salinas River at a family friend's dairy opposite the present site of the Atascadero State Hospital. He used a homemade 3-tined spear, which he called a "Portuguese fly rod," with handles of 1/2 inch galvanized pipe that could be connected together, screwing into the base of the spear. He doesn't have it now. They also used a pitchfork, but never shot fish.

In the winter of either 1942-1943, he and his brother Wes got three salmon one day there behind the Atascadero State Hospital. They were definitely not steelhead, but salmon, being deep-bodied, dark colored and between 34 - 36 inches long. They were not slimmer and a shiny silver like steelhead. He is sure of



that date as Wes was then drafted into the Army and fought in the South Pacific where he lost his eyes to a Jap hand grenade one night.

Frank didn't get any fish after that date as the run there began to dwindle with the building of the Salinas River Dam in 1940.

February 16, 1998 A visit with Keith Tarwater

Keith Tarwater, standing in Blakes Plumbing with Frank hatch and I talking, told how his grandfather, Elmer Anderson, caught trout in the creek at his farm at Creston Road and South El Pomar Drive, a tributary of the Huero Huero River, in the 1920s and 1930s and up into the 1940s. That creek had water in it year round. Those had to have been stock that came from steelhead at some point in past history. I have heard that the Klintworths caught trout in that creek further to the east in the Linne area when they settled that area in the 1880s and in the years after that.

March 29, 1998 A conversation with Bill Jardine on Nacimiento Lake Drive.

Bill remembers a story told in his family that about 1900 his grandfather William Jardine and his brother John checked the Huero Huero River during the spring runoff after a wet winter and saw some steelhead in a pool in the shallow river. They used a pitchfork to spear a spring wagon's box full of steelhead. This was about a quarter mile below the present bridge across the Huero Huero on Union Road, a mile up from the Highway 46 crossing of the Huero Huero. It was probably a dozen or so fish as that small wagon doesn't have a big box. It seems that steelhead rarely went up that river and this was an unusual event in a wet winter. Jardine Road to the north is named after these Jardines that lived there at the turn of the century.

I was talking to Don Keefer about this same time and he told that when he was in Paso Robles High School in 1939, that one lunch hour Bim Ernst stopped where a bunch of fellows were visiting in front of the school and showed them about a dozen steelhead in his pickup bed that he had speared in the Nacimiento River.

Henry Twisselman in his book, "Don't Get Me Started" tells about traveling from Cholame to San Miguel and spearing steelhead in the Salinas River.

April 7, 1998 A conversation with my neighbor, Clarence Sinclair.

Clarence was born in 1922 up Ranchita Canyon east of San Miguel. Clarence's mother, Luella Von Dollen, was married to Malcolm Sinclair, his father. Clarence has his grandfather George Von Dollen's forge-welded steelhead spear head. It was handmade by George about 1900 as Clarences's mother was born in 1903. Clarence recalls hearing his grandfather talking about going to the Salinas River near San Miguel and spearing steelhead. He probably speared fish in the Nacimiento River, too, as many people did at the Pleyto Road low-water concrete slab crossing.

The spearhead demonstrates the exceptionally good forge welder George was known for in the community. The spear is five inches wide with four barbed tines 5 inches long. The tines are roughly 3/8 inches wide. Overall length is 10

inches from point to handle hasp.

May 13, 1998 A conversation with Tim Barlogio.

Tim Barlogio was trout fishing with spinners in Jack Creek above the old bridge yesterday on their property. In a long hole he spied a nice 24 inch steelhead. That was the first steelhead he's seen since 1979 when at Easter he caught a 27 inch steelhead that was spawned out, a slinker. Tim has been catching trout, between 12 and 24, this May up to 13 inches long, mostly 8 - 10 inch natives.

He remembers the story that his grandfather, Miles Barlogio, once saw a steelhead in the 1940's in Jack Creek below an old sycamore stump in a deep hole. After trying to catch it with various baits for several hours, he finally put a gob of worms on a bullhead (cabazone) hook used to fish off the rocks on the coast, and teased the fish to bite. It weighed 17 pounds when weighed.

This March, 1998, my son John Franklin, while on night patrol as a SLO sheriff, shown his unit's spotlight into the Salinas River below the Paloma Road



culverts in the Salinas River crossing south of Atascadero a number of times after midnight and spotted at least two steelhead, around 30 inches long. On more than several occasions he saw one steelhead.

April 8, 1994. A conversation with David Barlogio.

David told how one time in the 1930s or 1940s his father, Miles, and neighbor Johnny Luther stopped the car on the Jack Creek bridge at their farms. Peering into the creek on the upstream side, they spied a nice steelhead finning in a shallow hole. Johnny had his .22 rifle along and he shot the fish.

Miles was so afraid someone might come driving by on the York Mountain Road and catch them, that while Johnny scooted through the creek side poison oak and willow tangles to get the fish, Miles drove onto the bridge, stopped the car and opened the hood, making as if he had car trouble. No one came by, but it has been a family story, good for many a chuckle through the years.

David, born in 1934, recalls during the

1940s Miles putting up chicken wire on Jack Creek on their place and getting steelhead. Not many, just several a winter. The wire was never left up.

In the late 1940s, Miles was checking the cattle on his Cass and Fickle places on Dover Canyon Road off of now Highway 46, the upper end of Dover Canyon Road. David was along as well as his sister Mylene and friends Carl and Lorene Anderson, all children. Miles had stopped at the locked gate across the road, to turn the car around.

Getting out quickly, he looked in the small brook there, bent down, and deftly scooped out a steelhead on the bank. Grabbing the flopping fish, he jumped into the car and they returned home on Vineyard Drive.

As a boy in the 1940s, David recalls catching small trout several times a year in the spring and early summer on the small brook coming down the Shadow Canyon branch up to Sclaris Ranch, now know as the Noble Road. Yearly, they had Barlogio family picnics beside that stream in a favorite spot. There are still trout in that brook in 1999, part of Paso Robles Creek. Technically, Jack Creek begins where that stream flows into Jack Creek near Jack Creek Bridge.

January 30, 1995 A telephone conversation with Nick Marquart, Senior.

Nick got to chuckling when I phoned and said I'd like to talk about steelhead spearing in the old days. He was born in 1914 and raised on his ranch. He lived in San Luis with his grandmother during the winter to go to Cal Poly as the Jack Mountain Road- now the Santa Rosa Creek Road- wasn't even graveled and it was impassable in the winter. He went to Cal Poly 1931 - 1933. Every noon hour he, my father, and Uncle Wes played handball while my father attended Cal Poly those same years. Uncle Wes attended Cal Poly for his 10th grade of high school in 1931 - 1932. My grandmother, Ethel Franklin, was in charge of the Cal Poly cafeteria and she, Aunt Lois, Uncle Wes and Dad all lived on campus in what was then called the "barracks." Nick Marquart was attending Cal Poly as a high school senior, except his classes counted for college, too. He has a college degree, he told me, but never received a high school diploma. Cal Poly at that time was a high school, junior college as well as a college.

Nick really never did hunt or fish much,

but he did get some steelhead over the years. His ranch, which his father owned and Nick grew up on, borders the head waters of Jack Creek as the San Francisco Canyon on the north. Rocky Creek, part of the Santa Rita Creek drainage, flows from behind his barn on the south side of his ranch. He believed Santa Rita had as many steelhead as Jack Creek. In a wet year with plenty of water, the steelhead came nearly up to his barn. Hartsell's dam blocks all of Rocky Creek and the Santa Rita today. He doesn't know of any trout or steelhead in either Jack Creek or Santa Rita Creek; not since Nacimiento Dam was built in 1956.

The biggest steelhead he ever got? Well, he was on horseback checking the cattle over in San Francisco Canyon during WW II, so it had to be sometime between 1941 and 1945. He had his 25/35 along with him. He spotted these 2 large fish in a riffle. He shot just over them, but they still turned belly up. He grabbed them floating down stream and stuffed them head-first into a gunny sack which he then tied to the saddle horn. Both their tails stuck out the sack!



A gunny sack is 32 inches long, so they were longer than that as they were somewhat kinked and the binding twine was wrapped around their tails and the sack. Ernest Claassen told me the biggest steelhead he ever got on Jack Creek was 10 and one half pounds and measured 32 inches long. He got it during the war years on Grandpa Abe Claassen's pasture in Jack Creek, shooting it in the head with his 30/30. Interestingly enough, where Nick got those two big fish is about the same place where in 1938 or 1939 my Dad and Johnny Whitner got what was probably a salmon about three feet long.

I teach school with an avid steelhead fisherman, Rod Monte, who has weighed and measured steelhead on the San Lorenzo River at Santa Cruz that he has caught that are in that class. A 14 to 16 pound steelhead will measure 34 to 37 inches long. He caught and measured one steelhead that was 37 and one half inches long and weighed 16 pounds.

If Nick Marquart's two steelhead's tails stuck out of a 32 inch sack tied around the tail, they must have been 36 inches long or more weighing 16 pounds. A salmon that long would be more like 20

pounds, as they have a bigger girth. Big fish!

I stopped and visited Nick Marquart on February 4, 1995, and when I asked him if I could take a picture of his steelhead spear, he stopped sorting cattle in the corral and went right to the spear standing propped in a back corner of his shop. It was impressive!

It was so heavy and massive looking. The spear was handmade by a blacksmith in Cayucos in the 1920's for Nick's father. The spear has a span of 6 inches wide with 4 heavy 3/8 inch round barbed tines, each 6 inches long. It has a 1/2 inch square iron shaft 18 inches long joined to a 6 foot long hefty wooden handle the diameter of a shovel handle. Its overall length from barbed points to the handle's end was 8 feet.

Nick said that he hadn't used it too much, having had a shorter-handled one, too, at one time. He chuckled and grinned as he said as I was taking some pictures, "There was this nice steelhead near the bottom of this hole on Rocky Creek in his ranch. I carefully positioned the spear points about a foot over him and rammed it down hard! Caught him right behind the head. The handle was nearly all

underwater, it was so deep! I pushed to get the barbs all the way through and was able to draw him up and out onto the bank without him flopping off!"

January 31, 1995 A telephone conversation with Irvin Perry.

Irvin Perry was born on the Santa Margarita Ranch where his father farmed on a part of it. When he was 12 years old, they moved to Adelaida where Irvin went to the second Lincoln School. With his Dad and Mom, they moved to his current farm on South River and Charolais Roads in 1941. They farmed and milked cows. He stopped milking about 1956.

His neighbors just west across the road were the Duane Halls. Irvin never did spear a steelhead. One night, though, in the 1940's, he was invited to come over after dark and fish in the river. Norman, Duane, Irvin and a couple of other fellows stood spaced out in the river along a fence set up, but they didn't get any steelhead that night. He said Norman and Duane were really wild and got really excited fishing the river.

Irvin farmed along Shack Creek from South River Road to Creston Road. At

Creston Road and several hundred yards west, there were big springs there that kept that creek flowing a good stream of water the year around. He claimed that he never did see a steelhead, nor for that matter, a trout, either, in the creek. Jim Rude, however, told Irvin that he caught trout in Shack Creek - named after early settlers that farmed and had their house about where Rambouillet Street now passes, named Shackleford. Jim claimed he caught the trout further up in the pools at the springs. Irvin never did fish it.

My father caught trout in Shack Creek in the early 1940's. I can faintly remember being with him as a small boy, watching and playing as he fished. Down through the years Dad talked about catching trout there in the early days. In fact, the creek flowed year around until in the latter 1960s when the city put in a huge pump at Sherwood Park and Wakeman put in a big irrigation pump by the springs to irrigate a bunch of alfalfa that later became the Golf and Country Club Development. Those wells pulled the water table down and the springs quit flowing. The willow trees are still there to mark where the springs were located. Where South River Road crosses the creek across from Walmart was a great spot for all the folks to gather water cress.



Since there were trout in the creek, steelhead undoubtedly ascended the creek at some time and spawned there to start the trout populations. Now, the only flow in the creek is storm drainage.

Irvin chuckled as he told me about an incident that happened about 1944. Dad, Uncle Wes, Art Buchanan, and Irvin were coming back from clamming at Morro Bay one spring day. Where Highway 41 first hits Atascadero Creek at Old Morro Road, there is a low rock dam across the creek. As Dad always did when passing that dam in the winter and spring, he pulled over and stopped to check the hole below that little rock dam. There wasn't too much water flowing, as Irvin recalls, but before he even got over to the bank, here charged Dad and Uncle Wes up the bank, each holding a steelhead! They had just jumped in and grabbed the fish with their hands. Irvin laughed as he remarked, "Your Dad and Wes were an enthusiastic bunch of outlaws!"

February 1, 1995 Talking about steelhead as I was with Uncle Wes Franklin at the Salinas River.

Today I got Uncle Wes and drove down Oak Lane on the old Hall Place to get some pictures of Uncle Wes posing with my Dad's old steelhead spear, or gig, as Dad always referred to it. He also called it a "Portagee fly rod."

I asked Uncle Wes about the Atascadero Creek incident that Irvin Perry had told me about the day before; where he and my Dad had each grabbed a steelhead with their hands returning from clamming at Morro Bay.

Uncle Wes instantly grinned real wide recalling the event. He retold me his view how he and Dad each got a steelhead that day.

"That was a good spot for a fish. Anytime we passed by there over the years, we always stopped and checked that hole below the little weir. Several more times during the 1940's we got steelhead out of that hole. That was a good spot," he concluded, knowingly.

As a kid growing up, I heard the following adventure many times. In fact, every time we went to Morro Bay and passed alongside Atascadero Creek,

It seems that a week or two after trout season has opened about 1944 or so, Art Buchanan, Uncle Wes, and Dad parked at Highway 41 and old Morro Road and hiked a mile or two up Atascadero Creek in the Eagle Ranch. There is a waterfall on the creek high enough to stop the migrating steelhead from getting any further up the creek. In the hole they caught 3 or 4 steelhead, a couple of them being really dandy fish. It was a memorable day and Dad really enjoyed retelling it many times. Actually, he had fished it several times in the '40's, getting steelhead most of those times, along with trout.

Uncle Wes told me more about fishing for steelhead as we looked at the river and I got some excellent photographs with Dad's spear. The spear we have today is really what was called a frog spear. Uncle Wes was telling me as I had him pose with the spear alongside the Salinas River. He remembers being with Dad when he bought that particular spear head from Eric Lundgren's sporting goods shop on Park Street in Paso Robles between 13th and 14th street. Eric stocked and sold those heavy duty "frog" spears, that obviously were not for frogs.



He still doesn't know how Eric got away with it when they were so popular for gigging steelhead. There weren't any bullfrogs in the country, then!

Dad had had a homemade spear. Uncle Wes doesn't know what happened to it, but for some reason Dad bought this frog spear. It was about 1943 or 1944, during the War. They were really too narrow, Uncle Wes remarked, but they worked fine. They could be carried in the pocket or under a car seat, ready for use with a shoelace tied to the socket hole. Most folks, along with Dad and Uncle Wes, usually used a regular pitchfork, although a manure fork was preferred as they had 5 or 6 tines so a fish had less chance to slip through, compared to a regular pitchfork, with its four tines. If someone had a spear, it was usually a homemade one. Most people did forge work and could fashion some sort of a spear that worked fine.

Uncle Wes said he and Dad always used a spear in Jack Creek. They'd have a handle about 8 feet long and as thick as a shovel handle. You needed a spear that long as the fish were in the middle of the creek's riffle at the tail-end where the water ran in a riffle just above and into a

hole. The courting fish swirled and scooped with their tail so the rushing water's current would carry away the sand and gravel, making a nest or redd about a foot deep as long as a fish. The eggs were laid in this nest and fertilized by the side-by-side fish, and then covered up by the tails of the swirling fish, where the eggs incubated in the moving water and the fry hatched. The fingerlings migrated to holes that had water all summer or if the holes dried up, they worked their way down into the gravel where it was wet.

I remember about 1963 - 1966, Elmer Hamm, who for many years worked for the SLO county road department, telling how when they were hauling gravel out of Los Tablas Creek toward the end of summer with which to gravel roads, hundreds of trout fry and fingerlings were in the wet gravel as deep as 20 feet down. There was not a trace of water on the surface, yet the fish were evidently safe down in the gravel. I asked him if that was only one time but he said that over the years they mined gravel to put on the roads and the trout were in the gravel.

That afternoon while taking pictures, Uncle Wes said the river was fine for spotting the fish working their way

upstream, although it was still a little cloudy looking. They produced a telltale "V" wake as they surged powerfully upstream relentlessly, showing even in water flowing 18 to 24 inches deep. You would stand out in the current watching, as moving around much would spook them and they'd go tearing downstream to get away.

Don and I had a steelhead experience with Dad in May, 1955. I was a senior in high school and Don, my brother, was a sophomore. He was wearing his new FFA jacket. We snuck into San Francisco Canyon from the Klau Mine Road at the head of the canyon on the 7X Ranch. We were trout fishing, but Dad really just wanted to show Don and I the creek. Now I think he just used that as an excuse to go back into his early days!

We left the house about 4 am and parked the car in the dark on the Klau Mine Road at the head of San Francisco Canyon. We walked part of the way in on an old road that went down the canyon, the hills bare and grassy on both sides. I recall quicksilver mine tailings all over the place. We were real edgy as we were trespassing, for sure. About the time we got to an old quicksilver mill ruins, we

saw lights on in a trailer and a dog started barking, so we skirted to the south up the side of the broad canyon opposite the trailer. By then it was light enough to see our way through the brush and keep pretty well out of sight.

Then a loud shot went off and we thought we were being shot at. Dad had us real quick-lie hide behind a big tree and freeze. Then we realized it was some dynamite charge going off at some mine workings and our hearts quit beating so fast. We worked our way down to the creek and began fishing. It was really a neat place, very beautiful. We were catching some nice trout, too.

Eventually we fished our way down to a fence across the creek. Just above the fence a hundred feet or so, a dead Hereford cow full of maggots was lying in the creek's water. The creek there had table to car-sized boulders in the creek and the water gushed in, over, and around and in one of those holes under a big boulder, Dad hooked a dandy steelhead. It got off or broke the leader; anyway, we fussed around there for several hours, trying to catch that fish. I remember it drifting out several times, feeding on maggots drifting down from



that carcass. We put on maggots for bait and hooked the fish several times, but never did land the 18 - 20 inch fish.

We got our limits of nice, native trout by evening as we fished up to where the brush ended. As it got dark, we hiked on up to the car. It was a really dark and moon less night, spooky sneaking along, peering hard into the darkness. I remember falling a lot as walking on the hillsides, you couldn't judge the distance, and what looked like a long step, turned out not to be. It was a vivid escapade with Dad. Whew! At least we managed to avoid getting caught and caught some nice trout, beside seeing a beautiful area

February 7, 1995 I stopped after school and talked to Norm Bridge about steelhead, while in his sporting goods store, Bridge Sportsman, in Paso Robles

Norman "Norm" Bridge was born in 1925 on a 160 acre dairy farm at Airport Road and the Estrella River. He attended Pleasant Valley School and grew up along the Estrella River, which bordered their farm on its northern side. His family did lots of hunting and fishing and he spent lots of time doing that as he grew

up, the only boy in the family, along with his one sister.

When I asked him if he ever saw a steelhead in the Estrella River, he replied that only once did he ever see one, probably about 1933 to 1936. He chased it up the quite muddy water, spotting it from its "V" shaped wake it made in the shallow, muddy water. He and his father finally saw it in some clearer water, confirming it was a steelhead. His Dad, born and raised on the place, never mentioned ever seeing a run of steelhead in the Estrella River, either, although there was plenty of water in springs all the way up past Shandon.

Norm told of going regularly in the late winter and early spring over to the Salinas River and spearing steelhead. They checked the willow-lined holes from above the junction of the Estrella and Salinas Rivers all the way to Carminati's farm at the Huero Huero. This was in the 1930's until about 1943 when Norm went into the U.S. Army. They never used spears, but manure forks, his Dad using his 30/30.

A favorite pastime for his parents, when Norm was a small boy, on a nice Sunday afternoon late in winter or early in

the spring, was to join with the George Crowfoot family from the Estrella Plains-site of the present Paso Robles Airport-for an outing to the San Antonio River. Traveling out the Pleyto Road from San Miguel in their 1928 Hupmobile, they'd find a nice picnic spot beside the road overlooking the San Antonio River. There the adults would set up a table and play their favorite game, Pedro. Norm's dad would prop his 30/30 close by and as he played cards, he kept a watchful eye cocked on the river. Spotting a steelhead swimming up the river, he'd grab his gun and shoot it. Norman grinned as he said he can still clearly see his dad wading out in his lily-white legs with his pant legs rolled up stabbing the stunned fish with a manure fork and wading back to shore triumphantly with his squirming prize. Norm still has the old rifle. The kids of both families played beside and in the water, also being on the lookout for ascending fish when they were older. The fish were usually about 24 inches long weighing probably about 4 pounds.

Norm recalls in the 1930's folks gathering from around the area on the cement slab where the Pleyto Road crossed the Nacimiento River, spearing

steelhead as they crossed the road. It was more like a community party. He never did it, but was there and saw it. He said it was really something seeing the fish crossing that slab.

I talked to Don Wolf from San Miguel in October and he told me of going with his family and spearing steelhead on the Nacimiento slab in the 1930's. They farmed along the Salinas at the mouth of Vineyard Canyon, but they didn't go for steelhead there in the river. There was usually too much water and they weren't into it all that much. Occasionally he and his brothers would cut down a tree to float down the river and take out fences that might be there.

Norm Bridge said he and his Dad preferred spearing steelhead just above the Huero Huero in the Salinas River when the Huero Huero was flowing. There was less water in the Salinas River there.

Norm claimed he never did hear of steelhead going up the Huero Huero. Although they must have done it some over the years as the Klintworth's got trout in holes in the Genesee area north of Creston, according to Johnny Whitner.



February 7, 1995 A telephone conversation with Waldo Carminati.

"Those were some days, going down to fish on the Salinas River at our farm where the Huero Huero River flows into the Salinas River," said Waldo when I talked to him about steelhead in the Salinas.

They got their steelhead with a manure fork. They also had a spear they made in the forge by taking a 4-tine garden spade and hammering it fairly round with a barb on each tine. It made a good spear. They also used a shotgun, along with the pitchforks.

My brothers and I would poke around the holes looking for fish as we played there by the hour when the chores were done. It was hard to get steelhead during the daytime. That's when we'd shoot them with the shotgun. The concussion would stun them. We were even crazy enough to put a blasting cap with some fuse and weight it with a rock. It would float under a log jam and debris and knock out a fish if one was there hiding. We'd even stuff string wadded tightly into a bottle, adding some water to wet the string. We weighted it with a rock and drifted it out of sight under a jam. The

string would swell as it got wet and explode the bottle, spooking out a hidden fish.

When night came, the fish would start moving upstream. They didn't move much during the daylight when the water was low and clear. We'd put a fence of chicken wire across, build a bonfire, and wait. When a fish hit the wire, he'd shake it with his nose and we'd hear the rattle of the wire. Wading out silently with a light, we'd spear him.

We never took more fish than we could eat. If we caught 2 or 3, we'd quit, taking up the fence. It wasn't right to leave it as you only took what you needed. No one ever bothered us; everyone did it that lived along the river.

After I came back from fighting in WW II in 1946, we never did get another fish. The biggest one we ever got was 10 - 11 pounds. Usually they were about 4 - 8 pounds. All those times were in the late 1920's to the mid-1940's. Now it is gone.

The Huero Huero never did have steelhead. It came up but went down too fast. It didn't flow enough to have steelhead.

I understand the Klintworths got trout in some pools around their farm near

Creston when they came into the area in the 1890's. ~~They would have had to come from steelhead that at some time ascended the Huero Huero.~~

February 26, 1995 Visiting with Milton Dueck when they were over for Sunday dinner.

I asked Milt about steelhead in Santa Rita Creek. ~~In the mid 1920s, the Jewell Brothers, Cris and George, sold the 6,000 acre Rancho Santa Rita to the Sibley Family of Rochester, New York. They also bought the 600 acre V2 Ranch on York Mountain by Shadow Canyon and Rancho San Marino of 1,000 acres on the coast just south of the Cambria city limits. Rancho Santa Rita consists of most of the land around Highway 46 and Old Creek Road.~~

The Sibleys sold 4,000 acres back to George Jewell, ~~the western end of the ranch. The 2,000 acre portion contained the ranch buildings with the house and barns and the main course of the creek. The first ranch manager for the Santa Rita Ranch was from Canada and he didn't do well.~~ In 1936, Jerry and Alma Dueck,

cousins of my mother, were hired as ~~ranch managers, staying until 1952, when the ranch was sold to the Hartsells. Hartsells also bought back the 4,000 acres from George Jewell, as well, about that date.~~

Uncle Jerry and Aunt Alma had two children, Carrie, ~~their daughter who with her husband, Chuck Porter, are missionaries on the Amazon River in Iquitos, Peru. Milton (Milt) was their younger child, born in 1932 and 4 years old when they moved to the Santa Rita Ranch. The house and barns are located east of Old Creek Road and Highway 46 West. One can see the buildings from Old Creek Road about 1/2 mile after leaving Highway 46, just down the canyon to the left.~~

~~Milt said his father and he got steelhead all those years as that is the head waters and main steelhead spawning area of Santa Rita Creek. They used a 4-tine pitchfork to spear the fish, never a spear. Uncle Jerry used his 30/30, too. Once he got three steelhead with one shot. Milt claimed a bullet wouldn't kill a fish if it was more than 3 feet deep in the water. The expanding bullets are complexly expanded, too, from hitting the water.~~



hitting the water.

Rocky Creek, from the canyon to the north on which Nick Marquart's ranch is located, joined the Santa Rita about a half mile below the ranch buildings. There is a deep hole 6 or 8 feet deep at that spot that they used for a swimming hole all summer. Below it was a long pool up to two feet deep about 100 yards long. One May or June, a big steelhead was spied in the hole where it was marooned for the dry summer by the receding creek flow. The water never did dry up all the way, as there were springs that kept at least a trickle all the way down the Santa Rita to Jack Creek. Milt dove down and spooked the steelhead into the shallower pool where his aunt stabbed it with a pitchfork as it swam past her. It really thrashed and splashed water all over the place as she leaned out over the water forcing the tines down into the gravel bottom. They got the fish. At the house they weighed it at 10 1/2 pounds, the largest one they ever got while living there.

One time in the early 1940's, Milt and his father spied a big reddish-looking, kind of golden hued big fish below the "lower barn" near Rocky Creek in the Santa Rita. It was at least 3 feet long, or

more. Milt believes it was a salmon, as it was colored more like a goldfish than a silvery steelhead. He was hurrying back to the lower barn to get a pitchfork when here came the old game warden, Milt Botts, walking along the creek on their ranch checking on things. Milt thinks Milt Botts was aware of the salmon, too, and was keeping an eye on it. The fish went uncaught.

Milt says that native trout were plentiful in all the creeks and their tributaries that had even a trickle of water flowing in it. The Santa Rita Creek flowed the year around from numerous springs. In the winter trout worked their way up into gullies that in the summer dried up as they were above the springs. You could catch them with your hands.

In 1955, Hartsell built a 35 foot high dam across Santa Rita Creek below Rocky Creek's mouth, the big lake behind it covering 100 acres, or so. That stopped the steelhead from getting any higher up to their main spawning grounds. For a few years steelhead came up to the dam's base. There are no trout in Santa Rita Creek today.

The biggest steelhead Milt ever speared was a 13 1/2 pound fish in San

Simeon Creek. I have heard that 16 pound steelhead were not that uncommon in that coastal stream. Most of the coastal streams had larger steelhead than the Salinas drainage. There are still annual runs of steelhead in the coastal streams and up the Salinas River to Greenfield and up the Arroyo Seco River, a tributary of the Salinas.

March 4, 1995 An afternoon with Uncle Wes Franklin on Jack Creek talking and taking pictures. Then we visited Louis and Phyllis Bergman at their ranch just upstream.

It was a beautiful spring day as Uncle Wes and I drove to Jack Creek on Grandpa Abe Claassen's former 400 acre "Pasture" with Jack Creek wending its pristine course along the southern edge of the land. Large sycamore trees line its banks along with live oak and digger pine trees. The slightly cloudy water babbles along over numerous gravel beds and swirls lazily through holes. It is still good spawning grounds for steelhead.

We stopped along Dover Canyon Road above the old picnic area where the creek

takes a bend near the roadside. We walked over to the creek and I took some pictures of Uncle Wes with my pitchfork. He stood by a large, old gray-barked, gnarly sycamore tree in the creek with water around its base creating a dandy hole. Uncle Wes told me he speared a few steelhead in this very hole at this tree in the latter 1930's and throughout the 1940's. The creek was flowing a nice stream and the water was just about right, having cleared after the last rain. It sure made his eyes sparkle as he excitedly pointed to where a fish could be working the gravel above the hole around the tree's base where the riffle falls into the hole. He was holding my pitchfork and I know that if he had seen a steelhead, he'd have been in the water in an instant, although he is now 80 years old, still strong and sprightly.

We lingered a while enjoying the memories and the noisy babbling of the meandering discolored water wending its way past new spring grass and nodding wildflowers in this pristine solitude. It was easy to imagine the wiry figures of two brothers in water-soaked pants and shoes, crossing and recrossing the riffles 55 years ago



excitedly checking every hole and trough for a silvery, streamlined fish; staring closely at any "V" shaped wake that might be moving side to side or back and forth. Then the electrifying excitement of sneaking and crouching stealthily to the unsuspecting reproduction-driven fish. The quick stab of the spear and the sound of steel tines grating hard on the rocks and pebbles of the gravelly bottom. The impaled fish thrashing violently, splashing water everywhere, before slipping the fingers through the gill covers and bringing the flopping fish to shore, to be admired and exclaimed over. Memories and other times now past- - -

There were numerous places from that vantage point where Uncle Wes pointed out where he and Dad had seen fish on some junket; some places where they had gotten a fish or two. The winter of 1995 had been a heavy rainfall year, with over 80 inches recorded in this area, compared to a normal of 40 or 50 inches.

We then drove on up the 2 miles to Louis and Phyllis Bergman's home. Warmly greeted, steelhead stories began flowing of a time now gone but not forgotten. Louis and Uncle Wes stood beside the San Francisco Canyon branch

of Jack Creek as I took their picture holding a pitchfork. At 88 years of age, Louis still got excited thinking and talking about those past years still vividly etched in his mind. Uncle Wes is 80 and they'd both have gone in the water if a fish had come working its way up the riffles in front of us.

Uncle Wes immediately recalled and Louis joined in as they talked of one time when 6 or 7 fellows had gone up the creek above the house and had gotten 9 fish! They even recalled the exact spot.

"Yes," said Louis, "Right where that big rock sits in the middle of the creek. I saw this fish under a ledge of this rock, and although I couldn't get my spear really in a good position, I managed to get him. But he flopped off and my brother Alfred got him. Alfred was really good at spearing a steelhead!" as Louis raised his arm and reenacted the whole incident. It was easy to see it all, even now.

Several times Louis retold the story of how in the spring of 1930, after moving up there with his brothers in 1929, he was driving the milk cows in to be milked one afternoon across Jack Creek just below where Marsh Creek comes in from

Adelaida joining San Francisco Canyon branch to make Jack Creek. The cows chose one path through the knee deep water and his horse another path. A pair of spawning steelhead scooted out from under his horse's feet from where they had been spawning. His horse about bucked him off as he shied away, spooked, too. They hurried through milking, his father, John Bergman, insisting the cows be milked first. Being now dark, they got a lantern and managed to find and spear both fish.

He sure grinned mischievously as he told how in 1943 he and his father were going down the creek looking for a fish. They had crossed into Uncle Abe Claassen's place, when from a hidden vantage point, they spotted Uncle Abe, Ernie, and Ted working up the creek on their place. Louis and his dad were hiding in a big cascara bush about 75 yards away. Uncle Abe had his .303 Savage and the boys had a spear and a .30/30. About that time Milt Botts and another warden appeared on the scene and caught them red-handed. He took away Ted's spear. Louis and his father never were spotted. His father was so scared of being caught, that he ran home

as fast as he could when the wardens were out of sight.

I asked Louis how large his biggest steelhead was. He just shook his head and said that he got lots of nice fish, laughing heartily at the flood of memories. Phyllis remarked how delicious fried steelhead was, unless they were spawned out and on the way back to the ocean. We laughed and talked about Louis' big double-mantle lantern that was so legendary on the creek by everyone I had talked to about fishing with Louis. It was really bright and lit the whole canyon.

We drove away having had a good time. Uncle Wes remarked how nice Louis had always been to he and Dad. Really good natured and friendly, a really good person. Bill Dyck, on the other hand, was real feisty and belligerent if he thought someone might be infringing on his area of Jack Creek where he checked, even though it didn't belong to him. Dyck Creek flowing behind his barn was only his area and he made sure others didn't fish it. It is uncanny how fishing brings out different qualities in a person.



April 4, 1995 Visiting with Ted Claassen as we went out to their former place in Willow Creek and went to Jack Creek, talking about his experiences, the youngest son of Abraham G. Claassen.

The following is written in the first person of Ted Claassen:

I was a senior at Templeton High School when I was drafted into the Army. I had 220 units so I could graduate in June. February 3, 1943, I rode a bus to Fresno with a bunch of other fellows from this area to be tested and if passing, inducted into the Army. My, the air on the bus we rode was blue with cigarette smoke which I could hardly tolerate, seeing I was from a non-smoking Mennonite family. Passing the various test, I was sworn into the U.S. Army the next day, February 4, and returned home to our farm in the Willow Creek area 14 miles west of Paso Robles on a 7 day leave before having to leave for basic training. I was 18 years old. My brother Ernie stood in for me at graduation and received my diploma at graduation in June.

I was the youngest of 11 children, the fifth boy in the family. I had not done much steelhead fishing; my brother Ernie, four

years older than I, did more fishing and hunting than any of us brothers. In fact, I never did spear a steelhead, although I accompanied Ernie and my brothers-in-law, Harold and Wes Franklin, several times at night along Jack Creek in our pasture.

The day before leaving home for basic training, Jack Creek was just right to maybe have a fish or two in it. Papa, carrying his .303 Savage, Ernie carrying his .30/30 Winchester carbine, and I with Ernie's spear, set off for our pasture a mile away in the Model T truck to celebrate my leaving by getting a fresh fish for supper. We parked the truck just past our corral in a hole in the brush on the south side of Dover Canyon Road, across from the creek where it makes a bend beside the road. Both sides of the road was our property.

We walked up the creek from the picnic grounds, beside the Patch, and up to our line fence at Louis Bergman's place, peering intently in the water holes with their root-entangled nooks and crannies in the banks for a steelhead. We didn't spot a single fish. So we began working back down the creek, rechecking every possible lair for a furtive fish sulking in

the slightly murky water.

In the Middle Water Hole, half way down the Patch - our potato and vegetable growing flat plot of land - , a nice 18 - 20 inch steelhead was spotted in the shadowy depths. Alerted and watchful, it drifted effortlessly, like a ghost, into the tangle of sycamore roots of the armpit-deep water, disappearing.

I quickly stripped off my clothes and slithered into the cold water with the spear, stubbing my numbing toes on the rocky bottom in that frigid water. Papa positioned himself at the riffle up the creek below the Upper Water Hole at the head of the patch in case the fish fled upstream. Ernie positioned himself just below the Middle Hole in a shallow riffle, rifle at the ready.

I probed and prodded into the roots and holes with the spear and my toes, trying to flush out the fish. But he never came out and I finally gave up when about frozen numb. I climbed out in the chilly breeze and struggled quickly into my clothes. The three of us resumed walking down the creek on the north side, resolved there were no more fish to search for.

We were nearly down opposite the

truck when a holler from the brush across the creek commanded us to cross over! It was Oren Philbrick, the warden! We crossed over to him where he took my spear.

Looking at all the human footprints alongside the creek, he asked if they were all ours.

"No," Papa replied. We knew there were any number of different men that checked the creek nightly.

Actually, our neighbor across the road from our house, Martin Holquest, had been checking the creek regularly, has had Harold and Wes Franklin at night.

I suppose I might have gotten a ticket but for the fact that when he learned I was leaving the next day, February 11, for the Army, he let me off. Then, too, we had no fish, but it was obvious what we had been doing.

We all walked together the 80 yards to the road and our truck, and there was Milt Botts, the other warden, guarding our old Model T.

They gave us a stern warning and Oren removed the homemade spearhead. Keeping it, he pitched the 10 foot long handle of 1/2 inch pipe way up into a thick brush pile of mostly poison



oak! Fortunately, they didn't take either rifle.

With a parting, "Shoot a Jap for me!" from Oren, they climbed into their pickup and drove off.

Ernie, who didn't get poison oak, promptly climbed into the brush and retrieved the handle to his spear I had been carrying. Within a few hours, the handle had another spearhead and was ready for use.

The new spearhead, as had been the one taken away, was made from a hoedown. Ernie fashioned it into a spear in the forge. A hoedown was a narrow fork about 8 inches wide with 4 ten inch long tines bent at a right angle to the handle, looking something like a garden hoe. Straightening the tines back and forging a barb near each point, it made a dandy spearhead.

The hoedown was used to drag the grain stalks from the header wagon onto the Jackson feeder on the threshing machine. Uncle Ben Claassen always drove the three-horse header, the horses walking behind it pushing it ahead of them cutting the ripe grain. A twelve foot wide swath was cut and a 3 foot wide canvas draper with a hardwood slat 1

inch square every foot edged with a leather strap on each side carried the stalks up into a header wagon being pulled continuously alongside as it moved forward. The header wagon had one low side about a foot high that the header chute extended over and the other side was 4 or 5 feet high. Two horses pulled these header wagons when full beside the threshing machine to be unloaded into the Jackson feeder.

I only remember getting one steelhead in my life, when I was about 16. I was walking up the creek above the Patch in the pasture looking for fish when I spotted one just below Bergman's line fence on our side of Jack Creek. Shooting down into the water aiming the 303 Savage below the fish swimming below the surface, I shot. It floated to the top, struggling feebly. I was so excited I jumped right into the knee-deep water to grab the fish. In my excitement, I dropped the rifle in the water to grab the slippery fish with both hands. So I had to clean the rifle and a nice steelhead when I got home.

One time at night I remember being with Ernie, my brother, and Wes and Harold, my brothers-in-law, at the picnic

area in the Pasture. A wide plank crossed the creek and we spotted two steelhead spawning in a riffle upstream a bit when standing on that plank. They saw us and spooked, getting away from us.

One time I went with Harold, Wes, and Art Buchanan trout fishing up Atascadero Creek to its head waters on the Eagle Ranch the first day of trout season, the last Saturday in April. A waterfall tumbles over a ledge ten or twelve feet high into a dandy pool. That hole is all the farther upstream a migrating steelhead can get up the creek. There were nice trout and several steelhead in the hole. We caught two steelhead and a nice mess of trout. Walking back to the car I killed a big rattlesnake. I nearly stepped on it. One thing for sure, Harold sure did enjoy fishing!

July 13, 1995. A conversation with "Howie" Harold Steinbeck

Howie's grandfather, Ralph Ernst, was a "fish'in fool" according to Howie. I was telling him about this project to write about the former steelhead days in the Salinas River system. When he was a young boy growing up in the Union

District east of Paso Robles, he tagged along with his grandpa in the 1940's and 1950's. Howie was born in 1938 and he was his grandpa's little shadow. He went fishing about once a week. "Time to fix fence" announced at a meal or getting up in the morning meant, "Pack up, Mother. We're going fishing!"

Grandfather especially loved trout fishing and he fished all the streams around that had trout, both on the coastal side and in the Salinas. Howie remembers many times being with his grandfather snagging steelhead in the Salinas River in holes along the bank under the willows. About 4 pm, the lowering slanting rays of sunlight revealed the fish lurking in their hideouts. Ralph didn't use a gig or gun. Instead, he had a big fishhook snelled to a six foot length of stiff wire. He'd snake that hook under the chin of the fish deftly, and yank back, snagging the fish. He rarely missed.

He kept the rig coiled behind the car seat where it was always handy in a moment. His favorite place to fish was the Salinas River just up from Carminiti's to about opposite the present Paso Robles Water Treatment Plant at the north end of



town on the eastern bank alongside North River Road. There were lots of shady holes there and many people preferred that area to look for steelhead.

September 16, 1995 Visiting with my cousin, Herb Strauss, at Ed Weatherby's house along Jack Creek in Hidden Valley Ranchettes west of Templeton.

I was with my son, Johnny, this morning at a Men's Breakfast with his church, The Atascadero Bible Church. About 70 men were in attendance. It was held in the field below Ed Weatherby's house beside Jack Creek. We were about 1/4 mile above the confluence of Santa Rita Creek and Jack Creek on the Hidden Valley development west of Templeton 3 or 4 miles.

Herb Strauss grew up about a mile north of the area and his father farmed all that land for years. Herb is now about 50 years old. Herb works at the rock quarry at Santa Margarita. I was telling him about my project and some of the things I have learned from the various people I have interviewed.

He told me that he knows a man that works for the county road department and

that he for sure saw a nice steelhead in Tassajera Creek at the north end of Cuesta Grade above the Highway 101 bridge a mile or two during February, 1995. Herb could have gone over and saw the fish, but he didn't have time. This individual, an avid fisherman and knowledgeable about trout and their spawning habits, reported that he saw several spawning holes or redds, in the area, as well. With all the high water this winter with more than double the average rainfall, I am sure there must have been some steelhead coming up the Salinas River.

I teach with Ralph Lewis in Paso Robles. He lives in a house in Garden Farms just north of Santa Margarita a mile. Tassajera Creek runs about 30 feet behind his house and he and his two boys play in the creek a lot. It flowed some water all summer and he said that there were lots of little trout fingerlings in the creek this fall in October, 1995.

Herb also told me that he went trout fishing this May, 1995 in Jack Creek from where Santa Rita and Jack Creeks meet to above Jack Creek Road north of Highway 46 where it crosses over Jack Creek along David Barlogio's place. He

caught 3 trout in the 8 - 10 inch class. Tim Barlogio also caught trout in the creek on their land this May, 1995, when trout season was open. Herb also knows of trout being caught in the mouth of Paso Robles Creek and Graves Creek where they both enter the Salinas River at Highway 101. These trout were bright, shiny fish, most likely "egg eaters" or juvenile steelhead that come up and feed on steelhead eggs from the spawning adults. Although they will have eggs, too, and undoubtedly spawn.

My daughter-in-law's brother, John Cummings, told me in September, 1995, that friends of his were catching a few trout in the mouth of Paso Robles Creek this summer, 1995.

After the breakfast, Ed Weatherby took Herb and I over to this 10 foot deep pool near where we were eating and out of which he pumps some water to irrigate a couple of acres of pasture. We peered into the sunlit water and I believe we saw at least one trout swimming around with the pike and suckers, about an 8 inch fish. Ed's son caught one trout out of the deep hole in May.

Herb's stepfather, Jerry Hamm, lived and farmed along Jack Creek above

Highway 46 in the 1950's and 1960's, when Herb was in high school. Herb remembers several steelhead being caught in Jack Creek by his uncle in the late 1950's. The steelhead run soon died out after Nacimiento Dam was completed in 1956. Its water flow was needed to push the Salinas River's water out the bar at the ocean.

John Barnes told me that he and a couple other fellows speared a 31 1/2 inch steelhead out of Paso Robles Creek in the early 1950's along Rossi's place.

Later today, in the afternoon, I happened to meet one of my former students and friend, Danny Lacy, now, 1995, a Senior at Templeton High School. He works part time on a small place bordering Jack Creek near the county road to Santa Rita Creek, a mile west of Templeton. He told me that he and a friend of his saw 4 nice steelhead in a big pool in Jack Creek near the bridge in March. They stood on a big rock and looked down into the hole where these fish, each about 24 inches long, were swimming around. they didn't bother them.



October 2, 1997 A conversation with Albert Rist at a Paso Robles Historical Society meeting.

Albert was born in the Bradley area and was a "fishin' fool." I asked him if he ever caught any steelhead. He grinned as he told me about going down to the Salinas River at Bradley. One must know that for many years, from the 1920s until the 1980s Albert and his wife Laura owned most of Bradley and had most of the businesses there, having inherited it from Laura's uncle.

They would build a fire on the bank and sit and listen for steelhead thrashing over the shallow shoals. They would run out with a flashlight and spear them with a pitchfork. In the morning, he would also ease slowly along the bank, peering into the holes along the edge, where he would spear fish.

Usually using a pitchfork, he also had two or three homemade spears over the years. He had a half inch galvanized pipe coupling welded onto the spear and would screw in a length of pipe for a handle. "It would have been nice if we had had PVC," he remarked wryly!

Fred Smith, the King City warden,

would speak into the Standard Gas Station in Bradley and try to catch Albert fishing. He came close, but never succeeded! In later years they had a good laugh together about the chases!

Albert, when I asked how many fish a year he speared - a dozen or two? - he shook his head no. Five or six, probably. Some years maybe a few more, depending on the height and flow of the Salinas River. He never weighed or measured any steelhead he got, but agreed they were about four to eight pounds.

Several times he went to the upper Nacimiento River behind Bryson/Hesperia. They'd put chicken wire netting across the river and sit and wait, watching to see if the wire wiggled when a fish stuck his nose in the mesh and tried to get through. This was at night, never daytime.

Burnett Creek was really a good spot and he speared some up that creek, as well as Tobacco Creek. There was an old cabin up Burnett Creek they'd stay in. For trout fishing they'd go over Pine Mountain into the San Carpoho head waters on Hearst Ranch and trout fish. They would hook into steelhead, but they usually

broke off.

He said it took about seven days after the bar at the mouth of the Salinas River washed out before the fish reached Bradley or a new surge of high water raced through after a rain. He tried shooting fish, but he said he never did get one that way.

November 13, 1995 Visiting with Woody Proud, who grew up in San Luis Obispo. He is my daughter-in-law Cindy's grandfather, married to Dortha Iverson. He was born in 1919.

I told him about my writing about steelhead. Did he ever get any?

He just laughed in that quick, guttural, throaty, laughing chuckle and wide grin across his friendly, furrowed face and shot back, "Lots of 'em!"

I first asked him if San Luis Creek had much of a steelhead run in the old days. He quickly stated how there were thousands of steelhead in the creek each winter and spring.

From the time he was a young boy in the 1920's until 1951, when the fish stopped, he said you can't imagine the numbers of fish in the creek and its

tributaries. Below the old library, he has seen literally hundreds of 4 to 8 pound steelhead stacked so thick in the holes they nearly pushed the outside fish on the edges out onto the banks out of the water during the 1930's. He graduated from San Luis High School in December, 1937, and caught many fish over those years. The biggest one he ever caught weighed 14 1/2 pounds, about 32 inches long.

In 1946 when he returned home from fighting Japs in the Pacific, he bought 12 acres at Foothill and Santa Rosa Streets through which flowed Stenner Creek. It was loaded with steelhead. However, when he sold the property in 1951, very few fish came up that year and within a couple more years, all steelhead spawning had stopped in all San Luis Creek as there was so much pollution from garages dumping their used motor oil and grease, grease from the cafes and meat plants, and runny stuff from the stores and businesses.

He has caught steelhead in all the tributaries of San Luis Creek, including near the bottom of Cuesta Grade above the Lowe place, and around Cal Poly.

He told me he never once speared or



shot a steelhead in his life. He would lay on the bank and feel underneath the overhanging ledges along the edge. The undulating fin's movement of the water marked where a fish would be laying. If you touch their tail, they'd spook and take off. Carefully touching the fish in their anal area, he gently began stroking their underside back and forth, in a petting motion. Working up to the gills, when they flared open expelling the water, the fingers were thrust up into the gills. Pinching together, you clamped your fingers in the gills and jerked up at the same time, bringing the flopping fish out onto the bank.

Woody claimed he never missed. Old Si Swinerton, from an early settler family that had a dairy at Chorro Street and Highway 101, taught him how to catch steelhead when Woody was just a young boy.

The steelhead were larger in San Luis Creek than over the grade in the Salinas River tributaries. He has also caught many a steelhead in the Santa Margarita area- Tassajera, Trout, and Rinconada Creeks. Both forks of Trout Creek, behind Santa Margarita, were good fishing. They join just before running east of the

cemetery, flowing north and joining Tassajera Creek below Garden Farms. In the early 1930's, a China man and his family lived in the flat, boggy area of Trout Creek between the cemetery and Garden Farms, reputedly making whiskey and living off fish.

He also got steelhead in Adelaida from the Nacimiento River tributaries. He claimed that when Nacimiento Dam was built in 1956, that ended the steelhead runs. Putting in the Salinas Dam in 1940 greatly curtailed the upper Salinas fish runs, too.

The fall rains each year brings life in so many forms to our parched Central California hills. One form is to fill the thirsty soil with moisture. This water creeps out or slides down as runoff water, collecting in swales and draws, gurgling and working downhill. Recharged springs begin to overflow, too, and this water is collected by canyon junctures to form creeks that converge and combine their water to fill the Salinas River. This muddy water surges toward the ocean at Monterey Bay, 125 miles north.

Dad's excitement passed to us six kids- I (Harold), Donald, Alfred, Robert, Lonnie, and Roger - and Mom as we drove over from our house 3 miles east of the Salinas River after the first big winter rains to see if the river was running. After not flowing all summer, it was exciting to see the extending fingers of debris-laden water pushing and shoving ahead tirelessly towards the ocean. If the water was already flowing past the Santa Ysabel Ranch, we'd drive north downstream until we found it's head.

Big gobs of cream-colored, brownish foam would form as air was trapped in the bits of grass, leaves, dust, and tumbling water. Pillow-sized chunks of foam would catch in the weeds and willow limbs as the water level rose swirling and eddying over shallow bars and deeper channels.

Foam floating downstream mostly in the center of the river indicated the water level was rising, while foam mainly along the banks showed the river level was falling.

I remember Grandpa Claassen telling how he had seen the water coming down the Nacimiento River. The front of the water could be in a wall as high as a

horse's back. One would not want to be crossing the river with that much water coming down.

Dad always got really excited seeing the river flowing. Every time we would cross the river from then on during the winter and spring, Dad would tell all us kids to "keep your eyes peeled" looking for a possible fish pushing upstream. He would have a hard time steering straight as he peered intently into the water, too, about stalling our car, or, as he would say, "keeping the old hooten-nanny going!" His excitement was contagious. We all realized that this feeling of his was from a memory bank of unforgettable escapades up and down Jack Creek and the Salinas River. He would then launch into one of his stories of spearing steelhead. The fish are gone, but not the memories. Now Dad is gone, too.

In summary, steelhead took 7 days to swim up to Paso Robles from Monterey Bay, and 9 - 10 days to reach their spawning areas up Jack Creek. They ran from January through March, depending on the fluctuating flow of the river after each heavy rain. Some years, the river never flowed or the flow was too small to push through the bar at the mouth. The



Salinas River normally quit flowing about June to August, even before any dams were built or the country was settled. The first rains are generally in October, but the river usually didn't flow until the heavier rains came in December or January.

Steelhead averaged 4 - 8 pounds each, the early fish in January generally larger. The fish in March at the tail of the run included steelhead 16 - 18 inches long, 2 - 3 pounds on up. Juvenile steelhead 8 - 12 inches long, called "egg eaters" or half pounders, came up in March at the end of the run, eating eggs that they found floating in the water.

Big steelhead were 10 - 12 pounds in the Salinas River, with very few over 10 1/2 to 11 pounds up to 17 pounds.

Probably more than a majority of the fish spawned and returned to the ocean with the high, muddy water that concealed them from probing eyes on the banks. I think that, in heavy rainfall years perhaps more than 80 or 90 percent of the fish spawned and returned to the ocean safely.

I don't believe that more than several hundred fish were taken by people in a year out of probably hundreds that came up in an average rainfall year. I really don't

know, but everyone said that lots of fish were safe. The Nacimiento River might have had as large a steelhead run as the Salinas above its juncture, maybe even more, especially in drier years when the Nacimiento always had more water than the Salinas.

Chinook salmon once came up the Salinas River weighing up to 35 pounds, with some up to 48 inches long and around 46 pounds. These salmon runs were very heavy in the 1890s and fell off sharply about 1910 or so and by 1943 were over in the Salinas River. There might have been salmon later in the Nacimiento. The Nacimiento River seems to have had more salmon than the Salinas above their confluence.

The demise of the steelhead spawning runs began in 1940 with the building of the dam at Santa Margarita across the Salinas River. This curtailed the annual migration somewhat. But building the Nacimiento River Dam in 1956 and the San Antonio River Dam in 1958 pretty well ended the steelhead run up the Salinas River above the mouth of the Arroyo Seco River where it empties into the Salinas River near Greenfield. The Arroyo Seco still has a steelhead

migration and could very well be the source of a few steelhead that still come up the Salinas. I have read that up to 10 percent of a migration can divert up unfamiliar waters, for some unexplained reason.

Many tools and methods were used to collect the steelhead- homemade spears, manure and pitch forks, store-bought "frog" spears, rifles, shotguns, snag hooks on stiff wire, nets and fences, and by hand. Dynamite was not unheard of, too.

Most of this activity went on at night as the fish were less easily spooked and even somewhat attracted by the light. Flashlights were most commonly carried but bright gasoline lanterns were used, too. All who took fish thought they were not hurting the migration and usually took only what they could use fresh. They were highly protective and jealous of the run and became very angry with those they suspected might be fencing too much, snitching on them or threatening a fight, or sending logs down river to take out the barriers. It was understood that one did not take too many fish - that would really raise tempers- or invite "outsiders" in for fish. It

seems the wardens overlooked a few fish by locals, but trounced on outsiders with a vengeance.

Warden Orin Philbrick must be given credit for his part in packing trout fry in ten gallon milk cans by horse and mule back to remote areas to get them started where natural barriers had kept them out since time began. There is not a stream in the Santa Lucia Range that doesn't have trout because of him, including brown trout in some of the Arroyo Seco drainage.

Most fish passed by when the river was still high after heavy rains; each fresh discharge into the ocean triggering a new run of fish. Often one rain followed the next after only a couple of days respite, keeping the water up and too muddy to peer into well enough to see the fish. It was not possible to get them when the water was muddy and high. They traveled day and night then, but when the water was low and clear, the fish would travel more by night and lay up during the day in protective lairs along the banks where the current was less strong.

The fish did not require a lot of water in which to swim. They would "skitter" over shallow sand bars and riffles where more



than half their body was out of the water;  
just as long as they could get some water  
with which to push against with their  
powerful, broad tails. This would kick up a  
big spray of water as they flailed the water  
in a surge of frenzy. The fish could be all  
scarred and spotted with sores when they  
finally arrived at their spawning holes.

Most of the oldtimers claimed the main  
spawning stream for steelhead in the  
Salinas River above the Nacimiento River  
was Jack Creek along with its tributary,  
Santa Rita Creek. Fish were seen  
spawning in it from the junction of Santa  
Rita Creek up to its headwaters in the 7X  
Ranch and Marquart Ranch. The prime  
spawning area of Jack Creek was from  
the Dover Canyon Road bridge upstream.  
Fortunately, Jack Creek from the Salinas  
River is still in pretty much the same  
condition today in 1999 as it was in the  
early days.

Most everyone seemed to eat their  
steelhead fried. All declared that it was  
delicious eating. Scalding the fish with  
hot water was a common method of  
loosening the scales and then scraping  
them off with a dull knife.

Trout season opened the last Saturday  
in April, so much of what I've written about

was illegal. Everyone I've talked to are  
fine, upright folks. I suppose this was an  
opportunity for a challenge, and it was  
taken, resulting in some mighty, fine  
eating. Now it is all just memories, fond  
stories, some fodder for yarns, a good  
chuckle and sparkling eyes with a far off  
glint of days when when these hobbling  
old, stoop-shouldered men were young  
and agile with a silvery fish on the end of  
a vibrating pole wading in ice-cold water  
up to their waist with frost on the  
streamside grass and their breath  
exhaling in clouds of vapor as they  
scrambled up the muddy banks. It is  
thrilling to know a few steelhead are still  
following their ancestors' riffles.

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