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Winifred Ferdon Dette: Diary of a Catskill Fly Tier

by Michael E. Valla



The Dette home/shop in the early 1950s, before the highway Route 17 was constructed.

THE OLD HOUSE AT the end of Cottage Street, in Roscoe, New York, is strangely quiet and still. Aside from a small desk that I moved into the front room to write these words, the house is entirely empty now. And if it were not for the memories I have of the house, and of the times I stayed here, it would be hard to imagine that the small room was ever anything other than just a living area. But it was this room that served as a fly shop for many years when noted Catskill fly tiers Walt and Winnie Dette dressed their hallmark trout flies for hundreds of fly fishers who made pilgrimages to the storied Catskill rivers. This is the place of the Beaverkill and the Willowemoc, two of the most famous trout streams in America, and it is the place where I first met Winifred Dette.

All photos from the collection of Mary Dette Clark.

The old sign still hangs across the entire side of the home, although it is hidden now by poplar trees and growth: WALT DETTE FISHING TACKLE-FLIES. It is the sign that caught my eye from across the highway nearly forty years ago.¹ And to a boy of fifteen who was wandering the area alone on a day's fishing adventure, it spelled Mecca. I ran across the highway from the bus depot—fly rod, boots, and vest in hand—toward the house.

I had immersed myself in fly-fishing books and articles at the town library, reading about the Catskill rivers and their famous fly tiers.² It was just a question of somehow getting to Roscoe and those rivers. A simple solution was to secretly save school lunch money and collect the few dollars needed to take a bus trip from my home in Binghamton, 65 miles to the west, to live my dream for at least a day.

"We have an extra bedroom if you would like to stay a week," Walt offered

when he tracked me down, on orders from Winnie, and found me fishing that evening along the Willowemoc a short distance from the back of their house. I had stopped in the fly shop early that morning, and Winnie seemed a little bewildered and wondered how and why I had come to the river alone. Later in the day, she directed Walt to look for me for fear I would miss my evening bus back home.

That meeting resulted in a friendship that lasted until Walt and Winnie passed away. I stayed with them many times over the years, particularly during my teenage and college summers. The Dette home in those days was somewhat of an empty nest. Winnie and Walt's children, Mary and Walt II (called Clay), were well into adulthood. Mary lived on Long Island raising her own family, and Walt II (an engineer) was raising his out of state. I was offered Clay's room. Clay dabbled in fly fishing during childhood (he caught

a 14-pound Atlantic salmon, to his credit, from the Margaree River), but his interests were more in the sciences, engineering, and hobbies focused on those activities. Walt died in 1994, and we lost Winnie in 1998, but they both still live in my thoughts, and their matchless Catskill style lives on in the talent of others who follow their traditions.

In the years when I stayed with them, this was the scene in the fly shop: Winnie tucked in her fly-tying cubby on the right, Walt tying in his little domain to her left. I usually squeezed in between them, intently watching Walt and persistently tugged at Winnie for historical discussion. Walt instructed me at the fly-tying vise, directing my fingers through the motions that made the Dette flies so uniform and beautiful. Winnie would interject comments as we all tied, and I listened as she offered details about the history of fly fishing in the Catskills.

Daughter Mary Dette Clark, a superb tier in her own right, still ties flies at the home her parents moved into in the early 1970s, a couple of doors down from the old place I so fondly remember. In the spring of 2006, I sat at Winnie's bench (it appeared as if she'd never left it) and did some tying for Mary—not for money, but simply because I wanted to. There were envelopes and old cigar boxes stacked here and there, still filled with hackles she had organized. The small

glass jars in which she placed her stripped hackle quills were there, just as if she was preparing to tie a dozen Red Quills. She loved tying Red Quills, and I can still remember her instructing, "You have to soak your quills when you tie Red

Quills." It was easy to recall the discussions we had, and sitting at her place brought on a flood of memories of her tying style, methods, and the array of Catskill patterns that emerged from her vise.

Winnie spoke often about the economy of motion in fly tying. When the Dettes tied a dozen classic dry flies, they would neatly lay out on the bench twelve wing pairs, twelve sets of measured hackle, twelve hooks, and the appropriate body material. Then they would systematically assemble the dozen flies in a most efficient manner. Winnie, as well as Walt and Mary, preferred this method to repeatedly picking up a hackle cape to pluck hackles fly by fly.

Efficiency was one concern, but not at the expense of uniformity, durability, and function. The uniformity of their flies resulted from an eye for material selection and an exacting sense of proportion. Winnie frequently mentioned that material recognition and selection was the hard part in precision tying, next to proper measurement of the fly components. As for her insistence on proper measurement, I recall an incident from the summer of 1971, when I was seventeen. Walt and Winnie's grandson, Mary's son Gary, was my age, and they thought it would be nice for the two of us to meet and fish together. Gary came up from his home on Long Island, and we fished together for a couple of weeks. The idea was



Winnie Dette, later in life.



Winnie and Walt Dette in the 1930s.



Mary, Walt II, and Winnie in the 1940s.

to do some night fishing, and Gary decided he needed some Light Cahill dry flies and wanted Winnie to tie a few. Gary pleaded with his grandmother: "We need Light Cahills, and we need them right away!"

Winnie was in the middle of cooking dinner and couldn't be bothered right then with the request. Gary persisted, and Winnie, somewhat riled at this point, shuffled her pots, then made her way into the tying room. She grabbed some wood duck flank feathers for winging, reached for some ginger shade hackle, and proceeded to measure every single hackle against her gauge to ensure they were the proper size for a size 10 hook. In a hurry or not, she still measured the hackle for uniformity of size (from that moment on, I have always measured my hackles to hook size).

Who was this woman who tied those famous Catskill style trout flies for more than sixty years, this caring person Winifred Dette? Eric Leiser, in his book *The Dettes*,³ did a wonderful job of shedding light on the family, but as Leiser commented to me in a letter shortly after the book was published, it was sometimes hard to get information from them. "They simply won't

brag or even talk about the good things they've done." He reflected, "It was in fact quite tough getting what I did get."⁴

It is true Walt and Winnie were considered a fly-tying couple (and later Walt,

Winnie, and their daughter Mary were regarded as an inseparable fly-tying family), but Winnie did not receive the level of recognition she deserved in both the evolution of fly tying in the Catskills and in the history of fly fishing in America. Although it would be common to see the both of them mentioned together as an indivisible pair, the significance of her own historical contribution was infrequently described in any detail.

This may have been the result of a combination of things. I never sensed from Winnie a feeling that she sought, or felt entitled to, recognition that was separate from Walt (or from Walt, Winnie, and Mary). Their relationship was certainly synergistic, and they generally insisted on being considered an entity. Moreover, she viewed her craft as simply providing trout fishers with a means to catch fish; she minimized its importance. She generally did not hover around writers (who may have been interested in her story), although she was very fond of a few, like famed artist and writer William Schaldach,⁵ of whom she often spoke. The Dettes, as a rule, simply were not out to promote themselves in any fashion. Then there's the hard

ineluctable fact that women in those years were often marginalized when it came to their own accomplishments in male-dominated sporting activities, such as fishing. However, Walt himself commented in his later years that he wished he had made more of a point of describing how much Winnie did in the beginning and how important her role was in the development of their craft.

A careful examination of the evidence of the past indisputably shows that Winnie had an important role in the history of fly fishing in America. The Dettes saved virtually every letter and piece of correspondence they received, as well as copies of letters they had written to others. Mary graciously allowed me to go on sort of an archeological dig through the records and files. There are hundreds of letters, and I recently spent days poring over what I found.

I had been aware of the existence of the files for many years, ever since my boyhood days with the family, and I often thought that they were



Walt and Winnie on the Beaverkill River in the 1930s.



The Riverview Inn.

stashed away for posterity's sake and with time would surface. But later I was told of the discovery of the *Diary of Winifred Ferdon: 1928*. Once I read the diary, I arrived at a new level of appreciation for the role Winnie played in the Dette fly-tying legacy. She often stated that the only reason she tied flies was because Walt was interested in tying, something he first started to try in 1927.⁶ What is clear from the diary is that Winnie had a genuine interest herself in fishing, enjoy-

ing the outdoors on the rivers, and learning to tie flies.

Great-grandson Joe Fox, who now ties flies alongside Mary, commented that some written information that the family was unaware existed had been discovered among Walt and Winnie's stored belongings. The family had not yet gone through it themselves. One of those items was the diary. Talented West Coast fly tier Jim Slattery, who bunked with me during a recent stay in Roscoe, thought

that finding the diary was significant and felt strongly there was some history to be had from its pages. We spent time into the wee hours of the night reading over this and other documents and letters.

Winnie had her beginnings as a Catskill fly tier in 1928 at age eighteen.⁷ Her parents operated a summer hotel, the Riverview Inn, on the Beaverkill River close to Roscoe. In letters written in the mid-1980s, Winnie explained her beginnings in fly tying and the early relationship she had with Harry and Elsie Darbee, another well-known Catskill fly-tying couple. It was sometimes assumed that the Detttes and the Darbees started out together before the two couples went their separate ways and operated independently of each other. But this was not the case.

Winnie first had the idea of selling flies, and she has said that selling flies was the furthest thing from Walt's mind in those years.⁸ Walt loved tying, but he experimented as a hobby only. And the two of them, in the midst of their romance, would meet often at Walt's house to tie flies. Even during their budding and developing relationship, fly tying, fly fishing, and an interest in these diversions created a strong bond between them.

My parents ran a summer hotel near Roscoe and had a large clientele of fishermen every spring. I tied and sold flies to them, before I married Walt in the fall of 1928. It was from the hotel that Walt and I sold flies for the first two years, but Harry (Darbee) did not join



The Riverview Inn.



Walt, Winnie, and Harry Darbee.

us until 1933 as he was doing other things than tying. When the Depression hit this area, and things got pretty hard, we went into fly tying commercially (wholesale) to make a living. We moved into a small house in Rockland which was tied up in my maternal grandparents' estate, and worked from there. Walt went to New York City and obtained such large orders we had to have help and it was in late 1933 that we invited Harry (who was living in New Paltz) to join us as a third partner. The following year we moved into a larger house in Roscoe on Academy Street, across from the Bivens house, where Elsie lived. She was younger and Harry had not met her until we hired her to help out, sorting hackle. After they were married in 1934 or 1935 we split up and they went into their own business. Elsie did not tie in the few months she worked for us, but learned from Harry after their marriage.⁹

It is true that Winnie, Walt, and Harry did spend a significant amount of time with each other fishing the Beaverkill, and there are numerous entries in the diary that capture in detail their forays

on the river and of some large trout that were taken. There are descriptions of the three of them hunting down the elusive Andalusian roosters at area poultry farms in search of hackle.¹⁰ It is clear that

Winnie was involved in those experiences—as well as ones on the river, fly casting, and taking trout—right along with the boys.

Winnie's first attempts at fly tying were as frustrating as those any fly tier has experienced, and it appears from her diary she struggled at first. All tiers have a learning curve, and Winnie was no different. She writes: "At the rate & quality which I tie I might earn 10c a week. About the only thing I can do right is put the hook in the vise & that's the least."¹¹ Another entry bemoans: "I came home and tied up half a dozen split wings but none of them seem to be as good as the first two I tied. I either get them too large or too small."¹²

But her skills gradually improved, and she became more confident in her tying. There is not a fly tier around who cannot remember that magic day on the river that he or she caught the first trout on a self-tied fly. That day for Winnie was May 5, 1928.

Went fishing all afternoon. Caught my first trout on a fly I tied myself. I was tickled to death too. I went out with Paul and he didn't get anything at all. Got mine on a Cahill. Mr. Hendrickson and Mr. Steenrod came up. Mr. H says he'll bring me up a rod. I sure wish he would. Steenrod showed us some of his wet flies. All tied on #6 hooks and they sure are whoppers. I bet they kill the fish though. I've changed some of my ideas.¹³

Roy Steenrod is a significant figure in the history of fly fishing in America. Steenrod and his pal A. E. Hendrickson, along with George Stevenson, were regulars on the Beaverkill in those years. It was Steenrod who, after a significant fishing episode at Ferdon's Pool on the



Winnie in 1951 with a 16-pound Atlantic salmon caught from McDaniel's Pool on the Margaree River.

Beaverkill, created and named the Hendrickson fly. More importantly, Steenrod was a very close friend of Theodore Gordon, long labeled the father of dry-fly fishing in America. Gordon, often called a southern gentleman, came to the Catskills in 1882 after a financial disaster involving a Georgia railroad.¹⁴

Steenrod worked at the post office in nearby Liberty and got to know Gordon when he stopped by to mail his flies to customers. Gordon was known as a loner, but Steenrod was one of the few who tied flies with him, and they regularly fished together. Gordon corresponded frequently with British fly tier and chalkstream fisherman Frederic Halford, another historical figure. Around 1890, Gordon received forty-eight dry-fly patterns from Halford, and Gordon experimented with adapting the dry fly to his beloved Catskill waters. When Gordon died, he left the original Frederic Halford flies to Steenrod, and they eventually ended up with the Anglers' Club of New York.¹⁵

Winnie frequently visited with Steenrod, and there are diary entries that give us insight into their interaction. This relationship clearly shows, as Eric Leiser

so aptly points out, that the Dettas are an important link in the chain of fly tiers that reaches back to Theodore Gordon. It might be argued that the link with Steenrod puts Winnie Dette in the chain all the way back to Halford. Entries such as these tell the story best.



Winnie and Al Dowling on the Beaverkill River in the early 1940s. Dowling was a regular at the Dette shop during those war years.



Author John McDonald, Winnie, and Walt in 1986.

I drove down to Liberty and called on Roy Steenrod. We showed him the samples we received from England and he thought them pretty good. He showed us a lot of his things. Such a mess as his material seems to be in! I don't see how he finds anything. His tying vise is just like Walt's. He sort of kidded us—still he didn't act as though he thought we were a couple of foolish kids. Some professionals would.¹⁶

Well, I went fishing today but all I caught was a miserable little chub which I threw up on the bank. Mr. Steenrod got 8 beauties. We got talking on the subject of flies and Mr. Hendrickson gave me about \$20 worth of flies. Mr. Steenrod gave me a couple of flies he tied (those he uses himself). I showed him some of those I tied and he and Walt were discussing methods of obtaining material etc. Altogether we had a large evening. I'm going fishing tomorrow with Mr. Hendrickson and Walt will meet us on the river. Mr. Steenrod has to attend a meeting in Liberty in the afternoon.¹⁷

Mr. Steenrod went down to the room tonight and tied a couple of flies. He sure is quick at it. He told us where we could get material. Says he ties about 500 dozen a year. He was awfully nice about it. I was afraid he might think we were just a bunch of crazy kids.¹⁸

Winnie, and no doubt Walt, must have received some degree of inspiration from Steenrod as it was only one year into their enterprise that they sold significant numbers of flies. In 1929, Winnie's meticulous records indicate they sold more than 200 dozen (including some to Steenrod), and a year later they sold more than 500 dozen, reaching Steenrod's bar themselves. A dozen flies went for \$3 in 1929.¹⁹

Their customers in those first couple of years included Preston Jennings, Corey Ford, Ed Hewitt, artist Jack Atherton (who later painted the color plates of Catskill trout flies for John McDonald's piece in the May 1946 issue of *Fortune* magazine²⁰), and Steenrod himself. These fly fishermen, and others of no particular pedigree, were well known in their day; many were writers.²¹

Preston Jennings, for one, wrote *A Book of Trout Flies* (Derrydale Press, 1935),



Left: Mary and Winnie, 1940s.

Below: Mary and Walt II, 1940s.



a work that is considered a classic. He often recommended the Dettes to others, and Winnie welcomed his recommendation. "I want to express my appreciation for the kind recommendation of Mr. Jennings" was Winnie's response to an inquiry letter from an angler in Michigan seeking out Dette flies.²² And those first years were just the beginning. Once the big wholesale orders came through, there were orders in the several hundred range. Even single orders of more than 720 dozen were not unusual.²³

What is most astounding is that Winnie, in the 1930s and 1940s, continued to tie a significant number of flies while raising a family and working in a position at the local bank, a job she held for more than thirty years. "Mom was definitely a

very hard-working woman," Mary recently said to me. "When you consider all she was trying to hold together—her two children, Dad's needs, and her job—it must have been very tiring and difficult for her to also spend many hours at the tying vise. But she wasn't a complainer."²⁴

It is true Winnie was a particularly talented fly tier, but my personal admiration for her rests in the belief that she was an extraordinary person as well. I have fond memories of her outside of the fishing and tying arena, when we both watched the evening baseball game, or shared in a crossword puzzle clue, or discussed news events over a slice of breakfast toast.

Winnie had a way of putting the joy of fly fishing into realistic perspective, and I found solace in the words she offered me

when I mentioned to her, in the early 1990s, that with trying to raise a family, I just couldn't seem to find enough time for the river. In a letter to me, she wrote:

There are times for family and times for pleasure, such as fishing. But the times for your children growing up are all too short, and too precious. There will be plenty of time later for your fishing when they are grown.²⁵

To those of us who knew her well, we miss her first as a dear friend. And we know that she has earned her place in the unique and fascinating history of fly fishing in America.

ENDNOTES

1. Michael Valla, "Walt Dette," *Fly Fisherman* (September 1994), 16, 20-23.
2. Included in my reading were pieces by Cecil E. Heacox, such as "Charmed Circle of the Catskills," *Outdoor Life* (March 1969, vol. 143, no. 3), 50-53, 88, 90, 92, 94. Heacox was a Cornell University-trained fisheries biologist in the then-called New York State Conservation Department and avid fly fisher who wrote an extensive two-part piece for *Outdoor Life* about the famous Catskill trout streams and the region's fly tiers. He was a personal friend of the Detttes. He also authored *The Complete Brown Trout* (New York: Winchester Press, 1974), as well as "The Charmed Circle Completed," *Outdoor Life* (April 1969, vol. 143, no. 4), 80-81, 177-180.
3. Eric Leiser, *The Detttes* (Fishkill, N.Y.: Willowkill Press, 1992).
4. Personal correspondence, Eric Leiser to Mike Valla, 29 August 1994.
5. William J. Schaldach was an avid outdoorsman, artist, and writer who was employed as an editor of *Forest and Stream* magazine (later named *Field & Stream*) until the late 1930s. Schaldach, in his classic *Currents and Eddies* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1944) wrote about the Beaverkill River. He stayed with the Detttes on many occasions.
6. "Roscoe Fly Tying Team," *The Walton Reporter* (Walton, New York), 31 May 1946, 9.
7. Personal correspondence, Winifred Dette to Miss [Judith] Dunham, 9 October 1987.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Personal correspondence, Winifred Dette to Barry Lewis, 6 October 1986.
10. Winifred Ferdon, *Diary of Winifred Ferdon: 1928*, 8 January 1928.
11. *Ibid.*, 9 January 1928.
12. *Ibid.*, 17 April 1928.
13. *Ibid.*, 5 May 1928.
14. Cecil Heacox, "The Catskill Fly Tyers," *Outdoor Life* (May 1972, vol. 149, no. 5), 66.
15. *Ibid.*, 67.
16. Winifred Ferdon, *Diary of Winifred Ferdon: 1928*, 29 October 1928.
17. *Ibid.*, 8 May 1928.
18. *Ibid.*, 10 May 1928.
19. Detttes, Record Book, 1929.
20. John McDonald, "Fly Fishing and Trout Flies," *Fortune* (May 1946, vol. 33, no. 6), 126-33, 150, 152, 155, 156, 158, 160, 162. This classic piece features a number of noted fly tiers, including the Detttes.
21. Detttes, Record Book, 1929.
22. Personal correspondence, Winifred Dette to W. A. Daniel, 14 March 1960.
23. Detttes, fly sale to Folsom Arms, Record Book, 7 January 1934.
24. Mary Dette Clark, interview with author, 20 August 2006.
25. Personal correspondence, Winifred Dette to Mike Valla, December 1990.



Mary, Winnie, Walt II, and Walt, 1940s.



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