

I didn't realize how limited my vocabulary was until I started fly fishing. Now the names of artificial flies, like gold-ribbed hare's ear, parachute adams and woolly bugger, roll effortlessly off of my tongue.

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Fishing bear-hide flies and red-flannel underwear

Although I don't have much patience when it comes to tying my own flies, I figure I could have handled the pioneering techniques used by the Whitefish area settlers during the 1890s.

Fishing on Whitefish Lake was a popular activity at the time, and a number of people, many from Kalispell, came up in wagons and by horseback. Most camped or stayed at Ramsey's Resort, which was managed by W.O. Hutchinson from 1893-1895.

Hutchinson was quite a fisherman. One day, he and his brother went out fishing in Monk's Bay using plain hooks and meat as bait. They weren't having much luck, but next to them another fishing party in a dugout canoe was having an entirely different day on the lake. A man named Stevens, who was catching a nice big trout every minute, led them. When Hutchinson asked what he was using for bait, Stevens replied, "Bear hide."

Stevens had taken a piece of bear hide about the size of a pea and put it on his hook.

Hutchinson learned from this experience, and while not having much luck hunting later that fall, he turned to fishing. The only problem was that he didn't have any bear hide. So he improvised.

Hutchinson shot a pine squirrel, cut off the end of its tail and put it on his hook. A few years later, he reported that the same technique landed him 75 trout in an hour, the best catch he ever made in Whitefish Lake. Other reports at the time, from "reliable and truthful" men, were that they had large catches of fish using pieces of their red-flannel underwear.

But the early settlers weren't the only men testing their luck at Whitefish Lake. Historically, bands of Native Americans periodically camped and fished along the shores of the lake.

Bloods, Piegans and Blackfeet came from the eastern plains, and the Salish (Flatheads, Kootenai, and Pend d' Oreille) traveled here from the west and south. The Kootenai name for Whitefish Lake was "Mateeth," and they were known as canoe Indians that often fished using spears.

Native Americans employed many fishing techniques in Western Montana. Often they fished using a baited hook and a line of woven horsehair. Sculpin, a small baitfish called s'tit'ma by the

Flatheads, were often used as bait.

Snagging trout with bone hooks was also employed. The hooks were manufactured from the scapula of a deer. This thin flat bone fractured easily when fresh, and the slivers were fashioned into a barbed point. It was then fastened with sinew to a straight piece of bone or a small stick.

Sometimes, fish were caught in cone-shaped fish traps or weirs usually constructed of willow. At the end of the day, excess fish from the day's catch was sun-dried on pole racks and stored.

Modern equipment and fishing techniques used in Whitefish Lake have changed dramatically since the days of bear-hide flies and snagging fish with bone hooks.

However, a common denominator of an awe-inspiring backdrop has always framed the fishing experience. Just remember, the next time you're fishing on Whitefish Lake, it wouldn't hurt to wear a little flannel. Just in case you run out of bait.

Next month, Lake Line's article "Shrimping for Answers in Whitefish Lake" will explore the ramifications of the introduction of opossum shrimp into Whitefish Lake and Tally Lake beginning in the late 1960s.

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