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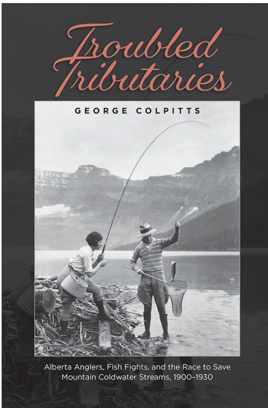

TROUBLED TRIBUTARIES: ALBERTA ANGLERS, FISH FIGHTS, AND THE RACE TO SAVE MOUNTAIN COLDWATER STREAMS, 1900–1930

by George Colpitts

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The Bow Fishery, Baitcasting, and Modern Camping in the Rockies

The streams of Rocky Mountains Park had long been popular with anglers from Calgary. By the mid-1920s, however, Banff was emerging as a mass tourist destination. Newcomers, most of whom arrived by car, brought with them new attitudes and expectations. They put unprecedented pressure on local resources, including the Bow River and its lakes and tributaries. Many of these visitors had neither the financial means nor the time to engage in more than brief forays into nature. For the most part, they viewed the mountain landscape from a distance: for them, the wilderness was primarily a magnificent but static tableau that inspired a comforting sense of grandeur and peace. Many of these tourists also fished differently than locals did, and—given their ever-increasing numbers and, as a result, their collective financial clout—their ways of interacting with nature mattered a great deal.

Perhaps no one could have fully anticipated the ways in which automobiles transformed the experience of nature in the western watersheds in the interwar years. In the parks of Alberta, as elsewhere, automobiles altered sensibilities, enlarged the range of possible pleasures, and drove new consumer demands, while also giving tourists a new independence of movement.[1] But if automobiles individualized encounters with nature, they also mediated the experience through their technology. Tourists began to understand nature with the motions, sounds, and windshield optics of their cars.[2] Meanwhile, the lucrative revenues to be won in the arrival of larger numbers of automobile travellers led to the commercialization of parks and an expanded array of services. In the environs of Banff, auto-driving tourists also forced park administrators to build new roads—in the end, falling back on the model of picturesque vistas, viewpoints cut here and there along the way, and

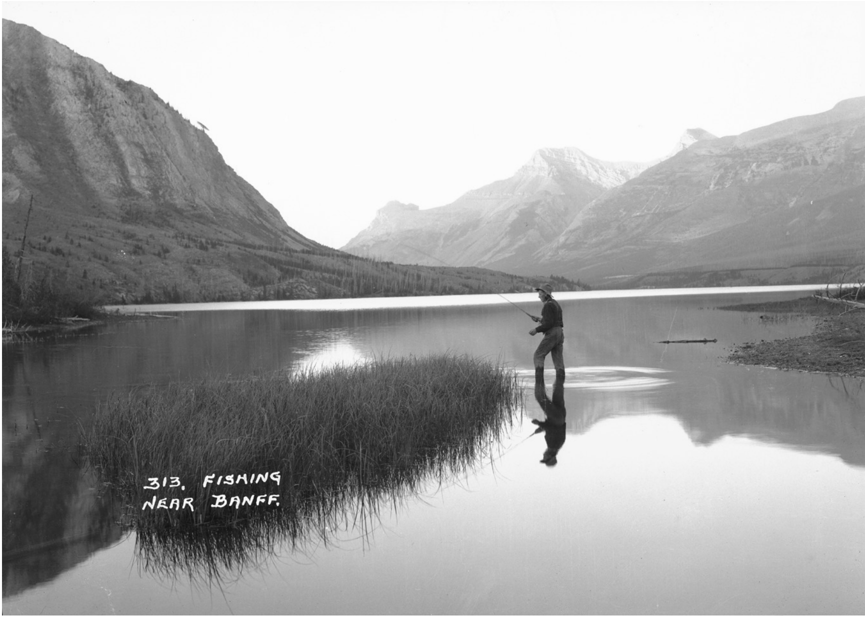

FIGURE 6.1
Fishing near Banff. Byron Harmon Fonds, V263/NA-448, Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies.

attractive, photo-ready curves.[3] Ironically, then, the park itself encouraged an understanding of nature as something ornamental, a "wilderness" panorama to be viewed in passing, while offering a different experience in angling, one favouring baitcasting.

Autotourism, Angling, and Banff

As early as 1907, automobile clubs in Calgary were forcing their entry into the Banff townsite, which at that point was still prohibiting vehicular traffic. Even after 1911, when parks policy relaxed to allow automobiles in town, driving was completely prohibited after 11:00 p.m., and while cars were allowed on the streets, it was at a reduced speed—even slower than the thirty miles per hour, the typical maximum cruising speed of early Model Ts.[4] As they ventured outside town into the park itself, auto drivers again had little freedom, as they were restricted to the few cart trails suitable for traffic.[5]

But the road system and power capacity of automobiles expanded considerably during the war. In 1916, prisoners in the Castle Mountain and Cave and Basin Internment Camps built roads connecting Banff to the nearby mining town of Bankhead and to the thermal springs at the Cave and Basin. The following year, more roadway opened to Lake Minnewanka, located not far to the northeast of the town, and a portion of the Loop Drive was built. Shortly after the war, autos like the Ford Model A could cruise at fifty miles per hour, prompting improvements to the rather harrowing Tunnel Mountain hairpin turns. Already in 1919, tourists could drive all the way to Johnston Canyon. Road building quickened. In 1921, the road from Banff to Lake Louise opened. Not that these thoroughfares were the smooth highways of today. In 1921, Norman Luxton, writing in his *Crag and Canyon*, lamented the state of the roads and commented sardonically that Charlie McAulay, the general construction foreman at the park, was a greater evangelist than Billy Sunday: "The roads Charlie builds shakes more hell out of people than Sunday's sermons."[6] All the same, in 1923, great fanfare accompanied the opening of the Banff–Windermere highway, and, by 1926, roadsters could roar from Lake Louise all the way to Field, British Columbia, stopping to feed bears along the way.[7]

The tourist pump, though, had to be primed. In the early years of the automobile, it was mostly local traffic going into the park. As of 1919, the roads linking Calgary and Banff to the lucrative American market in Montana were still very rough and full of detours and other interruptions, and most Americans remained completely unaware that Canada even had national parks. But James W. Davidson, president of the Calgary's Good Roads Association, and other Calgary boosters understood that the southern trail to Montana, completed in July 1919, could whisk tourists from Glacier National Park to Calgary in a single day's drive. Leaving early in the morning, one could stop "long enough en route to catch of mess of good-sized trout," and still make it to Calgary in time for dinner.[8] That "road," however, was still only a trail, and it needed upgrading on the Canadian side of the border, as Davidson explained to parks commissioner James B. Harkin, pointing out that he had even found deep-pocketed Americans ready to give funds to see the route improved.[9] As the *Calgary Daily Herald* reported, Davidson was also working south of the border to reassure tourists that Canadian parks beckoned them from Glacier (which, by 1919, hosted

about five thousand visitors annually). Closer to home, the paper noted that Davidson's association was working with town councils to make the route better known and "less confusing": evidently, many of the early American roadsters venturing into Canada managed to get thoroughly lost between Cardston and Calgary.[10]

In the end, Davidson's efforts to promote visits to Canadian parks proved unnecessary. Roadways to Banff, whatever their condition, were wired through American good roads manuals and auto guidebooks into a continental network. Beginning in 1920, the "Banff to Grand Canyon Road," some 2,200 miles, was well advertised in signs and pamphlets. Droves of intrepid visitors began arriving from the United States, lured northward in part by the attractive post-war currency exchange. Lethbridge and Fort Macleod competed fiercely to have the "Great Highway" from Glacier and Waterton built through their towns now that hundreds of Americans were leaving greenbacks in addition to their exhaust fumes on their way to Calgary and then to Banff.[11] It helped that the Good Roads Association was affiliated with the Calgary Auto Club, whose vice-president was none other than trout angler and sportsman R. A. Darker.

Despite road networking, park administrators did not want to let autos run amok in mountain nature. Cars were initially banned by order-in-council in 1905. At the time of is construction, park superintendent Howard Douglas was intent on restricting the Calgary–Banff road to use by only horse-drawn coaches driven by tour operators.[12] Automobilists drove the road anyway on its completion in 1909.[13] With her son Norman at the wheel, Lady Isabella Lougheed and her family (minus Sir James) were the very first to drive an auto to Banff over the road. The group packed extra fuel and a large food hamper, "for of course there were no restaurants on the way." They bounced over ruts and through bogs. What a thrilling ride it was. One of the passengers remarked that they breezed "along wonderfully for the first ten miles. We had our hats tied on with a mile of veil. Norman wore big gauntlets and a driving cap with goggles. The motor veils streamed behind in the wind. It was wonderful: a lovely sight as we approached the Rockies." But the police promptly impounded their car on its arrival to the Banff townsite, releasing it only when the motorists promised to return home. To cap the adventure on their way home, the Lougheeds' roadster blew

a tire, left the road, and struck a tree. The group returned to Calgary by rail.[14]

The Calgary Good Roads Association was just as adamant on using the road, staging a group auto excursion to the townsite later in 1909, despite the law being against them. In 1911, they successfully pressed Frank Oliver, the minister of the Department of Interior, to lift the ban, albeit with the requirement that car owners park vehicles at the police barracks during their stay.[15] But Calgarians promptly drove their "buzz wagons" everywhere in the townsite regardless.[16] Parking restrictions were finally lifted in 1915 as J. B. Harkin, the park commissioner, began overseeing an ever-extensive road-building program. Drivers, however, could not do anything they liked. Norman Luxton ("Mr. Banff") continued to complain of bylaws limiting driver freedoms, particularly when they could drive, and at what speed cars could travel. He attributed these bureaucratic decisions to a "public be damned" attitude, such as in 1921, when the superintendent ordered all the town's main motor drives to be tarred at the same time, smack in the middle of tourist season.

All the same, Banff was in many ways created by the automobile. Growing auto traffic required the construction of service stations and auto garages, as well as restaurants and accommodations.[17] For most automobile tourists, a campground was the accommodation of choice: a buck bought them thirty days of camping in the park. Although some of them preferred "random camping," pitching their tent in a spot that appealed to them, many demanded properly organized campgrounds. In the early 1920s, Camp Rundle offered a ground in Banff alongside the Spray River. Registered campers were assigned small plots to pitch their tents.[18] Tunnel Mountain's campground, developed by architects in 1927, moved away from individual camping plots. Although Rundle's grounds patched within a grid of roads that provided access to necessary services, campers at Tunnel Mountain could pitch tent wherever they wanted and more in keeping with the idea of camping in nature, a tradition honoured well into the 1960s.[19] None of these sites offered truly rustic camping. The "Campers' Paradise" at Tunnel Mountain described by the *Calgary Daily Herald* had twenty dining shelters, cement cooking stoves and even electricity.[20] Services there would "induce tourists to linger longer than they first planned," enjoying "every comfort and convenience that can be devised."[21] The numbers spoke for

FIGURE 6.2
Fishing for trout in Lake Louise, 1894. V653 NA 72, Vaux Family fonds, Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies.

themselves. In 1927, the newspaper reported Tunnel Mountain hosting 6,017 vehicles and 21,620 campers.[22]

Tunnel Mountain's planning, allowing campers the freedom to choose where, within the grounds, they wanted to pitch their tents, reflected J. B. Harkin's overall approach to parks campgrounds. He was mindful of the line between resort tourism and genuine camping, and discouraged his mountain park managers from improving campgrounds too much and restricting those who, travelling by car, wanted to find spots around roadways where they preferred to tent. Policies continued to tolerate campers who squeezed between spots lining the roadway to Radium in the 1920s.[23]

Beyond the borders of Rocky Mountains Park, the Bow River valley quickly became a draw to automobilists. From Calgary, the road largely followed the route of what is now Highway 1A, running through a

landscape mediated by railway engineering, itself oriented to the Bow River. For much of its length, the Bow Valley is a wide and relatively level expanse, an expedient feature that attracted CPR surveyors in the first place. Running parallel to the rails, which required a gentle gradient, the road was almost ideal—only occasionally a little hair-raising on its steeper sections. From a motorist's perspective, the Banff road nestled in the valley's spaciousness allowed the viewing of mountains rising at a comfortable distance. The topography envelops, rather than overwhelms, travellers. Even as the foothills give way to the first mountains, the furl of valley complexes is far enough away that the austere slate peaks of the Rockies are incorporated—as thousands of snapshots attest—into a majestic scene, rather than towering over the passing traveller in frightening sublime. Roadsters enjoyed the meanderings of the Bow River, confident in their place in the world and not fearing for their lives by envisioning spills down roadside cliffs. Apart from the formidable gradient of the Cochrane hill, most of the Banff–Calgary trail, winding through the reserve lands of the Stoney Nation and the Seebe flats before skirting Lac des Arcs, offered a memorable portrait of forest vistas and the gentle roll of foothills, all rendered in a pleasing palette of colours, with the true alpine peaks looming safely in the distance.[24]

The Bow was entirely open for angling amusements. The best conditions on lakes and ponds, especially at Minnewanka, were early in the season, before the summer heat drove trout into the darkest reaches of the lakes and beyond the reach of most anglers. Trout rose early in the morning and, especially, during the moody changes of weather in the mountains. Violent storms often swept down the Bow Valley, but the rumble of thunder, the colonnaded black clouds closing off the valley, and the mists clinging to the mountainsides were usually followed by shafts of sunlight piercing the haze to strike the valley floor. All of this played with the angler's sensibilities. The sheer allure of fishing here drew a steady traffic of visitors through the Bow Valley to Tunnel Mountain and the Rockies beyond.

Since most traffic had to go through Calgary, the city served as a gateway and clearinghouse for the angling-camping craze. By 1923, the roadway to Calgary from the United States was bringing thousands of American tourists, who often stopped over in the city before the next leg of their trip to Banff. Calgary businessmen were aware that

American roadsters were in a position to choose where to go depending on the availability of campgrounds.[25] They knew an opportunity when they saw it, quickly having the city build a camping spot in the most lucrative location possible, right in the middle of the sprawling city. The campground located on St. George's Island, just east of Prince's Island, was accessible by a small bridge. St. George generally served as the spot for trade union picnics and church socials. Well within the heart of the city, its campground presented what the *Calgary Daily Herald* described as an "exquisite little spot . . . sacred to motor gypsies." Tables, shelters, benches, and stoves were provided, and, the *Herald* explained, "cars can be parked here indefinitely or permanent camping indulged in." For the modern businessman, this was an ideal combination: a camper could feel "cut off from the world as if he were in the centre of a forest reserve, far, far from civilization," while remaining conveniently situated "within elbow's length of the telegraph and post office." Sounding a remarkably global note, the paper added, "his business, thousands of miles away, is never entirely out of his reach . . . the pulse beat of 'outside' is never lost to him for a moment."[26]

Urban Calgary intimately connected to the national park in a myriad of ways. Geographically, the proximity of the park meant that many well-to-do Calgarians kept houses in Banff, and many more moved back and forth between the two communities throughout the summer. Many drove, even in the early days of motor travel. Lady Lougheed loved Banff. She kept her own home there, and it was said that the season had not truly started until her summer residence officially opened. Meanwhile, scores of Calgarians drove or took the express train that went into service at the start of July, with Calgary's *Morning Albertan* often keeping track of the who's who coming back and forth in its society pages.[27]

In Banff, beginning on July 1—the opening of fishing season—tourists lined the shores of the Bow and Lake Minnewanka to land their catches. Almost all of them drove to their casting spots. Minnewanka, by far the most popular angling destination, had been raised four feet in 1908 to improve navigation; in 1912, it was raised an additional twelve feet to provide water storage for the downstream hydroelectric generator that initially supplied power to the Banff townsite. Like the Bow a few decades later, Lake Minnewanka became a second nature, an artificially reconfigured version of the original.[28] The dammed lake, in

turn, transformed the experience of tourists. Its peaceful waters were refilled annually with hatchery trout, a necessary procedure in view of the massive influx of tourists to the lake. At dawn, these ever-smaller trout—verging on juveniles, given the high turnover of the fish population—jumped for the thick clouds of caddis and mayflies, the only disturbance to the morning serenity of the lake's surface.

But there were still some big catches to be had in this jewel of the Rocky Mountains. Some of the granddaddies survived a few years, lurking in the dark depths of the lake. In 1923, a Minnewanka lake trout was landed weighing thirty-seven pounds—so big that it was immediately hauled to the Banff museum for display. Bagging this struggling giant—forty-two inches long and twenty-four inches in circumference—was no mean feat.[29] All the same, by the early 1920s, most visitors contented themselves with modest catches. Long-time residents of the area were, of course, fond of telling stories about how good the fishing *used* to be. One Red Deer angler, heading to Minnewanka on the CPR in 1924, encountered an old-time curmudgeon who, "between tobacco clouds," remembered when "seven or ten or fifty casts meant seven or ten or fifty rises of the biggest, bitingist most vigorous fish that ever lived; all cutthroats none less than a pound and a half." True to form, the man concluded: "Them days was real fishin'." The Red Deer visitor came to share the old geezer's pessimism. Arriving to Banff, he immediately headed up the Bow to a promising spot, "with weapons rigged." But the promise proved empty: "Feverishly and eagerly I cast. Then steadily and doggedly. Then slowly and sullenly." He bagged only a single nine-inch trout and lost another on his line before night finally fell. Only the next day, after avoiding crowds and starting early, did the visitor land his catch: "Praise be to cord and rod and hook," he wrote. He fought a hooked fish across the river's width for some forty yards before landing "three pounds of sparkling, spotted cutthroat trout, twenty-three inches long."[30]

In contrast to the Highwood, where there might always seem room for more anglers, Rocky Mountains Park waters became congested at key bustling points for tourists. What with the advent of automobiles, the river's upper reaches now offered a veritable fast-food drive-in nature experience, if not always a flawless one. In 1920, Calgary's *Morning Albertan* recorded one group's experience fishing Minnewanka. The anglers came armed with all kinds of bait, only to attract more than

FIGURE 6.3
Minnewanka biggies, 1923, displayed in front of a Banff town café with weights inscribed on the photo. George Noble fonds, V469/1625, Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies.

fish: they wound up blistered by "some sixteen hundred mosquito bites." One of them told his wife that he had "hooked a dandy trout" and was reeling it in when "a monster of a fish, a trifle smaller than a whale, bobbed up and swallowed the trout," heartlessly stealing it from their table.[31] That was one way to explain a bad day's fishing. But beyond its disappointments, Minnewanka's reputation continued to draw ever hopeful anglers annually. Trout, it was said, were so massive there, that when one was pulled up on the hook, Minnewanka's water levels dropped three feet.[32]

Whatever proud catches awaited anglers in Minnewanka's waters, it was, in the end, auto-driving anglers, coupled with the greater number of trout placed in streams and lakes, who shifted Albertans' sensibilities about their wilderness places. As the hatchery facilities in Banff and then Waterton busily churned out fry, tourism surged, particularly toward the lodestone of the mountains to the west. As the

more refined anglers suspected would happen, the crushing numbers of tourists changed their sport entirely. A 1927 article in the *Ottawa Citizen* walked its readers through the various fishing options available at the time. There was the "still line" technique—dropping a line into the water by hand or from the end of a stick, as well as fly fishing, which required art and skill. The article suggested something between the two extremes: baitcasting. This also used a rod and a reel, but in place of delicately tied flies, it relied on an ever-increasing range of real and artificial (metal or rubber) baits. The rod was also shorter and thus easier to manage, as well as more readily portable: a baitcasting rod could easily be folded in half and stowed. With the weight of numbers in their favour, tourists often chose the simpler sport and stimulated the creation of a market for a dizzying "array of spinners of various sizes and shapes, with and without feathers partly concealing the hooks, pork rind baits, and a bewildering array of artificial minnows of all sizes, shapes, colors, and motions in the water." However "fantastic" looking, each lure seemed to boast "a devoted following of admirers."[33]

It was certainly the easier technique of baitcasting that appealed to tourists arriving by auto with only a few days to spend in wilderness—most of them urbanites with only modicum angling skills. Quite apart from its ease, baitcasting was also versatile: it could be done from shore, from a bridge, from a boat, or from a dock or pier. It was not merely for kids only, then, that, early in July 1924, just as the season opened in the park, Banff's Standish & Sons offered a "bamboo fishing pole, line, hook and sinker, the whole outfit," for only thirty cents.[34] Dave White & Co., another enterprise in town, offered steel rods for as little as $1.50, as well as "specially made bait for Minnewanka."[35] It was most commonly baitcasting equipment seized upon by anglers fishing without permits, usually consisting of "steel or common bamboo" rods worth, at most, twenty-five cents apiece.[36] Not many baitcasters discriminated very carefully among the varieties of fish they were landing, if indeed they even knew them. Tourist fishers crammed themselves into boats or gathered in clumps on bridges and along riverbanks, keeping up a steady stream of conversation. Women and men mixed, snagged each other's lines, and hilariously hooked nearby tree branches.

The transformation of the fishing experience related not only to the simple technique of rod-and-reel baitcasting but also to the larger camping experience. At least by 1917, the growing numbers of

automobile campers were forcing park administrators to encourage tourists to camp in organized grounds. That year, about a thousand autos were registered entering the eastern park gates at Exshaw, and the superintendent, Jack Clarke, reported an increase in "the number of camping parties at favourable points on the main roads, parties being able, without inconvenience, to carry all camping paraphernalia in their cars and make their quarters wherever the fancy seized them."[37] Pitching one's tent at random reflected the once-common pursuit of "woodcraft camping." In the late nineteenth century, campers had tended to invade a section of woods, cut down trees, and start fashioning chairs, tables, and clotheslines, downright occupying the space—and, because they used horses and guides to get into their locations, they often stayed a long time. By the 1920s, the blunt force of automobile camping had made these "woodcraft" traditions impractical—a serendipitous development, since, in the long term, this mode of camping would have devastated parks that, after all, were set aside to be free from human artifice and interference.[38]

Automobilists largely provided a solution to the problem of human impact. They carried all the camping paraphernalia they needed, loading their autos with portable canvas tents, a "tick" sleeping bag stuffed with feathers (usually whiffing of kerosene), and an extra rubber tire to serve in the event of a flat. Automobilists carried nifty gear, like the $8.88 "waterproof" canvas tent, available in 1928, that could be clipped onto the side of an auto and opened on one side into the interior of the car. A large range of enamelled and nickel vacuum bottles and jugs to keep liquids fresh were on the market, as well as hatchets, axes, folding skillets, "auto spades," portable folding cots with steel-reinforced hardwood frames, and no end of comforts prêt-à-porter. Auto camping was cheap, and the passenger and driver were self-sustaining and independent.[39]

These automobilists ultimately succeeded in taming, if not the wilderness itself, then the idea of "wilderness." It was a place one visited, deliberately yet very selectively forgoing some of the comforts of home, a place from which one could easily escape, if need be. Whereas the great fly fishers spent hours in solitude, quietly contemplating nature and studying the behaviour of fish in their aquatic environments, auto-driving tourists hurried their visits to nature before often throwing their lines willy-nilly into the water to try their luck and then moving on.

This change in sensibilities was summed up in the campground itself, laid out with an eye to separating campers while keeping them together. Where a traveller in the countryside "blissfully follows his inclination as to where he shall lay his head for the night," he tended to opt for the convenience offered in campgrounds set aside for them by the various municipalities in Western Canada.[40] In choosing spots along roadways, travellers tended to again bunch up with other travellers at favourite spots, scenic places, and convenient points along the route. Organized campgrounds facilitated this gregariousness while also providing a measure of privacy and a sense of "home" ownership surrounded by scenic vistas. Describing Banff's Camp Rundle, the *Crag and Canyon* opined that automobile tourists want "a real out and out camping ground where there is no danger of crowding on the other fellow's lot and one gets the notion one is the sole proprietor of the earth." Quite impressively, these independent tourists still bunched up together on the same grounds. How any of them found complete isolation from the hundreds of others tenting around them was largely achieved only in their imagination.[41]

In the end, then, the very forces that concerned anglers farther downstream in the Bow River basin—growing throngs of tourists, the need for fish that would keep them happy, and the resulting pressure on fisheries—came to define leisure fishing along the congested riverbanks and lakeshores of Rocky Mountains Park—and, indeed, Canada's national parks in general. Propelling these changes was the automobile. Tourists in their speedier vehicles hurried through nature, temporarily occupying campgrounds to satisfy their needs and wishes, or finding spots alongside each other to fish streams along the roadways. Not surprisingly, these visitors preferred simpler baitcasting over fly fishing, and their sheer numbers meant that streams needed constant restocking, to which park administrators and fisheries staff gave top priority. With the advent of baitcasting, the line between fishing as sport and fishing as recreational activity arguably hardened, with each representing a specific understanding of nature and the place of human beings in the landscape. Looking forward, one may argue that car-driving and baitcasting tourism fostered a new orientation toward nature that, since World War II, has prevailed in the truly crowded environments of national parks to the current day.

Fly Assembly, Boyce Collection, Collection of Glenbow (9222), Photograph by Francine Michaud.