

# The History of Erie Steelheading from the '60s till today with Jim Simonelli: An Odyssey

By: Alex Ciocca

*Interview edited for clarity*



Photo credit: Jim Simonelli

As the leaves begin to change and the temperature starts to cool off from the dog days of summer, there is one thing on the mind of nearly every fisherman in the Tri-state area: migratory lake-run rainbow trout, commonly known as steelhead. For the unaware, a steelhead is identical in genetic code to that of the traditional native rainbow trout of the Western United States, except that this rainbow trout decided to go on a so-called “big adventure”. Typically steelhead

are an ocean faring fish, or *anadromous* as we like to call them, but they were historically stocked in the Great Lakes region as a sport fish and will behave exactly like their anadromous cousins but there is no ocean therefore we call them *adfluvial*.

Generations of anglers have been making the pilgrimage to the Great Lakes region in hopes that they too will be able to dance with this fiery fish, but how did we get to this point and who is responsible for the fishery that we know and love? What were the tactics used through time and what was “Steelhead Alley” like in past years? Recently I sat down with Jim Simonelli, past President of the 3-C-U Trout Club, to discuss just that. Jim was a prominent figure in the Erie steelheading scene nearly from the beginning and along with some other amazing gentlemen played a critical role in creating the wonderful fishery that we have here today.

Alex Ciocca: Tell us a little about yourself and how you first got involved in the Erie steelhead scene.

Jim Simonelli: I moved to Girard, Pennsylvania in 1971 after I left the service to be a little closer to the Elk Creek region. Some friends and I were doing trial-style dirt bike riding back then and on a frigid winter day, I was riding through the Fairview gravel pits and I saw Bob Hetz leaning over a tank containing all these fish; and so I rode over and that was my first experience with steelhead. Back in those days, noodle rods and egg sacs were the way to go until I met a fella from the Ohio region's fishery, he was catching them on a fly rod. So I strapped a fly reel to my noodle rod and tied on a black wooly bugger and caught my first steelhead on a fly, that was around 1977, or so.

AC: Tell us a little about 3CU and how you got involved with the club.

JS: I was involved in the local Trout Unlimited chapter and to break it down, 3CU was formed by four different groups, the Northwest chapter of Trout Unlimited, the Wesleyville Conservation Club, the Erie County League of Sportsmen, and the Gem City Outdoorsmen club and that's where you get the three Cs and the U for Trout Unlimited. I wanted to be more in touch with my local area and so naturally I slid over to 3CU. At the time, I was the director for Gem City Outdoorsmen so I became the representative from Gem City in 3CU. My kids were growing up around that time and I used to take them everyday to the raceways to feed the fish and it was nice to see it done locally and watch them grow. I'd have to say this was around the year 1980.

AC: 3CU was very important to the initial growth of the fishery and for over fifty years has been supplementing stock. What were those early days like?

JS: It was really a grassroots movement of guys spending their time, money, and concern on something they cared deeply about. Without guys like Bob Hetz, Jimmy Dallas, Gordon Bannister, and many others, I sure wouldn't have been able to piggy-back off of them and continue their work. They were the ones responsible for trapping the fish on Thomas run and then releasing 750 of them the next year, only keeping fifty for brood stock.



These were true salt-of-the-earth type guys and they were proud and protective of their fish. An old funny folklore is the time Jimmy Dallas brought over a bunch of members of the Audubon society to tour the spring fed pond where they were raising fry. Upon arrival the members were mortified to see that someone had killed a blue heron and hung it over the pond so the maggots would fall off and feed the fish.



Photo credit: John Fallon

AC: What were the early salmon rearing and stocking efforts like and when did they start showing up in the tributaries as fishable runs?

JS: 3CU was given the first coho salmon fry back in about 1968, so you had about a two year lag before we started to see them in the tributaries. 3CU's heart was never in the salmon program so once the state hatchery got online, the salmon program was nearly entirely moved to the hatchery. It was a constant battle in those days between 3CU and the PFBC on the way things should be done in regards to the re-breeding of the same brood stock. This inevitably led to the collapse of the salmon program in just a short couple years as the fish just weren't coming back.

Fast forward to the '80s and we thought something similar was happening with the steelhead and we felt that most of the returning fish were 3CU fish and not the state's hatchery fish. So in around the year 1980 there was a tagging program implemented on our fish to test that theory. Believe it or not one of our tags was returned from the Salmon River in Pulaski, New York, so he must have gone up the canals or over the falls to make it into Lake Ontario and up the Salmon. I think that biology has a lot to do with where the fish returns and fish return numbers also, especially males. Will a male force himself to go back to Alaska or will he take an easier route

down in Washington? With those natural factors in place there is much more variation in the gene pool.

Also around that time the PFBC did a scale survey on the fish in an attempt to try and find the most purebred steelhead genetics and separate them from the domestic “mutts”. What they found was that there were 27 different variations of steelhead in our Erie streams. We at 3CU were getting eggs from the Salmon River, Upper Michigan, as well as some of the original broodstock from the West Coast region. So we had purebred wild steelhead from the original McCloud strain stocking effort from way back in 1881. Back then they had no idea what steelhead even were, they knew they were trout but they also knew they behaved like salmon, so they called them “salmon trout”. Shortly after the scale survey there was a viral outbreak in the fishery so the PFBC wanted to control the broodstock and no longer allowed us to use our egg hatching facility. Instead they gave us fry to raise in our raceways, so from that point on 3CU and PFBC fish were one and the same.

It sounded like a good idea at the time, but the consequences were felt within the decade. I have stories of taking my son out on opening day of trout on Elk Creek and we'd be fishing over 300 or more fresh spring run steelhead. I had a good buddy at that time named John Bowser who was a waterway conservation officer and he proposed that we stop stocking brown trout in Elk Creek as we had steelhead all the way from September to June. So the long story short we lost some of that diversity in the streams and along with that we lost the three seasons steelhead fishery, really the whole dynamics of the fishery changed over that time period. I'm not saying that this was the wrong decision and I know the intentions were good, unfortunately in nature sometimes the outcome isn't exactly as desired. I also have no ill will towards the fish commission, they make very tough decisions with the data they have and then are forced to wait sometimes years to see the results of those decisions.

AC: Let's talk a little about the angler side of things now. What was the distribution of fly and bait anglers back then and did you see any transition over time?

JS: One of the founding members of 3CU, Jerry Honard, was one of the original guys fly-fishing the Erie area. There were maybe only a dozen guys at that point in time fly-fishing for steelhead, most guys were using noodle rods and egg sacs. Through the '80s fly-fishing started to gain huge popularity though and one of the turning points for us was when I went down to the Seven Springs Fly-Fishing Symposium in the late '80s. I wrote a pamphlet titled, “The Guide to Fly-Fishing for Salmon and Steelhead in Lake Erie Tributaries” and the local Trout Unlimited paid to have it produced. I went down there and handed out thousands of these pamphlets to anyone who walked by the booth. I wanted more people to appreciate the amazing fishery we worked to build, but the main point I want to bring up though is that the Erie steelhead scene was predominantly funded by bait fishermen.

Not too long after “A River Runs Through It” was released, and shortly after that the internet came out, guys were posting about the fishery and sharing experiences. Then I started to see guys from Pittsburgh coming up so the news was out, and we definitely saw a transition. So for

a period there, it wasn't 50/50 fly to bait, and in fact more fly fishermen than bait. I think we've seen the numbers equalize out though and they're back to mostly 50/50. Now was every fly fisherman a good steward of the sport, I'd say not because along with the influx of fly fisherman came some poor attitudes towards other anglers as well as the beginning of privatized properties. So we lost a lot of stream access and certain prominent guides of the time pushed for this privatization, when the waters are public we all benefit from them. I've always been a very strong advocate for open waters, in fact one time a lease holder donated a \$1000 check to 3CU and Bob Hetz ripped it up in front of everyone. He was adamant that we're not raising fish for private entities, these are everyone's fish.

For the longest time Elk Creek was literally a dump, a place people would push old cars over the bank to rot. So nobody cared about the creek or what was going on back there, it wasn't until someone waved money at them and asked them to post their property so they could take clients out on private water. Our way to give back to the community for their generosity was the fruit basket program. We decided one Christmas that these landowners were so nice granting us access that we should do something nice for them also, so we went out and bought them fruit baskets for the holidays. At one point, we had over 120 properties we were giving fruit baskets to. Unfortunately, that number has slid to around 80 as some landowners have decided to post their property. Hopefully the PFBC continues to purchase those easements that grant more access to fishermen.



Photo credit: John Fallon

AC: So with the obvious increase in fishing pressure has it had any effect on the runs and do you think it is a sustainable fishery from a harvest standpoint?

JS: I don't think pressure has had any effect on the runs at all, I think the issue with diminishing return on runs is a management issue. For instance, if there are 300 fish in a hole and a guy takes his limit, it's no big deal; but if there are only a dozen fish in that hole and he takes his limit then all of a sudden we're in trouble. So really the argument could go both ways, but I think if we have more prolific runs then harvest isn't an issue. I also think the seasonal pressure has changed as well, anglers aren't spread out over three seasons anymore due to the run timing and we are now seeing 75% of the overall pressure solely during fall months. Once you start doing the math between the amount of tributaries and the amount of fish running there just isn't nearly as many fish to go around, not to mention what would make a steelhead run Elk rather than Godfrey or Trout Run? So like I said I think it is more of a management issue than a harvest issue but I really don't see it coming back unless we change the management process.

AC: Are you happy with the current state of the fishery and do you think that the next generation will be able to pick up where you left off and continue the fight?

JS: Honestly, I don't have much faith in the next generation. There will never be another Bob Hetz, he gave up his whole life to this fishery. His entire heart and soul was in those fish and I don't think there is another person on the planet that will devote that kind of personal time and money to the fishery. He is an absolute saint and I don't believe there is anyone to replace him. Even in the clubs today, there just isn't the passion or the replacement of the old guard. The younger guys just aren't interested in going to the shows and doing the volunteer work like they used to. In modern times, people typically turn to the government and in this instance, the PFBC, and I would have to say you're going to see more of the same then. I'm not knocking the fish commission in any way, by any means, but I think we will see similar issues in the future that we are in today. Bob dedicated nearly his entire life to this fishery and it was his passion, I just don't see that passion today.

AC: Do you have any suggestions for ways people can get involved to help today?

JS: I'm a big advocate that you can't expect volunteers to do everything, but you can expect everyone to be a volunteer and do something. Some wonderful organizations to volunteer for are 3CU, Gem City Outdoorsmen, the PA Steelhead Association, Trout Unlimited, Sons of Lake Erie, and any of the other active groups in the Erie watershed.

*Photo credits to John Fallon and Jim Simonelli*

*The PFBC declined an interview request at the time of publication.*

About the author: Alex Ciocca is a freelance outdoor journalist in the Pittsburgh region with a serious passion for fly-fishing, hiking, and camping. He also operates an etsy store where you can find epoxy sealed trout insects from all across Pennsylvania. Follow him on Instagram to keep up with the next exciting thing he has going on!



IG: dragfilledrift

Etsy IG: the\_insect\_emporium

Etsy link: <https://www.etsy.com/shop/TheInsectEmporium412>