

The Broken Neck Trout Campout: A Continuing Coincidence

If you believe in the old AA adage that a coincidence is simply a miracle in which God prefers to remain anonymous, then that first fishing trip 25 years ago was merely a coincidence.

That first fishing trip back in 1985 was actually two fishing trips that merged over hot coffee on a cold morning at Tom's Place, along Highway 395 near Rock Creek, CA.

Since it was two trips, let's look at how each of them started. But as far as when they started... Well, that's debatable. **(See "When was it, anyhow?" below)**

Dick G. , "the original newcomer," remembers that one day he was at the Chula Vista Alano club with Bill M., "talking about going to the Sierras. We wanted to go fishing and gold panning, go for about 7 days.

"I was telling Richard (R.) about the trip, and he said that he was 'going to meet some men from Bakersfield at June Lake.' So, we agreed to meet them there. I had been to the eastern Sierras many times before I got sober.

"Richard told us what day and where."

Richard was planning on going fishing with Dan S. from Bakersfield.

Dan had been wanting to go fishing up in Mammoth for some time. "I started bugging Richard and Jerry (W.) to go fishing up there," Dan explained.

"You see a few years before that time, Jerry and Don (H.) and few other guys took a fellow up to Rock Creek for a few weeks to sober him up. It seems we took shifts on that guy to keep him up there.

"By the way, he is still sober with about 30 years... The last time I saw him he told me: 'I have neither found it necessary to drink or fish since that trip to Rock Creek.'"

Dan and Richard's friendship date back to Richard's years living in Bakersfield. Richard moved to San Diego in 1979. Dan and his wife would visit them periodically "and of course Richard sponsored lot of drunks in the South San Diego County. I became familiar with a lot of those guys when we visited down there at meeting and golfing and Birthday Gatherings."

So Dan and Richard assembled five other AAs for the trip. The seven of them would hook up with Dick and Bill.

According to records found in one of the campout photo albums, the nine men on the first campout were: Leo P., Bakersfield; Bill M., Chula Vista; Dick G., Lemon Grove; Craig S., Bakersfield; Jerry "Old Dog" W. , Bakersfield; Don H., Bakersfield; Bob S., Bakersfield; Dan S., Bakersfield; Richard R., Chula Vista.

Dan remembers that the original plan called for them to meet up with Dick and Bill "at June Lake, about 45 miles North of Rock Creek Road.

"With good fortune, Don drove up several hours ahead of everyone else.

"Remember now, this was years before Cell Phones.

"When Don got to June Lake, there was almost a foot of snow on the ground, and other fishermen were sliding the boats across the snow to the lake."

So Don headed out, hoping to find Dan and the rest of the group before they got to June Lake.

"Somehow Don caught up with us down around Toms Place, and (we) made a change in plans.

“We went up to the French Camp Ground. We rented about 3 or 4 individual camp sites, set up camp, and Craig and I put some signs made out of paper plates out on Hwy 395 for the others guys coming later that night. The signs said: **FRIENDS OF BILL TURN HERE.**”

And somehow, those little paper plates posted along Highway 395 actually worked.

“Those guys saw the damn little ol’ signs,” Dan added, “and came right on in camp.

“God takes care of Drunks, for sure.”

Dick also remembers the snow. He and Bill arrived at June Lake about 7:30 p.m., there was snow on the ground “and it was cold. I looked around for Richard, or a truck with AA stickers on it, but I couldn’t find anybody.

“We went to sleep in the back of the camper, cold as hell.”

The next morning, Dick said, “Bill fixed coffee, and I walked the campgrounds to find the guys. No one, anywhere. We decided to leave.

“When we were driving out, we stopped at the notice board at the entrance to the campground. There was a note pinned to the board:

"Friends of Bill W.

"It's too damn cold here.

"Moved to Rock Creek Lake."

So, Dick and Bill headed back down 395 Rock Creek. “We drove to every campsite and couldn’t find anybody. We decided to have a cup of coffee at Tom’s Place, pulled up in front got out of truck.

“The first thing we heard was Richard laughing. So we went inside and met the guys from Bakersfield.”

Richard recalls that he had been working an auction in Norwalk on that Thursday “and by the time I finished there, and drove to Tom’s place, it was around 2-3 a.m. before I arrived, early Friday morning.”

There were seven men there, and then Dick and Bill showed up. After breakfast they followed Richard and the crew back to the campsite, and the Fishing Trip that we now know as Broken Neck actually started.

But back then it was just a weekend fishing trip, so some of what happened is lost. Who keeps detailed records of a fishing trip?

As Richard put it: “It is hard to remember everything because we never had any idea it would last this long. If we’d planned on it continuing all this many years, we’d probably have screwed it up.”

But the three surviving founders all do have memories, especially of the more spiritual aspects of the trip.

“We went fishing every day,” Dick recalls, “had great meals, and sat around the fire at night and talked. One night we talked about Jean’s Whore House, just over on the Nevada border, and we were loud.

“At the camp site behind us there were some guys drinking, and about 10:00 p.m. we heard them yell they were off to the whore house.”

Richard remembers that “Dan stole my towels. But I got them back.”

Richard also remembers that even though they may have considered themselves great fishermen, they always brought food up with them, even on that first year. “We always had food, however someone was always frying fish.”

Dan remembers the exception. “The guy who bought the food (one year) didn’t get to Rock Creek until Sunday Morning. We ate a few fish and we went to Bishop and bought some food. We never let that guy buy food again.

“I am not telling his name.”

And Richard is not telling who it was who was supposed to get the hats made in Year #3. The man took the money, but “produced no hats.” But they did have hats in Year #2, and in Year 4, and every year since then.

There are a lot of “traditions” associated with the fishing trip, but their origins are not always easy to nail down. According to the dictionary, a tradition is “a body of long-established customs and beliefs viewed as a set of precedents.” So, many of the traditions surrounding the Fishing Trip developed slowly.

The name, however, was born during that first trip, while they were fishing at Rock Creek Lake.

“I was the only one catching fish,” Richard remembers, “and Dan Stone complained that I was breaking the trout’s neck; I was setting the hook so hard. Thus, Broken Neck Trout Campout.”

Dick said that they had already decided that they wanted to do it again the following year, and to name the event. But they did not want to name it after any person or place, “so when Richard caught that trout and broke its neck, actually broke it near in half...”

Richard agreed that “it was the fact that I had caught several, and no one else had caught anything.

“As is with many things in our sober life, the name just sort of evolved.”

Dick also says that Richard’s original trout – pictures of which are so proudly and colorfully embroidered on hundreds of hats and jackets and sweatshirts – was “pretty small, maybe four to six inches. Closer to four.”

The “No Women. No other rules” rules were always in force, Richard said, “but it was unspoken for a long time. Then someone decided we should adopt it.” He doesn’t remember who.

The Old Dog Fishing Derby, named in honor of Jerry W., started in 2004.

The golf tournament started around about year 7, Richard says. “It is named after Carl Dake, who has since passed on.” HE was not one of the founders. “He never played a round of golf in his life, but when he first got sober in Bakersfield, we all used to take him with us to drive the golf cart, and to keep him from being off by himself and taking a drink.

“He enjoyed watching us all try to hit the little white ball, as he used to say. He attended the campout for many years prior to his death.”

There was at least one “tradition” that didn’t last. Richard says: “For awhile, we were letting fathers bring their kids. But it didn’t take long for us to stop that, and make it just alkies.”

Richard, whose sobriety days is June 28, 1974, said that Dick, who got sober on Sept. 28, 1984, had the least amount of time in the group. Dan’s sobriety Dec. 31, 1976.

Dick said: “I was given all the jobs in the camp, cleaning the fish, washing dishes, and helping with the cooking.”

But he did not work alone. Dan said: “Mostly during the early years, the new guys just did a few things like clean fish and fetch coffee.” Aside from that, “Everyone did the work. We always had group mess.”

Richard said the “assignments” started to go first timers on the trip “a few years later. I’m not sure when that was,”

Even though he did have to clean too many fish and brew too much coffee, Dick said, “I will be so ever grateful to Richard inviting me to be a part of it, and I will continue to show up as long as I can.”

Dick recalls that when he got home after that first trip “I had had such a good time, that I told everybody who would listen and I was trying to find a newcomer for next year.

“Something happened to me there. I can't explain what it was but from that time on I have had enthusiasm and willingness to stay in AA.”

Richard and Dan both give Dick a lot of the credit for them getting together again for Year 2, which led to Year 3, and all the other years that eventually made it a tradition.

Richard said that Dick “had so much fun, he spread the word.”

Dan agrees. “It was a group discussion. We all had a great time, and Dick G. wanted to bring his own newcomer the next year.”

While Richard and Dan have each missed one campout, Dick has made every single one of them, the initial ones at Rock Creek, which were followed by campouts at Lake Mary, Pumice Flats, and, currently, June Lake.

The founders ran the first fishing trips. In Year 2, there were somewhere between 12 and 18 people, depending upon which of the founding members you talk to. As Richard points out, they didn’t keep records. It kept growing year after year, and finally, after 10 years, the founders turned it over to a committee system which continues to run it today.

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“When was it, anyhow?”

Dan S, remembers it taking place on the long weekend after Labor Day, Thursday Sept. 5th through Sunday the 9th. 1985.

Dick agrees that it was sometime in September.

Richard, however, says it took place in June.

One thing they all agree on, however, is that there was definitely snow on the ground when they got there.

So, was it snowing at June Lake in either June or September of 1985?

We don’t know.

The weather records for June Lake at The Weather Underground (www.wunderground.com) go back only to 1996. There are records for Bishop going back to 1985, but Bishop’s elevation is 4,146 feet while June Lake’s is more than 3,000 feet – or more than a half mile – higher, at 7,621 feet. And while it is usually colder in June Lake, how much colder it is varies on a daily basis.

But in June of 1996, the farthest back we could find, the temperatures usually hit the low 50s at night, while in September they would go into the low 40s.

Dick says that it was dark when he arrived at about 7:30 that night. "It wasn't dusk, it was dark." In September, the sun around 7 p.m. in that part of the mountains, but not until after 8 p.m. in June.

Dan says he recalls there being deer hunters up there, which is a fall season sport.

So, did it take place in June or September?

When someone who really wants to obsess on this finds 1985 weather record for June Lake... please let the rest of us know. Until then... We do know for sure that it happened in 1985.