

Charles Dickens and bull trout

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It would be ironic if Charles Dickens, arguably the greatest 19th century British novelist, were alive today to fish for bull trout from the shores of Whitefish Lake. Perhaps as he waited for a nibble at the end of his line, he might reflect upon his early career, after he penned his 1841 novel *Barnaby Rudge*.

The solace provided by the beautiful backdrop of Whitefish Lake might have tempered his memories of a novel that was not very well received by the public, and was the least read of all his works. Critics would later state that the novel was structurally flawed and that Dickens was confused about what kind of writer he was to become.

His reflection might be interrupted by a bone-jarring bend at the end of his fishing pole. As he struggled to reel in the freshwater leviathan, its beauty would be astonishing. The faint olive-green body framed by the ivory-white leading edges on its fins and the colorful splash of orange and red spots on its side ... what kind of fish was it?

Most Montanans would tell him it was a bull trout, but I'm sure there are a few ol' timers who would tell him it was a Dolly Varden. Until 1978, bull trout were called Dolly Vardens.

However, genetic and morphological data has shown that these two fish are, in fact, different species. Geographically, Dolly Vardens are more of a sea-going (anadromous) fish, whereas bull trout mainly occupy inland waters such as the streams, rivers and lakes of Western Montana.

I'm sure Dickens would have looked surprised when he heard the name Dolly Varden, because this was the name of a character in his novel *Barnaby Rudge*.

This character was the locksmith's flirtatious daughter, who often wore flashy, colorful dresses, including one notable green outfit adorned with pink and crimson polka dots. This outfit gave Dolly's name to a pink-spotted calico material, and ultimately sheer-figured muslin worn over a bright-colored petticoat, the vogue fashion statement of the 1870s.

This set the stage for what may be the first and only time fashion and science have merged: 15-year-old Elda McCloud, of northern California, had been reading the book *Barnaby Rudge* in the 1870s when a group of fishermen brought home their catch of colorful "calico" trout from the upper McCloud River and laid it upon the lawn of her Uncle's Soda Springs Resort.

The fishermen thought the flashy trout deserved a better name. Elda suggested they should call them Dolly Varden. The name stuck.

Perhaps Dickens would find it curiously poignant that the least read of all of his works had

influenced the naming of a fish. It might cheer him to celebrate the beauty of this spectacular fish as he gently released it back to the depths. This inspirational moment might transition his thoughts to happier times that came later in his life when other works like *David Copperfield* and *A Tale of Two Cities* garnered critical acclaim and launched him to praiseworthy notoriety, even from the most cynical critics.

At the time of Dickens' prolific career in the 1800s, bull trout swam in the waters of Montana in strong numbers, dominating the top of the aquatic food web. "It was the best of times," and it seemed that bull trout were, in fact, characterized by their colorful, flamboyant namesake. However, their current plight represents the "worst of times."

Like Dickens' dirty, drab and poor little orphan Oliver in *Oliver Twist*, bull trout have been subject to mistreatment and are misunderstood. Without appropriate measures to protect this native fish and its habitat, this crippled species might limp along and finally go the way of Tiny Tim in a *Christmas Carol*.

Since fashion is cyclical, I maintain hope that this fish species will bounce back to its former glory and inspire future generations.

Next month, part two of this series is titled "Slippery Native Montanans" and will explore the history of bull trout in Whitefish Lake.

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