



Leigh H. Perkins: The Art of Giving Something Back

by Geoffrey Norman

THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF FLY Fishing owes a lot—indeed, its very existence—to the vision and amiable tenacity of one man, Leigh H. Perkins. For most sportsmen who have bigger fish to catch, if not to fry, this would be a sufficiency of good works for one life. But for Perkins, dedication to the Museum is just one good deed among many, a way of giving back a little to a world, and a way of life, that has been astonishingly good to him.

If Perkins was not born a sportsman, then it could certainly be said that he was raised that way. He was his mother's fishing and bird hunting companion from an early age. On salmon rivers in Canada, duck marshes in Ohio, and the plantation quail fields of north

Florida, he learned to do things the right way and that there was much more to sport than the simple taking of fish and game. He became not merely good at fly casting and wing shooting but, more importantly, a deeply committed conservationist as well.

How many young men go off to college, as Perkins did when he enrolled at Williams, with their bird dog for a roommate? On fall weekends when other students were thinking of football games and fraternity parties, Perkins was heading across the state line to Vermont and the bird coverts where he still hunts. Consider this testament to his enthusiasm: one opening day he went hunting in spite of what he thought was a cold or a case of the flu. As the day

wore on, he felt worse and worse until he finally had to crawl back to his car. When he finally checked into the infirmary, he learned he had polio. It was, mercifully, a mild case. Since then, he has missed only one opening day—he was getting married. "It was," he says, "a case of terrible scheduling."

While he was at Williams he also fished the Battenkill River, and that is where he can be found during the month of May. The Battenkill became Perkins's home river in 1965 when, after selling a successful business in Cleveland, he bought the Orvis Company in Manchester, Vermont. It was the beginning of a wonderfully successful business story.

When he bought the company, Orvis

File Photo



Left: Leigh Perkins brought H. Norman Schwarzkopf to tour the Museum in September 1991. Above: Leigh and Romi Perkins (also one of the original trustees of the Museum) hunt for red-legged partridge in Spain.

was selling a few split cane rods and some angling accessories. But the supply of cane was problematic—trade with what was then “Red China” was illegal and the old stocks were nearly exhausted—and fly fishing itself was a kind of eccentric second cousin to other kinds of fishing. The company was sleepily coasting on its one hundred-year-old reputation. Perkins changed that, to put it mildly.

Orvis had about half a million dollars in annual sales when he bought the company. Last year, the figure was \$90 million. But admirable as those numbers are, they only tell part of a tale which is vitally important to anyone who cares about sport, and the future of hunting and fishing, in these times.

Last year fly fishing finally was certified in the only way that really matters in American culture—Hollywood made a movie about it. And the closing credits of *A River Runs Through It*, Robert Redford’s respectful treatment of the Norman Maclean novella, give “special thanks” to the Orvis Company. The movie folks are not the only people who owe at least a nod of gratitude to Orvis and to Perkins. The list includes all of us who care about the world of sport, in general, and about fly fishing in particular.

When he took over Orvis, Perkins realized that before his company could prosper, the sport it depended on needed robust growth and acceptance as well as a certain amount of protection. He is a salesman to his bones and he undertook to sell not just rods—traditional split cane and the new, faintly heretical graphite—but fly fishing itself.

Orvis, under Perkins’s leadership, launched a program to make the sport much more understandable and accessible—to demystify it. In addition to designing user-friendly tackle, Orvis offered fly-fishing clinics to the uninitiated who might have been daunted by the sport’s reputation for purist ritual and sheer physical difficulty. The clinics translated the old devotionals from “Latin” and those who attended were delighted to discover that they could learn to cast, and do the other necessary things, in two days.

The clinics became a widely copied institution and had an incalculable af-

fect on the growth of the sport. “We never made any money on the schools,” Perkins says. “It was sizzle, not steak. But they did what they were supposed to do.” Which is make more fly fishers.

The more people who cared, it seemed obvious, the better the sport’s odds for survival. And if some of the more procrustean members of the angling fraternity objected to the new popularity—they seemed to think fly fishing should be a closely held secret—they would have a hard time arguing with Perkins’s efforts to water the source of the tradition and to preserve the resources upon which it depended. He donated space in his store to artifacts and this led to the creation of the Museum. For years the Museum *was* Perkins. He and his friend Gardner Grant cajoled the necessary contributions and hired the necessary curators and, in general, tended to the Museum until it could survive on its own as it now does.

Perkins has been a strong supporter

Orvis file photo



Leigh tying on a #22 trico on the Battenkill, his beloved home river. Leigh, now chairman of Orvis, is a national director of The Nature Conservancy.



of all the right conservation groups—Federation of Fly Fishers, Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy—and when you have his support, you get more than lip service. You get both time and money. He served on the boards and he dedicated a percentage of his company's after-tax profits to the causes he so fiercely believed in.

If you went to a fund-raiser in Manchester during the eighties, you would inevitably see Perkins there, doing his part to drive up the bidding on a Pleissner print. And if you hadn't planned on going, and he knew you at all, you would probably get a call and an invitation to sit at his table. Those were hard invitations to turn down. Perkins does not so much badger you into doing something you were not inclined to do as infect you with his own irresistible enthusiasm so you wind up wondering how you could ever have not wanted to do the thing in the first place.

It was at one of those dinners, after

one of those persuasive calls, that I first met Perkins ten years ago. I became a friend and admirer then (could you tell?) and I still wouldn't know how to turn the man down, even if I wanted to, which I don't. I've learned to ride along on the coattails of his enthusiasm. It is a great journey.


I have fished the Battenkill with Perkins. Hunted for quail with him in Florida. Sharptail in Montana. Grouse in Vermont. Fished the Test and the Itchen in England with him. That's only a slight portion of his annual itinerary. If you want to find Perkins, you check the calendar for the finest sport available at that season. If it is June, try Islamorada where he will be on the flats after tarpon or bonefish. September? Check the spring creeks in Wyoming and Montana. April? Likely you will find him turkey hunting in north Florida. And so on.

In the time I have spent with Perkins, I have been struck not so much by his ability, which is considerable and understandable, given all the practice, but by his sheer undiluted enthusiasm. He can't get enough. He never calls the hunt for rain, which is not surprising in someone unwilling to let a mere case of polio keep him out of the field.

Among the many enduring images I have of Perkins afield is one from the

River Test. It was one of those days when the spheres were perfectly aligned so that we had both fine crisp weather and an absurdly abundant hatch of green drakes. We began taking rising fish before lunch and we continued to take them through the afternoon and into evening. Leigh was happily fishing with the latest Orvis innovation, the one-weight rod, and routinely landing fish of 18 inches with it. As the light faded, I looked upstream to see how he was doing; he had taken a seat on a little bench—after ten hours of it you get tired—but he was still casting. While I watched, he took fish on half a dozen consecutive casts. He was laughing happily as he released each fish, dried the fly, and searched for another riser. I believe if we'd had a moon he might have stayed on the bench all night.

A little later, as we made our way back to the fishing hut through the gloom, he said something that I have heard often enough but which seemed especially appropriate that day, "Well," he said, "I don't believe I gave anybody any reason to feel sorry for me today."

He never does. 

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The Museum when it was housed in the Orvis Company in Manchester, Vermont, circa 1967.

From the Father of the Museum

by Leigh H. Perkins

AROUND 1966, after I acquired the Orvis Company, I was attending a Theodore Gordon Flyfishers dinner at the Williams Club in New York. Herman Kessler, one-time art director of *Field & Stream* (and married to the superb fly tyer Helen Shaw), mentioned to me that somebody ought to start a museum on fly fishing. Being fairly young and bushy-tailed, I said, “OK, we’ll look into it.” Orvis had recently established the *Orvis Record Catch Club News* (which has since expanded into the hugely successful *Orvis News*), a great medium for communicating with the fly-fishing community. The success of the *Record Catch News*, and the selling of the idea of the American Museum of Fly Fishing to the public, was due to the impressive talents of the *News’s* editor, Baird Hall.

The Orvis Company’s Route 7 store had lots of memorabilia hanging around, the centerpiece being a wooden carousel of wonderful photos and Mary

Marbury flies, which comprised the plates of her book *Favorite Flies and Their Histories* (1892), and which was put together for the Chicago Columbia Exposition in 1893. The Orvis Company had a small wing off the store where we were dabbling in ladies’ clothes, but not too successfully. It was my thought to get rid of ladies’ clothes (it turned out that was a bad idea—they’re now a major profit source for Orvis) and devote one small room of the store to the Museum, thus getting the memorabilia out of the main store and allocating all that room to selling space.

To fund the early Museum, I talked the famous, local artist Ogden Pleissner into doing an original painting of the Lye Brook pool on the Battenkill (which at that time was my favorite fishing hole), and allowing us to make prints, the sale of which would launch the Museum. Ogden very generously consented to do so. We then put together a small board of directors, established the Mu-

seum as a charitable organization, and announced the concept and the sale of the prints in the *Orvis Record Catch Club News*. The prints were offered for \$75 each and we were able to sell out long before the prints were actually produced, providing us with a nest egg to establish the Museum.

Arnold Gingrich, one of our most active early board members and the second president, recommended the most incredible curator for the Museum—Austin Hogan. Austin started out as a part-time volunteer director of the Museum. I think if we created the Museum for nothing else but to air the incredible character of Austin Hogan, it would have been a worthwhile venture. He was one of the most irascible old curmudgeons that I’ve ever known, but he was brilliant and witty, too. I’m sure he had a profound affect on everybody he came in contact with. When it came to telling stories, Austin could top any of us, and his usually came from far out in left field.



Left: One of the first boards of trustees, 1970. First row from left, Dick Finlay, Dudley C. Corkran, Alvin Grove, Ted Rogowski, and Wes Jordan. Second row, Milford K. Smith, Hermann Kessler, Clayton Shappy, Leigh Perkins, Donald DuBois, and Raymond Kotrla. Third row, Austin Hogan, Ben Schley, Jane Gingrich, Arnold Gingrich, and Harry Darbee. Not pictured are Warren Shepard and Gene Anderegg.

Below left: Mary Orvis Marbury's panels were one of the first exhibits in the early Museum.

Below right: Austin Hogan, the Museum's first curator, points out a fly's merits to an early Museum visitor.

Orvis file photo



File photo



Initially, the Museum had a pretty small budget and the Orvis Company picked up whatever we couldn't raise through the board of directors. From there on, it had a life of its own. As we attracted more and better trustees, the Museum finally became independent—which it never would have become without the very able help of Gardner Grant. Not only was he personally very generous, but he was able to put the arm on many other interested anglers in support of our Museum.

The Museum is, in large part, the product of its four executive directors: Austin Hogan, Paul Schullery, John

Merwin, and Don Johnson. Each of these individuals contributed a great deal and the Museum grew depending a lot on their strengths and interests.

One of my functions was to make sure we had an executive director and that once the director bowed out or got stale, and it was time to pass the baton, to make sure we replaced him. The financial situation of the Museum has fluctuated erratically, and my other function was, along with the able assistance of Gardner Grant and Foster Bam, to go out and raise money to balance our budget. Sometimes it was more fun than others, but it has always worked

out. I can remember at one point getting pretty discouraged about the amount of effort required to pump money and breathe life into the Museum and was told by Austin Hogan that there really was no choice. Once the Museum was created, there was no way of killing it. It would always survive in one form or another. I'm sure he is right, and at this stage we are all very proud of the Museum's renovated quarters, new displays, this fine magazine, and the "Anglers All" traveling exhibit.

I feel comfortable that we, as a team, have done a good job in preserving the history of a delightful way of life. ~