

## *Alder Hex*

*Jim Norton*

It was late afternoon; one of those overcast grey end of November days. Evening was settling in and Hank was working on holiday cards for his clients. The cards contained a brief handwritten note about the client's trip; the season and a fly; this year an Olive Heron. Looking out the window at the West Branch of the Magalloway it was easy to visualize the trips as he thumbed through the journal.

The name on the mailing label was Matt Patterson; it didn't seem like nine years ago that Matt had called the last week of June asking if there was an opening for the weekend. The weekend coincided with the Alderfly hatch; a zebra caddis and the most prolific hatch in the state. Hank had received a call earlier in the day canceling the weekend; the weather didn't look promising. Matt said he'd fish in any weather and was in Boston for the weekend and had never fished in the east.

Saturday was overcast, windy, cold and raw. Hank had left his jeep and trailer at the take out and walked two miles back to Magalloway Junction. Matt arrived early; they stopped at the cabin to get Matt outfitted and drove to the put in on North River Road. The hatch had not started and fishing dries with the wind was impossible; Alternated between streams and nymphs it was a slow morning; a half dozen hits and four trout. Matt didn't say much; casting from the front of the boat was as difficult as Hank ever encountered. The wind was blowing up river and the gusts rocked the boat and blew it sideways when the anchor was out. It was the only time Hank had seen the wind strong enough to blow the boat up river. Normally in the riffles Hank rowed up river to hold the boat back and position it. It was every thing Hank could do to push the boat down river and he was on the oars all day. In the slower sections Hank turned the boat around and rowed backwards making casting easier as the wind carried the line up river.

Around 10 the first of several rainstorms blew through; the rain was coming up river in sheets. They had only made two miles and were just about to Hanks Cabin. Hank never stopped at the cabin for a break but he decided getting out of the rain would be a good move. Over coffee Matt related how he had started fly fishing in Oregon as a youngster and had fished all over the west and now lived in Houston. It was easy to see even with miserable conditions he was an excellent angler who relished being on the water. At noon they stopped for lunch under the route 16 bridge as another torrent of rain pelted down. Around 1:30 it started getting dark as another front blew in. This time it was hail with the wind whipping white caps up the river. Hank pulled the boat in under a stand of hemlock; tied the bow off and dropped the anchor. They huddled under a tarp as the sound of marble size hail pounded down; when the hail ended the wind intensified. Getting down river was going to be impossible. Hank walked the boat about 100 yards down river where the road was close enough to winch it out; and was lucky enough to hitch a ride to the Jeep.

A half hour later they had picked up Matt's car and were back at the cabin. It was the worst weather Hank had experienced in ten years on the river. By 4pm the wind died down and the sun broke through. Hank asked Matt if he would be interested in trying a pond for the Hex hatch in the evening. Hank grilled steaks on the deck and they talked

about fishing. Matt had a preference for Montana and Hank related how he had learned to fly fish while working for Waltham Technologies on a project in Montana. One of the employee's parents had a ranch on the Big Hole. That was before the McGregor ranch became a fly fishing destination. Hank told how Kevin McGregor had taken him under his wing for a few years. Matt had stayed at the ranch and used Kevin as a guide. Fly fishing has a way of making the world a pretty small place; maybe it's because the fly fishing population isn't that large and eventually you're likely to run into someone who knows a friend or acquaintance or has fished someplace you have.

When they launched the canoe the pond was like a mirror. A few Hex's were starting to show as Hank worked the canoe around the pond. Look for a natural and cast the fly as close as possible; simulate the twitching motion and keep a tight line. Differentiate between splashes and slurps; cast to the slurps, the larger brookies feed without expending as much energy. Matt landed a few and became enthralled as the hatch intensified; just after sunset a 16" brookie capped off the evening. The hatch slowed and they listened to the sounds of the night; a moose walking on the other side of the pond and coyotes in the distance. It was a day to remember; the worst and best.

Sunday morning; what a difference a day makes. In the 50's, no wind, sunshine and the hatch was on. It was one of those days every angler should have once in a lifetime. Matt had a brookie on his first cast followed by browns, rainbows and salmon all on dries. The flies were active in the shade under the alders and when clouds drifted by the hatch would swarm over the bushes and river. Silent the day before Matt started talking; he worked in finance and was the company treasurer at thirty five when he met his wife just out of collage. He described himself as a company man; a workaholic to be precise. She was bright, well educated and attractive. He wanted to move up the corporate ladder; she wanted a family and kids. They were married six months later and in five years had three kids; a boy the oldest and two girls. She was everything he ever imagined in a wife taking care of things on the home front as he worked his way up to CEO at 44. Matt was then 61 and the company was in the Forbes top 100. When the youngest enrolled in a collage summer program he talked to his wife about retiring. She stunned him by asking for a divorce.

He had never seen it coming; he was looking forward to retirement. His wife was in her late forties; she had raised her family said she didn't want to spend her life in a retirement community with what she described as an aging older man. Matt said he could never comprehend how he was successful in business and so dense about women. He had found out a few days before the trip to Boston. Matt left a generous tip; he said it was peanuts compared to what a shrink would cost with better results. That was the start of a life long friendship.

In October of 2005 Matt returned the favor of listening. That summer Mary Foster's body was found on the West Branch; her husband had tried to frame Hank for the murder. Eventually things worked out but the loss of Mary was a black cloud that wouldn't go away. There was never a romantic relationship but they had become good friends. Matt had done his home work after learning Hank had worked for Waltham Technologies; it was the software his corporation used and he thought maybe someday he could hire Hank. A friend of Matt's from collage was the CEO of the company that purchased Technologies. Hank had started out as a Systems Engineer and worked his way up to manager of customer services at thirty three. Seven years later he was the Director

of Software Development and married to one of the company's top sales representatives. In the summer of 2000 the company was sold. Between the company stock plan and stock options which became fully vested as a result of the sale Hank cashed in a substantial amount and resigned. Hanks wife had been working in Houston for a year before the sale and had an opportunity to move to Paris with the new company; she eventually became the VP of European sales. She suggested a divorce after realizing Hank was content with his life but would never move on as long as they were married. Hanks world was operating West Branch Outfitters in the town of Magalloway Junction where the West Branch entered the Magalloway River. A general store, garage and a population of 67 people comprised the Junction, the last town in New Hampshire before the Maine line.

Matt's corporation had bought out another large company that was close to bankruptcy. He needed to get the company integrated as quickly as possible and knew Hank had managed similar projects. Matt convinced Hank to run the project as a consultant saying he needed a change; surprisingly Hank agreed.

Hank has several shows and presentations scheduled over the winter and he persuaded Pat Rivers; a young guide who lived in the Junction to take over. Pat was in his early thirties was a jack of all trades who could do about anything; you had to be to make a living in the hardscrabble North Country. Pat's wife Mary also a native of the area was a teacher in Rangeley Maine. Hank had been using Pat whenever he could and they had become good friends. Mary's sole purpose in life other than raising their two children seemed to be playing matchmaker. She was constantly on the prowl and seemed to know every available female north of the notches. As good as he was at guiding Pat had no confidence speaking in front of a group and was very apprehensive about doing the presentations but he finally agreed.

Hank and Pat were at the Berlin airport at 10am on January 2<sup>nd</sup> when a corporate jet from Matt's company landed. Pat had been amazed to see Hank in a suit; and more so when he was invited to take a look at the inside of the plane, he had never flown. Setting in the Jeep with Duchess, Hank's setter Pat watched as the plane vanished in the overcast sky.

The headquarters for the company that was being acquired was in Phoenix; seven hours later Hank walked back in the corporate world. From the moment he walked through the door it seemed like he never left. The project coordinator for Matt's company was Susan Davis; a striking brunette that reminded Hank of his former wife; sharp, aggressive and driven. For the next three months Hank worked ten to sixteen hours a day; six days a week. Hank has a few rules; one was don't mix business with pleasure; he had only broken the rule once when he dated his wife. Reality was that very few women could live in a remote area like Magalloway Junction; he occasionally dated but they were few and far between even with Mary's matchmaking efforts. Occasional flings when he was a ski instructor decreased over the years although there was a lawyer he met skiing from Portland Maine. She was not particularly looking for marriage but wanted someone who in her words was successful and goal orientated; guiding didn't quite fit into that category. Still they remained close friends and sometimes a little more.

The end of March the project was completed. During the three months they worked together Susan was all business. Matt flew in to have dinner with Susan and Hank and to express his thanks for bringing the project in a month ahead of schedule. Reviewing the project Hank made sure to credit Susan for doing an outstanding job. Matt said she

always does and said if she could fly fish he'd marry her. Susan smiled and laughed and said he's been saying that since I went to work for him twenty years ago. Camaraderie is a gift shared between friends and it was apparent both had a lot of respect for each other.

Back in New Hampshire Hank still thought of Mary and knew nothing would ever change that but he was looking forward to the season with a renewed vigor and knew he would never enter the corporate world again. Hank picked up a used year old drift boat from Ardvark Outfitters in Maine on his way home from skiing Sugarloaf and dropped it off for Pat and said thanks for doing the presentations and taking care of Duchess. Duchess and the kids got along so well they wanted to keep her; Hank said OK but only until bird season.

In the middle of April Hank received a call from Susan; she wanted to learn to fly fish before the middle of June and asked if Hank would help; there was one condition; he couldn't tell Matt. Susan asked for books and CD's on fishing; Hank recommended Thomas Ames "Hatch Guide for New England Streams" and a few others.

Susan looked different in jeans and a sweat shirt and was a little more relaxed. Hank asked about her fishing experience; she had never fished. She had grown up on a farm in Nebraska and football was the family passion. She related how when she was small her father told her she would be the first female quarterback for Nebraska; she believed him until she was twelve. Hank thought he would get started casting at one of the local ponds and demonstrated a basic cast. Her cast was flawless; almost perfection. She blushed and said the Joan Wulff casting class she took in April must have helped; that and practicing two hours a day.

Hank thought they would use the boat the first day and wade the next day. A few small mayflies were hatching and she asked if they were blue wing olives size 16. She must have memorized the book; in two days she identified every insect and turned over more rocks looking for nymphs than Hank did in a season. She almost dropped the rod the first time she had a strike and it was late in the afternoon before she got the handle on playing a fish; but once she did it was like she was born with a rod in her hand.

Wading was a bit more difficult, it took her a while to get the handle of walking in the river. Around sunset they were on the meadows on the West Branch; a small caddis hatch was on and trout were starting to rise. Susan stopped fishing looked at the sunset and said it's phenomenal. The tension seemed to drain from her face and Hank thought it was the first time he had ever seen her relax.

On June 15<sup>th</sup> there was a phone message from Matt. Matt picked up the phone on the first ring and was laughing so hard it took him a while to get the story out. At the stockholders meeting Susan did a PowerPoint presentation of the project and financial benefits. Matt had congratulated her on an outstanding effort and ended by saying "if you could fly fish I'd marry you". She proceeded to flash up several pictures of her on the West Branch with trout; the last an 18 inch brookie and a quote underneath "Susan, you're one hell of an angler - Hank"; those in attendance laughed so hard it almost broke up the meeting. Hank asked Matt what he was going to do. Matt said; I have a trip to Missoula the last week in July; I'm going to invite her and get the last laugh.

The evening of July 28<sup>th</sup> Matt called. Hank you're never going to believe this. My son, Matt Jr. one of my daughters Jill, Susan and I spent four days drifting the Clark's Fork and the Blackfoot. Susan and my daughter Jill roomed together and got along great. Today we fished the Bitterroot. We pulled in for lunch where there was a ranch for sale.

We walked up to the house after lunch. It's a huge log cabin with an open porch facing up river. You can see the mountains with snow on the peaks. It's an unbelievable setting. We were all admiring the view and Susan said it would be a phenomenal place to live. I thought I'd get even with her and said; marry me and I'll buy it for you as a wedding present and we'll move here. She said yes; I thought she was kidding but she wasn't. We're doing it. I won't be out in September but we'll both be there next year. We want you to come out next July.

The following July Hank arrived at the ranch, it was everything they said and more. Matt looked ten years younger; Susan's hair was several inches longer with a slight touch of gray. For a week they drifted different sections of the rivers from mid morning to late afternoon. Hank visited the ranch in 07, 08, and 09. During that time he had the chance to meet and fish with all of Matt's kids; Matt Jr. had married and had a young son, the apple of Matt's eye. Hank made the trip again in 2010; he knew the kids had been at the ranch and would be leaving the day before he arrived; he wished that he could have gotten away a few days earlier to spend a few days with them.

When Hank pulled into the ranch the first thing he noticed was several vehicles in the yard. Matt Jr. was walking towards him; as soon as he saw his face he knew something was terribly wrong. They had been tossing a football around the afternoon before and Matt had gone up on the porch to get a glass of ice tea. He didn't return and it looked like Matt was asleep in the rocker; he had died of a stroke.

The funeral was the next day; Matt's ashes were scattered on the river in front of the ranch. That evening at dinner everyone was depressed. Hank told the story of the first time he had fished with Matt and how terrible the conditions were; about the great evening and the next day. Hank said that was a low point in Matt's life but he had gone fishing because he knew it was the best thing for him to do. Hank told them your Matt would want you to celebrate his life and get on with your own and that's what we're going to do; everyone is going to fish tomorrow. They fished a few days and at dinner Hank told stories about the trips they had taken which got the kids and Susan talking about other trips with Matt.

There's no replacement for a father or husband; Hank knew it would be a long process. The last weekend in September Susan returned to New Hampshire; a trip she had made with Matt for years. The sadness was still in her eyes but the arm that was going to throw touchdowns for Nebraska had the rod laying out beautiful casts. The last evening they went to the Balsams for dinner. At the end of the evening Susan said; the only thing I was successful at in life was my work. I had a few failed marriages. I respected Matt and I ended up loving him; he was a great person who loved his kids. They became part of my life and hope they always will be. I think of his grandson as my own. I love the ranch plan on living there the rest of my life. I worked with you for three months and know more about you than you think. I'll marry you if you'll move to Montana; let me know by January.

January was a month away. Hank loved guiding and thought he could do it for a lot of years; but he could always guide in Montana. Pat could take over the business; they had a few young guides coming along. There was no one to talk it over with. Duchess had taken up residence at Pat's house except when he picked her up to go hunting. It was the story of his life with females, none around. In hindsight he should have moved to Paris with his wife. What were the chances of meeting another woman like Susan in a lifetime?

