The Jerry Bartlett Angling Collection presents: Sporting Legends of the Catskills. Nick Lyons. Reflections and Remembrances. A life Well Fished. Saturday, December 2nd, 2017, at the Phoenicia Library. This event is made possible with funds from the Catskill Watershed Corporation, in partnership with New York City DEP. Recorded by Silver Hollow Audio.

Beth Waterman: Welcome! And thank you all for coming. This presentation is part of our series titled Sporting Legends of the Catskills, made possible by funds from Catskill Watershed Corporation, with support from New York City DEP. Today's guest is Nick Lyons, a sporting legend himself. Nick learned to fish as a boy, during the summers he spent at Laurel House in Haines Falls, which was owned by his grandparents, Nathan and Sadie Bernstein. Many of you are familiar with Nick as a fisherman, author, and publisher. Appreciation and esteem for Nick extends far outside the Catskills. The Lyons legacy was featured in Trout magazine this fall, in an extensive article about Nick, which I can pass around for those of you who may not have seen it. You'll have to find it though! And we here at the library are very indebted to Nick for his many generous donations to the collection. He has been invaluable in terms of giving us advice, and providing books for the collection, and also books that we have sold, so that we can purchase new books. I want to share with you a note from a friend whom I saw this summer in Michigan. I mentioned that Nick was coming to the library, and she sent me this:

Letter: As of recent, because the fishing is slow, I picked up a book out of my 400+ fishing library stash. It is a wonderful story of an angler's relationship with a very special type of water. I always enjoyed this author's writing, because he can focus on the subtle aspects of the sport of fly fishing, not the sensationalist drivel.

Nick Lyons: That's because I don't catch fish [laughter].

Letter: I have spent the last 30 years fly fishing, operating my custom rod building business, donating time to fisheries conservation groups, and teaching a lot of fly fishing classes. Thirty pages into the book I thought, "gosh! If only my students could read these first 30 pages, I wouldn't have to bother to teach." The book also brought back names of dear angling friends. Larry Duckwall, for example. And dear angling places. I love to share my books and give them away joyfully. But this one is a keeper. The book is Spring Creek. And the author is Nick Lyons. Thank you Nick, for everything, always. Dorothy Schramm, Pentwater Michigan.

Beth: So that was just a tribute from someone who's far more experienced than I am and more knowledgeable about fishing and the literature thereof, that expresses the great esteem that Nick receives throughout the fishing community. Nick brought some copies of his books today, and he's donated them to us. He will sign them after this talk, and we will receive a donation. We're not really selling the books, but we'd ask for a donation to the library…

It's a great honor to have Nick here with us today. Thank you all. [applause]

Nick: Thank you. Thanks, Beth. Thank you all for coming, for being patient. This started in September, when I was supposed to come. And I had pneumonia. Then it happened again, but I had a family matter that I could not break. My granddaughter was playing Lear in King Lear, so I just thought that was a unique situation that I couldn't pass up. But I'm delighted to be here. And I'd like to talk about some of the early moments of my fishing, how I got started, which is different in each case, but it overlaps with the way everyone got started, I think. And then get to the publishing, which became an important part of my life, and something about it, and I'd be glad to answer any questions, eventually, that would be of some help. I was a cunning little kid, and when I was six, I think, and I can remember back that far, I was catching everything that moved up at the Laurel House. I caught frogs, salamanders, newts of various kinds, crayfish, and then eventually a catcher gets to the catching of fish. And I can remember catching perch and what we called shiners, they got quite large, in what is called South Lake now. My grandfather owned the Laurel House in those days. Most of what went on with the older folk were pinochle on the back deck, and swimming. No one else fished.

Come on in, Liz. And Star. Star is invited also.

So I was just at the place where I'm catching everything that moved, up at the Laurel House. And there was a comic that they hired to be there and entertain the guests, not just at performances, but also to walk around and make them laugh a little bit. He had the name of Pitzy Katz, as I remember. And I did my first enterprising activity related to fishing at that time. He paid me five cents a frog, little frogs, the little ones, to go under… he would turn a cup over, like this, or all the cups were turned over, when they served at the dining table, and then when somebody opened it up and they saw the frog, it became a moment of some hilarity and shock. There was a little creek that came out of South Lake. I think it's called simply Lake Passage now, or something like that. I don't know what South Lake, what they sell now, what it produces now, but it only had shiners, blue gills, they're rather big, and also perch in it. And what I didn't know, since I'd never seen one of them, was that it also had the shark of the pond, very large pickerel, that ate everything in sight, and were better catchers than I was. One day I was bringing in a shiner of maybe 6 or 7 inches long, and suddenly, like a dog taking it, the shot of a pickerel comes along, grabs it, doesn't get the hook in him, but wouldn't let go, he wouldn't let go of his meal. I got him into the boat, and lost an aunt, who started to scream, who was out there with me. The little runoff from the lake had a little area just below where the water was very clear, and where the smaller pickerel go maybe 11, 12 inches, were, and being a devious little kid, I figured out that in the short time that they wouldn't feed down there, and what I had to do is get some piano wire on the end of a stick, put the piano wire down with a noose on it, and yank them. And I got them. My next big accomplishment was even worse, and I had a very, very bad childhood for someone who became a lunatic fly fisherman for a while. Partway down the runoff from the lake, there was a little ballooning of the water, of the stream, and lying on the boards one day, just watching things happen, I spotted the nose of some fish I'd never seen before. Quite lovely. And hiding under one of the bulwarks, and this is mid-summer I

think. I tried everything I could. I used worms, of course. I started with worms. I tried a crayfish. I tried one of the frogs. I was capable of trying anything that I had caught elsewhere to catch fish. Nothing got this thing to move. So I went down onto the buttress of the little bridge, and it was trout. It was a very big trout, maybe 15 inches, which was a lot for me. I tried the wire on him, but I couldn't get it around him. And then I figured out the only way to do this, since he was a very tame and quiet trout, was to tie a Carlisle hook on the end of one of these sticks that I used, and very, very patiently, perhaps after 10 minutes of very slowly lowering it down, slip it below the head, and yank. So I did so. And I caught this really beautiful trout, killed it immediately, beautiful, probably the last of the Mohicans in that water. I brought it back and was feeling very, very proud of myself. A fly fisher happened to come up to visit at that time, a guy named Leo Mertzl, as I remember, and he had a trunk full of fly fishing equipment. It seemed bizarre to me to have boxes of flies. Six or seven rods in cases. Special places for the reels. This would have been in 1940, maybe, 1939, perhaps. I didn't know what it was about. And he was brought to me in good time, as the resident angler, all of age 7, and wanted to fish for trout, naturally. I told him that I had heard of a trout, I didn't tell him the whole story, it looked like it would be too complicated. So we went to the pond first, and he fished for bass. And he got nothing. There were no bass in South Lake at that time. And we fished for a week, and I really tolerated him, you know, with his flies. And all of his equipment. Then when he left, I had a little drawing that I had made of this trout, before I turned it over to the kitchen to cook it. And I sent him the drawing and said, here's something that I, is this a trout? It's something I caught a little before you came. And I caught it on a worm. So I not only caught it by gigging it, but I also lied. It was the beginning of many lies that fishermen are heir too. And I remember him riding writing back and saying, you know, it looks like a trout to me. But I really couldn't be sure from your drawing, and that creek that we fished didn't have any fish in it. So I'm not sure what it is. It was my first falling. I fell. And things continued. The last time I fished was with a very old friend named Knox Burger, a literary agent. And we fished in a place that I called Bill's Pond. Bill Kronenberg's pond. You may know Bill. It was filled with absolutely gigantic rainbow trout that he fed on pellets. And that's all they wanted. They want pellets for lunch, dinner, all the time. And they would come readily to it, and not to the fly at all. I had taken a few of the fish, I had figured out the great problem that you needed a pellet imitation, not a fly. And Knox, I'm afraid, was on his last months, and was very frail, lost a lot of weight, he was a great literary agent, and he wore a T-shirt all the time, saying, Honest Prose and Nerves of Steel. And I don't think he weighed 90 pounds then. And his eyesight had gone bad, and his hearing had gone bad. And it was coming to the end of things, as things go. He wanted to fish once more, so I figured the best place was Bill's pond. I took him there, and just as we sat down, I said, Knox, you can't catch them on flies here. You need a special pellet fly that I've devised. The big devising, it was a piece of cork that had a hook in it. But Knox said, no hamburger! He wanted just to fish with flies. He couldn't tie the fly on himself, he could hardly see it. So I tied on flies, 4 or 5 or 6 flies that we changed. And nothing came to it. I mean, you could see these huge fish cruising. Finally he put on the—he didn't put it on—but he said, one more try, and this time, went to the side, I put on the famous Lyons pellet fly, and of course the

first cast something, I don't know 20 inches, maybe 7, 8 pounds, comes and takes it and just about pulls Knox into the water. He was sitting on a chair, and I had to hold him with two hands, or he's going to go in. We bring it in, put it in the net, he puts his hands over it, so he tells how big the thing is, and it's gigantic. And he turns and says to me, no hamburger! And I said, and I lied, just like I had lied about the trout. I said, that's right, Knox! It was a great catch, a great fly, and I lied through my teeth. In between those two events, I learned a bit about the ethics of it all, and did a batch of different kinds of fishing. I think that the most interesting part of my relationship to fishing, and including all types, is that my father had died before I was born, my mother had to work. Living with my grandparents, people thought I was being spoiled rotten. I was a nice kid then, I mean, I didn't believe that they were going to do to me what happened. They sent me to a boarding school. And it scared the shit out of me. I really had never seen anything like that in my life. It had one virtue. It was on a pond called the Ice Pond, which had been used in revolutionary times for cutting ice. And I went there. And there are pictures of me fishing it. And I believe that it probably saved my life, going down to that pond, fishing with the bobber, watching the pecking, trying to tell what was down there, watching the lines go into the water. The lines of light going into the water, and somehow touching something numinous and real and mysterious. And it hooked me. And I became very, very involved with it. When my mother finally remarried, we lived in Brooklyn. And I fished for all the junk that was available down at Sheepshead Bay. Hackleheads of one kind or another. Fish that blew up when you touched them. Fish with odd names. And loved it, loved it madly. Trout still echoed in my brain a little bit. And at 13, which is, I was quite small at 13, I began to make the long trip with a friend of mine, by subway, from Brooklyn to Grand Central, and from Grand Central up to Brewster. We had big backpacks on us, we had rods, could have lived for a month in the wilderness with all we took up for this one day. And we caught, we caught trout. We were catchers. We knew how to catch and kill trout in those days, first with night crawlers that we got on the lawns in Brooklyn, and almost got arrested for, and go around with a flashlight on someone's lawn, you're liable to get arrested. And then with spinning lures for a while, which seemed to us a very great advance on our technique, particularly something called the homo reverso, which sounds worse than it is, I guess. And also a fly, a spinner called the CP Swing, which was the great killer. I remember the second time we went up, I found a feeder creek to the East Branch, and was fishing with worms and a bobber, and caught a green fish about that long. I would have been 14 that year. It was a fish of 12, 13 inches. Put it on a stringer, didn't know what the devil it was. Caught another. I had three of them on there. And the warden came. The only time a warden has ever come to visit me when I was on a river. And he said, how's luck? And I said, well, I'm just, I just got this nice green trout, I said. And he said, have you got any more of them? And I said, yes, and showed him the stringer. And he said, they're not trout, son. They're bass. They're smallmouth bass. The season doesn't start until July 1st. [laughter] I can remember vividly taking the fish I had on the line off, and let him go immediately, and then the ones on the stringer, one at a time, the last of which was over on its side, wiggled for a while, went downstream, and I kept praying that it would suddenly right itself and take off. Finally it did. He said, learn the trouts, son. I mean,

learn the fish. Learn what the fish are. Which I tried to do. I think that the years in college at the University of Pennsylvania, I fished a bit, and I picked up a fly rod for some reason, one of those Shakespeare rods, and figured out that you don't put the line through that little ring, that you can't cast as well when you put it in the little ring. I would cast in the Palestra after basketball practice. I didn't get very good at it, and I didn't think it was a good way to catch fish, I didn't believe you could catch fish that way. But in graduate school in Michigan, I went to the Au Sable once for a visit, and just going up country, and I stood at a bridge … one of the bridges over the Au Sable, and I stood there for a minute watching a fly fisherman, really the first I'd ever seen. I was 25. I'd been in the army, I'd really advanced my fishing to being a very lethal kind of killer of trout, with a spinning rod. But I watched this guy, and there was something about the fly rod and the line, and the aerial ballet that took place when a good caster is working. And the fly. He was using a big yellow fly, a big sulphur of some kind. And you could watch it go down right under the, he would cast it just upstream of some overhanging branches, and you could watch the fly on the surface, a dry fly of course, float down, and slip into the main current. And then of course a trout came up and took it. And it just electrified me. I almost lost my wife on that trip. She was sitting in the rain in the car and couldn't figure out why I was standing on a bridge in the rain over that. But it was absolutely hypnotizing to see that casting, the fact that he not only caught fish, caught a fish, but also caught it beautifully, caught it in an interesting manner. And after that I became more and more involved with fly fishing, 'til one summer I was beginning to fly fish a little more in the Saw Kill that runs through Woodstock. Spent a couple of summers there with four children, all of whom were, four years apart, and from the youngest to the oldest, and looked like quadruplets at times, and we required two or possibly three babysitters at a time to handle them. But I would slip off to the Esopus, which I, when I first had contact with Ed, who is a master of the Esopus, and I also fished the creek, the little Saw Kill. Someone told me about a man who was the painter named, Manny Bromberg told me about a man who was the best, serious fly fisherman of them all. And I had to go with him, and he was going to set up a trip. It turned out to be Frank Mele. And in the fullness of time, maybe two weeks of trying to get him, I finally made an arrangement to meet at 8:00 in the morning, at Jim Mulligan's house. I don't know whether you knew Jim Mulligan. Cartoonist for the New Yorker. So we set out at 8:00, to go to the Beaverkill, which he called Mecca. The trip, we finally got there at 8:00 that night. Frank was in his cups for a while in those days. And he also would stop at every bar, and he would make comments on every person he saw. He'd stop and look at someone in the fields, and give me a whole story about them. And it was quite an event. We finally got there. I've never been a drinker, but I think I had one or two beers along the way; I could hardly stand. We rushed down to the water. I had, that winter, tried to develop a fly that would imitate the spinner of the green drake it was called, I called it the pigeon drake. And what you find in New York are a lot of pigeon quills hanging around. So I had taken the quill, strapped it to something, put some white hair on the sides, and I thought this was going to be a great fly for that hatch. I get out on the water, weaving and bobbing, and make a cast and this, can I call it a fucking thing, sinks! Sinks like a stone. It was terrible. By the time I got it off and got on new flies, Frank had, calmly, with his pipe in mouth,

caught one fish, and was catching a second fish. We left, we got back in 45 minutes, I think. And I kept thinking about this odd day. And I, you know, from my teen years, I wanted to be a writer, and I'd written by this time maybe 15 scholarly essays based on the advanced studies in English that I'd done in Michigan. I'd written somewhat about the publishing world, which I was now involved with. But somewhere in the back of my head there was something else rattling around, some other voice. And this voice didn't seem to be mine, the one that I was using to write about Chretien de Troyes or Kafka or other folks. So I sat down, and I wrote this story called Mecca, about this trip with Frank. And it just came right out. It's not the best piece of writing, but it was a different voice, and I could feel it as being different. I sent it off to Field & Stream within three days of the time, and they responded within three days. The New Yorker has yet to respond [laughter] … still trying. Now they don't even respond. But the old days they used to send little slips of various kinds. I had shoe boxes full of them. But there's something about that prose that really said maybe this is closer to what would be a happy thing to write. So I sat down and wrote another about gigging this trout, which I called First Trout, First Lie. I sent that to Clare Connelly at Field & Stream, and he took that too! And paid $1000 each for two of them. I said, gee, this is a lot of fun! [laughter] And I love doing these. I think the second one, First Trout, First Lie, is a better story and is closer to what I finally set upon as a writing voice that I had confidence in. But since then I wrote maybe 2-, 300 of these little, I call them shaggy fish stories. There seem to be an endless number that come from the fishing world. Sometimes just an odd situation like some grand fly fisherman who boasted about the number of fish that he caught, once too often. And I heard a story about him coming off a float trip on the Madison river, and having caught a 15-inch rainbow, and someone, and the guide told me, he said, well that's the first time I've had a fish grow 6 inches between when we left and when we got back. But a lot of little things happened. Gingrich telling me that he had caught, Arnold Gingrich from Esquire telling me that he'd caught on a western trip 19 inches worth of trout in four installments [laughter]. Or Charles Ritz once when I published his book out of having lunch with him in a rather New York restaurant, he had just fly fished in salt water for the first time, and I said, he was about 83, 84, very vigorous, and had just brought his mistress in to the Ritz hotel, I think, I said, did you enjoy it? You know, I didn't know what to ask. And he said, he said, well, it is like, it is like sex after lunch: meant for men with hard stomachs. I think the editing I did, the fun I had with the hundred odd books on fishing, most of them, about 90% on fly fishing, I think gave me a huge amount of pleasure. Met some very interesting people, fished some very interesting water, from pike and trout in France, in England, on the chalk streams, and whereabouts. I think it was Frank, actually, who not only gave me the first story, but also gave me the suggestion of republishing some of the greater older books. And I knew about Art Flick's Streamside Guide. I did not know marinara, Marinaro, from a sauce. He just was a totally new name to me. And I started with those two. Frank introduced me to Art Flick, with whom I got along very well. I published his little book. I had insisted to the editor-in-chief that we do it with a water resistant binding, since it was a book that seemed to be proper for taking to the river, and even if you didn't drop it in, it at least would resist any kind of splash. And I remember him saying, well, we'll try it with a lead binding, so

that it sinks, and people will have to buy another one. [laughter] But the Flick was amazing. It sold 15,000 copies before you could blink. And they suddenly said, well, sign up all the ones that you can. And we'll sell 15,000 right away. And I did some practical books that in, you know, the years, this was when, 40 years ago that I started doing these. Some of them still very much in print. I remember the first practical book was Selective Trout, which did very well and still sells. I did Lefty [Kreh], poor Lefty is not well now, I did his book with Mark Sosin, Practical Fishing Knots. I was always a little more reluctant to do practical books, because I'm not good with my hands. I tie with three thumbs, and I, the technical aspects of fishing somehow have been less interesting to me, though enormously important and enormously interesting. One of the books that was not about anything technical was old Sparse Grey Hackle's book, which had been called Fishless Days originally, when it was published by the Anglers Club. And I met with Sparse. We had some, he was a remarkable man. I think he was in his early 80s. He had been the debating champion of New York state in 1914. I mean, really, a remarkable old fellow. And I once went fishing with him on the DeBruce water, and he said to Mari, he said, you know, Nick has been working too hard. Why don't you go fishing, Nick, and I'll entertain your Missus. This great old fellow talked to her about ballistics in the Mexican American War for about an hour. Mari just smiled and said she didn't remember or understand a word of what he had said. But Sparse's book is one of those odd, not practical books, that had a very, very interesting life as well. I'd bet him the summer, I was feeling very cocky, that these books could really sell. And I bet Sparse a dime that we would sell out the first 7500, which was a large printing, of this book of stories, is what they are. Nothing practical in it at all. There's a very funny story in it, Who is Sparse Grey Hackle, about some 50-pound trout, and soaking bread with scotch, and it's a bizarre thing. I didn't see how it could sell 7500 in ten years, but I'd bet him anyway, because the dime I could afford to spend. And in late November we had to go back to press, and I called up Sparse, and I told him, you know, we're going back, and I'm winning the bet. I mean, we've sold out that edition, you owe me a dime. And he [grumbles]. Every time he came by, which, I don't know what his work was, but he always seemed free enough to show up with his double breasted suit and his very formal and big thick glasses – he's still the best proofreader I've ever met – but he could barely see, I think. I'd say, Sparse, can you pay me the dime, please. And I said, it's a very serious bet, I was very serious about this, I worked very hard to sell it. He says, don't worry, buster. I always pay my bets, debts. Around April, this gnome of a man shows up and drops a box on my desk, and he says I always pay my damn debts, buster. And walks out. And I wish I had it here in Woodstock, but he gave me a leather bound, bound in green Moroccan leather with the dime inserted into the … and with the inscription, for Nick, who published this book.

I had good days with it. I tried to solve some fights between multiple authors. I had strange things happen. Sparse once told me that he wrote something for Sports Illustrated, in which he talked about someone named Reginald Cauchois I think was the name – who had once deigned to use a live nymph. Mostly he was a dry fly fisherman. And Sports Illustrated, without checking, got pretty good checkers, they

had run it, the copy editor said, what is an olive nymph, I've never heard of such a thing, and changed it to live nymph. And for fly fishermen, fishing with a live nymph is ten times worse. Sparse said it was the most libelous change of one letter in the history of the English language. And he never wrote for Sports Illustrated again. He was a man of great principle.

I had some very pleasant, funny, interesting, great friendships that came from it. I had the pleasure of developing really a very, a list that I was very proud of. I had books that I missed, that I won't tell you about today. But that happens also. And then I sold the business, and the people that took it over did not work well with some of the fly fishers, and they went to other places. That old list was dispersed. I think there's very little of it left. Though there's still a Lyons Press, that's owned by a company in Maryland. At any rate, I've chatted on very fast, said everything I know about fishing, or that I can remember. There are lots of stories that I have in these various books. Is there any, have I gone on too long?

Beth: No, not at all.

Nick: Or too little. I can go on for hours. Now that I see that my memory works enough, to go back to my sixth year, I can go on for somewhat longer. I remember Ed Ostapczuk writing me a letter that I didn't understand his Esopus well enough in those days, but I would take, you know, I'd race off from my four children in Woodstock, and my wife, leaving them alone with them, or the two babysitters, and the portal would be on. And I didn't know how to get information on it. So I said I'd had an erratic relationship to it. I once dropped a good English bamboo rod by a man named Dennis Bailey, into the Esopus, coming out of it after dark. I always fished late. I had the rod tucked under my arm, must have, it must have fallen out. So I got to the bank, and there was no rod. And it was a little turbid then, a little chalky. I went back the next day and kicked around at that spot, it's just upstream of the Emerson inn, where the railroad is now parked all the time, which I like to fish, and found the rod. Very generous to me that day. But I love the Esopus. There is one great story that some of you, most of you probably know, called In Praise of Trout- and Also Me, about, by Paul O'Neil, whose son now writes a lot, that's distributed here, which is a wonderful, wonderful story. One of the best of the fishing stories, I think. Anything I can talk about that you'd like, you want to know? Are you all holding fishing stories that you want to publish?

Ryan Kakeh (audience): What's your proudest story/work revolving around fishing?

Nick: That's a good question. I had the good fortune to meet a curmudgeonly old guy named Herbert Wellington, through a friend of mine who fished a lot in Montana. And we got into a correspondence for the better part of a year, I think, from the winter on until the summer. And … he was a letter writer, and when I get caught up, I have a granddaughter whom I write to twice a week. I write a lot. But Herbert and I would talk about fishing matters, and who we liked and not. And he invited me to come out and fish his water in the west. And I had no idea what it was, I had fished

the chalk streams in England, the Kennet, in particularly, but also the Test and the Kent Stour, the Stour river, which is the river that runs down into Canterbury, that you see in all of the paintings by … Constable. All the Constable paintings. A lovely river. But I'd fished the Kennet a lot, and it had whipped me pretty badly. The British streams are reasonably shallow, very, very clear, the trout have been fished over by some great fishermen. And you have to be pretty precise. They have their own set of rules, as most of you know, that you have to see the trout before you cast, you're not allowed to cast until you see a specific trout that you're casting to. And it is a good discipline, actually, though when I started it just scared the hell out of me. They finally put me at a bridge where there was a fish called Old George or something like that, some 7 or 8 pound brown that had been in there for years. Nobody had caught it, because it hung out under the bridge, which was a little downstream of where you cast from. You couldn't cast to it from the lower part. And downstream fishing being frowned on, nobody had really fished for it. They said, let him have a go! Let the American have a go at Old George! And there were about 6 or 7, more than that, maybe 8 or 10 people lined up in a little semicircle to watch the American fish for Old George. I didn't know what to do. My first time on the water, I didn't want to insult them. On the other hand, I was very anxious not to be made a damn fool of. I get in the water, and there are caddis all over the place, they're just bouncing up and down, so I take a Troth Caddis, which is a terrific fly, and I lay it out as across stream as I can go with a little wave in it. The bloke's fishing downstream! Someone shouts. [laughter] Finally, I do the best I can to keep it reasonably across stream and not up, and sure enough Old George comes up, takes the fly, I strike it, and [exclamations] and I snap him right off! [laughter] I've done a little of that, and then Herb Wellington invited me out, and it turns out that not only does he fish in the west and have a nice ranch, but he has 8 to 10 miles curving, probably the equivalent to 12 miles, of a remarkable spring creek called O'Dell Spring Creek, which flows for about 12 or 14 miles, and then goes into the Madison near Ennis. And there are only two landowners. He owns one section, someone else owns another. And his section is right in the middle, and it's all the best water. I think the times I fished out there were the most interesting, challenging, satisfying of all the fishing I've ever had. I love the Catskills, and I love the rivers, the many that I've fished, from the Schoharie, the Beaverkill, the Willowemoc, and certainly the Esopus, too. But this thing was remarkable. It was one of those unfished, unstocked rivers, with just the right balance between the amount of food available and the trout. They, in most places, hung out under undercut banks that were deeper than the table. I mean, sometimes you'd get close to the edge and step in, and you could see that it was really hollow. I fished it for the first time for about three weeks, and it took me a week before I caught a trout. I was reasonably good by then, but the trout had their own patterns. He only allowed the dry fly. I couldn't quite get it. I just didn't really understand it. I caught some trout that first trip, and then the third or fourth trip we made I started to get a lot. And they, it was fascinating, because it was, it had a rhythm and it had a logic to it. The pale morning duns would start at about 10:00. And they'd go on with little changes right up until dark, when the caddis would start, just until dark. Every now and then there'd be, in July 4th weekend, there would be the western green drake that came off, and it was astonishing. It was like a circus. The fish would, you

could see them in the shallow water making a wake right across 20 feet of, I don't know how they tell, but they would go 20 feet across after a real green drake fluttering on the other side of the creek. It was astonishing fishing. It was almost, it was not quite like that wonderful G.E.M. Skues story called Mr. Theodore Castwell, in which someone finds himself in hell, and he catches trout after trout. And he says, can't we stop? And his keeper says, no! [laughter] You mean, I've got to go one catching these 2-pounders? [laughter] Yes, says the keeper. It wasn't like that, because the fish were all varied, they remained hard right up until the last time I fished it. And you had to be pretty canny to do much business with them. I fished it, I fished it a lot, and I really fell in love with it. I caught some very big trout. I saw Wellington catch one that I think was 30 inches. It was a dog of a fish. I mean, it was just absolutely gigantic, like a salmon. I was sitting next to him when he was casting from a sitting position, and I saw the fish take. He fought it all the way to the end, and then it finally was right next to him, and the hook pulled out. And he didn't throw his rod down or get angry. He'd seen him before. But it had that kind of fish in it, hidden. I never got anything more than about 21, 22 inches. But I found it a remarkable, a remarkable fishery. Endlessly interesting. Wellington was very close to, he never talked about his friends, and you didn't know who his friends were, and he was very much contained, what he said. But he was a very close friend of Harry Darbee, and he would bring Harry out for a couple of weeks. And Harry would camp down on this, down near the creek. Herb had about 500 Darbee flies in a jar, and they had a break-in, they stole the jar and threw all the flies out the window. [laughter] It was a great place. I went back in the summer of 2015, two years ago. And they had done, the other land owner, and this is something, you know, that, what you're writing about, Tony, had done extensive renovation of the stream. And the reports were that the renovation was great, the fishery was very healthy, it was producing some big fish. The problem was that Wellington's water in the middle had gotten all the silt. The silt had come down, and there was a famous pool that's on the jacket, actually, of one of the books that I donated, the pool was about 12 feet deep. As you, as it came around, it was a bend pool, and after the turn, it was about 12 feet deep, and the fish, you could see them in the very clear water, maybe 25, 30 trout. And they would rise, almost as if they had meal tickets of some kind. I mean, there'd never be more than one or two rising. But there would be a, if you rested it, there would always be something coming back in a few minutes. I love the pool, and fished it a number of times. That summer, two years ago, there was an island where that indentation had been, with plants growing out of it and everything else. It was terrible. I mean, the silt had literally killed the fly life. I saw no pale morning duns, the water temperature was close to 70, which for a spring creek, and that particular spring creek, is at least 10 or 12 degrees higher than it ever was. I did not catch a fish. I fished in places that I knew well. And I think screwing around with a river, you get that now and then. That's happening, Tony Bonavist is writing something on the Beaverkill about that, and Ed Van Put has been involved with it. And it's really, it gums up rivers, if you don't think about the whole thing. But that, in a few words, to answer what my favorite fishing experience, it was fishing that creek, and the times when it was the best, and the times when it really was very tragic. I had two or three wonderful, mostly interesting episodes. Lefty came out once, who's a friend of

Wellington's. And I fished with him. And he fished, he has several times said, Nick has just been lying all these years. He's a better fisherman than he makes out. Because there was a situation, one, where Lefty was fishing some little run, and I said, Lefty, you know, after he was done, you know, they really won't come up if you stand up like that. He knows enough to bend in certain sections. And he said, we'll creep up. So I crept up. And fish came up, and I caught it pretty quickly. And Lefty, oh my gosh, you've been lying all these years. [laughter] Lefty was very interesting. I think the only real mistake I've ever seen Lefty make, or hear about, he made on that pool I just mentioned. You know, as the water came around the pool, around the corner, around the turn, it went under an undercut bank on the far side. Then it opened up maybe into this big pool. And then it had another couple of runs along the far bank. And we were coming up the stream, and he sees a rise right up at the curve of the bend, right where, there's an overhanging branch. And he says, I'm going to try for that. I said, Lefty, don't. You know. He said, I can reach it, don't worry, I can reach it. It was about 120 feet away. And I said, Lefty, that's not the point. And he's already, and he threw it, and he throws it, maybe it was three inches off where it should be, but it didn't catch. Then he threw two more up there, and the fish was down already. And it was a gorgeous cast. It was just a beautiful cast. And then I said, Lefty, you've never been on this pool. Let me show you something. And we walked to a place where you could look down into the heart of the pool, and had put down about 35 trout with this extraordinary cast of his. I think those things happen, and I think Lefty was one of the great fishermen, or is one of the great fishermen. He had a lot of, Wellington had a lot of people come who, to visit. He had Sid Neff there once. Do you know Sid? Does anyone know Sid? He's a, Sid's a very intense fly fisherman. He does beautiful book bindings. Just gorgeous. And is, gets angry very quickly. I fished with him one day, and he ran ahead of me to get to this pool, which sort of put me out of any sympathy with him. But I found some fishing, and I asked him when he was coming off the water, did you have some fun, Sid? And he said, very serious voice, dead serious, he said, I never have fun when I fish. [laughter] It's the end of the conversation. And I always have fun. I mean, I'm just on the other side of the equation. But if anyone else dares to ask a question now, I have another hour that I can talk. [laughter] Anything else, about the publishing world? Or this or that? I had a lot of fun publishing 100 odd books, and … Mike Valla wrote me a wonderful letter telling me that he had had a difficult teenage time of his life, and that the books that I was publishing at Crown had really, the Marinaro, or the Jennings, the Flick, the Leisenring, he said they saved his life. And what else do I want to hear from a publishing career than I had some effect, or given somebody some pleasure.

Ryan: As a writer, I just thought it was a good idea to ask, do you find that there's a story in every experience when you go out fishing?

Nick: I do. I think there are. And I think that it's the strangest thing, I don't know that any other sport quite has that. I know there are people who say there are stories in a game of golf, and I heard a terrible story about Mr. Trump playing with someone, and the guy said, well, I can't play with you anymore. And he asked why. He said, well, you cheat. And apparently Trump answered, I do cheat. I cheat. And I cheat on

my wife, and I cheat in business, he said, and if you can't handle it, maybe we shouldn't play together. I don't know whether that's apocryphal or not. [laughter] But it's an amusing story. But I think, you know, there are good baseball writers. Good baseball situations. I know someone who writes only on the horses. But somehow the literature of fly fishing, or the act of fly fishing, or the connection to the water, the number of variables, the number of moving parts, the number of different characters, I don't think I've ever gone on the water where I haven't come back with a story of some kind.

Audience: Did you ever do anything with Red Smith?

Nick: I knew him a bit; I like his writing enormously. But no, I asked him to do a little book on fishing, and he said the most he gets is 1100 words. He says that's the limit, and he writes within that. He has the most natural sense of metaphor of any sports writer I know. I can think of one marvelous, marvelous, he's describing a shortstop, and he says 'he covered the ground like crabgrass.' It's terrific. I mean, it's just as fast and full of life as anything. He's a great writer, and I like his fishing stories, too, of which there is a little collection called Red Smith on Fishing.

Beth: Well, we'll have to get that collection.

Chris Hensley (audience): Actually, I wanted to say one thing. One of the reasons I'm here today, Nick, is to thank you. My name is Chris Hensley.

Nick: Oh, yes.

Chris: About 3 years ago, I was partly inspired by your writings and publishings to do an event down the road called Trout Tails, where we brought together many of the guys in this room.

Nick: A terrific thing, at Spillian.

Chris: Yup, at Spillian. And it started, you know, the idea was just to sort of tell some fish stories and connect it to the past. It was successful, and now this year in our fourth year, it's expanded, it's going to be all up and down 28, with multiple businesses involved over a two-month period.

Nick: That's great.

Chris: So it's sort of taken on a life of its own, and I wanted to thank you, because early on you were encouraging. You couldn't attend that year, but you provided us some books and autographs, you did some interviews for us on the radio, and it was so much appreciated, and I wanted to come thank you.

Nick: Thank you, Chris. Thank you. I had an odd time. After I stopped teaching, I never used notes when I taught, for thirty years in the classroom. But when I got out,

I got very shy, and I used to write everything out. And it sounded so prepackaged and some joke I'd worked on or something like that just came out so flat and predictable that I really decided not to talk in public at all anymore. And then went up, as Mark knows, I talked up at the Hilltop Historical Society in June, and it just encouraged me to think that maybe I could remember some of these things and talk and have a conversation with folks, instead of writing something out.

Chris: And I love the anecdote you tell about, to be a successful fisherman, you have to put a little piece of your heart on the hook, too.

Nick: Did I say that? That's a nice phrase. [laughter] My goodness. What genius I had then. [laughter] Oh, dear.

Audience: I just have a question, because when you went to the University of Pennsylvania, what was your major?

Nick: Alas, it was insurance.

Audience: And when you went to grad school?

Nick: It's another part of my life that I'm writing about now.

Audience: Oh, good!

Nick: I literally hated the Wharton School. I cannot think of, I don't know why I stayed. I was on the basketball team. It doesn't look like it now, that was 100 pounds ago. We had a great star then named Ernie Beck, and won the Ivy League, and I once wrote a profile of him when I learned how to write. And I wrote to him and said Ernie, I was on the other end of the bench. You probably don't remember me. He said, I remember you very well, Nick. He said, you were a skinny little kid from Brooklyn who could run all day. Now I can't walk without a cane. Things change. No, I was at Penn, and I think I stayed because I was very much connected to basketball and to crew, which I liked a lot. And then when I went into the army, I remember the day it happened, but I read Big Two-Hearted River, Hemingway's story. And I just said, my gosh, people write about fishing, and is there some kind of writing I can do? I didn't do anything for another 5 or 6 years. But in the army I began to read everything I could find. And it was really very scattered reading. I literally would read everything from, gosh, Mickey Spillane to Kafka. I mean, just whatever I could get my hands on. And when I got out, I decided to go back to school. I decided, you know, I'm nowhere. I don't know where my head is. I don't know what, I'm not going to go into insurance, I just dislike it. I mean, I like it now. If Medicare is knocked out, I'm [not] going to be very happy. But I went back as a freshman to Bard College, which is just across the river. Actually, I went to, I was at the New School for 6 months, in New York City, and the guy there at the end of the term, I said, you know, a man named Keith Botsford, a very esoteric course called English Prose Style, which we read everything from the early English to Henry James, very intensely.

And I realized something that term, something about my interest in language, enormous. And I remember at the end of the term walking up to him and saying, sort of, can I make the team? Can I go on? Is it stupid of me to think that I can understand this stuff? And he, cocky son-of-a-bitch, and he said to me, he said, Nick, he says, you're not dumb. You're just absolutely illiterate. [laughter] I took that as a great compliment at the time. And I went to Bard as a freshman, under the GI Bill. And it, Ruth was there then, and my wife was there. I got married that summer and trailed Mari into Cranbrook, in Michigan, and looked around for some place to go back to school there, to parlay the courses at the New School and Bard College, none of which had been anywhere near better than a B minus. I'd been a terrible student. And some awful monster like Grendel in Beowulf guarded the door to the MA program and said I should go back to the garment district [laughter] that I would never get through here. But I said, it's too late, I'm already signed up. I'm ready to go. Can you let me into the MA program? And he said, I can't, actually, I can't. But go and take these psychological and aptitude tests, and then come back and we'll talk. And I came back, and he said, well, I really can't keep you out. But I'm not going to let you into the program unless you get five A's, which I've never gotten in my life. And we were living up in Pontiac, which is about 50 miles from Ann Arbor, and in the winter I'd come down, it was like a bobsled trail going down the Pontiac trail. And I got five A's, and really began to discipline myself then. He let me in, and I got an MA, and a doctorate a couple of years later. And I'm reasonably comfortable with my head now. But it's, you know, it's the kind of change that I think we all make or should make sometime in our lives, when we say, this is the thing I want to do. And I'm late learning it, but I'm going to go back to the beginning if I have to, and learn it. And I see a lot of people who make choices later on, some much later than I did. I thought I was antique at 25. But it turned out to be a very fortuitous choice, scared me out of my wits, and I was in total apprehension that I could get through, and it was just a delight year after year to see that my head was good enough to get through all of this, and that it was, that I just lost a lot of time, but that time really didn't matter. It certainly doesn't matter now, at 85, you don't worry too much about time anymore. Thank you for that question.

Beth: Well, I think …

Nick: We're done.

Beth: We'll move down the hall, Nick had brought some books as I said, and we'll continue the conversation in smaller groups. Thank you all for coming. [applause]