

Valley Angler Another One Falls by Bill Thompson

Last Monday was indeed a “Blue Monday”. The bad news came by way of E-mail and was soon followed up by a phone call shortly after. It seems that another small fly shop is closing its doors forever. It's sad to say that Mountain Road Fly Shop in Raymond New Hampshire is the latest victim of changing times and markets. The small fly shop has become an endangered species.

The owner of Mountain Road is a good friend which only serves to make the loss even harder. As a small shop owner myself I am well aware of the pitfalls of being in the industry. It would seem that the small shop today is being assaulted from all sides.

One would think that the big box store would not be a problem for the fishing industry. Unfortunately this is not the case. Stores like Bass Pro and Cabala's are having a negative impact on small shops. Recently Bass Pro opened a new store in Foxboro, Mass. The week of the grand opening every small hunting and fishing retailer were treated to a week of relative quiet. The same phenomena were felt in Pennsylvania when the Hamburg Cabala's opened a few years ago. Within a year of that opening a half dozen or more small fly shops closed their doors. Very shortly a new Cabala's will be opening in Scarborough Maine. It will be interesting to watch and see how this all plays out.

If this were not enough the Internet is also taking a toll on small fly shops. Of course not just fly shops are taking a hit all so called “brick and mortar” stores. There have always been catalog houses and they have always played a roll in the industry, however there is something enticing about buying through the internet. The instant gratification through the click of a mouse. Personally I would much rather have the luxury of being able to look the merchandise over at my leisure and make my own selection and not be at the mercy of the guy who fills my order at the other end of the world. The easy solution is to become part of it, but not an easy task for a small operation with no guarantee of success.

Should small hunting and fishing shops disappear altogether the world will be a sorer place than it already is. Box stores and the Internet will never be able to replace the service and expertise found in small shops. It is highly unlikely that you will ever find a small group of guys standing around in a Cabala's discussing the relative merits of the Hornberg verses the Wooly Bugger. In what box store are you going to find a guy willing to stop what he is doing to take time out to show a customer how to properly tie an Adams? Up until now larger institutions like Orvis and L. L. Bean have managed to hire well qualified associates to man their stores. Large box stores are far more interested in the bottom line; which translates into lower paid personal and larger numbers of part timers to avoid paying benefits.

It is the small shops that have always been the keepers of our sport. They have, in some ways,

functioned much like universities in that they have been the seats of higher learning for aspiring anglers and hunters. And if nothing else a good place to get a free cup of coffee.

The decline of the small shop is actually a microcosm of what has happened to American society. The bigger is better mentality is costing us more than we realize. If small fly shop are places to learn the art of angling then is not the same true of the neighborhood hardware store? I always got a kick out of the old TV comedy Tool Time Tim. Tim was always seeking refuse in his local hardware store where he hung out with his buddies. Probably something that you are not going to find at Home Depot. Today we have to find this kind of comradery on the Internet in some chat room.

I spent thirty years in the discount retail industry and in all that time, with few exceptions, never had the time to get to know any of my customers. For the most part the only human face the customer ever sees is the face of the person at the check out counter. Today in my own shop every customer becomes an instant friend even though they may never pass through the doors again.

See you on the river.