

Charles Dickens and Bull Trout

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Charles Dickens was arguably the greatest 19th century British novelist but his literary aptitude was in question early in his career. After he penned his 1841 novel *Barnaby Rudge*, he took some hard knocks when the novel 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.



Bull trout

Albeit never known to Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* did, however, set the stage for what may be the first and only time literature, fashion and science have merged. In question is the identification and name of one of the Flathead Valley's native trout species. The fish is beautiful with a faint olive green body framed by ivory white leading edges on its fins and a colorful splash of orange and red spots on its side...but what kind of fish is it?

Most Montanans would call it a bull trout, but I'm sure there are a few ol' timers that remember calling the fish Dolly Varden. In fact, it wasn't until 1978 when bull trout became the new name for Dolly Vardens here in Montana. Genetic and morphological data has shown that these two fish are, in fact, sub-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 the Flathead Valley.

In *Barnaby Rudge*, Dolly Varden was the locksmith's coquettish 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 1870's.

15-year-old Elda McCloud of Northern California had been reading the book *Barnaby Rudge* in the 1870's and connected the dots when a group of fishermen brought home their catch of what they called 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. Having just purchased a dress in the Dolly Varden style, Elda suggested they should call the trout Dolly Varden. The name stuck.

One has to wonder if Dicken's would view the naming of a fish complimentary and as consolation to the criticism he endured for the novel. Fortunately, literary success came later when his other works like *David Copperfield*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *A Christmas Carol* garnered critical acclaim and launched him to praiseworthy notoriety, even from the most cynical critics.

At the time of Dickens' prolific career in the 1800's, Dolly Varden's swam in the waters of the Flathead Valley in strong numbers, dominating the top of the aquatic food web. "It was the best of times" and it seemed that Dolly Varden were, in fact, characterized by their colorful, flamboyant namesake.

However, their current plight represents the "worst of times." Like Dicken's dirty, drab and poor little orphan Oliver in *Oliver Twist*, Dolly Varden have been historically subject to mistreatment and misunderstanding. Early in the 1900s, there was even a bounty placed on the heads of this voracious "cannibal of the trout family" in an effort to decrease predation on other species. If not turned in for a bounty, you were patted on the back for pitch-forking spawning Dollys and tossing this "trash fish" up on the bank to flop around to a ghastly death. Montana even allowed a commercial fishery for Dolly Varden in 1913 and 1914 in an effort to reduce their numbers.

Today, bull trout are protected as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act. Since bull trout are known to travel hundreds of miles to spawn, private individuals, corporations, and state, federal, tribal and international governments must manage their land to protect the habitat of Flathead Valley's iconic top aquatic predator.

Since fashion is cyclical, I maintain hope that this fish species will bounce back to its former glory and inspire future generations of 15 year old girls and all who have a special place in their heart for the aquatic wonders of the Flathead Valley.



Source: Wikipedia, 2000

The fashionable Dolly Varden