

LYONS

# Remembering John Gierach

By Ed Engle  
*Redstone Review*

My friend John Gierach passed away on October 3, 2024. A few of you may only know him as a columnist for the *Redstone Review*. Most of us remember him as the guy whose pockets were always stuffed with dog treats and was often greeted by passersby with a salutation of “How’s the fish-in?” Neighborhood dogs greeted him enthusiastically knowing a treat was coming their way.

I first met John in the early 1970s at a Boulder Free University poetry class and knew we’d be friends. Later on we met up at his place on Grove Street in Boulder to play our guitars where I quickly learned he was a far more talented guitar player than I was. He lived there with his black and tan coon hound “Plug,” who he’d taken under his wing when he worked at the Humane Society. Plug was famous in the neighborhood for stealing Frisbees from students at the nearby University of Colorado campus and bringing them back to Grove Street. There was a pile of them in the yard. John left them there as a tribute to Plug’s moxie.

John and I fancied ourselves hermit poets in the Chinese tradition and would meet up everyday to hike Gregory Canyon. Our favorite hikes were on the misty, cloudy days that we dubbed “Sung Dynasty days” after a style of Chinese painting that often featured misty, mountain days.

Most of all what we had in common was an urgency to be outside and write about it. This quickly morphed into hunting and fishing trips. And the camps that go with them. John was most at home in camp. It didn’t matter if we threw our sleeping bags on the ground and slept under the stars or made a more formal tent camp.

Every camp has a fire builder and in ours it was John. He carefully placed every piece of kindling so the fire would get plenty of oxygen when he lighted it much like the way he chose and placed the words in his essays. Those campfires

always had a well placed stone or tripod over the coals to hold the coffee pot. John loved coffee.

Somewhere along the way John was introduced to fly fishing and it fit him like a glove. There was poetry in the casts, art in fly tying and trips and camps that were full of stories. Before long he was writing outdoor columns for the *Longmont Times-Call*, where he met his future wife, Susan de Castro, who was the business editor. He also wrote articles for fly fishing and outdoor magazines.

John saw any adventure, road trip, hike, hunt, or fishing trip as raw material for an article or essay. He carried a notebook where he scribbled ideas down and, in the beginning, often took his typewriter on fishing trips so he could get a day of fishing in and meet a deadline when the day’s angling



was over. No matter what, the writing always came first for John and he honed his skill with iron-willed discipline that saw him at his desk every day unless he was out fishing.

John’s enthusiasm for fly fishing was so strong that it wasn’t long before he converted me. Next thing I knew I was at Sawhill Ponds, fly rod in hand, with John teaching me to cast. A few months later he taught me to tie flies. John was always learning. He figured out how to make popper bugs from wine bottle corks for bass fishing, developed a life-long fondness for bamboo fly rods, learned to Spey cast and tie

Spey flies, while all along making sure to get an article or essay out of it.

It was inevitable that he would publish a book. The first was a chapbook of poetry titled *Motel Thought* in the 70’s. The second was a larger volume of poetry, *Signs of Life. Fly-fishing the High Country*, published by Pruett Press, came next. Ostensibly, it was a “how-to” book but it doesn’t take long when you read it to see there’s a lot more to it. Consider this sentence from the book: “The ancient Chinese philosophers used the qualities of water to illustrate what human enlightenment should be like.” You didn’t find sentences like that in any other how-to fishing books.

Next came *Trout Bum* also published by Pruett Press in 1986. This was John’s first hardcover book. John coined the phrase, *Trout Bum* and even without any internet or social media, it went viral.

It was revolutionary and its popularity spread by word of mouth among anglers across the country. By the time they finished reading the book most were secretly longing to quit their day jobs and become trout bums. The rest is history.

John went on to author more than 22 books about fly fishing. All of them were eagerly waited for by his loyal readers.

Maybe I should leave it there, but on a more personal note I should say John saved my bacon any number of times. Once I lived in his attic for several months while working through some marital stuff. John just said, “Stay as long as you want.” Neither of us had any money then, so we spent a lot of time at McCall Lake fishing for bluegills that we filleted to make fish tacos.

I admired John for this kind of selfless generosity backed by his famously dry sense of humor and one-liners. I’ll miss him.

*Ed Engle is a flyfishing and outdoor writer. He and his friend John spent many years fishing, hunting, camping, hiking and hanging out together. Engle’s books include: Seasonal; Flyfishing the Tail Waters; Splitting Cane: Conversations with Bamboo Rodmakers; Fishing Small Flies; Trout Lessons; Fly Fishing the Tailwaters; Tying Small Flies. He lives in Manitou Springs, CO.*