Fishermen prefer to tell the old stories

We've had a little rain. Now, with a couple of days of good weather so the water will clear, it will be time to go steelhead fishing on the Russian River. You might even get lucky and catch a nice fish.

There was a time when that would have been a joke — a whimsical stating of the obvious. Of course, you'd catch a fish. You'd catch your limit in any one of the many great fishing holes on the Russian. The river was a first class steelhead stream, and its proximity to the Bay Area made it a mecca for urban fishermen.

Older fishermen — the born-and-raised who spent their lives on this river — have seen some of the best fishing on the coast. And they've seen it disappear.

Jim Vadon puts it succinctly. "Nowadays you have a hard time finding a place where you can get to the river. And if you do get there, it's hard to find a good hole. And if you do find a good hole it's hard to find fish in it. So it's just plain hard."

Walt Christensen would agree, "I look at the holes where I fished as a kid and they're gone. The river is flat."

Art Volkerts used to favor the lower river holes like Willow Creek and Freezout until seals began to congregate at the mouth of the river. "The seals chase the steelhead out of those holes. You can't fish there anymore."

Leroy Danhausen, terms himself "very pessimistic." He sites access and the flattening of the river bottom as the major factors. "Last year I didn't fish at all. There was no fishable water. This year I haven't fished yet."

He sounded dubious.

These men are not tellers of fish stories. They have caught a few fish in their day. Christensen, at 87, is the dean. Wait not only wrote a fishing (and hunting) column in The Press Democrat for 40 years, he was among the most active members of the Sportsmen's Club, stewards of the river through the glory years of the steelhead.

Vadon, a retired real estate agent, wrote a fishing column for the Cloverdale Reveille and his articles appeared in outdoor magazines like Field and Stream. Volkerts, retired editor of the PD, started his journalism career as an outdoor writer for the Sebastopol Times. In his "executive years," when the fish were running he could often be found, in the late afternoon, waist deep in Neeley's Hole, still in his dress shirt and tie. As for Danhausen — he may qualify as the steelhead fishing scholar. Born in Windsor, Danhausen has lived in Healdsburg, where he taught junior high school for 32 years, all his adult life and has fished the river since childhood.

In 1962 Danhausen wrote a paper on steelhead fishing on the Russian River for a class at Sonoma State College, in which he predicted that "the days of the steelhead are numbered." With its photographs and numbered map and careful descriptions, Danhausen's paper could have been used as a fish finder at the time. Today, like too many of the 141 fishing holes he describes, it's history.

Danhausen wrote of Virgil Sullivan, who lived in Western Sonoma County, where his grandfather was a homesteader in Green Valley, his whole life. Born in 1907, he established himself as an exemplary fisherman while still a young man. He was considered to be among the best fly fishermen (and fly-tier) in the area. An "authority on steelheading," Danhausen called him. Virg had stories to tell.

He told Danhausen of the Depression years, when he was young and money was scarce. "He used to fish for food," Danhausen wrote, "not only for his family but for several of the neighboring families. His father sent him one day to catch as many steelhead as he could so they could be smoked for future use when the fresh runs were over. He went to the mouth of Willow Creek, about a mile and a half upstream from Jenner, and there he had the most fabulous day of fishing in his life. He caught 27 fresh run steelhead in one morning on hand-tied flies of his own creation. He said he could have caught many more, but his arms became so tired and cramped that he couldn't lift them any longer. The fish were so plentiful and so eager that they were even taking his fly when it hit the water on the back-cast. He ended the story by saying, sadly, "Those days are over; no one will ever experience a day like that again."

The late Hector Lee, who taught the folklore class in which Danhausen wrote his steelhead treatise, was a noted folklorist and storyteller who had a yarn about a fish he called the Russian River cactus fish and how it became extinct. It's a fableistic tale and there are no cactus fish in the paper Leroy Danhausen wrote for Dr. Lee. But there are some fine stories.

Virgil Sullivan told Danhausen about the spring and summer runs of striped bass and how, as a small boy, he helped his father net the bass at Foresti Pool. The time he remembered best was the day his father's net had so many bass that "Virg had to run to a nearby farm and borrow a team of horses to pull the loaded net from the river."

Each hole on Danhausen's map has a name and some have a story to go with the name — like the hole on the backside of Riftch Mountain known as the Rudy Hole. "It is called this by local fishermen," wrote Danhausen, "because once a brightly-colored steelhead (one that had been in the river a long time) was caught there. Its gill plates and sides were so red they nicknamed it "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Steelhead" and released it. The story got around and the name stuck."

The sturgeon that lived in the Mosquito Pool is another almost-legend. There were plenty of sturgeon in the river at the turn of the century. Sullivan remembered hearing his father talk of Mr. Ridenhour, a river area pioneer, selling sturgeon from a horse-drawn cart. The elder Sullivan told his son the fish "looked as long as a dining room table."

When Danhausen's paper was written there were reports of "a huge, battle-scarred veteran hooked and lost occasionally by fishermen in the Mosquito Pool area." Volkerts corroborates the story, "I used to write about "The Monster of the Mosquito Pool," he recalls.

It will only take a few more decades, a few more tellings, for some of these stories to tip over into the folklore category. Sadly, the steelhead may go with them. This is a regret in any of these dedicated fishermen's minds that the river is in peril.