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Photo: Back in 2005-06, the Oil Creek Chapter of Trout Unlimited sponsored the first Trout in the Classroom projects in Pennsylvania. The program teaches youngsters about trout and environmental quality. Brook trout photo by Bob Steiner.

Working title: Oil Creek TU marks 10 years with Trout in the Classroom

Did your child's class raise trout in school last year? Or are they looking forward to "finally" having the teacher whose students raise fish in the classroom? Are they saying how "cool" that is?

Then you and your youngsters have the Oil Creek Chapter of Trout Unlimited to thank, for its ground floor and continuing sponsorship of the area's Trout in the Classroom projects. Every project must have a local sponsor and behind each local class in the program is the Oil Creek Chapter, making participation possible.

The 2015-16 school year marked a decade of the Oil Creek Chapter's involvement in Trout in the Classroom and the Franklin-based group is noting its first 10 years with pride. The members are anticipating the 2016-17 academic year by continuing to sponsor eight classrooms, while taking stock of their history in the program. Indeed, local records and information from the State Council of Trout Unlimited point to the Oil Creek Chapter's having initiated Trout in the Classroom in Pennsylvania.

Although the exciting end result for youngsters involved is releasing their little trout into a stream or lake, Trout in the Classroom is really about raising the coldwater-requiring fish in chilled and aerated aquaria and learning about the trout's role in water and environmental quality. Trout in the Classroom has had a presence in this area and, through the Oil Creek Chapter, in Pennsylvania, since the 2005-06 school year.

In a recent conversation with Gary Ross, the current president, Tom Young, past president and a founder of the Oil Creek Chapter, and Lance Bowes, manager of the Venango Conservation District, we retraced the local start of Trout in the Classroom and talked about the future.

It was Bowes who first brought Trout in the Classroom to the chapter's attention.

"I had gone to a state watershed conference," said Bowes. "They had a presentation on Shad in the Classroom in Maryland and mentioned the Trout in the Classroom program in New York. I thought, we have trout here and that would be a good match."

Trout in the Classroom's genesis was in New York in 1997. Bowes said he remembers talking by phone with "the gentleman from Long Island who came up with the concept. His idea was let's raise trout in the classroom and teach kids in the city about water quality. He went to New York State's Trout Unlimited and others got involved and that's how it started."

The specifics of equipment and curriculum were already in place and National Trout Unlimited had adopted the program, when Bowes learned of it. He brought his proposal to the Oil Creek Chapter in the fall of 2004. The chapter quickly embraced the opportunity as part of the educational component of Trout Unlimited's role in the conservation of trout and their habitat.

Three teachers signed on for 2005-06, Mike Crocker at the Oil City High School, Eric Mowrey at the Titusville Middle School and Pete Lindey, at the Venango Vo-Tech. The chapter voted to pay for the aquarium and chiller setups with its own funds if necessary, but also to seek grants for that year and anticipated additional classrooms.

"The first year we got a \$3,500 grant from the Justus Charitable Trusts and \$1,000 from the Cranberry WalMart and the chapter kicked in some money," said Young. "We bought the equipment for the first three and got them going."

With the program up and running here, several chapter members toured participating classrooms in November 2005. With them was Ken Undercoffer, then president of the State Council of Trout Unlimited. Undercoffer came to view working Trout in the Classroom projects, as other schools and Pennsylvania Trout Unlimited chapters were considering getting onboard. Evidently he liked what he saw, because by 2008-09 there were 94 Trout in the Classroom projects statewide.

That first year here wasn't all roses. A lot of the trout died. At one school a weekend storm cut power to the chiller and aerator. Others succumbed to fungus growth due to overfeeding. Since then participants have learned to keep the water cold and not overfeed, "but they all still do," laughed Young.

It would have been easy to quit, but the teachers told the chapter they liked the program and how it fit into their science course. The students had shown a lot of interest and they wanted to do it again, no matter how many fish, if any, they raised to releasable fingerling size.

New York's hatchery system was already involved in providing fish for Trout in the Classroom projects. Oil Creek Chapter's sponsored projects became a chance for the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission to become similarly involved, and chapter members made appropriate contacts. The commission decided to become a player and provided the first fertilized trout eggs, while 3CU Trout Club of Erie County donated small-size fish food. When the local projects lost almost all their fish, the Fish and Boat Commission generously donated replacement eggs. The commission now ships eggs to participating Trout in the Classroom schools each November.

In Mid-May, 2006, local classes in Pennsylvania's first Trout in the Classroom projects released their fish into Justus Lake and Oil Creek: a single fish, dubbed "Super Trout," from the Vo-Tech; about 15 trout from Oil City; and 50 from Titusville. The releases were done with pride and the comments were unanimously to do it again.

And they did. Fast forward to 2016 and "today the Oil Creek Chapter is still the local Trout in the Classroom partner," says Ross. "None of the classes would be doing this without a sponsor. We buy the equipment, which can be passed on to other schools as needed." Start-up costs about \$1,200, plus there is equipment replacement and maintenance. The chapter also pays for participating teachers' attendance at the mandated Trout in the Classroom training, held each summer by the State Council of Trout Unlimited. Funds to do all this are raised at the chapter's annual banquet and PPG Industries has been providing yearly grants. The Venango Conservation District still has a role, giving assistance and advice to both the chapter and teachers.

For 2016-17, the three original teachers are continuing with the program, plus Mike Reynolds, at Titusville Middle School, Mark Ferringer at Valley Grove Elementary School, and Simone Ray at Cochranon High School. In Meadville Chris Oblich will have a project at the middle school and Christine Gordon at the high school.

Everyone at a school that has Trout in the Classroom seems to take an interest in the health and fate of the little fish. "At Meadville and some others they have a big glass window so all can see the trout tank," says Ross. "So we're exposing thousands of local students to Trout in the Classroom each year," adds Young.

From its apparent state start here in Venango County with the Oil Creek Chapter, according to Program Coordinator Tali MacArthur, Trout in the Classroom today involves 37 Pennsylvania Trout Unlimited Chapters, directly affecting 2,500 students. Interested local teachers can contact the Oil Creek Chapter at P.O. Box 366, Franklin, PA 16323. The Trout in the Classroom website, www.patrouintheclassroom.org, has additional information.