Since it began 13 years ago, the Federation of Fly Fishers Whitlock-Vibert Box (WVB) program has developed from one Oklahoma club’s dream to an internationally popular program. With the backing and funding of the Federation and Bob Cunningham’s total dedication to the program as WVB service chairman, we have been able to realize our goals for this unique trout, char and salmon stocking management tool. No one knows our success story better than Bob. His review here of WVB’s history is a story every FFF member should know, understand and take great pride in.

But first, before Bob begins, allow me to put my two cents in about WVB. The day I became involved with the original Vibert Box, my life began to change for the better. Each year this program pays back 10 times what I put into it – not a bad investment for these days! I will explain why.

The WVB is a very efficient, simple tool to incubate and hatch eyed salmonid eggs when properly set in a suitable stream environment. It releases the very young fry into the stream as they become physically able to swim, eat and avoid natural dangers. Such fish adapt and survive as wild fish or they perish just as naturally produced native species do. It works no biological miracles but allows each user of it to observe and learn what a wild trout’s interaction with nature truly is.

This tool can be successfully used by trained amateurs or professionally trained fishery manpower. The first motivation common among FFF members and others will naturally be to improve their fishing by stocking more fish via this simple “hands-on” method. As you study the WVB program before actually planting eggs, a learning process begins that develops your understanding and appreciation for the water, its environmental conditions, and all the wonders of wild trout. With either success or failure, you receive a gift of knowledge that enriches your life and the lives of those around you.

Holding the eggs, planting the boxes, seeing the eggs hatch and eventually holding a fine WVB hatched mature trout in your hands (or seeing such a fish return to the WVB plant sites three or four years later to spawn) is a true spiritual experience.

Like any new idea, it challenges the establishments of fishery management programs. It is not directly in competition with these but rather an offer of an additional tool for better fishing. FFF has carefully progressed to explain, ensure and prove WVB merits with these people and agencies here in the United States and over the world with fine, well-conceived approaches. Bob Cunningham, our 14 consultants, the WVB handbook, WVB slide show and funded research have established WVB and FFF credibility for this program. A lot of doors are now open that were tightly closed just a few years ago. But we have learned...
Eleven innocent words appear as the first goal established by the Green Country Fly Fishers (GCF) in its formal organizational meeting and recorded in GCF Bulletin No. 1, January 18, 1969. They were to “Initiate a project which will create a new brown trout fishery.”

It was a simple goal. Determine if the water analysis, summer water temperatures and aquatic life of Spring Creek, near Locust Grove, Oklahoma, might sustain a brown trout population. If so, the club would acquire what fingerlings it could afford and introduce them into the stream. It might also be necessary to do some stream enhancement for trout protection and temperature control.

The decision of the 10 charter members under the leadership and strong encouragement of Dave Whitlock did not seem to be much beyond routine. None of us dreamed that it would result in the development of an efficient instream salmonid incubator and nursery, which today is the Federation of Fly Fishers’ most outstanding and valuable program, at least in my opinion, and I know many Federators who will agree with me.

It has been my good fortune to be involved with the program from that very first day and to see it unfold like a fairy tale. During the summer of 1969, repeated Spring Creek studies indicate the qualities deemed desirable for a brown trout fishery. The State of Oklahoma gave its approval to the project and suggested that its development be kept secret because of the remoteness of the area and their inability to police activities along it.

Milton Blaustein, a charter member of GCF, had been assigned to locate and price a shipment of 10,000 trout. In April he determined that the best source of brown trout would be those ranging 6 to 8 inches in length delivered from Getz Trout Farm in Colorado at a cost of $2,500. Although the membership had grown to nearly 50 members by that time, it was highly questionable that such funds could be made available that year. Garvice Loucks, vice president of GCF and manager of a Tulsa sporting goods store, suggested that we package fly tying materials and sell them through his store. By October it was obvious that the funds would not be available in time and the project would be delayed a year.

Blaustein’s assignment was fulfilled, but as a scholar of fly fishing he chanced to read an article in “Trout,” that involved the use of Vibert Boxes, an instream incubator, by the Catskill Chapter of Trout Unlimited (TU) in New York. This incubator was invented by Dr. Richard Vibert in France in the 1950s. Milton also located a source of brown trout eggs at Paradise Brook Trout Company in Cresco, Pennsylvania, at a price of $6 per thousand plus air freight.

Dave Whitlock contacted Don Warren of the TU club in New York to determine the source of Vibert Boxes and to gain the benefits of TU’s experience with them. One hundred boxes and a small pamphlet describing how to use the box were obtained, and the first setting of 50,000 eggs was made December 12, 1970. Recovery of the boxes February 20, 1971, indicated a 94 percent hatch rate. Similar annual settings were made with similar or better results. The success of this work and the values of hatching trout in what was to be their natural environment was recorded by Dave in The Flyfisher, Volume V, Nos. 2 and 3, 1972, under the headline “Trout by the Boxful.”

Dave carefully paralleled the work in Spring Creek through the use of aquariums in his garage at home. He photographed the entire process from the
receipt of the eggs to the recovery of the boxes, as well as the development of the salmonids in the aquariums. He prepared material for the step-by-step, audio-visual program that was developed and placed in FFF’s film libraries. It was titled simply “The Vibert Box.”

Three significant observations were made from the frequent in-stream checks on the hatching process and the work done by Dave in the aquariums. The first was positive. The attitude of the working crews toward trout fisheries changed incredibly by watching trout emerge from their eggs, absorb their sacs, and struggle to survive in a wild environment. Catch and release became the game, not only in Spring Creek but in salmonid fisheries generally. It was gradually realized these Vibert Box trout, ranging from 6 inches to 6 pounds, were too precious to eat or take home to show off. The desire to keep trophies was overcome by the desire to return them unharmed, to be caught again, and to reproduce in season.

The second finding was the 500 eggs held in “cube form” in the Vibert Box allowed fungus from dead eggs to spread rapidly to successive eggs in all directions in the affected box.

The third finding was that the reds, prepared with selected and sized gravel ideal for hatching, were also ideal for many bottom feeding predators. They provided predators a place to live beneath the gravel and advance to feast upon the helpless egg-sac fry as they dropped into the gravel upon hatching.

Upon hatching, the egg sac fry would drop into the bottom tier, the nursery, until the sacs were absorbed, they were free-swimming, ready to start feeding, and better able to avoid predators. With this design only minor predators could move into the nursery because the size of the slots was only sufficient to permit fry to escape.

Continuing usage indicated modifications would be beneficial to the original design. The changes made were minor but of great value. They reinforced the hatchery door for snug closure and reduced the slot sizes in the nursery to prevent exposure of egg-sac fry; however, no overall dimensional changes were made.

In the first 2.5 years there was no publicity outside the FFF on this program, but in 1978 Whitlock’s article “Revolution in Trout Rearing” appeared in the February issue of Outdoor Life. In late January of that year, inquiries by letter and phone began pouring into the FFF office.

At first there were two or three letters a day. The numbers steadily increased to a peak of 63 in one day in August 1978. Letters were promptly answered with a standard reply. Marginal notes were made to specific questions. Inquiries still arrive occasionally from persons who have just read that old issue. In the two and a half years prior to Dave’s article, 3,954 boxes were distributed. In the five years since, 13,582 more have been distributed, making a total of 17,536 boxes (see the editor’s comments at the end of this piece) and 1,911 Handbooks.

The device has steadily gained favor with governmental fisheries agencies across the United States and Canada as well as with sportsmen’s groups. In most states and provinces, it has brought the groups together in a
spirit of cooperation, joint ventures and better understanding of attitudes toward salmonid fisheries. Care must be taken to continue to improve this relationship.

There were many boxes ordered by FFF and TU groups and others in the United States and Canada in 1982, but it is interesting that eight orders from Japan totaled 1,020 boxes; two orders from Austria 425 boxes; four orders from Australia 425 boxes; and from Argentina, 33 boxes. Fisheries management in British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec ordered 191 boxes. Many of the 1982 orders were repeat orders, some for the third time. During the life of the program, orders have been received from 41 states and all the Canadian provinces, in addition to Argentina, 33 boxes.

New Zealand, Cumbria (in the United Kingdom), Holland, Germany and South Africa.

We are excited by the large reorders from successful users, but even more refreshing are when certain orders or requests for information are received. In January 1983, a Handbook and two Whitlock-Vibert Boxes were given to the McKinley High School Aquatic Ecology Department, Buffalo, New York, for experimental use. It is the policy of FFF to fill such requests gratis. In the past there have been instances where high schools, college students, Boy Scout troops, and at least one Eagle Scout used Whitlock-Vibert Boxes to reach their respective goals.

As it became apparent that the Whitlock-Vibert Box was being recognized as the fine tool that it is, the FFF trained persons from strategic locations across the United States and Canada to become WVB consultants to serve as instructors and leaders to nearby groups who request their services. Each consultant is available on his personal priority basis. Dave has trained two groups, bringing them to his home on the White River in Arkansas where the training requires four days in the classroom and one day of actual work in the stream. An April 1983 program is being set up by the Southwest Council, where Dave will train several persons, which will add several to the 14 consultants now on call.

The FFF has contributed funds to certain universities for projects involving the Whitlock-Vibert Box. Some of their findings are interesting. Also, reports from many users suggest the system is labor intensive and siltation sometimes a problem.

Redesign and enlargement prototypes are under study. Also under study is the probability that more consideration need be given to using species and strains of salmonids that prosper best in specific areas. These may be the subjects of later articles.

Pricing of boxes and handbooks has been kept at cost. Increases are consistent with production and postage costs. The program sustains itself, but the monetary returns are not directly accounted by FFF. To redesign and tool present prototypes, indications are that it will cost about $15,000. Extensive testing will continue.

It is important to understand that while the Whitlock-Vibert Box, properly used, will produce more than 80 percent swim-up fry, the box will perform no miracles. Nor can it cause a failure! It is a tool that when properly used provides the answer to whether the tested water will produce and sustain the particular strain of salmonid whose eggs are used. The FFF is gathering information to determine which species, subspecies and strains seem to thrive best in certain geographic areas.

The development of the Whitlock-Vibert Box is quite timely, proving itself most valuable as costs of hatchery operations soar, and as many fisheries experts begin to recognize that better quality salmonids result from instream incubation and retain the instinct to return to those same areas to reproduce.

Dave sees the results of some of his efforts firsthand, for in “his” White River below Bull Shoals Dam, he and the White River FF have made repeated incubations of brown trout eggs. The river is stocked regularly with large quantities of catchable rainbows, yet the upper section of that tailwater has become predominately a brown trout fishery. As recently as five years ago, this was not so. As long as Dave and people like him with curiosity and inventiveness are allowed to exercise those God-given gifts, we can expect to look back upon the day the Vibert Box will be classed as the Model “T” and the Whitlock-Vibert Box as the Model “A” Ford. Nothing is constant but change.

This article is a reprint from the spring 1983 issue of the Flyfisher. Editor’s note: The WVB is an IFFF success story of the first order. Since the mid-1970s the organization has sold and shipped thousands of boxes to countries including Norway, Japan, Germany, Canada and the United States. The program has “helped fish get a start in life” and let the Federation do conservation work that otherwise could not have been accomplished. The Federation thanks Dave Whitlock for his generous and lasting contribution to the organization.