

E.C. Powell, Angler & Rod-maker

a tribute by Lee Richardson

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ALTHOUGH HE WAS KNOWN on six continents for his magnificent fly rods, I think of Edwin C. Powell as an angler, for it was love of the art of fly fishing that dedicated him to a life-long mission—to spend his earthly span in the creation of rods as finely attuned to the touch of the angler as the Stradivarius is attuned to the touch of the master violinist.

And like the Stradivarius, the book is closed on the Powell rod. When Billy Powell passed in 1966, some ineffable quality perished with him, a quality which up to now has eluded the finest of our new breed of rod makers.

Powell was born in Gilroy, California, in 1878 and passed away in Marysville, September 3, 1966, where he and Mrs. Powell had lived since 1917. He first began making his famous fly rods in Red Bluff 56 years ago, using only a block of wood with tapered cut-in segments, a file and Tonkin cane bamboo. Five years later he moved to Marysville where he built a shop in the rear of the modest residence at 624 C Street. There he spent the remainder of his life creating some of the finest works of the rod-makers art, under Patent # 1932986.

I first met “E. C.” in his Marysville shop in 1955, where we practiced casting with rods of various weights and lengths. I found him a gentle, soft-spoken modest man with a consuming passion for the outdoors and the streams of his native Sierra. We became good friends and eventually I became the proud possessor of four Powell rods, mostly 9-footers ranging in weight from 4 Vs to 5 Vs ounces, all with B action.

They have served me well during the ensuing years, from the bleak, wind-swept and robust rivers of Tierra del Fuego to the equally wind-swept and robust rivers of Western Alaska. I could ask nothing more than the manner in which they have performed and endured under frequently trying conditions, particularly the 5 Vs ounce. It has punched into the wind of the Andes and the Alaska tundra, it has delivered a big wet fly as far as I can throw one, it has subdued bright sea-run cohoes and steelhead of 16 pounds and more, and it remains straight as a string, an instrument of power, grace and utmost beauty. These rods are, indeed, my pride and joy and if I had a wife, I believe I should rather loan her to a friend than one of my precious Powells.

Powell’s widow, Myrtle, recalls that in his 50 years of dedication “he invented and developed the saw and machinery necessary to produce his rods and, although these somewhat lessened the load, 85 percent of the work involved in producing fine split-bamboo rods was hand labor.

“Probably his best-known invention was the semi-hollow rod, which was stronger in relation to weight and length than any other rod ever built, and possessed a nicety of action not duplicated by any other manufacturer.

“We have no count of the rods produced by Mr. Powell but it was in the thousands and they are in use on all six continents. To sum up, we believe his aim was to give the angler better rods and service for their angling pleasure and his least thought was to make money in the process.”

Powell himself has left some recounting of the principles which guided him and the translation of those principles into rod design. In 1936, he published a paper, “A Short Common Sense Treatise on Fly Rod Construction.” It said, in part:

A fly-rod is a compound machine using three types of power application in its work of fly casting. Muscular power furnished by the angler is applied by leverage to the rod, which converts most of this into spring power and power by momentum. I make three distinct types of rods that I describe as A, B and C.

A-type rods embody tip action and butt resistance and are the keenest and most sensitive in their action, as well as affording the finest balance, but are perhaps the least fool-proof of the three. In the mildest form of A rod, I split one-thousandth of an inch into sixths to arrive at the proper mathematical taper that will produce what I want. The difference between this mildest type A rod and the most severe one is the difference obtained by changing from 1/6 of one thousandths to 1/4 of one thousandths of an inch, used in a progressive manner. In reality, there is a great difference in the amount of muscular force it takes to put the same amount of bend in either. Properly handled A rods are the most rugged for their strength and butts withstand more strain.

Once, because of an embankment, the writer lifted bodily from the water black bass weighing three pounds with an A-type rod. He has also stopped a strong swimmer weighing 165 pounds inside 120 feet. In each case the rod's proper angle forced the strain to the butt.

The C-type is the most fool-proof because it will stand more awkwardness, more holding of the rod out of correct position and more yanking when fastened to a limb or fish without injury to the rod than can be had with any other type. Nevertheless it is a good rod for any light spinner or bass lure than can be handled with a fly rod.

Both A and C rods are extremes. The B is not an extreme but a uniform taper throughout its entire length. They may have a fast, medium or slow taper but the taper is the same ratio throughout the length of the rod. These rods have become quite popular and though they do not develop an extreme virtue as in the other types, neither do they develop an extreme fault. They are inclined to throw a wider loop on the back or forward cast than the A, to permit a soft lighting fly.

In 1937 Mr. Powell prepared a pamphlet entitled "The Mechanics of Fly Casting and Subjects Closely Related," from which I quote:

Most anglers consider fly casting an art and in no way a science. In many cases this is true for practically all good fly casters have obtained their expertness because of the natural artistry within them. That which is referred to as "timing" comes from a human quality rather than from something mechanical. I find some people almost void of it while a few possess timing in abundance. He who possesses timing in an unusual amount may become a real artist as a fly caster without understanding the mechanics involved, but the person handicapped by a lack of this mysterious quality has little hope of ever becoming expert without knowing the mechanics involved. ..

The caster is the power unit that furnishes muscular power which is applied to the rod by leverage. This application of power puts a bend in the rod and the rod's inclination to straighten produces power by spring. When spring power expends itself, it creates power by momentum, and momentum goes into casting power up to the joint where spring power ceases.

There is one important truth that is hard for the angler to appreciate, namely the fact he does not propel his line any more than the archer propels his arrow. The caster merely applies muscular power in such a manner that the rod does the casting.

As to fly-rod construction, the finest thing that can be achieved is that quality which produces a unity of action with continuity from tip to butt. A good fly rod yields a smooth, even application of power and the caster applying muscular power in a similar manner produces line flow capable of developing delicacy, accuracy or distance.

A rod to be used strictly for wet fly fishing should be built with more casting power than one for dry fly for in wet fly fishing the angler must have a rod capable of picking up a wet and comparatively heavy line and casting it out to greater distances. (Mr. Powell, of course, made these remarks long

before today's modern lines such as the Wet-Cel.)

In dry fly fishing, casts average much shorter and the angler usually must resort to much false casting. For this work he should have a rod that will go into action without too much effort and at the same time enough spring power to cast the distance desired without undue strain on the rod. If the rod is too soft it lacks the snap and keenness so necessary for distance required or proper control. These opposing factors make this a very particular rod to select or build because it must embody, above all things, sensitivity and delicacy of action.

In almost every discussion of fly rods the question of balance arises. First, the balance within the rod itself and second, the balance of the rod with reel attached. When we speak of a well-balanced rod we speak of one with the bulk of its weight near the hand hold. It is not the entire weight of the rod that counts against the angler so much as the proportion of weight forward of the grip. For example, my 10 foot tournament distance fly rod that weighs $5\frac{3}{4}$ ounces registers heavier to the caster than my $9\frac{1}{2}$ foot Burnham steelhead rod that weighs $6\frac{1}{8}$ ounces. This is because a greater proportion of the rod's weight is farther forward in the tournament rod. In reality there is almost no balance in a fly rod when it is put to use in casting. Power application is the most basic fact underlying either casting or proper fly rod construction and all the power is applied forward of the heel of the hand and none back of this point.

The back cast, of course, is the foundation for the forward cast and for this reason is most important, for a good forward cast cannot be expected if the back cast is poor. Likewise if a caster depends entirely on his rod for the back cast, a slack or drowned line will make it impossible to get good results so the wise caster makes use of his left hand to assist in making the back cast.

One of the greatest pleasures in angling comes from performance for a well-executed cast is just as great a pleasure as a well-executed stroke in billiards, lawn tennis or golf. The more pleasure anglers obtain in their sport other than just taking fish, the less they will crave quantities of fish which will allow this, the most wonderful of pastimes to be enjoyed by more and more people.

In closing, it is the author's sincere wish that this paper may be a help to those fishermen and tournament casters that love angling as an art and casting as either an art or a science.

Though it was my good fortune to know E. C. Powell intimately and to visit with this master rod-maker and his wife, Myrtle, in their home on numerous pleasant occasions, I fished with him but once, on the Rising River in Northern California. I had called in Marysville to pick up a rod I had ordered and Mrs. Powell informed me her husband was camped out in his trailer near Burney Falls, a short distance from the Rising River Club. On my arrival I informed Col. Harold Mack and H. W. Fletcher, club members, of the proximity of Mr. Powell and we drove over to invite him to join us for a bit of fishing on the club's private water the following morning. The grand old man (he was quite deaf then) was delighted and accepted with alacrity and though breakfast was not to be until 8:00 a.m., we heard his car drive up at 5:00, to be sure he wouldn't miss anything.

Rising River, as the name implies, emerges from the lava beds north of Mt. Lassen much as the Metolius does in Eastern Oregon, or Big Springs in Idaho, source of the North Fork of the Snake. It is a meandering meadow stream, swift in places, that can be readily waded or just as readily fished from green, overhanging banks. It is classical dry fly water, clear as glass and just as cold and reputed to hold rainbows and browns upward of seven pounds. The setting is pastoral and beautiful and Cinnamon Teal nest in the marshy places nearby.

After breakfast we went fishing for there was usually a good rise around mid-morning and emulating the example of our hosts, we tied on small dry flies in sizes # 16 and # 18. The flies were so small I found difficulty in following them as they went dancing down the riffles, but no matter, for what I wanted most was motion pictures of the old master in action, so mostly I forsook the rod in favor of my cameras. There developed some good shots of E. C. casting a fly as beautifully as you

might suspect, even for a man of 81, and good footage of the river but try as he would he didn't coax a fish. The others had a little luck.

Finally, with noon-time approaching and the sun high in a sky of infinite blue, I heard him call: "Harold, you got these goddam trout so wised up, nobody can catch 'em." And with that, we returned to camp.

Few men in their lifelong endeavours have enjoyed a life as rewarding or satisfying as E. C. Powell and fewer still have given so much pleasure to others as the grand old man of Marysville. His was indeed a labor of love, with no thought of personal gain, his only reward the satisfaction of building a fly rod that gave utmost joy to his faithful clientele. His rods are now collector's items, cherished and proudly used by the fortunate few who possess them, for there can never be another Powell rod fashioned by one of America's and the world's truly great rod-builders.

