

Skues and the World's Best Rod

by

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IN the February issue of *Trout & Salmon* appeared a short article under my name tracing the history of the Leonard Rod Co. of America. A passing reference was made to the Leonard rod beloved of G. E. M. Skues, which he affectionately called the 'World's Best Rod', and I intimated that it may now be in the safe keeping of Carl Otto von Kienbusch of New York.

The magazine could not have cooled off the press before I received telephone calls, good natured I may add, from certain fellow members enquiring as to my eye-sight. How could I possibly have missed the Skues Leonard rod contained in its case that hangs on the wall of the Club?

That there is a Leonard rod in the case, and that it *did* belong to Skues, I would not question. Does the card affixed to the case not state '9ft. 5oz. Leonard. Action softish. G. E. M. Skues' fly-rod used for over fifty years up to 1949'. But let us dig a little deeper.

Let us see what Skues had to say, so that we can tie the tag World's Best Rod, which he often used, to a rod of particular specification. In *Itchen Memories*, page 101, we learn 'A friend, G. L. C. . . . was a devout admirer of my little 9ft. 5oz. Leonard, dating back to 1905, which he styled the W.B.R., which being interpreted means World's Best Rod'.

Can we assume that Skues was devoted to this 9ft. Leonard for the major part of his angling life? Again *Itchen Memories* provides the clue. Page 75, 'My rod was my little 9ft. 5½oz.' (the weight has crept up by half an ounce at this stage) 'Leonard, presented to me in 1905, and forty years later when I gave up fishing, as good as ever'.

We shall now move on to the rummage sale where Skues tackle was sold after his death. The *Flyfishers' Journal* for Winter 1949 tells us, 'Bidding was perhaps best for all kinds of flies, which included a full box which belonged to the late G. E. M. Skues. Two

or three exceptionally pleasing rods were the second best attraction, among them a Leonard rod'. Can we assume this to have been the W.B.R.?

It would seem that this was the rod handed on to Skues' brother, C. A. M. Skues, when G.E.M. gave up fishing. Once more *Itchen Memories* helps us, page 85, after a description of the length and weight of the rod we read ' . . . when in 1945 my trout fishing came to an end, I handed the rod and its remaining top to my brother. The rod was as straight and as serviceable as on the day it was acquired.' Most certainly he is writing about the W.B.R.

We have, I think, now reached the point where Skues' brother, C. A. M. Skues, put up his brother's rod for auction at the rummage sale.

May I now turn to a letter I received in 1971 from that well known American bibliophile and ardent collector of flyfishing memorabilia, Carl Otto von Kienbusch. I am sure he will forgive me if I quote from our personal correspondence, that I value greatly, in the interests of historical research.

'When Skues died I bought from his brother, the architect, Skues' favourite rod, a 9ft. Leonard of early vintage, also the reel that went with it . . . I took the rod out to the North Platts in Southern Wyoming and mounted what I thought was the proper line. It required only a very few casts to show me that the rod was of very slow action and just how Skues managed to keep his fly high above when kneeling I do not know'.

We would now seem to have reached an impasse. Two World's Best Rods? Is that possible? From the evidence one would think not, however, four brief words in an article by Skues' old friend Dr. A. E. Barton in the *Flyfishers' Journal* of Autumn 1949 cause one to ponder. The words are 'Skues possessed three Leonards'.

Apart from the W.B.R. we find Skues had a 9ft. 6in. Leonard rod. Again I quote Skues words, *Itchen Memories*, page 52. 'I was trying out a new Leonard rod (recently presented to me by a grateful client), 9ft. 6in. of exquisite split cane in three joints which was destined later to become the special adoration of my good friend, Dr. E. A. Barton, and to be dubbed by him 'Matilda'.

We now have two named rods, the 9ft. W.B.R. and the 9ft. 6in. 'Matilda', but what of the *three* rods referred to by Barton? could there have been a second W.B.R.*?

Some of our older members may well be able to prove that I am tilting at windmills. If this be so then I would welcome their views. One way or the other there would seem to be some sort of mystery.

(*Just before this number went to press I came across an article by 'E.O.E.' on p.38 of the Summer 1936 *Journal* (Vol. XXV No. 97). It is called 'The Advantages of Disadvantages' and in it the author itemises his rods as follows:—

'an eleven foot split cane trout rod (Hardy).'

'a ten foot six inch Houghton rod.'

and then adds 'Hence, of the rods which I have owned, the six which have been presented to me by clients supposing that they had cause for gratitude have all been beautiful Leonards, mostly of the vintage years.'—Ed.)