

Walton Powell Builds “The Golden Signature” Rod

by

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‘NILS, there is nothing romantic about this. It’s hard work.’ So said Walton Powell, famous rodbuilder, as he heated a long piece of bamboo cane over an open fire.

‘You must be very careful not to heat it too much.’

Many years ago I wrote to E. C. Powell in California asking him to build a flyrod for me. At last my Powell rod reached Sweden and I was very impressed by its excellent quality. I have written about this rod in a couple of my books and it has given me a great pleasure for many years. E. C. Powell died some years ago but his son Walton is building cane rods and they are even better than his father's.

Last year I went to California. Walton Powell had invited me to come to Chico and study his craftsmanship and, I must say, this was a most fascinating experience. For about a week I spent several hours a day in his workshop and I entirely agree with what Walt said when he started to heat the cane. I would also say that the art of Walton Powell is a creative ability of the highest order and I am sure nobody can build better splitcane rods.

I am now the proud owner of a *'Golden Signature'* rod he made for me. This is really two rods in one. It has two tips and two butts. One butt is longer than the other but both tips match the butts. Thus they make one rod of 8ft. 6in. and one of 9ft. 1in. and they have a certain tolerance when it comes to different weights of line.

'A rod designed to cast just *one* weight of line only is not a good rod,' said Walton. 'With this rod you should be able to cast with different lineweights from No 4-8 (AFTM). It depends upon how you cast the line.'

There is no difficulty in getting tonkin bamboo from China but it is of a different quality. Before the USA said 'no' to China — when imports of bamboo from that country was forbidden — old man Powell had his own local agent who selected the best bamboo. That was the wild-growing bamboo. Nowadays Walton only imports cultivated bamboo which is better than the wild-growing as it will be more uniform with less faults. But he still has to select a part of the imported cane for his rods — maybe half of the amount of bamboo pieces is good enough and, for the *'Golden Signature'* rods, perhaps 20% of one shipment will be used.

I suppose that most of the members in our Club are familiar with the way of building a splitcane flyrod so I will not go too deeply into it. I must say however that it is one thing to read about it and quite another to see how it is done and what skill and care it requires. Most high grade splitcane rods are rather expensive today but when you have seen what lies behind the construction of a perfect rod you will not be surprised about the price. You pay for quality.

The bamboo must be mature before you can use it. It must be four years old. That is important. When Walton gets a shipment he sorts out all pieces with faults and there may be many different faults in the wood. As for example bugbites. At last, after it has been dried for a long time, comes the day when he can start working with it.

The heating of the bamboo to drive out all the moisture of the wood is a somewhat tiring and very exact procedure. You must be careful as Walton says — not to burn the wood. He is probably one of the very few rodbuilders who use the open fire for the heating. Otherwise the bamboo is 'baked' — heated in an oven which Walton says is not so good at all.

The bamboo is first split by hand into strips. Then these strips are again split into finer strips. To get the exact dimensions and forms of the strips or sticks as you will call them, Walton has constructed a rather complicated but very exact saw. It was fantastic to see with what precision he worked with this saw.

You must also be very careful when you split the cane so as not to cut through the fibres in the wood. This is as important as judging the quality of the wood when you start working with it since you only make a rod from one and the same piece of bamboo to get the uniform structure.

When the rodblanks are ready and the sticks have been put together and cemented they must hang for a long time to dry before one can start to finish the rod. Walton Powell, like his father, does not varnish the rod but gives it instead a surface of oxidized oil which impregnates the wood. Thus you never have to put on anything like varnish to maintain the condition of your rod. You need merely to give it an overhaul with raw linseed oil a few times a year.

Walton Powell now works alone in his workshop attending to all the details by himself step by step. Because of that his production is limited. He might build around 150 rods a year. On the other hand he is also making very fine fibreglass rods—there are probably no better ones in the market today. But his splitcane rods are the angler's gems and they may soon, like his father's rods, become collector's items. He is now working on a book about flyrod making as he believes that what he knows about rodbuilding should be saved for the future benefit of other rodmakers.