Jean Crooks caught this massive snook on a slender six-strip bamboo fly rod in Florida's Tamiami Trail circa 1948.

CANE *on the* COAST

Bamboo Rods Shaped the Destiny of Saltwater Fly Tackle

Story By Ed Mitchell
Vintage Photos By Charlie Ebbets

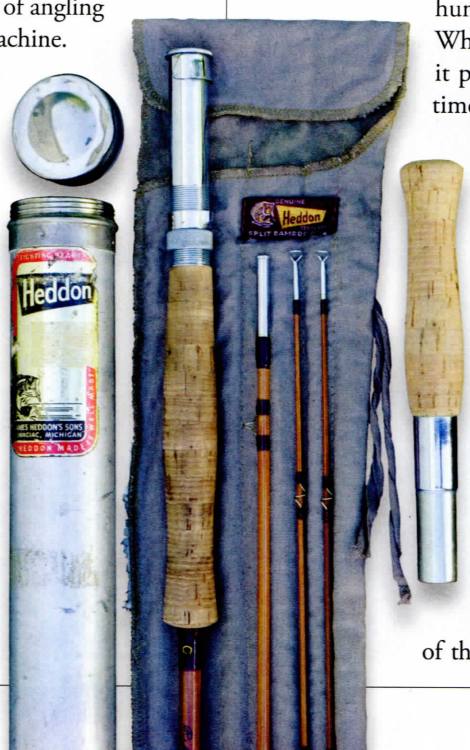
Among my fly rods, there is one tube that I open only on special occasions. Were you to pick it up, you would notice a label stating that inside is a rod with a fighting heart. True enough. It's a Heddon Riptide, a three-piece, 9-foot, six-strip bamboo saltwater fly rod.

Hand-built around 1950, the Riptide was one of a few split-cane rods specifically designed for the brine. To the eye, it's a jewel. In the hand, its slow, relaxed motion is a joy to cast. And each time I fish with it, I feel I'm holding a piece of angling history. In its own way, that rod is a time machine.

Fly-fishing in salt water not only began with wooden fly rods, but I believe it's fair to say that our sport's formative years were inextricably linked to the evolution of wooden fly rods.

The earliest rods available in the 1800s were typically heavy, clumsy affairs. Take, for instance, the rod James A. Henshall tells us he used for Florida fishing back in 1878. In his book *Favorite Fish and Fishing*, he describes it as a "twelve foot, twelve ounce, ash and lancewood fly-rod."

From our vantage point today — surrounded by many superb fly rods — it's difficult to imagine wielding such a stick.



The author's priceless "time machine:" A three-piece, 9-foot Heddon Riptide, built specifically for saltwater use in 1950.

Further evidence of the state of early saltwater fly rods can be found by reading A.W. Dimock's *The Book of the Tarpon*. Published in 1911, the book details Dimock's Florida adventures hunting the silver king during the late 1800s. While he was able to land fair-size tarpon, it proved a grueling ordeal, obliging him at times to hand the rod off to other anglers. When the butt section snapped, Dimock tells of fashioning a replacement from a heavy hickory hoe handle.

EMERGENCE OF THE SIX-STRIP, SPLIT ROD

While Henshall and Dimock deserve our utmost respect, it's easy to see that the equipment of their time posed an enormous obstacle to the advancement of the sport. With such poor-performing tackle, one could not be expected to truly take on the brine, nor could fly-fishing in salt water reach its potential.

What anglers desperately needed was a lighter, smaller, stronger rod, one capable of throwing a long line without throwing out

Baseball and saltwater fly-fishing extraordinaire Ted Williams assembles a bamboo outfit deep in the Florida Keys' backcountry.

FFSW Tippet

Line Weights

Older bamboo rods are not marked with the fly line weight-classification system we use today — it didn't exist until the 1960s. Prior to that, fly lines were classified by their diameter, running from "A" (the thickest fly line) to "I" (the thinnest).

In today's parlance, an A line roughly equates to a 9-weight, a B line to an 8-weight, and so forth down the ladder. Since physical weight and diameter rarely go hand in hand, picking the right modern fly line for an older rod may involve a little trial and error.

For instance, my Heddon Riptide is marked for either a GBG or a C line, which translates to a double-taper 8-weight or a level 7. In practice, I prefer a weight-forward 8, which would have been called a GBF.

your shoulder! Fortunately for us today, even while Dimock was busy battling big tarpon in Florida's Turner River, that new rod was quietly born. Granted, it took considerable time before this rod would fully evolve, but it was destined to energize and revolutionize the sport. It was the six-strip, split bamboo fly rod.

As the 20th century unrolled, superb American craftsmen such as Hiram Leonard, Charles F. Orvis, E.E. Garrison, Jim Payne and others began applying their genius to the hexagonal split-cane rod. Sometimes with hand tools and other times with specially designed machines, they experimented with tapers and rod-building techniques in an endless effort to improve their offerings.

For most of them, it was a labor of love, done with the eyes of an artist and the dexterity of a surgeon. Little wonder that from their workshops soon emerged the finest fly rods the world had ever seen. And it would be these new high-performance, American bamboo rods that would eventually propel saltwater fly-fishing into the addictive adventure it is today.

In the 1920s, saltwater fly-fishing was still found only in isolated pockets, particularly in sunny Florida. Howard Bonbright, inventor of the Bonbright Tarpon Streamer, was one such fly-rodding Floridian. Others could be found at exclusive angling clubs such as the Long Key Fishing Club, established in 1917. And when the Tamiami Trail opened in 1928, a few intrepid Dade County fly-anglers discovered incredible roadside opportunities for snook and tarpon. Northward in the Chesapeake Bay, Tom Loving was bending a cane rod to chuck flies to striped bass by middecade. And without a doubt, other unsung anglers were using the cane rod to take weakfish, bluefish and other species.

Yet to the best of my knowledge, no cane-rod builder offered a saltwater fly rod at this time. There simply wasn't enough demand. Their catalogs, however, did contain 9-foot-and-longer fly rods designed for Atlantic salmon and largemouth bass. Although these rods lacked corrosion-resistant ferrules and fittings, they had the necessary strength and casting properties to take on many saltwater applications and were immediately pressed into use.

GROWING DEMAND AND INTEREST

Good-quality split-bamboo rods became more widely available in the 1930s, and saltwater fly-fishing in general was gaining popularity. Perhaps the most notable announcement came in the form of a 1933 *Field & Stream* article written by George Bonbright, which detailed how he landed a 136-pound silver king on a fly rod. It caused quite a stir.

It was also in the 1930s that the legendary E.F. Payne Rod Co. was commissioned by A.E.

Clockwise from left: The vom Hofe "De Luxe" Tarpon Rod was born in 1941; Joe Brooks lands a silver king on a bamboo rod; E.F. Payne's saltwater rod selection; redfish and snook were common targets with bamboo fly rods. Center: Herbie Welch flashes a 12-pound, 4-ounce bone caught on a cane rod.

Hendrickson to build a 10-foot tarpon fly rod. Hendrickson, who had a financial interest in the company and was a peripatetic angler, wanted this rod to target tarpon at Gatun Locks in the Panama Canal. It's quite possible that Hendrickson's interest in tarpon had been piqued by Bonbright's article. Regardless of Hendrickson's motivation, however, this rod may well have been the first custom saltwater fly rod ever built.

The 1930s eventually faded in the rearview mirror, and saltwater fly-fishing was poised to bust out of its shell. During the next two decades, devoted fly-anglers armed with split-cane rods took on the salt like never before.

By 1939, Florida captain Bill Smith had documented the first bonefish on a fly. In Rhode Island, Harold Gibbs began catching hundreds of striped bass on a fly and convinced Orvis to make a saltwater fly rod. Down South, George Bonbright, George LaBranch and Lee Cuddy were all catching silver kings on fly rods.

One morning in 1947, Joe Brooks and Tom McNally helped a 22-year-old angler pick out a fly rod, then they showed him how to cast it. The young man's name was Lefty Kreh. In Coos Bay, Oregon, in 1948, Joe Brooks landed a world-record 29-pound, 6-ounce striped bass on a fly rod. That same year, Brooks took a 9-pound, 2-ounce bonefish, which garnered bonefish-on-a-fly honors at the Metropolitan Miami Fishing Tournament. In 1949, famed Maine angler Herbert "Herbie" Welch, guided by Jimmy Albright, landed a 12-pound, 4-ounce bone on fly. And only two years later, near Content Key, Florida, Brooks caught the first documented permit on a fly.

Florida fly-fishing pioneer Lee Cuddy (left) led Charlie Ebbets to this fine tarpon, taken on a bamboo rod in 1950.

As these angling milestones piled up, rod builders responded, creating fly rods specifically for the brine. By 1941, Edward vom Hofe & Co. of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, offered a "De Luxe" Tarpon Fly Rod. Built in honor of George Bonbright's silver king accomplishments, the rod was touted as being built along lines advocated by him. It was a two-piece, 9¼-footer wearing six chromium guides and a chromium tip top. This war machine weighed a whopping 14 ounces!

Meanwhile, Orvis built a special striper rod for Gibbs and was working on others. By the late 1940s, the E.F. Payne Rod Co. was cataloging three bonefish fly rods. They ranged from 9 to 9½ feet in length. With the butt extension removed, the 9-footer weighed about 6 ounces, a far cry from the stout vom Hofe tarpon model.

A GOLDEN AGE EMERGES — THEN FADES TO TIME

Joe Brooks' seminal 1950 work, *Salt Water Fly Fishing*, announced that, at the time, there were useful rods ranging from 8½ feet in length and 4¾ ounces in weight to 10-footers weighing 7¼ ounces.

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Bamboo Basics

You're probably thinking these antique cane rods cost a fortune. No way! The collectible market is highly geared to trout-size classic bamboo rods. Larger cane is nowhere near as expensive. So don't be surprised if you find a nice old 9-weight, split-bamboo rod for $500 or less.

If you manage to get your hands on one of these fine old rods, don't be in a rush to take it to tide. Before doing anything, examine it carefully. Start by running your eyes and fingers along the shaft, searching for imperfections. Cracks or open seams must be professionally repaired before casting.

Except for impregnated rods — such as those made by Orvis or Leonard (under the name Duracane) — most bamboo rods are protected by only a layer of varnish. If the varnish is chipped or not intact, do not expose the rod to water until it has been refinished or at least touched up. Also, inspect for deep gouges, especially up near the tip. These might indicate that the rod has been hit by a fly, which — as with today's graphite rods — can create a weak spot in the blank.

Sections should all be the same length. A short section indicates the rod was likely broken and repaired. A rod with a short section certainly isn't precluded from use, but its casting properties may be less than ideal.

Be sure the guides, including the tip top, are secure. Then check that all the metal ferrules, male and female, are firmly attached to the rod shaft. If any are suspect, stop and have the rod looked at by a professional. Before seating the ferrules, ensure the guides are properly aligned. Any attempt to twist a ferrule later is a sure ticket to disaster.

Once the rod is assembled, look down the blank and see how straight the shaft is. It is not uncommon for a bamboo rod to develop a "set" over time. A slight downward curve toward the guides is probably not a big deal, but a kick to the right or left is going to cause trouble. Fortunately, bamboo rod builders can usually remove a modest set.

Joe Brooks (left) and pals captured in a classic moment in 1949, chomping on cigars and rigging bamboo outfits for a day in the Everglades.

Brooks' personal favorite was a 9½-foot, 6⅝-ounce, two-piece Orvis Battenkill. In addition to this rod, he mentions Winston rods, long favored by tournament casters for both their lightness and power. Brooks also writes of the two-piece, 9-foot, 6-ounce South Bend Model 51, as well the H.L. Leonard Rod Co.'s 9½-foot, 6¾-ounce Grilse Rod.

At this time, the three-piece Heddon Riptide was on the market too. It was a two-tip 9-footer with chrome and stainless steel fittings to ward off the ravages of salt water. By 1951, the Leonard Rod Co. had brought forth two 9-foot saltwater fly rods for anglers seeking bonefish, striped bass or tarpon.

After 1945, advances in split-bamboo construction facilitated rods that were more capable of taking on the coast. Most notably, Orvis had developed and patented a way of impregnating split cane with Bakelite. Perfected by famed Orvis rod builder Wes Jordan, this process infused wood with plastic, not only strengthening the rod but making it impervious to water. Joe Brooks tested these rod blanks by submerging them for a month under his dock in Florida to no ill effect. He also bent one hard against a tarpon for over 40 minutes. The rod fully recovered.

Another development was the appearance of synthetic adhesives that proved much stronger than the hide glue widely used to assemble cane strips. The use of synthetic glue helped reduce the problem of cane rods taking on a "set" during a protracted fight. Then in 1952, along came the superior Super Z ferrule.

All told, the '40s and '50s constituted the Golden Age of the split-bamboo saltwater fly rod. For the first time, highly skilled rod manufacturers were constructing fly rods with the saltwater angler in mind. Our sport was finally getting the attention it deserved.

But the Golden Age of the saltwater bamboo fly rod would prove to be short-lived. By the late 1950s, fiberglass rods were cheap and widely available. Many anglers clung to their six-strip rods for some time, turned off by the poor quality of the initial efforts in glass. But fiberglass rods steadily improved, their shortcomings eventually disappearing.

There is no doubt, though, that the six-sided, split-bamboo fly rod swung the door open for saltwater fly-fishing — and for a time, cane was king on the coast.

The author would like to thank David Foley, a sporting-book dealer, and John Mundt Jr., a trustee of the American Museum of Fly Fishing, for their help in collecting information for this article.

FFSW Tippet

Slow It Down

I truly enjoy casting my Riptide, but if you have a fetish for fast-action rods, these oldie but goodies are going to feel weird. First off, slow down your casting stroke — get with the Zen of it! These rods are capable of throwing a long line, but you're not going to do it by driving the forward cast harder. Even if you have forearms like Popeye, the key to getting a slow-action rod to chuck a ton of line is to lengthen your casting stroke. Believe me, force is not the answer.