

# Ernie

*His life and his writing defined his love of beauty.*

**JOHN RANDOLPH**

**A**S WE REPORTED in our last issue, Ernest G. Schwiebert, Jr., Ph.D., died suddenly last December 10, 2005, of cancer. He was 74. He was a longtime contributor to this magazine (32 pieces) from its first edition in the spring of 1969 until his last contri-

bution ("In the Ring of Kerry," December 1982). It was my pleasure to work with Ernie as his editor from 1978 through 1982. My remembrances of him are best summarized in his evocative writing. Here are samples.

In our Pre Season issue of 1981, (fish-

ing with Jack Hemingway on the Kulik River) he concluded his "Alaska's October Rainbow" feature with this:

"The October wind carried the promise of winter, and the willows and alders were stripped of their leaves. Clouds hung over the steep-walled lake, but swirled fiercely along the ridges farther south. We were filled with fishing, and when Jack's henfish had drifted back into the current, we sat on the bear grass laughing like schoolboys."

In his lead to "Raspberries In the Rain" (April 1970) he opened with this description of fishing the Laerdal:

"It rained softly through the night. The mountains were covered with clouds just after daylight, and the street was wet when I crossed the gardens of the Lindstrom Hotel for breakfast. There were gulls working and wheeling over the tidal shallows below the river.

"The breakfast room was empty but the cold table was already laid and waiting. Breakfast was soft-boiled eggs and goat cheese and brislings in dill sauce, and when the coffee was finished I returned to my rooms to dress for the river. It was chilly and the radio promised overcast weather and more rain. There was an extra pullover in my duffel, and I rummaged for the rain jacket and scarf. The fresh Ackroyds and Orange Charms I had dressed after dinner were lying on the table beside the vise."

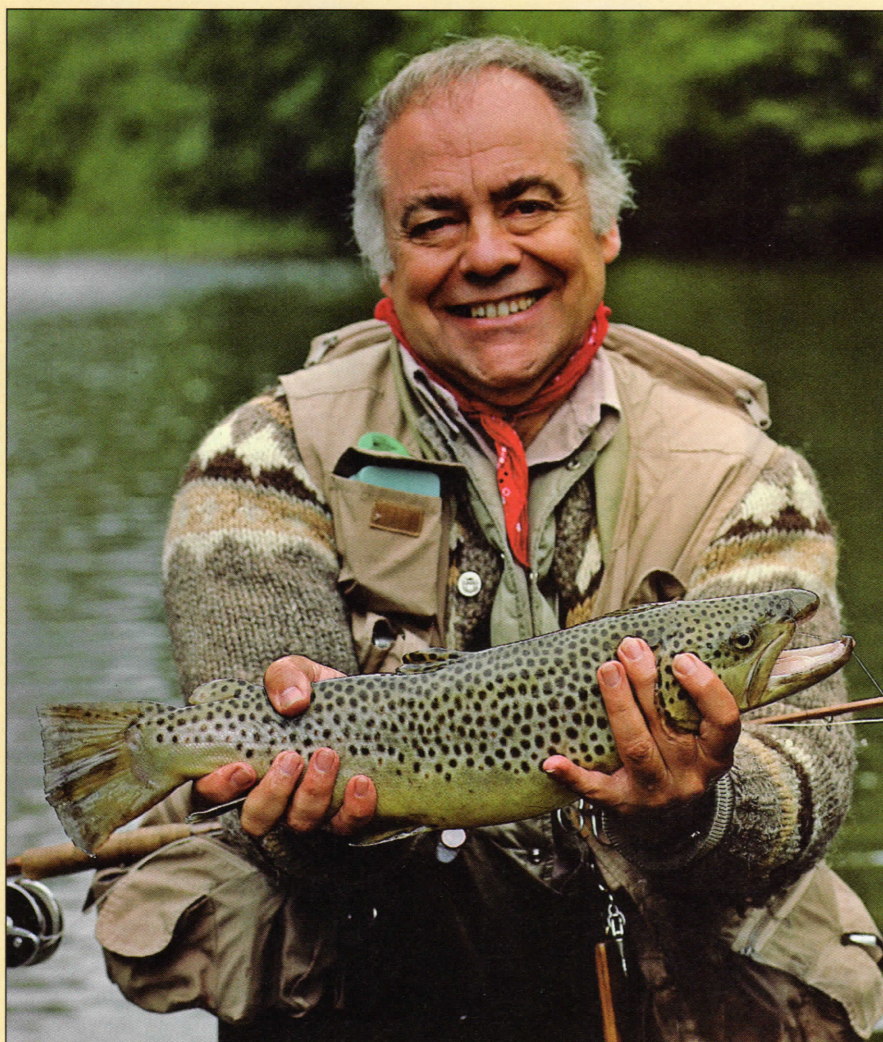
This from our Spring Special 1976 ("The Alchemy of Bamboo"):

"The first really fine rod that I ever saw was an eight-foot Payne owned by a physician in Chicago. It had been built by Edward Payne, one of the apprentices in the original Leonard shop in Bangor, and had been refitted by James Payne many years later. Their names were nothing to an eight-year-old who was still more interested in merely catching fish than in the subtle rituals of fishing, yet the craftsmanship and beauty of the rod were obvious—although I found it strange that the doctor loved his four-ounce Payne so much that he refused to fish it.

"It was many years before I fully understood such things, but lying in the lamplight, that gleaming Payne obviously had the overtones of some liturgical relic. The rod possessed beauty and an almost votive elegance. It was my first exposure to the alchemy of split bamboo.

"The Payne was kept in a saddle-

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Ernest G. Schwiebert, Jr., (above) was one of this magazine's most frequent and influential contributors from 1969 until 1982. His books include *Matching the Hatch* (1955) and the 1,745-page two-volume *Trout* (1978). He passed away Dec. 10, 2005. For more by Schwiebert, see "First Blood" on page 80 of this issue.



## RIFFLES & RUNS

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leather case. Its heavy stitching was frayed and pale against the tube and cap. There was a leather carrying-strap that fastened the cap with a small leather-covered buckle. The case was scuffed and worn, smelling faintly like a fine saddle or a seasoned pair of English riding boots, but its patina was only a prelude to the sensory riches it held.

"The faintly musty odor of the original poplin bag came first, mixed with the rich perfume of tung-oil varnish. The delicate silk wrappings were a pale brown that almost matched the color of the cane itself, and were embellished with ornamental wraps of primrose. It was a three-piece Payne with an exquisite slow action. The ferrules were beautiful, each female socket sealed with a perfectly fitted German silver plug. The guides were English tungsten steel. The elegant grip was shaped of handcut specie cork, remarkably free of check and markings. It was the classic Payne grip, slightly flared to conceal a reel cap inside the cork. The reel seat filler was a rich Spanish cedar, and its fittings gleamed like fine jewelry. The locking threads were exquisitely machined, and although the butt cap and locking hook were only aluminum, their weight and elegant knurling and polish seemed more like fine sterling—as beautiful as silver pieces in a showcase at Tiffany's."

Writing on a Paul Young bamboo rod:

"The rod has since taken salmon in Iceland and the Labrador, and has done yeoman duty on heavy Western rivers like the Madison and the Yellowstone, but nothing can surpass the memories of that first trip to the Argentine. It took a six-pound rainbow the first evening on the Pichi Traful, fishing a big Variant on its dry-fly tip, but it failed to defeat a much bigger rainbow at the famous Boca Chimehuin.

"The fish took almost angrily, with a steady pull that grudgingly refused to surrender line, and moved sullenly upstream into the angry surf that crashed across the outlet ledges of the lake. Suddenly it jumped in the heaviest currents, catching the sun on its gleaming sides as it cartwheeled downstream past the gravelly beach. It looked like ten or twelve pounds, and my arms were shaking as I followed its run. The rainbow jumped again, forcing the fight into the swift-running currents below the boca itself.

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## RIFFLES . . .

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The line sliced audibly through the water and the reel shrieked above the wind.

"The rainbow exploded into another series of wild acrobatics, and when I forced it back, the fly came sickeningly free. It seemed like a tragedy, since that was the biggest trout I had ever hooked, but the bittersweet feelings did not survive the trip. Two weeks later, the Parabolic 17 performed beautifully in Tierra del Fuego, using its special distance tip to combat the winds that prevail below the Straits of Magellan. It was there on the Dos Palos water that it took a brace of magnificent sea trout, weighing eight and twelve pounds, and I cannot take this rod from its case without remembering its baptism in southern Argentina."

I could go on for a long time quoting vintage Schwiebert from this magazine's

past. Unfortunately, space does not allow it. But here are a few words about what his writing style and content reveal to me.

Ernest G. Schwiebert, Jr., was enthralled with esthetics in its many forms: He writes of the beauty of rods, of places where trout and salmon are found, of fly dressings, of architecture, of wine, of writing, of geology, and of certain fly fishers and their pursuit of immortal truths.

Not a bad pursuit for a writing career. And in his best writing he accomplished what he set out to do. I recommend the following Schwiebert for reading from the past volumes of FLY FISHERMAN: "Thoughts on Coltsfoot Time" (Vol. 7, No. 5); "Secrets of Unfamiliar Streams," parts I and II (Vol. 7, No. 6 and No. 7); "The Longest Hatch," parts I and II (Vol. 8, No. 6 and No. 7); "A River for Christmas," (Vol. 9, No. 7); "Where Flows the Umpqua?," (Vol. 10, No. 2); "The Puzzle of the Henry's Fork," (Vol. 10, No. 3); "The Trout of the Shining Mountains," (Vol. 10, No. 5); "Understanding Pseudocloeons," (Vol. 11, No. 1); and "The Salmonfly Hatches," (Vol. 11, No. 6).

I recall that a fly fisher in 1943 encountered a young boy while fishing a stream in Michigan. He thought the boy's behavior strange since he was tipping over rocks, examining the insects underneath, and placing what he found in vials filled with alcohol. He asked the boy what on earth he was doing and the boy patiently explained that he was capturing and preserving aquatic insects for future fly tying, to match them for his fishing. That boy was Ernest G. Schwiebert, Jr., who 14 years later wrote *Matching the Hatch*.

I never shared a river with Ernie, but I shared them all with him through his writing, as did our readers. I will remember him as that boy. And I will have more to say about him, and his place in fly-fishing history, later.

