



# That Wood Fishing Rod Has Soul, Man!

by Timothy P. O'Brien, Ph.D.  
photos by Matthew Reilly

*You never knew, when a fish struck, whether or not your tackle would last long enough to let you land him. Reels froze, posts broke, cranks came off, bells spread, spindles buckled, drags broke, reel seats buckled, screws popped out! You just could not believe the things that happened!"*

*--Joseph A. Coxe, reel maker and angler*

Imagine yourself standing in or beside a lazy stream, the water rolls by in its eternal flow to another place, making its serene sounds as it flows across rocks and through bends. The trees rustle in the soft breeze, the sky is clear and cerulean, and the sun casts its warmth on all things below. The stream teems with all sorts of life, both seen and unseen, known and unknown. You are experiencing and enjoying this festival of senses—the scene, the sounds, the smells, the beauty of this sanctuary—and all is well with the world. Then at once, a breach in the water, this magnificent multi-colored creature rises to seize an insect...or is it? It is not; today the fish has taken an imitation, the one you presented, the one you created, and the game is on, again!

This scene has played out countless times through countless centuries as humans have sought fish of all sizes and shapes and in all types of waters. Historians have now proven that the ancients sought fish for sport as much as they sought them for food. So, how have humans accomplished this? What was, or were, or are the tool(s) of choice?

Fishing tackle is composed of several basic components: line, hook, and a device to hold the line (pole with reel), the primary component. Fishing poles have been called by different names over the decades. They are most commonly known as “fishing rods” or, in the case of saltwater rods, “tips.” Over time fishing rods have taken on different forms, sizes, and configurations, and have been made of a variety of materials. They can be as simple as a branch or piece of cane with a line tied to the end or as complex as a multiple-piece rod complete with all its various components. In 1939, Harlan Major offered the best technical description of a fishing rod in Salt Water Fishing Tackle:

*The rod, like any compound spring, must be able to accomplish two kinds of work. It must be flexible enough to respond to every impulse in order to reduce the speed of its thrust. This is the work of the light, flexible section of the rod tip. For the other type of work, it must be heavy enough so that when sufficiently retarded the impulse is passed along to the stouter portion, which takes the strain and, if within the limit of the line, brings the pull to a full stop.*

Regardless of the type of fishing being done, whether freshwater or salt, what anglers required was a fishing rod that would land a hooked fish. The lack of adequate tackle was indiscriminate, because it was not a matter of price or cost but lack of new designs. Regardless of the financial position of the angler, no one was immune from the calamity of a lost fish. In reality, anglers would have been happy to have tackle “just good enough” to work, which meant different things to different types of anglers. For example, the characteristics of freshwater rods were not effective for most saltwater angling, because some of the properties necessary for freshwater fishing rods did not adapt well to deep-sea fishing. Mainly, the lightweight flexibility necessary for freshwater rods made them too long and springy to handle many of the larger saltwater fish.



Despite the shortcomings, the most practical fishing rods were those made from wood. In order to make a more satisfactory fishing rod, rod makers of both the business and artisanal variety experimented with not only different woods but also with materials like steel and bamboo. Bamboo, which is actually a grass, proved to be an extraordinary material for fishing rod manufacturing because of its properties. In its natural state it could be used for fishing (cane pole). However, after modification the very best of its properties could be combined to become an extraordinary fishing rod. When deconstructed or “split” into strips and then laminated or glued back together, bamboo provided the flexibility and strength necessary for fishing. Bamboo lamination was not a new concept, as McLane explained, “Who first thought of splitting bamboo into strips and then gluing them together so as to obtain the full strength of the cane by eliminating its hollow center is likely to remain a matter of conjecture.” The lamination of bamboo was a process developed in China at least 3,000 years ago, as indicated in the book Tchouang-Tseu, printed in 950 B.C., that explained, “how to build split-cane ‘rods,’ glued and bound.”

The modern era laminated bamboo fishing rod came to be known as the “split-cane” fishing rod and was first manufactured in the United States in the 1860s. These were light-duty rods like fly rods and were typically made in four configurations: quadrate (4-sided), pentagonal (5-sided), hexagonal (6-sided), and, more rarely, octagonal (8-sided). Despite the complex configurations, the vast majority of these were designed for light duty.

Fishing rods were, and are, typically made in sections for ease of transport. They are connected by a socket and plug joint known as a “ferrule” that are mated. Typically, a ferrule is a weakened point, and while having multiple joints allows an angler to store and transport the rod more easily, these numerous joints have proven to be problematic especially in saltwater rods. The stress placed on them by the larger fish make them prone to break

at the ferrules. Fishing rods were, and still are, composed of several sections working in concert with one another to perform the task of landing a fish. The tip is the area above the butt, reel, and reel seat, and is the working part of the fishing rod. Every rod is equipped with certain hardware to make it functional, such as guides, ferrules, reel seats, and butts.

become grooved by line friction. In later years, guides were developed with rollers, made from a variety of materials, in an effort to ease friction and increase durability.

Like the fishing lines of same period, wood rods required maintenance and care, some periodically requiring scraping and re-varnishing. Wood

Some of the more notable wood fishing rod manufacturers of the 19th and 20th centuries were Hardy Brothers, Vom Hofe, and Tycoon Tackle. Both Vom Hofe and Hardy Brothers made all types of fishing rods and were pioneers in making big-game rods. Like all manufacturers of the time, they took their freshwater designs and adapted the

In today's world, engineering a product is often a global project with engineers and project managers spread across the world, and the availability of "wonder materials" is almost limitless. However, the wood fishing rod is still very desirable. The modern finishes and glues have eliminated the need for the intense constant maintenance of the past. The use of a wood fishing rod will take you to a time of yesteryear, of slower action, a reach into the past. Or, is it a reach into the future? You are standing in or beside that lazy stream, the water rolls by in its eternal flow and makes soothing sounds, the trees rustle in the soft breeze, the sky is clear, and the sun casts its warmth. The magnificent multi-colored creature is in your hand. You slowly and carefully remove the hook, and in an instant, it is set free, a little tired, but ready to fight another day. The fishing rod, made from a natural material, is timeless. That wood rod has soul, man!



Guides are placed along the length of the tip, at certain intervals to provide a free flowing path for the line to follow along the rod shaft and, as the name implies, guide the line from the reel to the end tip of the rod, forcing the spring action of the rod tip. Originally, guides were made of polished agate or glass because of their hardness and smoothness. However, because these materials were brittle, they could chip, resulting in a frayed or cut line, or

rods would "take-a-set," meaning they took on a bent shape permanently from the constant pull of the fish. As a result, they could (and often would) eventually break as a result of fatigue, making many anglers believe that wooden rods should be discarded after a few uses. In spite of the time-consuming maintenance to preserve wood fishing rods, the alternatives were even less desirable.

technology to saltwater. Vom Hofe began making fishing rods in 1876 and, according to Bingham, "For the first thirty years, Edward claimed to have personally made every section of their bamboo rods." Tycoon Tackle came along in 1935 and began to manufacture fishing rods with new innovative designs, primarily for saltwater, that eventually became the standard to which all were measured.

## *The fishing rod, made from a natural material, is timeless.*

**Timothy P. O'Brien, Ph.D. is the President of Tycoon Tackle, Inc., a Charlottesville, Virginia-based angling outfitter that originated in Miami, Florida in 1935. The company was on the scene in the formative years of big-game angling, and at one time more than 95% of all world record fish were caught on the company's fishing rods. The company is still family owned and committed to manufacturing products in the United States of America.**