



Childhood experiences often shape the lives we lead whether the memories help us avoid pitfalls or encourage us to pursue our dreams. For rod builder Jim Mills, fishing with his family as a child influenced his future in many ways. “I grew up on a tobacco farm in eastern North Carolina,” Mills told *Southern Trout Magazine*, “where we also raised wheat, corn, soybeans, hogs, chickens, and we sold eggs. When possible, Saturdays were reserved for fishing, and it was a multi-generational family affair. Fishing and sharing the catch were an integral part of the life of our family and our close-knit farming community.”

This passion for fishing followed him to the Smoky Mountains of western North Carolina in 1961, when he moved there to practice pharmacy. “It was on these streams that I began my love affair with trout fishing. I was fortunate to be mentored by several local expert fly fishermen,” Mills explained, “who taught me some of the finer points of fly fishing and fly tying. Early mornings and late afternoons would find me casting for trout or practicing techniques under their watchful eyes. On more than one occasion when fishing with these men, I would bust out my fishing regalia only to wrap up my line so that I could observe these masters at work as they skillfully applied their savvy. Since these beginnings, I’ve been lucky enough to travel and fly fish some of the best creeks and rivers in the United States.”

After his childhood on a family farm in North Carolina, Mills attended medical school and pursued a degree in pharmaceuticals. Upon graduation, he came to the mountains of

Western North Carolina where his wife was finishing college. “It was there that I began my love affair with trout fishing,” he says.

Mills then entered the United States Public Health Service’s Indian Health Service where he spent 30 years as a commissioned officer—serving the health needs of Native American populations across the country in pharmacy and hospital administration. Jim

also served as the Area Pharmacy Director for the 26 tribes east of the Mississippi. After he retired, he continued to work with Native American community health workers, providing advanced training and certification as part of a contract with the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians. With a life as full as Jim’s, it makes sense that he would not just retire and stop being productive. “Throughout my life,” Mills said, “fishing, fly tying, and rod building have been a mainstay. So it was a natural progression that after 42 years in the health profession, I embarked in earnest on a fly rod making venture.”

Mills has been building rods since 1964 when his first PHS assignment was to an extremely remote Indian reservation in Arizona where he lived about 70 miles from the nearest grocery store. “To make use of my spare time,” he explained, “I decided to build my father a fly rod for Christmas. I ordered my supplies, purchased a blank, and built my first rod using a large book to apply tension to the thread. Later I graduated to a crude



bench and replaced the book with a mouse trap. That first rod was not a work of art, but it looked like it might catch fish.” It was this rod, which he gave his father, which spread his name among a small group of fishermen, and then gave way to the professional rod building he does today.

makes each rod unique—customizing it to fit the fisherman. Some of the most important components to a custom rod are the wants and needs of the owner. “Rod making involves a number of components,” Mills says, “including the blanks—whether bamboo or graphite, guides, reel seats, handles, reels, line types, weights, etc. It’s not a matter of using the most expensive rod that makes fishing an enjoyable and rewarding experience; it’s the fisherman’s ease on the stream and confidence with the rod. Balance is

critical and comes not only from the choice of materials but also from the rod’s length, weight, and placement of guides. If you put the wrong components on even the best of rods, or if they are not placed properly, the

The Rod Wizard of Raven Fork Loryn Kirk

Not only does Mills build bamboo and graphite fly rods, he also restores bamboo rods. “The rods often come to me in dilapidated conditions after years of standing in old barns and attics. They look hopeless, but they can usually be returned to almost new condition. Some customers want to have a rod restored to hang over their mantle as a family keepsake. Others want the rod restored to a fishable condition. Depending upon the desire of the client, I can usually make the necessary modifications. It is quite gratifying to watch the old rods come alive again.”

As a rod builder, Mills





rod will not bring about a gratifying fishing experience. Listening to a customer leads to the production of a unique rod that fits them every time. Some are interested in shorter lengths for tight mountain streams, some want to cast long distances with ease, some want compact pack rods suitable for travel, others value high-end agate eyes and custom-made wooden reel seats—all of them want to feel that the rod and they are one. I put this ‘original spin’ on all the rods I make. Every rod must meet my standards of performance, which I have honed over years of fishing and rod making. I want my rods to feel like an extension of me.”

As advice for someone looking to buying his or her first custom fly rod, Mills said it is

essential that you buy a good and sturdy, but inexpensive, fly rod and fish with it for a while to figure out what you like and don’t like about it. “Cast several rods,” he said, “and observe the differences between them.” Think about where you are going to use the rod, he advised, and this will impact what rod is best for you.

Jim Mills sells his rods through local Western North Carolina fly shops, at fishing shows, by personal contact, and at www.RavenForkRods.com. “Customization is the cornerstone of my business!” Mills says enthusiastically. Mills can be reached by phone or email at 828-497-5576 or flyrodmaker@frontier.com.