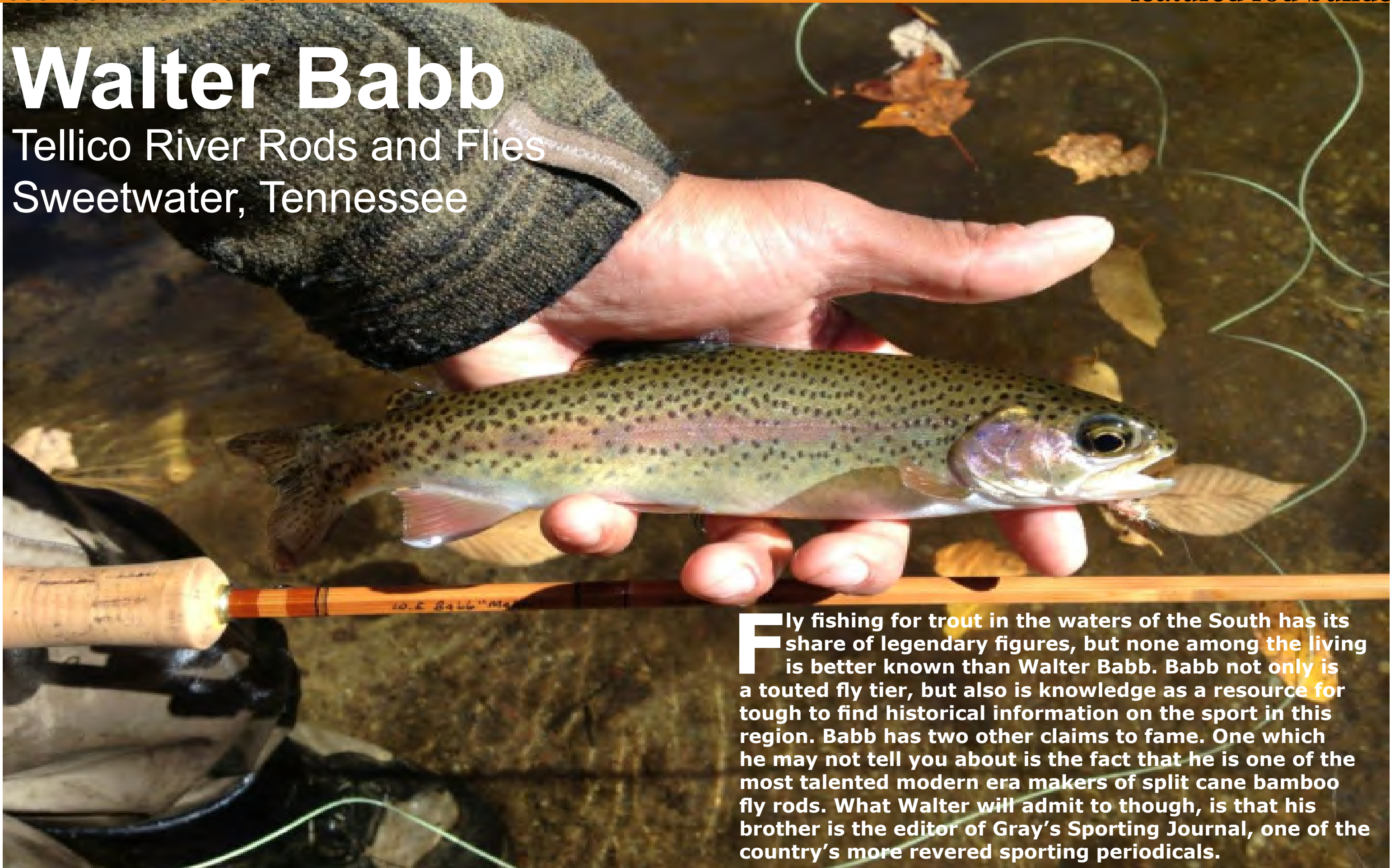


Walter Babb

Tellico River Rods and Flies
Sweetwater, Tennessee



Fly fishing for trout in the waters of the South has its share of legendary figures, but none among the living is better known than Walter Babb. Babb not only is a touted fly tier, but also is knowledge as a resource for tough to find historical information on the sport in this region. Babb has two other claims to fame. One which he may not tell you about is the fact that he is one of the most talented modern era makers of split cane bamboo fly rods. What Walter will admit to though, is that his brother is the editor of Gray's Sporting Journal, one of the country's more revered sporting periodicals.



Walter grew up fishing the dashing waters of what used to be known as the Tellico WMA, which not so long ago was epicenter of cold water fly fishing in the Volunteer State. His current fly fishing resume has grown over the years, although he still considers these fast flowing streams as his home waters.

"I caught my first trout on a worm in 1954 when I was 7 years old," says Walter. "The place was Tellico River, just above Big Oak Core Campground. Two years later I started tying flies and caught a trout on a fly in North River, about a half mile below McNabb creek. I remember both of those fish like it was yesterday. In those days my most frequently fished waters were the Citico Creek and the bigger Tellico River. I really liked fishing the upper reaches of these drainages, especially North River and South Fork of Citico Creek."

"My first fly rod was a hand me down 9 foot bamboo Horrocks-Ibbotson 'Beaverkill,' continues Walter. "That old rod was crooked as a dog's hind leg, and weighed at least 7 ounces. As I recall, it probably cast a 7 weight line which was fine in the days when I mostly fished worms and grasshoppers with it. Later, I fished wet flies and Tellico Nymphs, but I didn't mourn the passing of that piece of cane, as I later got a 7-foot, 9-inch Shakespeare 'Wonder Rod' for my 10th birthday."

Walter's fly fishing mentor was his father who was an excellent wet fly and nymph fisherman. This was the approach to fly fishing that Walter was first taught. Several years ago, a fishing companion asked Walter when he started Czech nymphing. Walter responding by explaining to the fellow that his father had told him about nymphing 'Czech-style' about halfway through the first Eisenhower administration.



"My father just called it nymph fishing," says Walter. "I know what he showed me goes back to at least the 1920's, so it's not something new in the Southern Appalachians."

A lifelong fly tier, whose signature patterns are the Smoky Mountain Candy and the Speck (originated by Joe Bishop), in 2000 Walter caught the cane splitting bug. Legendary bamboo rod builder Stan Smartt and David Ray were his 'bamboo mentors.' Walter says that Charlie Downs was a big help in getting him started as a serious rod builder.

"Stan, David, and Charlie allowed me to watch them plane, glue up, and bind rods," says Walter. "I watched a one day Wonder rod made for charity at Stan's shop. That's how I got started. Books such as a Master's Guide to Building a Bamboo Fly Rod, The Lovely Reed, and Fundamentals of Building a Bamboo Fly Rod, gave me some tapers to start with, and really good information. Also the Planing Form is a great quarterly publication that also has a lot of tapers and many tips from professional bamboo rod makers. I only make Bamboo Rods. I have assembled glass and graphite rods many years ago."

The hardest part is the grunt work. This starts with splitting the cane into strips, flattening and straightening nodes, or growth rings, and straightening strips. Rough, preliminary, and final planning is time consuming, and involves lots of plane blade sharpening, if you hand plane your strips. Some makers use a Morgan Hand Mill or some other milling device to shorten the procedure, but Walter hand planes his rods. He notes that the



toughest component to find these days is really good cork for grips. Everything else is readily available from many sources.

"My rod making equipment is mostly traditional," says Walter, adding "with some modern components such as shell epon Epoxy to glue my rods with. It's waterproof and has a 2 hour working time which gives me plenty of time to straighten rod sections before the glue cures. My rods are custom built to customer specifications. I have made charity rods for Trout Fest and T.U. auctions. John Geirach has one

of my rods and has mentioned it in Fly Rod and Reel. Also in Gray's Sporting Journal and the Heartland Series (a local TV spot).

Walter notes that potential bamboo fly rod buyers should consider where they will do most of their fishing. If they fish only dry flies in small mountain streams, that will tell him what tapers to start thinking about. If possible he recommends that they cast different rods, noting that most bamboo makers keep rods on hand to cast. Walter says that he has a closet full of different rods for customers to try out.

"The best advice for first time bamboo fly rod buyers is to do your homework," concludes Walter. "Get the rod best suited for the fishing you do most. Cast several rods, if possible. There is no such thing as a rod that will do everything. There are a few all around rods out there that will do a lot, but not all types of fishing. A good bass rod is not necessarily a good trout rod or vice-versa. I can be reached at 423-337-6772 or by writing to me at 197 Oakland Rd. Sweetwater, TN. 37874-1870. I don't have a computer, so it's snail mail or nothing."

