

TUFTS & BATSON

A PASSION FOR TRADITION

Making bamboo fly rods is an art steeped not only in tradition but lots of secrecy and lore.

AMELIA TUFTS and **GABE BATSON** give us a glimpse into their world.

Below: Gabe Batson.

TCFF: *You have amassed a reputation as bamboo rod builders who produce exquisite rods. Is that your primary passion?*

T&B: Thank you for saying so. It's an honour to be featured in *The Complete Fly Fisherman*. We have a passion for making bamboo fly rods, though you could say our primary passion is creating beautiful gear for anglers who seek performance at the highest level.

TCFF: *Give us a little background on how you (Amelia Tufts and Gabe Batson) started making bamboo rods.*

T&B: We both learnt in Portland, Oregon. Gabe: I was the first to learn. With a broken-down weed trimmer in hand, I went to slay the tall brush that was attacking the long driveway of rod maker Ed Hartzell. After I proved my desire, I was invited to attend the weekly meetings of rod makers at Ed's shop. There I learnt the basics of bamboo, wood and metal work that are required for making a fly rod.

Amelia: I started with the desire to make a bamboo rod of my own. With Gabe's help and the rod maker's bible – *A Master's Guide to Building a Bamboo Fly Rod* – open on the table, it was a challenge I was eager to take on. Little



Photos: Anne Freivogel



Above: Amelia Tufts.

did I know I'd love it so much. Six months later as I was finishing my first rod, I knew it wouldn't be my last. I had started down a new path and my focus was on this craft. T&B: When we started, we didn't have aspirations to become professionals. We thought we'd make rods for friends and eventually sell a few on consignment at a local fly shop. When we met Daryll Whitehead, he told us we could make world-class rods. We didn't believe that it could be true, but somehow having him tell us this started us on the path of believing in ourselves.

TCFF: Were you inspired by other builders, and if so, who is your favourite?

T&B: Daryll Whitehead. We've had the great privilege to work with him for many years. He is an extremely patient and generous instructor, who taught us to be open-minded, to think for ourselves and stand up on our own. We can't express

enough gratitude for being able to call him a friend.

TCFF: Do you make time for fly fishing, and if so, what is your preferred destination and species?

T&B: We do take some time for fly fishing, but not nearly enough. Our favourites are the reddsides of the Deschutes River in Oregon and the brown trout of Driftless Area in Wisconsin. We're looking forward to an upcoming trip for redfish in South Carolina.

TCFF: You obviously fish your own rods. Have you a favourite model and why?

T&B: Amelia's is the 8'0" 5-wt 3-piece, with medium action. This rod seems to know what the angler wants, and it's effortless to cast. Gabe's favourite is a 7'6" 4/5-wt 2-piece dry fly rod. It's supple and light and versatile enough to take anywhere.

TCFF: Do you field-test your rods?

T&B: Sometimes the prototypes become our favourite rods.

TCFF: Does the building process require special skills and equipment?

T&B: It does require special equipment. Steeped in secrecy and lore, there are stories of equipment hidden away in locked rooms, with speakeasy-type requirements for entrée into the inner sanctum. One rod maker was known to have permitted only two people to ever see his shop. Even then the equipment was covered before the guests were allowed in. There are a few tools specifically for making bamboo fly rods, such as bevellers, planing forms and binding machines, and some tools are crucial to the process but not specific to bamboo, such as lathes, saws and drills. In terms of special skills, anybody can make a fly rod. It takes persistence, patience and a desire.



TCFF: Do you have a dedicated shop, and what is your favourite tool in the shop?

T&B: We have a workshop in the historic Maplewood neighbourhood of St Louis, USA. It's an old storefront painted robin's egg blue.

Amelia: My favourite tool is our motorised dip-tank varnisher. It gives us smooth, flat finishes that make the rods beautiful to touch and look at.

Gabe: My favourite is the lathe, though I often have to remind myself that the best tool is using one's own mind.

TCFF: What are the important steps in producing a bamboo rod?

T&B: 1) Selecting the best piece of cane. 2) Flaming, splitting, heat treating, straightening, roughing. 3) Planing and gluing. 4) Ferrules and grip mounting. 5) Wrapping, varnishing. 6) Making the

reel seat, bag and tube. 7) Prepping for delivery – straightening, polishing, final inspection.

TCFF: Your rods are considered to be some of the finest around. Do you use a special kind of bamboo and do you source it locally or import it?

T&B: Thank you so much for the compliment. Our bamboo is from Guangdong

Top left and right: Each rod is made one at a time by hand.

Below: All Tufts & Batson rods come standard with two tips, a cotton bag and engraved tube.



Province in China. It's a small region where the conditions are just right for this particular species of bamboo. We think of it as being like Cuba is for tobacco – the climate, the way the wind blows, the hilliness of the area; all of these elements conspire to make the best bamboo for a fishing rod. Every year, our friend goes to China to sort the bamboo culms specifically for us rod makers, and we pick the best of that batch.

TCFF: Do you make your own guides, and what qualities should good guides have?

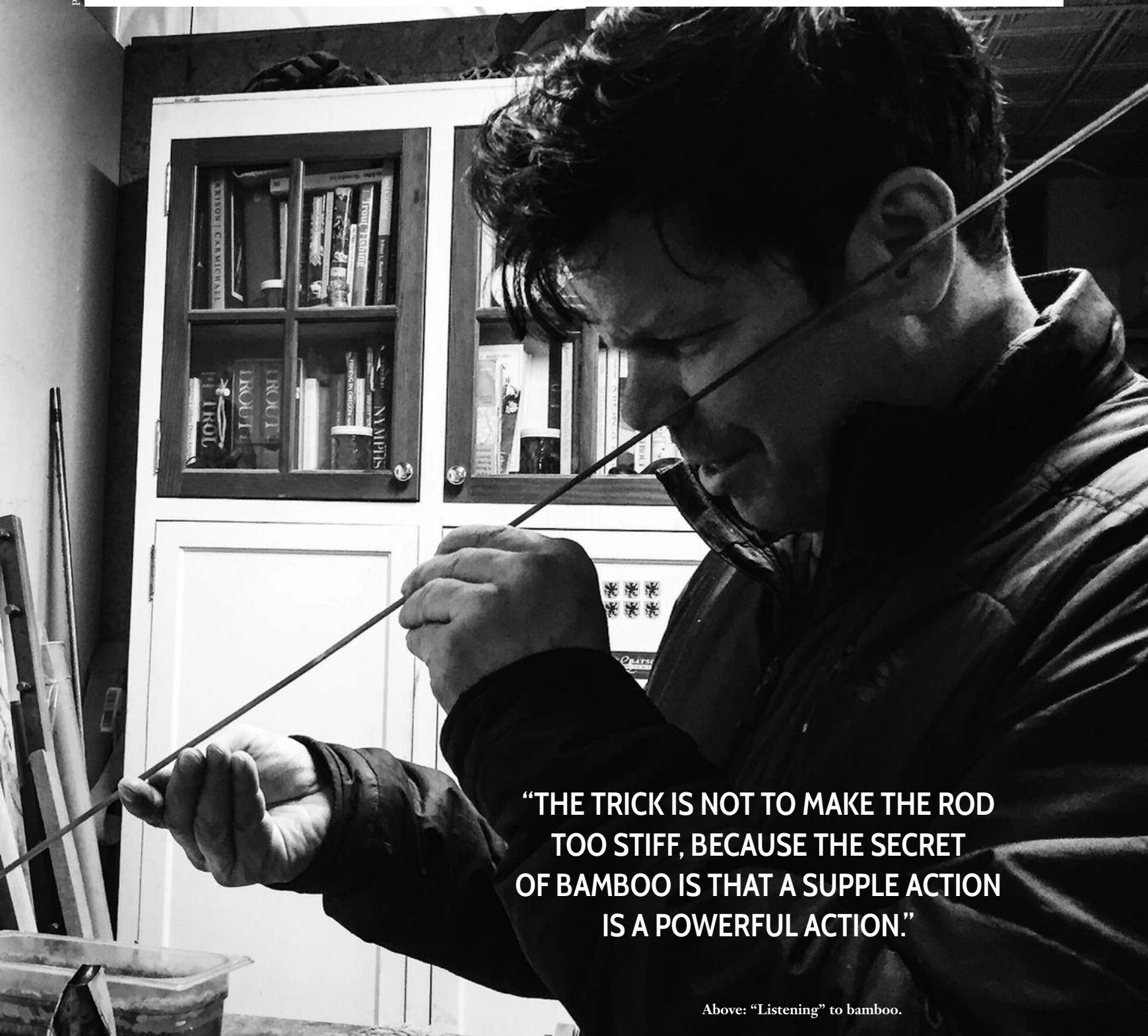
T&B: We purchase our guides. We feel outsourcing in this case yields a better product, because we buy from a company that lives and breathes snake guides. Our idea of a good guide is one that is strong but not brittle – it needs to give when knocked or stressed – and smooth so that the fly line wants to flow through. We

insist the guides have the right mass, because the mass of the guides and their placement affect the rod's action.

TCFF: Do you use a special thread to wrap the guides?

T&B: We use silk that is selected for its strength, diameter, smoothness and sheen. When varnishing the wraps, we use a technique that accentuates the iridescence and texture of the silk to give a

Photo: Frederick Silvers



“THE TRICK IS NOT TO MAKE THE ROD TOO STIFF, BECAUSE THE SECRET OF BAMBOO IS THAT A SUPPLE ACTION IS A POWERFUL ACTION.”

Above: “Listening” to bamboo.

“... THE BEST TOOL IS USING ONE’S OWN MIND.”

Above: A Tufts & Batson 7'9" 5-wt 3-piece bamboo fly rod.

pleasing vintage quality to the look of the rod. This demands the finest-quality silk.

TCFF: What do you think makes your rods exceptional?

T&B: If our rods are exceptional, it's only because of the exceptional people who fish them. Without these wonderful people who've chosen to acquire a Tufts & Batson, we wouldn't be around to practise our craft and improve the quality of our service with each turn of the wheel.

TCFF: What rod lengths and weights are most popular?

T&B: Everyone is different when it comes to wants and needs for a fly rod. Our most popular size and model is the 7'9" 5-wt 3-piece with medium action; we think this is because it's small enough for little streams, with power enough for bigger water. The taper is smooth and approachable, with backbone enough for anything thrown at it.

TCFF: How do you determine and produce the taper?

T&B: We conduct an interview with the angler, get to the person, ask about their fishing habits and, if possible, watch

them cast. We throw a few ideas back and forth. Once we know the line weight and length, we can set about designing the taper. What's the overall feel going to be? Where does it bend? Is it tippy, progressive, or bend all the way to the butt? Bamboo has a sweet spot in terms of how the mass of the cane is distributed over the length of the rod. We can move numbers around within this parameter to tailor how the weight is distributed and where the rod will bend and where it will be stiffer. The rod should feel light in hand and alive. This is because the nature of the material is so perfectly suited to casting a fly line. The trick is not to make the rod too stiff, because the secret of bamboo is that a supple action is a powerful action. That power is useful even when making short casts, because the magic is in the loading portion of the cast. A rod that loads easily in a smooth, controlled manner results in accuracy.

TCFF: And line weight?

T&B: We have a few ways to determine line weight, mostly from testing and experience. One nice thing about bamboo is its forgiving nature, which often allows for multiple line weights on the same rod.

TCFF: What rod/s are you busy building right now?

T&B: Right now we're building a dozen rods, among them an 8'0" 4-wt dry fly (one of our favourite designs), a 6'9" 3-wt 3-piece Smoky, an 8'9" 7-wt for steelhead, an 8'3" 5-wt Pinky Gillum Tribute and a few other trout rods.

TCFF: How do you dry your bamboo, or do you source it kiln-dried?

T&B: The bamboo is not kiln-dried; it's cured in the sun to change its colour from green. Bamboo is a grass, so its curing properties differ slightly from wood. We temper the cane using heat from a flame and an oven. This causes a chemical change in the cells of the bamboo that yields a resilient and set-resistant fly rod. It's like tempering steel to be both strong and flexible.

TCFF: How do you determine that a particular piece is indeed dry enough?

T&B: Bamboo takes on the humidity of the ambient conditions; dryness is not really a factor. We do age our bamboo for at least two years so that it can be properly tempered.



Above: The varnish is laid on in thin coats resulting in a durable and beautiful finish.

TCFF: Do you use special glue in bamboo rod construction?

T&B: We use special glues that are chosen for their consistency and strength. True story: One of our personal fishing rods, an 8'0" 5-wt, is called The Forklift because it survived being run over by a forklift. Even though it was a terrible shock to have it happen, it was a good test as to the soundness of the construction of

our rods. The dent in the bamboo left by the wheel has almost disappeared over the last few years as the bamboo has healed itself.

TCFF: How important is humidity in the construction process?

T&B: Our shop is somewhat humidity-controlled, but barring extreme conditions it isn't crucial.

TCFF: Do you use a special type of varnish/finish or is it commercially available?

T&B: We use a specific varnish that protects from the elements. It remains flexible when cured, so it's up for the job of repeated bending with the rod.

TCFF: Is its primary function to make the rod look good or to protect it from the environment?

T&B: To protect it from the environment, though it adds beauty too.

TCFF: To your mind, what qualities should the perfect bamboo rod have?

T&B: A fly rod is only perfect if it's perfect for you. It's a very personal thing. If we started with the premise that we somehow imagined the perfect fly rod in isolation, we would have already failed on that account. There's a perfect bamboo rod for everyone. It's the job of the maker to tailor the rod that suits the angler best. It should feel like an extension of the hand. It's a living thing. It might make you giddy to cast it. It's effortless to fish, with the line popping into a perfect back

Photos: Frederick Stivers

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cast coming off the surface of the water. It's a consistent performer. Your arms feel relaxed after a day of fishing, not sore, leaving you refreshed. Ideally, it'll last a century and you'll hand it off to your grandkids. A perfect bamboo rod must exhibit the highest level of craftsmanship, with all of the components being the very best available. Everything is proportional from grip to tip. The bamboo is straight and clean, free of twists, glue lines and voids. The varnish is glassy and flat with no ripples, pooling or drips. The wraps should look like they're all the same size and evenly spaced. We believe there is a level of execution where the final product looks as if it was created in one masterful stroke.

to greatness. We believe that those who practise this can achieve something that's almost an art. Those who achieve at this level inspire us, because it adds to the richness and beauty of life. And they do it without being asked and do not ask permission.

their lives. It's like they become part of the family. We're very grateful.

TCFF: The engraving on the butt ends of your rods is exquisite. Do you do it yourself or do you out-source it?

“THE SECRET IS IT’S EASIER TO MAKE A GREAT ROD THAN IT IS TO MAKE A MEDIOCRE ONE. ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS MAKE A GREAT ROD ONCE. IT GETS EASIER AFTER THAT.”

Below: Agate, one of the hardest substances on Earth, makes a practical and stunning stripping guide.

Photo: Jan Fredrik Lund



TCFF: What is the most difficult aspect of building the perfect fly rod?

T&B: Developing the willingness to accept only the very best and discarding the rest, which in a way means there is no perfect rod, because once you make one, it sets a new standard, which the next rod must exceed. We use a philosophy of marginal gains – implementing 1% or more improvements in every detail, no matter how small, so the overall result adds up

TCFF: And what part of the process is the most enjoyable?

T&B: We love being in the zone, whether it's in our work, business or our lives. There's a part of us that loves busily working at our creations, but it's meaningless without the people we serve. We've met the most wonderful people because of what we do. We love making an angler's dream fly rod and hearing about the triumphs they experience in

T&B: Thank you. We work with R3 Engraving in Oregon. John, who does our engraving, does an amazing job and he's always up for a challenge.

TCFF: What advice do you have for aspiring rod builders?

T&B: The secret is it's easier to make a great rod than it is to make a mediocre one. All you have to do is make a great rod once. It gets easier after that.

