

BAMBOO TOWNS



BOB BASH '19 SEND, TN

The world of fly fishing is still considered a niche category in the overall sport of angling, which for many of the uninitiated represents a style of fishing that seems complicated and only done by knowledgeable experts. Now for those of us who are dedicated and confirmed addicts of fly fishing we know that beautiful back cast and delicate landing of the fly on the water is only achieved after nearly losing a quart of blood, countless hours stuck in the trees, and hooking everything from ourselves, friends, and maybe even the family dog.

Even within the fly-fishing world there is a subset of categories; saltwater aficionados, Tenkara followers, carp hunters and the list goes on. However, the unicorn of fly fishing if you will is the bamboo rod angler; in the minds of most a cult of mystery practiced and performed by only the ancients, not unlike Gandalf conjuring the spirit world.

The reality is of course that nothing is further from the truth and the “Bamboo Bash” held for the past sixteen years in Townsend, Tennessee is on the forefront of not only keeping traditions alive but advancing and promoting the art of bamboo rod building and all it contains.

It was my pleasure to attend Saturday of this year’s three-day event, April 25-27, 2019 at Dock’s Motel, a proud sponsor and local legend unto itself in our area. Located just outside the gates of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park it has been the home base for the “Bamboo Bash” for years. I had the opportunity to sit down with Paul Hinchcliff, the organizer and head wrangler if you will for the last few years on the banks of the Little River as he described the origin and focus of the “Bamboo Bash”.

The event began almost 20 years ago as a gathering of those with a passion for vintage gear and bamboo rods. One of the original organizers, Ralph Shuey, was in attendance this year and both Paul and he are regular contributors to the online website “Classic Fly Rod Forum,” which serves as a base for those who follow the bamboo traditions. Paul emphasized that the mission for the “Bamboo Bash” is not a crusade for the past but to serve as caretakers of bamboo’s rich history while promoting and advancing its future.

A perfect example were the discussions held this year under the general title of Line Lab, also known as Why in hell won’t this damn line work on my cane rod? – a question familiar to anyone involved with fly fishing. The talk on Friday morning at Little River Outfitters, another sponsor of the annual event, brought a pair of special guests to the “Bamboo Bash”, Tom & Alexis Brodhead, founders of 406 Fly Lines of Livingston, Montana. Their talk was titled “Vintage Tapers Tweaked with Modern Materials”. They discussed the idea behind the company’s fly line taper and material designs. I was able to share some time with them Saturday evening as they told their story of ex-New Yorkers with a love of fiberglass fly rods who could not find the fly lines they wanted, so they designed their own. After retiring early to Montana, a spot they had visited for years, they started 406 Fly Lines in 2014. After some research they partnered with Scientific Anglers, who manufactures their lines, and which 406 Fly Lines now distributes around the world, including New Zealand and Japan. In a classic tale of you never know where a road will lead, 406 Fly Lines soon came to the intersection of bamboo rods and the quest for the magic fly line, and quickly became aware of a perfect match for a bamboo fly rod owner’s line requirement.



[left] Ralph Shuey
[right]- Paul Hinchcliff





Another of the highlights at the “Bamboo Bash” this year was the casting area where rods of every description are rigged with similar but various fly lines to help in an unbiased and non-company opinion of what works. I can simply say that based on what I saw in the attendees’ purchases, it was definitely worth the cross-country drive for 406 Fly Lines. Oh, and for those wondering where the name 406 Fly Lines comes from - that is the area code for Montana!

It is not just fly rods and fly lines that make an appearance at the “Bamboo Bash”, but also reels of every description and time period. Pflueger, Martin, Hardy and Shakespeare, just to name a few, in every size and condition were on display. As I watched the casting area, I could not help but notice, on a rod someone was casting, a beautiful reel with an almost burnished bronze color unlike anything I had seen before. As a complete amateur to the world of bamboo gear I had to ask and was told it was a Pflueger Bulldog, and when questioned on its age I was told it dated from somewhere between the 20’s and 30’s - as in 1920!

I was amazed not just to see an almost 100-year-old fly reel in beautiful functioning condition being used today, but to imagine the story and history of the reel. Who purchased it near the beginning of the last century? How many days on the river had it seen? How many fish had eluded its past owners? Where had it traveled and what waters had it traversed

in a bygone era of days past of cold pristine mountain streams and rivers? Maybe that is part of the allure for the current collectors and owners of these works of art, the inevitable realization that they are just temporary custodians of history.

The “Bamboo Bash” is the very epitome of what was the past, the present and what is the possible future of bamboo fly rods. It is a three-day event where the bamboo novice like myself can cast a rod handmade in 1955 by the esteemed rod builder, Paul Young, and in the same day cast a bamboo rod just built a few months ago by someone attending the “Bamboo Bash” that weekend, like Munsey Wheby or Jim Ifert.

It is truly a labor of love for those that make the journey each year to the base of the Great Smoky Mountains to attend this one of a kind event. It is a gathering of a tribe that welcomes all and shares a golden history of fly fishing, rod building and most importantly, an exchange of information among anyone who stops and takes the time to listen. At the end of my streamside chat with Paul Hinchcliff, I asked him what one phrase summed up the “Bamboo Bash 19” and with a wry smile he said.... “A weekend of Southern gentlemen on their best behavior.”

Next year when spring 2020 rolls around I suggest you load the car, maybe throw in some cigars and smooth sipping bourbon, and make your way to the friendliest town in Tennessee. There are not many places left in this world where the local IGA grocery store sponsors the ice, the motel rolls out the red carpet and the whole town says glad you’re here!



Ton & Alexis Brodhead
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