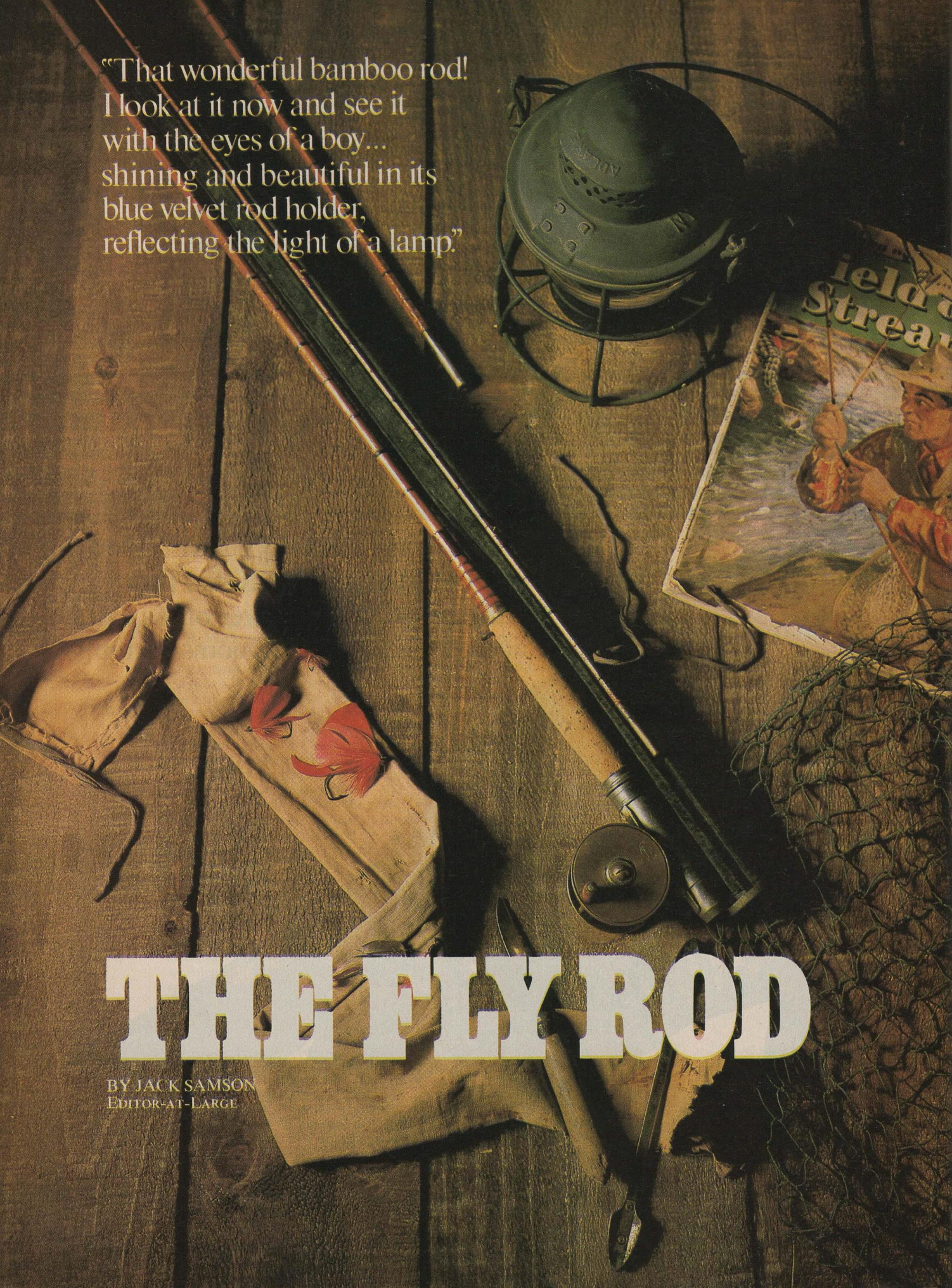


"That wonderful bamboo rod!
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THE FLY ROD

BY JACK SAMSON
EDITOR-AT-LARGE



It is one of the more pleasurable things to do—looking at old hunting and fishing gear and letting the mind take one back.

I have a 9-foot, split-bamboo fly rod I received as a gift in the 1930's from the family of a man who died. I was about ten then, and until that time I had been making do with a one-piece metal rod with a dinky level-winding reel filled with the ever-present black braided silk fishing line everyone used in those days, along with a red-and-white wooden bobber and a snelled hook with about a 6-foot 8-inch length of sturdy leader, which we always referred to as "cat gut."

Standard bait for any freshwater fish was a big night crawler. Nobody—at least no one I knew—cast to fish. We just swung the bait a couple of times and flipped it into the water.

These were Depression days, and as far as we were concerned, fly fishing was for the rich. I knew what fly fishing was because in the outdoor magazines there were photographs of men with long fly rods and strings of trout. But that's about all I knew.

So when I was given the bamboo fly rod I just kept right on using it the way I had the small metal rod, except that now I could reach out farther with worms. A small brass reel had come with the rod, probably simply because it was there. I didn't care whether it was right for the rod or not. It held a lot of black braided silk line, and that was all that counted.

But that wonderful bamboo rod! I can look at it now and see it with the eyes of a boy . . . shining and beautiful in its blue velvet circular rod holder, its polished metal butt reflecting the light of a lamp. It had an extra tip and came in a tan poplin case. For a year the rod caught mostly sunfish, yellow perch, and bullheads. Then a miracle happened.

I was a skinny, fragile, asthmatic kid, sick half the time, and the doctors finally told my family that if I was to lead any sort of normal life, I would have to spend some time out West where I could breathe. So my mother drove us west to Santa Fe, New Mexico. My father had to stay behind at his job, but he sent his younger brother, Bob, along. We took our time, camping as we went, driving through the Dakotas and then back down through Wyoming, Colorado, and finally to New Mexico. My wheezing stopped as soon as we left the Midwest, and life became a pure joy. Everywhere there were animals, birds, mountains, the heady smell of pines, and best of all, clear mountain streams.

The miracle happened in the Black Hills of South Dakota. We were camped on the banks of a small stream above the frontier mining town of Deadwood, at an altitude of about 6,000 feet. I had been catching both small trout and whitefish for a couple of days, but it had been tough. I wasn't able to find my trusty worms in the sparse mountain soil, and I'd been using grasshoppers I captured in the meadows. If I impaled

them just right and floated them correctly, the trout would flash out and strike them. But most times the fish took the hoppers without becoming hooked.

This day I was trying unsuccessfully to snag a trout from a long pool below a narrow log bridge that spanned the small creek, when a man walked over and stood on the bridge, watching me. Finally he sat down on the logs and beckoned to me. I sloshed up and joined him on the bridge. He took the bamboo rod and hefted it.

"Rod's all right," he said, inspecting the wrapping. "Beautiful piece of work. Reel's too small for good fish, but okay for small streams like this." He hauled in the line and looked at the grasshopper. "These are okay," he said, "but I want to show you something. Got any more hooks?"

I nodded eagerly and dug out a standard snelled hook. He took it and walked over to camp, where he talked to my mother and uncle for a few minutes. When he returned he carried several feathers from a pillow, some colored thread from Mother's sewing box, and a length of yarn. Sitting down on the bridge, he carefully began to work with the hook. I watched, fascinated, as he built a body out of brown yarn, wound it tightly with black thread, and fastened one sprig of feather as a tail. Then he made two side wings of the white feathers and tied them in place with the black thread. After that he wound the head of the hook, behind the eye, with black thread and put two bands of red and white thread on the body. Looking back, I don't know what the fly was supposed to represent, but it somewhat resembled a Fanwing Coachman. Holding it up to the late afternoon sky, he inspected it carefully. "It'll do," he said. "Now, let me show you how this thing works."

He stripped out several yards of black silk line from the brass reel, and flipped the fly into the riffles of the stream. I could see the fly as it bounced on top of the rapidly moving water. Holding the rod tip low, he twitched the tip as he jerked the line with his left hand. I was interested, but unimpressed.

Suddenly there was a flash in the white water, the rod bent, and a beautiful brook trout leaped and skittered across the surface as it fought the hook. I was so stunned I couldn't move. The man slid off the bridge into calf-high water and stumbled down the rapids as he held the rod high. When he slid the bright fish up the slope of the grassy bank of the pool below, I was waiting—falling on the trout with both hands and my body. The man laughed as I sat up, covered with black mud and holding the still-wriggling trout. He helped me up the bank and we headed back toward the tent. The trout was probably about 12 inches, as I look back, but *then* it could have weighed 5 pounds.

When the excitement had died down the man turned to me. "I'll show you how to make that fly," he said. "Because you're going to lose them." His name

was Pierre Menager, a wood carver, sculptor, and artist. He probably had no idea how much it meant to unlock the door of fly fishing to a boy.

In the next few weeks I caught some fine trout with my own flies. I didn't know anything about the difference between fishing a fly wet or dry. I fished all my flies downstream and across—letting them skitter across the surface of fast water. I still do that, and it works as well now as it did then.

One of the most agonizing experiences of my life happened that summer on a tiny outlet stream to a beaver dam, where willows grew along the banks and bent over the stream to form a canopy. One day—at just about noon—I sighted a large trout resting in the center of the clear, almost still water of the stream. The willows kept me from floating the fly down to the trout from any angle. After deliberating for minutes, I began to creep straight ahead till I was in position to inch the rod slowly over the big brookie. My heart was pounding and my mouth was dry as I lowered the homemade fly to the surface. Suddenly the big trout rose, opened its great mouth, and reached for the fly. I panicked and jerked the rod tip upward. The huge trout wasn't even spooked! I tried to free the fly for several minutes, then finally struggled to my knees. The fish saw me and streaked upstream to dart beneath a grassy bank. I didn't stop shaking for minutes.

I cast my bamboo fly rod on most of the trout streams around Santa Fe, where we had finally settled, but after losing some good fish I realized that the reel held too little line. I bought a battered fly reel from a friend for 50 cents. That meant I had to forego the Saturday afternoon cowboy movie at the Lencis Theatre, but it was worth the sacrifice.

By the time I moved back East five years later, my asthma was gone and the bamboo rod had become enough of an extension of my right arm that I could land my flies where I wanted. Casting style would come later, under the guidance of Ted Townsend and other experts I was privileged to know.

The bamboo rod continued to take trout, and bass, too, until World War II came, and it went into storage. It stayed there for five years, till I came back to New Mexico and brought it out again. Then in 1949 I bought a light, strong, fiberglass rod, and the old rod was retired for good, though I took it wherever I moved, and the summer heat of many an attic baked its silk windings and varnish, the blue velvet of its circular rod holder faded, and its poplin case grew brittle with age.

I have owned dozens of fine fly rods since those days and have fished some of the best fly fishing waters in the world. But looking at that bamboo rod today, I remember as vividly as ever the thrill the little brook trout gave me long ago when it struck the homemade fly. No other rod or fish or river has ever quite matched that moment.

