

# BAMBOO

## NICK TARANSKY

*Nick looks at rod styles, as well as the classic rod makers and their tapers.*

An interesting aspect of bamboo from both a maker's and an angler's perspective, is rod actions and tapers—as well as the makers who originally developed them. There is little if any overlap in the actions of graphite and bamboo rods, so it's a whole new world to learn about. With over 150 years of bamboo's history as a rod-making material, several distinctive styles of taper have evolved. In this issue I'll discuss classes of bamboo rod actions, as well as some famous rod makers and their designs.

### History and Evolution

Early fly rods from the time of Dame Juliana Berners and Charles Cotton were constructed from dowels of timber such as hazel, hickory and greenheart. The late 1600s to early 1800s saw the introduction of Calcutta cane, though in solid sections initially rather than split configuration. As early as 1801, four-strip tip sections were being made by Snart of England. It was an American however, Samuel



*A wealth of reading is available on the subject of bamboo rods and rodmakers.*

Phillipe of Pennsylvania, who is credited with introducing the six-strip Calcutta Cane rod in 1859. This, along with greenheart, remained the material of choice for rod makers until the early 1900s, when the stiffer, more powerful Tonkin Cane came into favour.

Through the early to mid 1900s, English rods produced by makers like Hardy were typically 9 feet or more, with a heavy action by today's standards. Australian rods generally followed this style, with some imported from the UK as blanks and finished in Australia. From an Australian perspective, these were days of big fish (and obviously strong anglers), so the heft of these rods is understandable. Quite a few such rods have a power and smoothness to them, but it can be hard after growing up with graphite to connect with their feel when first picking them up. I admit that if I struggle with some of them, it's probably me that's missing something rather than the rod.

During the same period American makers began producing many shorter, lighter rods. There was some overlap between the European/Australian rods and the American rods, but it's fair to say probably ninety percent of bamboo rods being made today are based on American tapers developed from the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rods of all shapes are being made of course: 1 weight and lighter, 5 feet and shorter, 10 weight and up, 15 foot double-handers, and everything in between. However if numbers and rod popularity mean anything, the 'sweet spot' for bamboo is in the 3 to 6 weight, 6 to 8 foot range.

## Classes of Rod Action

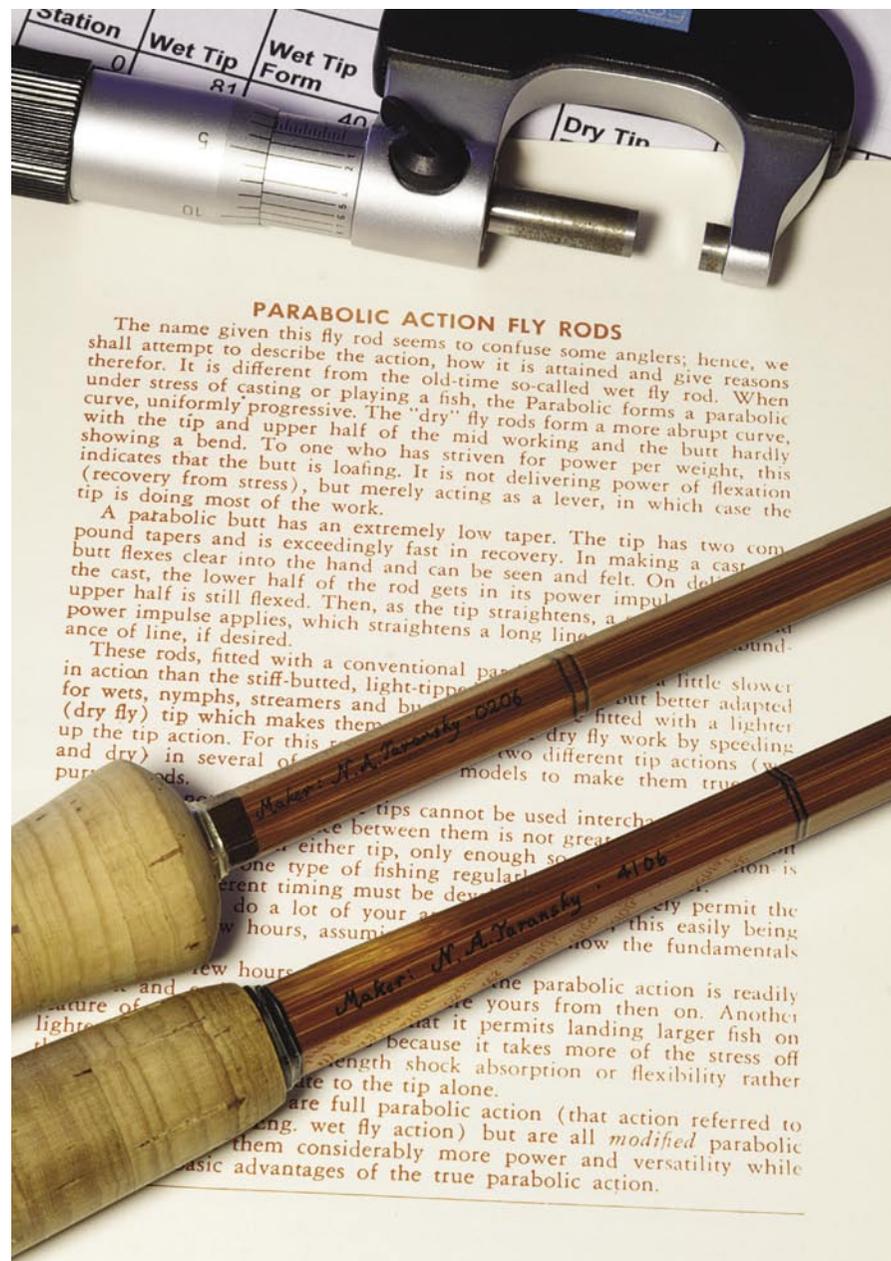
### *Wet Fly Action*

This is the classic 'old style' bamboo rod, characterised by a slow, heavy action. Generally used for fishing a wet (or team of wets) down and across, the aim was to keep the line speed slow enough to avoid drying the fly which would cause it to float. Tips were moderately thick, with the action felt through well into the butt section. Dedicated wet fly action rods are not commonly sought these days, lacking the versatility of most other designs. Some of the shorter versions of these rods (say under 9 feet if you can find one) have a smoothness and grace to them. They do require and reward a slow, smooth casting stroke.

### *Dry Fly Action*

The rise to prominence of the dry fly, and the associated need to dry the line and the fly, required a higher line speed. This was achieved by building a more powerful butt section, with a lighter, faster tip. Rods became shorter and crisper, with the ability to fish small flies accurately on light line weights and tippets. Much of this development occurred in the American east—I believe this was driven by a combination of the nature of the fishery, and competition for the discerning New York angler's recreation budget!

Most classic tapers being faithfully reproduced today, along with modern variations would fall into the 'Dry Fly' category. There is still quite a wide spectrum of tapers and 'feel' within the dry fly style of



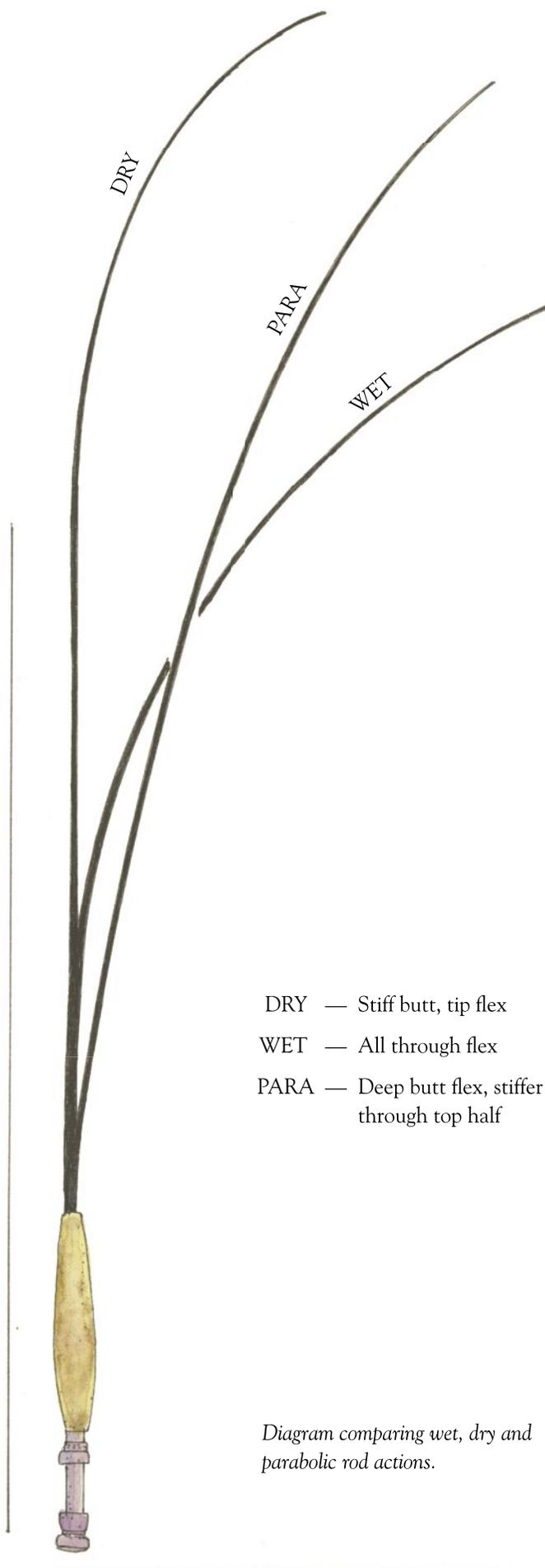
*Thin Parabolic Rod Butt (TOP), compared to much thicker Dry Fly Butt (BELOW).*

rod. Even limiting comparison to 7 foot 4 weights, there is surprising variation. The Payne 98, Payne 97, Garrison 201, DeGere 'Fast', Paul Young Driggs and many others all have noticeably different feels.

### *Parabolic Action*

Confusingly, the term 'parabolic' in this context has no connection to the mathematical meaning. The defining characteristic of parabolic rods is the slow, almost flat taper in the butt section. This allows a smooth, even loading of the butt section during casting, with a deceptive 'after burner' of power that comes in late in the cast. The tip is generally faster in taper, giving a degree of crispness in short presentations.

The French rod company, Pezon Michelle is well known for its parabolic rods. Charles Ritz discusses their virtues at length in 'A Fly Fisher's Life'. Many parabolic rods are 'staggered' in configuration, whereby the tip section is formed longer than the butt.



- DRY — Stiff butt, tip flex  
 WET — All through flex  
 PARA — Deep butt flex, stiffer  
 through top half

*Diagram comparing wet, dry and parabolic rod actions.*

Of course, there can be a blurring of Dry, Wet and Parabolic elements in a rod's taper and design. With many other variables involved, there is seemingly a limitless range of options for rod builders. Overall rod length has a major impact on action. Short rods (say 7 feet and under), with less weight and action-length, can feel tight and crisp, despite a slow base taper. My 'Bush Creek' taper for example, at a short 6'6", has a parabolic style butt, though the shortness gives it a dry fly-ish feel. The slow butt allows a subtle hinging down to the grip that lets the rod load and fire a short line fast and accurately in close, though it doesn't have the length and weight to give it that full parabolic feel.

## Some Famous Makers and Their Rod Actions

A nice thing about making your own rods, or even buying in the modern market, is you can try the tapers of otherwise unaffordable legendary rods. Though individual classic rod makers and companies often made a diverse range of rods, they were frequently noted for a signature feel or style of rod. Listed here are some of the best known rod makers and what they were best known for.

### HIRAM LEWIS LEONARD

Born in Bangor, Maine, Hiram Leonard (1831–1907) is recognised as the father of modern American rod making. With a background as a gunsmith, Leonard was responsible for standardising the 6 strip rod, and starting the move to lighter, shorter rods. By developing a beveller (which increased production) and by making advances in ferrules and other hardware design, the company grew as a commercial venture.

The Leonard Company continued after his death, and produced a number of classic lightweight rods down to wispy 1 weights. The 38H, a 7' 4 weight, is still voted by many as their favourite small stream rod.

### EDMUND E GARRISON

Garrison is renowned for the definitive rod making book 'A Master's Guide to Building a Bamboo Fly Rod' written with Hoagy Carmichael Junior. Original Garrison rods can command well over \$10,000. Garrison made his rods from the early 1930s to his death in the mid 1970s, primarily for the fabled Catskill rivers of the American east. (See John Fawcett's article in this issue—Ed.) He was an engineer who derived his tapers mathematically (the workings for which are found in his book.) His tapers produced even, buttery-smooth loading rods, at the more relaxed end of the dry fly scale.

### E. F. PAYNE ROD COMPANY

Like Garrison, father (Ed) and son (Jim) were another New York operation, spanning an 80 year career in family rod making. Noted for the highest standards in rod crafting, the fast dry fly actioned Payne 98 (7' 4 weight) and 101 (7'6" 5 weight) are favoured among many modern rod makers. Interestingly, after a visit from Charles Ritz in the mid 1930s, Jim Payne ventured into an acclaimed range of parabolic styled rods as well.

## LYLE DICKERSON

From middle America, Dickerson made rods from the 1930s to mid 1970s. Dickerson rods are generally built on powerful, fast action tapers, not too fine in the tip. They feature a business like dry fly action, but can fish nymphs as well. Dickerson's 7'6" and 8'6", 5 to 7 weights are popular with anglers today, including a number who live and fish in New Zealand.

## PAUL H YOUNG ROD COMPANY

Paul Young (followed by his son, Jack), were Michigan rod makers through the halcyon 1920–1960 era. The Young Company produced the iconic small stream American rod, the 'Midge', a 6'3" 4 weight. I (and many others) also have a lot of respect for their semi parabolic range of rods. The Driggs River Special (and especially a lighter tipped version modified by my own mentor, current master rod maker Jeff Wagner) may be the sweetest, smoothest rod I have cast. Another, the Parabolic 15, was supplied with a light (Dry) and heavy (Wet) tip in a versatile combination, which changed my mind about eight foot bamboo rods. The Young Company also made faster action rods as well, including the Martha Marie (named after Paul's wife) and the Princess. Interestingly, the Princess is a very similar taper to the Australian Turville's 'Jenny Anne'.

As you can see, some rod companies spanned at least two generations, with the son taking on the father's business, and in some cases the whole extended family became involved. Operations like T&T, Winston, Orvis and Leonard, which started as one or two person operations, grew over time into larger companies, with a flow of rod makers in and out (and between). Key personnel in the rod shop obviously had influence over the direction of the styles of rods produced during their tenure, and many collectors track down rods from particular eras, like a 'Tom Maxwell era Leonard 38H', or a 'Wes Jordan Orvis' for example.

## THOMAS AND THOMAS

From the modern era, starting in the late 1960s, Tom Dorsey and Tom Maxwell set the standard for modern commercial rod making that stands to this day. Light, crisp dry fly actions, with a rapid butt swell just above the grip, mottled flaming, superb varnish, wraps and overall finish typify their rods.

## RL WINSTON ROD COMPANY

Founded by Robert WINther and Lew STONer (hence Winston), Winston started in San Francisco during the 1920s. Much rod development during this period was driven by the requirements of tournament casting at the Golden Gate Angling & Casting Club, and many records were set with Winston rods. The need for power and light weight led to hollow fluting of rods. Winston was purchased in the mid 1970s by Tom Morgan, who moved the company to Montana, where it remains today. As fishing rods, Winston's bamboo rods are known for their full flowing, relaxed feel. Their longer, heavier rods are also favoured by many north-west American steelhead anglers.

Current rod maker, Glenn Brackett, became owner of Winston for a period, before selling his share in the business, but staying on as head of the bamboo shop. A few years ago, troubled waters flowed through Winston, and Brackett and the whole bamboo operation left the company to start their own business down the road (Sweetgrass Rods). The story is covered well in the George Black book (see below).

## Further Reading

All the above is really just a sketch of the bamboo rod and rod maker story. There is a wealth of further reading available on famous rod makers and their rods, including the following:

*Classic Rods and Rodmakers*—Martin J Keane (Winchester Press)  
Unfortunately out of print, and costing \$200 and up second-hand, this has chapters on all the rod makers above and many more, including Harold "Pinky" Gillum, the Edwards family, Charles Orvis, E C and Walton Powell, the Leonard family, the RL Winston Rod Company, as well as other historical information

*Casting a Spell*—George Black (Random House)  
A fascinating read on the American rod making industry makers, dynasties, relationships and the quest for perfection. It also documents the unfortunate Winston saga of a few years ago.

*Fishing Bamboo*—John Gierach (The Lyons Press)  
Looks at rods and makers, old and new, from the original Trout Bum's point of view. It was one of the books that inspired me to get into bamboo, and though I don't agree with everything in it (his love of long rods, for example) it's a great read. Gierach's other books touch frequently on aspects of fishing bamboo.

*Trout (Volume II)*—Ernest Schwiebert (Dutton Adult—out of print)  
Close to 170 pages of information on bamboo rod history and famous makers can be found in this classic work.

*A Master's Guide to Making a Bamboo Fly Rod*—Garrison & Carmichael (Meadow Run Press)  
Much more than a 'how to' book, it includes insights into Garrison's philosophy and stories about him and his rods.

*Splitting Cane*—Ed Engle (Stackpole Books)  
Profiles and interviews with a number of contemporary rod makers.

*A Fly Fisher's Life*—Charles Ritz (Winchester Press and others – out of print)  
Includes discussion on parabolic tapers and Pezon Michelle rods, including the 'Fario Club'.

*Lifelong Pleasure*—John Brookes (Stevens Publishing)  
In the chapter on John Malcolm Gillies, Brookes details Gillies rods from the 1930s onwards. His discussion on rod care and playing fish is well worth a read (as is the whole book!)

*Bamboo rod maker Nick Taransky lives in Queanbeyan, near the streams of the Monaro and Snowy Mountains.  
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