



Why would a sophisticated modern technologist adopt a method of building fly rods that is at least 135 years old?

"Economics, pure and simple," says Don Andersen, a sulphur operations foreman at a gas plant near Rocky Mountain House, AB.

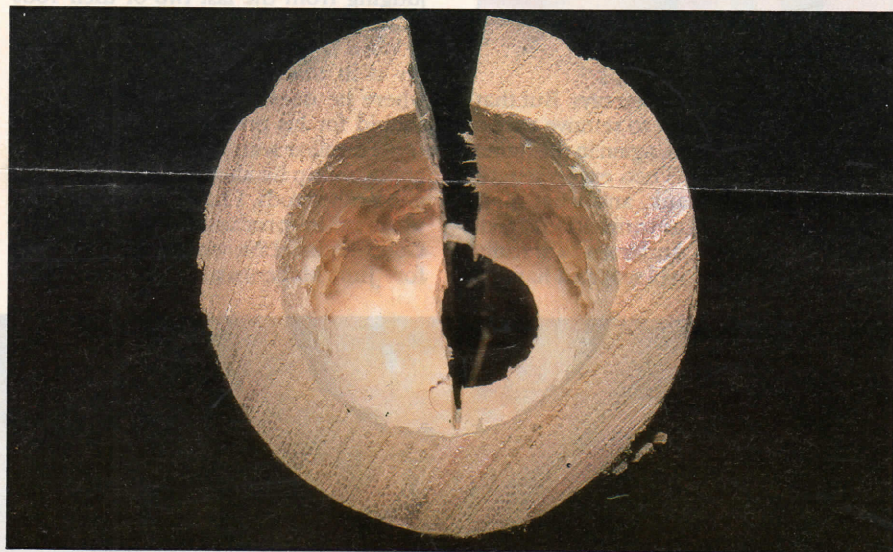
"Getting into making your own graphite or glass rod blanks requires too much big-money equipment; I thought I could afford to make split-cane rods," Andersen explains.

Don was born in Calgary, "39 years

his own rods, with actions computed from physical laws out there in the ozone.

Such a dream can and has become a reality for some masters in glass or graphite, but first you have to make the name and reputation that will persuade some big corporation to supply you with blanks manufactured to your own specifications. Even at that, the price is prohibitive.

Cane largely gave way to glass in 1948 and graphite muscled on to the scene in the mid-1970s. Now the manufacturers



End of a culm, showing dam.

ago," he says, with a Jack Benny stare that admits of no argument. He grew up in Turner Valley and on the Sheep River. He has been fly fishing since he was 12, and remains grateful to several anonymous gentlemen anglers of the old school who took a kid in tow.

Andersen served an apprenticeship in the ordinary rod-building arts: buying glass or graphite blanks and installing the guides, handles and reel seats. "But no matter how nice your windings and reel seat work," Don says, "you always wind up with a rod from a blank designed by some other guy and manufactured by some big corporation."

What Don Andersen wanted to do was make his own blanks, adapted to his own requirements and those of the people for whom he would build rods. Yes, he would use designs of the masters, but he also always had the dream of designing

are constantly experimenting with all manner of space-age materials, boron being the current rage. I started fly fishing with cane, but was weaned from it by some of the good glass and graphites, particularly when I found the heavy action of the big Number eight and Number nine cane rods hurt my elbow and shoulder.

But split cane persists, many anglers insisting it is superior to the light fly rods, those carrying Number four, five and six lines. British craftsmen first moved into canes imported from India (Calcutta Cane) in 1850 to produce rod tips of three- and four-strip construction. Butts were still being fashioned of various kinds of hardwood and the two sections were lashed together laboriously with twine, nickle ferrules being as yet unknown.

Back in the mid to late 1960s, when I

first started outdoors writing, I can recall Allen Bill, Alberta's pioneer outdoors columnist, being very proud of and fishing with a cane-tip, greenheart butt-fly rod and being given a demonstration of how it was lashed together. My recollection, too, is that this rod, of course, did not have stamped on it the A.F.T.M.A. line designation and that complicated negotiations went on between Bill and Scientific Anglers to have a custom line made for the rod to bring out whatever action it had.

Basic tool of the split-cane rod-maker is the adjustable planing form with properly sized and tapered grooves in which rough bamboo strips split from a "culm" of cane, now generally originating from the Gulf of Tonkin, are reduced with a sharp plane to a triangular cross-section.

Dean of Alberta's split-cane rod builders, Des McFarlane, an anesthesiologist in Edmonton, built his first cane rods from strips planed on a form he built from two hockey sticks. An occasional builder, Max Coulson, of Cochrane, is, as I recall, a machinist and built his own planing forms.

When the strips are planed to the precise tolerances, they are glued and bound together in a pressure-winding machine and left bound while the "stick" cures.

Although many configurations have been tried, the six-strip design with the hexagonal cross-section is now standard, where each strip is planed to an exact 60-degree triangle. The first six-strip split cane rod on the American market was built by H.L. Leonard of Bangor, Maine, in 1876. A little more than 100 years later, I inherited a Leonard from my father. I ration myself to a day or two a year with it on a small Alberta stream.

Building cane rods is not as expensive as the chemistry, vats, moulds and ovens of the glass and graphite industries, but Don Andersen soon found it was not going to be cheap, either. It took three machine shops and \$465 just to get his adjustable steel planing forms "right."

Much of the rest of his equipment he has built and designed himself: his winding machine, his unique dipping vat with the rotisserie motor to draw the stick slowly from the varnish, his tempering oven, the pipe with dial thermometers at each end. But other items, such as the lathe he uses to turn his unique reel seat designs, sometimes even to produce his own ferrules, is a high-ticket item that must be purchased. Andersen estimates

Andersen checking a finished rod.



he has more than \$3,000 in tools and equipment.

The materials are also expensive. Don Andersen, like many craftsmen, can justify the labour of an old art only by using the best materials he can find. The "culms" of Tonkin cane are purchased from Chas. Demerant in New York. Ferrules were once Rodan or home-crafted; now they come from "Joe's Tackle 'n Marine." Guides are either Perfection or Thomas and Thomas. Reel seats are all custom made by Andersen from teak or a wide range of handsome synthetic laminates and 18 per cent nickle-silver from the U.S.

"That was an expensive first rod," Don says.

In the production of a personalized rod, Andersen will talk with the customer for some time about his preferences as to length, line weight, action and ask what kind of fishing the client does and how long he has been doing it. The customer will be shown some of Andersen's reel seats and finishing techniques; probably he will be taken out to cast some rods from the maker's own selection of his own and other rods. Eventually, Don will be able to make a selection from his charted and graphed rod designs. Then the building starts.

First the bamboo culm is selected (after being examined for nicks and leaf nodes) then it is cut in half at six feet (2 m). Bamboo splinters are worse than steel. If the gloves are not already on, Andersen dons them now, as he splits the culm along the natural splits with a meat cleaver and hammer. Next he cleans out the internal nodes with a gouge and round file. From the tip culm Andersen splits 12 strips and from the butt culm six strips, with what looks like a sharpened screwdriver. The edges of each strip must then be planed, the nodes filed flat.

After straightening each strip in the flame of an alcohol lamp, Don then sets his forms for preliminary butt taper at .030 over the finished product and planes each strip to the triangular cross-section. The procedure is repeated for the tip sections, which Andersen planes to .030 over at ferrule tapered to .070 over at tip.

Using the machine made for the purpose, Andersen binds the sections together, places them in the "oven" and tempers them at 290 degrees F (143°C) for 30 minutes. This step usually features Andersen welding the propane torch on the pipe and his son running from end to end reading the thermometers.

Tempering completed, the butt and tip sections are unbound, the forms reset and the planing continued until butt and tip strips or "splines" are at design measurements, ready for gluing. For gluing, Andersen puts the strips together into their sections, tapes them each six inches (15 cm) with masking tape, then splits the tape between one spline. After the Urac 185 glue is mixed, Andersen spreads it on the joints between splines, rolls them up, binds them together with

twine in the binding machine and allows them three days to dry at 100 degrees F (38°C) in his drying cabinet.

At that point, "I am at where most glass and graphite rod makers start — I



Detail of a finished Andersen.

have my blank," Andersen says. But that blank must be scraped to remove excess glue and straightened, again in the flame of an alcohol lamp. Then excess length is cut from each blank, and what most people understand as conventional rod-building begins. Andersen carefully mounts his custom reel seat and handle,

tions dry two weeks in the drying cabinet. Andersen's final chore is to remove varnish from the guide surfaces with a dental tool.

"That," Andersen says with remarkable understatement, "in a nutshell is how to build cane rods, or at least how I build mine."

The result is a thing of beauty, both cosmetically and in function. Three years ago I can recall friend Lloyd Graff and Regina angling artist Jack Cowin, going out in a blizzard to try out Lloyd's new "Andersen." I fished the same blizzard downstream, and the conditions had the fish so on the prod that they responded to virtually every cast. Things were the same upstream, but I got the impression that, for Cowin and Graff, fish were merely an annoyance that interrupted their casting with that marvelous rod.

Don believes he is approaching or equalling the product of many of the more recent cane masters, but says he cannot yet achieve what Hardy did when it was still making cane rods, and says he is "a long way off from challenging Mr. Leonard." Personally, I believe Don has already far surpassed Hardy, at least judging from the last two of their rods I owned.

Word is getting out; Andersen probably is in that stage of most craftsmen where he does not yet charge what he should for his product. Since I first became familiar with Don's struggles to get going, set up his shop, build his first and a few other rods, I have noticed a steady upsurge in production. My last visit, Good Friday, Don was working on rods for Jim McLennan, a frequent con-



Andersen shaping and smoothing handle and reel seat in the lathe.

doing the final shaping in his lathe. The line guides are mounted next. Andersen winds all his rods with AA nylon thread then coats the winding with five coats of varathane and varnish. First the windings receive two coats of spar varnish, then the entire rod is dipped three times in varathane. The completed rod sec-

tributor to this magazine, and Barry Mitchell, publisher of *Alberta Fishing Guide*. Hanging out there, in Don Andersen's shop at Rocky Mountain House, of course, is a completed rod, on reserve for myself: it's time I went back into cane, carefully, with a little beauty of a rod for a Number six line.

