

Murphy's reel seats were natural extensions of his six-strip butt section. Two different styles are shown, but he always stamped his "maker's mark" on the upper (or fixed) reel band.

Charles F. Murphy: Splitting It Six Ways

by A. J. Campbell

The timeless controversy of just who was the first man to split cane into six strips will go on forever. Students of rod history may never ascertain the originator, but most agree that C.F. Murphy probably built the first complete six-stripper. And we do know that Murphy was the first to offer complete split bamboo rods to the American market.

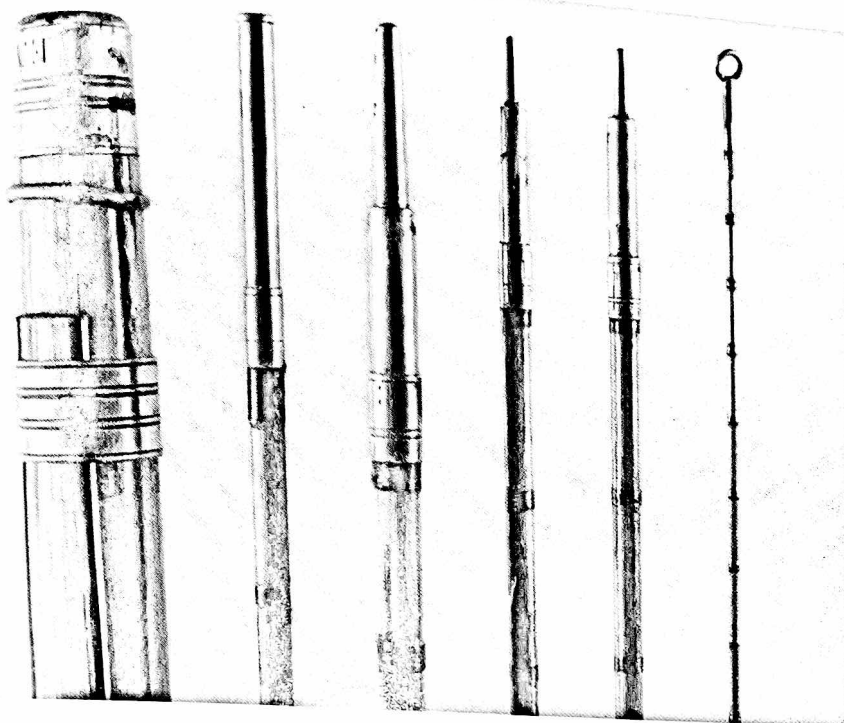
Charles F. Murphy was a wiry New York City Irishman of small stature, a "little given to brag of his exploits," a professional fireman, and a gifted woodworker. In the outdoor sports, Murphy was an avid wing

shot and a noted fly caster. He moved to Newark, New Jersey, at some point prior to 1860, but he was a "tackle nut," often frequenting New York's Andrew Clerk's and J.C. Conroy's. Influenced by Samuel Phillippe rods with four-strip mids and tips (as sold through Clerk's), Murphy built his first complete 4-strip trout rod in 1863.

In his own words, "I soon found that four strips left too much pulp on the inside - for the strength is all in the enamel - and I then made rods of six and eight strips." The eight strip idea was abandoned, his complete

six-strippers became stylized, and soon they were expounded by such notable anglers as Francis Endicott, Genio C. Scott, and Robert B. Roosevelt.

Murphy continues, "Two years later I made a salmon rod and Mr. Andrew Clerk took it to Scotland where it attracted much attention." Clerk then gave the rod to Genio C. Scott, who fished it up on the St. Lawrence and took some big pike and muskellunge." Writing in 1969, Scott understates the Scottish incident..."Dr. Clerk...carried with him a split bamboo rod made by their



C. F. Murphy's original metal-rod (male and female), half-round reel band

and the two-piece ferrule (both male and female) and a straight tip-top with no offset.

house." Scott concludes his course on the Murphy salmon rod by saying, "This is the fourth season it has been used, and, though it has killed many salmon (upwards to) thirty-five pounds each..it appears as good as new."

Going back to Murphy's own recollection, he stated, "Then, in 1866, I made a split-bamboo bait-rod for black bass, and arranged with the firm of Andrew Clerk & Co. to sell my rods, which they did for some years, and then they began to make them on a larger scale." Since the previously mentioned salmon rod was "made by their (Clerk's) house," we can take 1865 as Murphy's start up date with that New York tackle house.

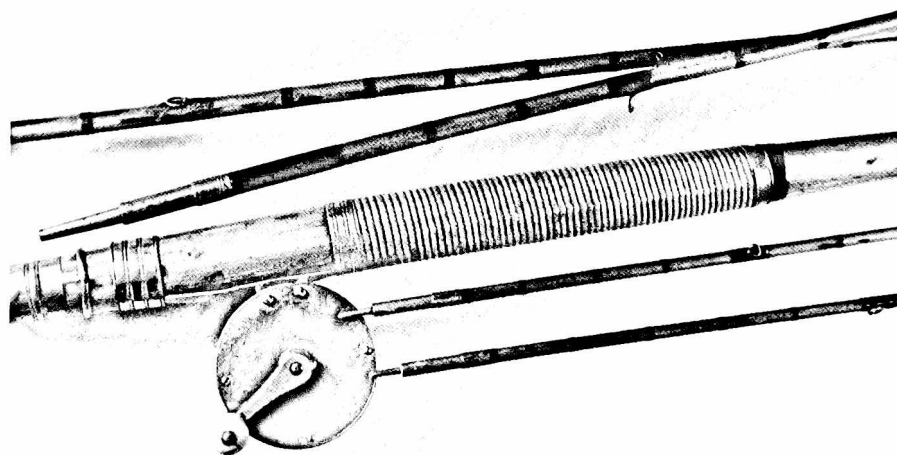
By 1865, then, Murphy had perfected the six-strip bamboo rod as a marketable trout, salmon, and bass instrument. Fittingly, the Jan. 21, 1865, issue of Wilkes' *Spirit of the Times* carried an Andrew Clerk & Co. ad espousing "The EXCELSIOR FLY ROD, manufactured from split bamboo, stronger, lighter,

and more elastic than any other." Murphy would continue to make each rod by hand for Clerk's until

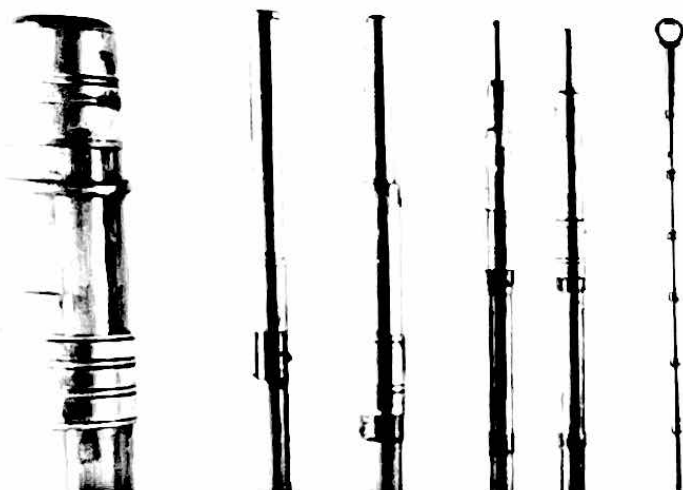
that company dropped the pioneer for someone who could keep up with the growing demand. How ironic, that the new maker started his career by examining a 4-strip Murphy in 1870-'71.

Murphy's favor with Andrew Clerk & Co. lasted until 1875, when the old Maiden Lane tackle house replaced his superb craftsmanship with the work of H. L. Leonard. It's also very ironic that Murphy's super-salmon-rod, admired in Scotland and whispered about in England, had set up a good Clerk & Co. export trade to the British Isles. Now called Abbey & Imbrie (Charles Imbrie was an old member of Clerk's), the house found a great early market for six-strip split bamboo salmon sticks.

By March, 1876, Murphy was on his own and advertising his wares in *Forest and Stream*. His "fine trout rods" sold for \$35 each, and as always, he was ready to "fill orders to a limited number." Just how limited was that number? We'll never know,



An early 1864-65 Murphy rod built prior to his Andrew Clerk & Co. years, the butt and mid are six strip, and the tips are of four strip construction.



Another look at the Murphy hardware.

but Charles F. Murphy probably finished a couple of rods a month.

Today, Murphy's hand-planed artifacts are appreciated by the very few collectors who are lucky enough to own one. There aren't many complete Murphy rods kicking around, so if you have one, send it to me as a gift. The American Museum of Fly fishing has four examples (so, they don't need any more), all supposedly three-piece 11-footers, and having a single mid and two tip sections.

The oldest Murphy I've examined was quite early, judging by the taper. Only the butt section was original, and although built in the six-strip idiom, it had the strange little "pin holes" seen on his early 1863-'64 models. Originally, it was probably an eleven-footer built in four sections.

Another early Murphy example is in the North Wing of the East Boothbay Tackle Museum. This rod is a 12-foot model with 6-strip mids (two) and a 6-strip butt. The three tip-sections are of 4-strip construc-

tion. This rod is one of the best examples of Charles Murphy's low but superb output. With precision German silver metal-work, this 1864-'65 beauty was built in a classic early-19th century configuration...having one extra mid and two extra tips...similar to 1840-1865 wooden rods by Conroy. The original price of this rod would have been about \$60. That was a fantastic sum to pay for a Civil War era fly-rod.

Murphy, however, never really made a killing in the trade. Late in life, Fred Mather, who knew "Murph" personally, claimed that..."he seemed to be unfortunate in usually meeting with an accident of some kind." T.S. Morrell writing in the March 13, 1880, issue of the *Chicago Field*, stated that, "Murphy is a very conscientious, careful workman...spending more time on his work than is profitable, and consequently is poor."

Indeed, Murphy tried to make his rods as light and delicate as possible. The tip sections of the previously mentioned 12-footer were tapered down to .065 of an inch. Through his excellent workmanship, the Newark maker was instrumental in convincing American anglers to "buy American" and to prefer the split bam-

boo rod over the wooden behemoths of the day.

In his *Book of The Black Bass* (1881 edition), Dr. James A. Henshall gave Murphy credit as the first to make a split bamboo bass and salmon stick (no mention of the number of strips). Henshall, however, gave credit to Samuel Phillippe as the originator of the split bamboo rod (no mention of "complete" or otherwise) and claimed that Leonard was the first to put the six-strip model on the market. Then again, Henshall owned a Leonard. He also thought that hand-made line was better than that machine-made stuff, and that round split bamboo was superior to hexagonal shafts. Possibly he suffered from mental constipation.

Charles F. Murphy, perhaps never really appreciated in his somewhat humble lifetime, continued to build his rods at 40 Halsey Street until his death. In *My Angling Friends* (1901), Mather said, "...brought up by the fire laddies, where the only qualities recognized in a man were honesty, pluck and muscle, he was an entertaining companion. He died at his home in Newark, New Jersey, in 1883, at the age of sixty-five."

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A Murphy advertisement from *Forest & Stream*, Oct. 12, 1876.

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