



*The best bargains in bamboo are where you find them—
which may be anywhere from your own attic to the basement of
a rural hardware store*

COLLECTIBLE CANE

TOM MAXWELL

THE RANKING OCCUPIED by the bamboo rod in the fly fisherman's list of tackle is legend. Of all those items he treasures most—careworn and time-polished reels, silver boxes of delicate flies, prized capes in blue and grizzled hues—the slender bamboo sticks have no equal. There is a pleasure derived from the warm color and natural texture of a cane rod that no mere synthetic can hope to match. Its deep-rooted ties to the best of our angling traditions are so powerful that to touch a fine rod in a moment of fancy is to invite transport to faraway places and long-ago times.

Because nearly all fly fishermen aspire to own and fish a fine bamboo rod, bamboo must be placed in a proper, "modern," perspective. The legions of fly fishermen increase with the arrival of each new season, while the number of these rods available (old and new) is decreasing. Concurrently, as the construction of new rods falls more and more to the low-volume custom rod builders, we are confronted with prices that limit the number of purchasers to a relative few. There is a way, however, to enjoy the subtle pleasures of casting with cane without having to file for bankruptcy.

We are only 30 years from the time when the majority of rods were made of bamboo. In those days before the 1950's, when fiberglass began to dominate the market, bamboo rods were produced yearly by the tens of thousands and ranged in price from a mere \$7.50 to a then-staggering \$125. Literally millions of mass-produced rods, in addition to the classic handcrafted rods we are most apt to think of when discussing bamboo, were distributed throughout the country, and it's likely that only a small proportion of these have met with total destruction. If you have a grandfather, father or uncle who fishes, he probably used one or more of these inexpensive rods at some point. If you are lucky, they may be tucked away in a fiber tube and cloth sack in some dark corner. These rods are also fair game for

under \$25 at auctions, secondhand shops and yard sales, and may often be found "new" in out-of-the-way sport shops, hardware and general stores where their uniqueness has been lost in time and a more recent array of rainbowlike glass.

It is to be expected that these rods, even the "new" ones, will be in some state of disrepair. But with the possible exception of a broken section, nearly any fault can be repaired, and broken or lost sections can be replaced. Thus, without extreme qualification, virtually any rod encountered in one of the many recesses into which such rods were placed so many years ago merits investigation and inspection. And just as most of these finds may, with effort, be made streamworthy again, nearly all will justify an asking price from \$1 to \$25.

Before going any further, I'll stop to make a distinction, for any fly fisherman familiar with the generally high prices of bamboo rods must by now be wondering about the general worthiness of a bamboo rod costing so little.

OURS IS THE AGE OF THE COLLECTOR. It would seem that any and every artifact having the least redeeming quality is of interest to one collector or another. The list of names that immediately occurs to us when mention is made of rod collecting reads like the rod builders' who's who—Leonard, Hawes, Halstead, Gillum, Payne, Dickerson, Edwards, Young, Garrison and others. And though one of these may on occasion turn up at a bargain price, the usual rule is that one faces the expenditure of several hundred dollars in considering the purchase of such a prize. These are, without hesitation, true collector's items.

These artisans will never be known again. The number of rods they left behind to mark their passing will never increase. We can never know the men or the motives that sustained and drove them, nor the manner

This would be an electrifying sight for any fly fisherman prowling a rural antique shop. Fortunately, because of the volume of low-priced cane rods produced prior to 1950, such sights are still possible. Photographed by Don Gray at the South Dorset (Vt.) Trading Corporation.

TOM MAXWELL is one of the founders and owners of the Thomas and Thomas Rod Company, at which he was working on the repair and refinishing of many of the classics he discusses in this article.

of reward they may have sought. We can only know those few rods left us as a legacy of a now-past era. It is understandable and fitting that these tokens be collected—and, with few exceptions, eventually retired.

I'm not concerned here, however, with these prized collector's pieces, but rather "collectibles." These are rods that were: (1) produced in quantity by modern production methods, (2) originally retailed at an inexpensive price—usually under \$50, and (3) marketed under the name of a firm rather than the name of an individual. Their value to us is as functional rods, not preserved artifacts, for in them we do not have the extension of an individual artisan, but merely the vestige of a production era. However, I'll add that the day is probably not far away when even the majority of these "lowly" rods will have acquired substantial value.

The names here are different: Granger (Wright & McGill), Heddon, Phillipson, Bristol/Edwards, Shakespeare, South Bend, Union Hardware, Horrocks-Ibbottson and others, plus all the rods manufactured by the above and sold under the individual names of hundreds of sporting goods firms across the country. The total production of these companies was enormous, with the number of rods being constructed between 1920 and 1950 extending well into the millions. Montague, for instance, formerly the largest of these old firms, had the capacity to build in one week the number of bamboo rods built annually today in the U.S.—and perhaps the entire world.

Don't underestimate these rods or rush to condemn them. Granted that few display the detail and fine hardware lavished upon the expensive handcrafted pieces, and you may find flaws aplenty, though most are superficial and hardly apt to affect the performance of the rod. But some of these rods will rank with the very best rods you'll ever cast. And as a special bonus, if you are enthusiastic over the current interest in the concept of "long rods, light lines," you will find many excellent makes and models in lengths of 8 feet and 8½ feet for a number five line. Look for fine tips on rods of these lengths, or what were commonly known as "trout model" rods, as distinct from the other large classification, the bass model.

These rods, though often constructed under an incentive piecework system, are often of praiseworthy quality because the equipment used to produce them and the generally good quality-control more than offset the inclination to haste. The best rods among them represent most of what we might expect in a fine bamboo rod regardless of its cost. Many are fine-tipped, delicate and in excellent accord with contemporary tastes.

But now let's look at some details of the collecting process and develop a set of guidelines for the low-budget collector.

Locating Collectibles

SINCE FISHING is for the most part seasonal, there is a far greater chance that your finds will occur during spring, summer and fall when outdoor activity is greatest. This is also a period when cleanups around the

house are undertaken resulting in a fresh flow of goods into yard sales, tag sales, auctions and flea markets. Too, this is the season for tourist-oriented secondhand and junk shops. All of these are prime sources for locating old rods. In addition, whenever you find yourself touring a rural area, check out all general stores, hardware and sporting goods stores. Don't be discouraged by the displays; ask if they have an old bamboo rod or two from years gone by. It is surprising how often one or more old rods have been removed to the back room because they simply would not sell. Regionally speaking, few places can match the Northeast for its cache of rods. This is due to the location of the very large manufacturers; during their prime, Montague, Union Hardware and Horrocks-Ibbottson were all located in this area, and among them they produced a full 90 percent of all the rods built. However, excellent rods have been found in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and Colorado and the West—and these areas have the benefit of perhaps not being so thoroughly scoured as New England. A general rule of thumb might be this: If fishing has been done there, don't pass it up, inquire.

The Prime Collectibles

AS OUR GUIDELINES DEVELOP, it will become obvious that virtually all cane rods will have some value and should not be overlooked. Some rods, however, will stand out when compared with their counterparts. In this case three stand apart: Heddon, Phillipson and Granger (Wright & McGill); and one of these, Granger, is beyond compare. Having handled thousands of rods, the highest compliment I can pay to the Granger rods is this: I have never seen a bad one. I cannot say this even of the majority of handcrafted makes. The 7-foot rod for a four-weight line, the classic combination, is without peer. The 7½-foot rod and 8-foot rod for four- and five-weight lines are nearly as distinguished. All are very fine-tipped and medium-actioned, affording the fly caster outstanding line speed, control and accuracy. These rods have proved to be durable and are indeed items to be passed on from one generation to another. Regardless of the model, the inexpensive Victory or the top-of-the-line DeLuxe, you will be hard pressed to find a better rod at any price.

A second maker of true distinction is Heddon. The array of rods offered by this firm was in itself impressive, ranging from the Blue Waters at \$25 to the Rod of Rods at \$100. All rod models were designated by a name and a number. The number in this case happens to be the key; the higher the number, the higher the grade of the rod. The Blue Waters, for example, was a number 10, while the Rod of Rods was number 100. Of particular interest should be the Black Beauty #17, the Bill Stanley Favorite #20, the Peerless #35 and the President #50 in lengths of 7 feet, 7½ feet, 8 feet and 8½ feet.

The third maker representing the best of these volume-produced rods is Phillipson. Bill Phillipson never achieved the level of aesthetic accomplishment attained by Wright & McGill or Heddon, both of which were

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truly beautiful rods, but they have, over the years, attained a well-deserved appeal of their own. These are the most rugged of rods, and the 7-foot for a five-weight line, the 7½-foot for a number six line and the 8-foot for a number six line are truly excellent, all-purpose, medium-action rods.

There is admittedly an element of subjectivity present in labeling the foregoing rods outstanding, but as one becomes familiar with the various rods available to the collector of collectibles, the objective criteria for this judgment will become more than evident. If you are fortunate enough to come across one of these rods and it is within a moderate price range, don't pass it by.

Evaluating a Find

SINCE COST IS A PRINCIPAL consideration, you should collect literally every bamboo rod you come across if the price is right. The chief reason for this is as follows: since the key to rapid production was and remains simplicity, nearly all the rods in this category were straight tapered, with the interchangeability of parts a significant concern. Thus you'll find the tips or mid-section from one rod a generally suitable match for the butt section of another. In view of this, even single sections are of worth, and certainly a rod that is missing parts will be most inexpensive. What should be kept in mind, then, is that from several partial rods may evolve a single rod, and likely the price will have been right.

What to look for is a bit more difficult. Obviously the rod should be complete and of full length in all its sections. The next serious concern should be the soundness of the sections. Concentrating on the sticks alone, gently twist each section along its length to determine whether or not the glue is still intact. A slight cracking sound or a tiny puff of dust will indicate that the section has delaminated. If the stick is firm, fine; if not, the value of the rod has been substantially reduced, but the rod is still of worth because such separations can be repaired.

Next check the ferrules to see if the fit is acceptable and if they are affixed firmly to the bamboo. The cork grip also merits a brief inspection, for it is common for grips to dry-rot or become loose. Neither looseness of ferrules nor cork deterioration are cause for serious concern, but a thorough exam will provide some insight into the care the rod may or may not have received, give you some idea as to the amount of work and cost that might be involved in the rod's refurbishment and generally enhance your bargaining power.

Finally—and most importantly—comes a very careful examination of the sections. Gently run your fingers

along the full length of each section, up and down each glue joint, checking for splinters and ragged edges. Often the same procedure with a loosely woven cloth or steel wool will help, as either material will readily catch on any unevenness or protrusion on the surface.

Next, under good light, visually inspect the sections over their full length, looking for tiny cracks, separations or hook snags. Then, in a most careful fashion, lightly flex each tip and reinspect, rotating the tip so that all sides/joints of the section may be inspected while stressed. Frequently this flexing will serve to sharply define splinters that may have been missed when the section was viewed without flex. In addition this procedure will immediately make evident so-called soft or damaged areas in the tip. Repeat with the mid-section if a three-piece rod, or the butt section if a two-piece rod, especially if the rod is of the soft, full-flexing variety. If followed carefully, the preceding steps can be carried out in mere minutes and will inform you as to the worthiness of your possible purchase. There are several factors that may assist in further appraising the rod, whether it is a top-of-the-line rod or a less expensive model. For the most part the earmarks of the "better" rods will include several characteristics.

1. They are likely to be a flamed or darkened brown tone in color; the coloring or tempering of a rod was an additional step and expense to be lavished only on the more expensive models. The less expensive rods will, on the other hand, be a natural white or pale yellow.

2. Examine the hardware. The more expensive rod models will have been fitted with nickel-silver ferrules; if scraped with a knife blade and the color is silver, it is a nickel-silver ferrule. If the scraping discloses a yellow color, the ferrule is of inexpensive, plated brass.

3. The cheaper rods will have very few guides for their length—say five or six on a typical 8-foot rod—and will be wound in a single color, whereas the higher grade may employ contrasting trim wraps and a greater number of guides, seven or eight on an 8-foot rod. A good rod will usually mount one guide per foot of rod length, thus an 8-foot rod would bear eight guides. Or the maker may have used a "length of the rod minus one" formula, in which case an 8-foot rod would have mounted seven guides.

4. Inspect carefully the dimensional increase or decrease where the rod sections join. The high-grade model will employ small dimensional changes as you move from one section of the rod to another. The less expensive model, however, may have sizable changes as one moves from tip to mid or mid to butt. These abrupt size differentials are pronounced and apparent to the eye. So too will be the "improved" ferrule that

was designed to accommodate such increases in size. The female section of the ferrule, rather than remaining a constant diameter over its full length, is of large diameter where it fits down over the mid or butt, but then drops drastically to receive the much smaller male ferrule as fitted to the tip or mid. These so-called improved ferrules are invariably of brass and of low quality, and they constitute the easiest item in identifying one of the low-cost rods of yesteryear.

5. A final comment on these ferrules is in order. They were usually carelessly pinned to the rod shaft, and the winding thread adjacent to the ferrule was just that—it simply butted the ferrule. The nickel-silver ferrules fitted to the higher priced models were very carefully pinned (more often than not, the pin is undetectable), and the edges of the ferrule were tapered down smoothly to the rod shaft and wound over.

6. Examine the bamboo sections with an eye to the following: a very thin varnish finish; a wavy surface as one sights along its length; open glue seams. A rod that was of the inexpensive variety will exhibit one or more of these obvious flaws; the better rod, conversely, will not.

Other Cost Considerations

IF YOU HAVE recently read any of the used-rod lists available to the fly fisherman, you'll realize that we aren't dealing with a fair-trade item. There are no established objective criteria for setting prices. "What the traffic will bear" seems to be the underlying principle. Because they are outstanding in quality and action, the Granger, Heddon and Phillipson rods command the highest prices among the collectibles. However, this is the case only if we consider dealer prices. With most dealers, it would not be at all uncommon to see these rods sold at prices approaching \$200.

This is, of course, inflated and certainly places such rods, as well as their sources, beyond the scope of this article and the category of collectibles. If you are a bit lucky, you may locate one of these rods, complete, full length and sound from a dealer in the range of \$75 to \$125. From such a source this would be a reasonable price. On the other hand, if you restrict yourself to the "backyard" sources mentioned previously, and avoid the expensive shops specializing in bamboo, prices will fall off perceptibly and the chances are that *no* distinction will be made as to make or model. This is a true bonus, as the most sought-after makes and models will cost you no more than less desirable items; usually condition alone is the factor used to establish the asking price. The rods that are unsound, incomplete or short will usually require an outlay of less than \$5, though you may find \$10 to \$25 not unreasonable to acquire the needed segments or hardware for the completion of a rod. For a complete and sound rod of the less expensive variety the price should not exceed \$25, but for one of the better grade rods a price tag of \$50 to \$75, providing little or no work is required to make the rod streamworthy, is eminently fair.

In any case, keeping in mind that there truly are no standards for pricing in the area of rods, try *bargaining*.

The three "collectibles" at left have been refinished by the author and are, from left, by South Bend, Granger and Heddon. The Phillipson at right is in original condition.

To summarize, you may expect to pay from \$5 to \$25 for your average purchase, but you may likewise have to go as high as \$50 to obtain a particularly fine rod.

Repair and Refurbishing

ABOVE ALL ELSE the uncertainty of what can be done with old rods has served as a restraint against picking up available bargains. Be assertive and take the plunge! Apart from completely broken sections, nearly anything can be repaired; even delaminated sections can be totally separated, cleaned and reglued.

Your first choice *may* be to have the work done for you. If so, again avoid the specialized dealers and current makers, as their prices will be high and inconsistent with our budgeted approach. Instead, approach your local rod dealer. He may be equipped to do the work himself, but he will be more apt to furnish you with the name of someone doing the work locally as a hobby or as a source of a little extra income. If the rod is sound and a cleanup and refinish are the only requirements, you may have to face \$30 to \$60 charged for the work, but the result will still be an inexpensive bamboo rod.

On the other hand, if you are good with your hands and a bit more adventurous, your choice *should* be to do the work yourself. If not experienced yourself, follow the same procedure as above. Seek out someone as experienced as possible and ask, "How do I do it?" Most fishermen who dabble in refinish and repair will be most happy to share their experience. Other sources of information for the do-it-yourselfer are dealers and manufacturers who provide kits and rod-building materials to anglers. Both can furnish you with step-by-step pamphlets on how to construct a rod from a kit. The work required in refurbishing an old rod is essentially the same, and such brochures will provide you with perhaps 90 percent of the information and instruction you may require. The points not apt to be covered in such a booklet will be stripping the rod, repair of minor flaws and straightening—a problem peculiar to bamboo—and applying a good coat of varnish. Additional data on these points is available, so there is no need for despair. This is where your local hobbyist will be of particular value, and if this route does not prove productive, then you may wish to consult the pages of a rod-building book. The recently released book, *A Master's Guide to Building a Bamboo Fly Rod*, by Everett Garrison with Hoagy B. Carmichael, is as close to definitive as possible, sure to be a classic, authored by an acknowledged master and the source of almost any answer to any question you may have pertaining to the bamboo rod. Other excellent references are sporting magazines that normally devote some space to the matter of tackle repair, FLY FISHERMAN's own "Rod Rack" being a fine example. 

