

Poised over his dusty alembics and retorts, the author transmutes a leaden-skied January day into some golden memories, discovering along the way an aqua regia to dissolve the off-season ills of a winter-bound angler.

The Alchemy of Bamboo

ERNEST G. SCHWIEBERT

IT IS A LATE FEBRUARY AFTERNOON, and a fine dust of snow lies on the carpet of leaves behind the house. The pale-trunked beeches still hold their winter cloaks of amber-colored leaves, but our oaks are stripped bare long before Christmas. The glacier boulders are starkly outlined through the woods.

The slender ash and dogwood trees are dark against the pale February light, and the bleak wind stirs faintly in their branches. It is cold against the soot-stained brickwork. It is a time for speculation about the coming spring, and for remembering our rivers past.

Every fisherman feels emotional ties to his tackle. Some anglers understand how their fly rods can transport them backwards through time, and in late winter I sometimes fill the library with several of my special split-cane friends. Each rod is carefully extracted from its case, assembled and flexed lovingly and taken down again, while the beechwood coals shift and settle in the grate.

The first really fine rod that I ever saw was an eight-foot Payne owned by a physician in Chicago. It had been built by Edward Payne, one of the apprentices in the original Leonard shop in Bangor, and had been refitted by James Payne many years later. Their names were nothing to an eight-year-old who was still more interested in merely catching fish than in the subtle rituals of fishing, yet the craftsmanship and beauty of the rod were obvious—although I found it strange that the doctor loved his four-ounce Payne so much that he refused to fish it.

It was many years before I fully understood such things, but lying in the lamplight, that gleaming Payne obviously had the overtones of some liturgical relic. The rod possessed beauty and an almost votive elegance. It was my first exposure to the alchemy of split bamboo.

The Payne was kept in a saddle-leather case. Its heavy stitching was frayed and pale against the tube

Photo by Warren Shepard.





and cap. There was a leather carrying-strap that fastened the cap with a small leather-covered buckle. The case was scuffed and worn, smelling faintly like a fine saddle or a seasoned pair of English riding boots, but its patina was only a prelude to the sensory riches it held.

The faintly musty odor of the original poplin bag came first, mixed with the rich perfume of tung-oil varnish. The delicate silk wrappings were a pale brown that almost matched the color of the cane itself, and were embellished with ornamental wraps of primrose. It was a three-piece Payne with an exquisite slow action. The ferrules were beautiful, each female socket sealed with a perfectly fitted German silver plug. The guides were English tungsten steel. The elegant grip was shaped of handcut specie cork, remarkably free of checks and markings. It was the classic Payne grip, slightly flared to conceal a reel cap inside the cork. The reel-seat filler was a rich Spanish cedar, and its fittings gleamed like fine jewelry. The locking threads were exquisitely machined, and although the butt cap and locking hook were only aluminum, their weight and elegant knurling and polish seemed more like fine sterling—as beautiful as silver pieces in a showcase at Tiffany's.

Such qualities are typical of the finest split-cane rods, and in my library this afternoon there is an example that is virtually unique. The rod is a magnificent early Leonard, certainly the oldest Leonard that can accurately be dated. It belongs to the California rodmaker Gary Howells, and it has an intriguing history in itself.

The Leonard was built in 1873, only two years after Hiram Leonard established his little shop on the Penobscot. Its fixed reel-fitting is inscribed from its maker to H. H. Howells, with the date engraved below. The dowelled ferrules are prototypes of the Leonard patent ferrule of 1874, their tubing rolled from sheets of German silver and reinforced at the throat with a simple welt. Ring-and-keeper guides were used. Fittings of German silver form the grip check, sliding ring and fixed reel band. The butt cap is also shaped from German silver into a crowned ornamental cup, its throat embellished with machined rings. The grip itself is fashioned of solid wood, the six strips of cane laminated over a spruce core, with alternating strips of tapered Port Orford cedar. It is like a fine violin in its perfect equilibrium of utility and esthetic pleasure and craftsmanship.

Two classic rods by Gillum (top) and Payne.

Photo by J. Barry O'Rourke.



The faintly musty odor of the poplin bag came first, mixed with the rich perfume of tung-oil varnish. The delicate silk wrappings were a pale brown that almost matched the color of the cane itself.

The rod was apparently made in partial payment for the legal work in securing the Leonard ferrule patents of 1874, since H. H. Howells was a young fly fishing lawyer in Bangor. It later traveled west with H. H. Howells to the Wyoming territory where the young attorney practiced law in frontier towns like Rock Springs and Cheyenne. Howells journeyed farther at the close of the century, settled and raised his family, and ultimately became a judge in San Francisco. The rod is still fishable a hundred years later, its action poetic and impossible to describe, like a well-seasoned Pauillac or Chateau Margaux.

It traveled the frontier with my grandfather, Gary Howells revealed to me last spring in the Yellowstone. What stories it could tell!

Sixteen years ago, on the threshold of my first trip to Patagonia, another historic rod arrived at my Princeton home. Its return address revealed that the sender was Martha Marie Young, the widow of Michigan rod-builder Paul Young. The package was puzzling, since I could not remember ordering another installment in my growing collection of Young rods, and I unwrapped it with curiosity.

It contained a unique Young Parabolic 17 with three tips, one bringing its length to eight-and-a-half feet, and two extending the rod to almost nine feet. The short tip was intended for distance work, and the others were special tapers designed for nymphs and dry-fly tactics. The butt is extra slow, almost flat in its taper from the grip to its stripping guide, and it demands a slow casting stroke. With its different tips, this remarkable fly rod could fish dry flies or nymphs on 4X leaders, or deliver a WF-8-S more than a hundred feet with ease.

Most customers considered this original prototype of the famous Parabolic 17 too radical in its calibrations and casting stroke, but Paul Young loved its demanding character, and grudgingly modified his subsequent Parabolic 17 tapers to satisfy his audience. The original has a unique character, with a willful spirit of its own, and it was some time before I adjusted my casting rhythms to fulfill its potential.

Paul always wanted to fish Patagonia, Martha Young wrote in the note that accompanied the rod. He'd be happy to have you fish it for him on those rivers down there.

The rod has since taken salmon in Iceland and the Labrador, and has done yeoman duty on heavy Western rivers like the Madison and the Yellowstone, but nothing can surpass the memories of that first trip to the Argentine. It took a six-pound rainbow the first evening on the Pichi Traftul, fishing a big Variant on its dry-fly tip, but it failed to defeat a much bigger rainbow at the famous Boca Chimehuin.

The fish took almost angrily, with a steady pull that grudgingly refused to surrender line, and moved sullenly upstream into the angry surf that crashed across the outlet ledges of the lake. Suddenly it jumped in the heaviest currents, catching the sun on its gleaming sides as it cartwheeled downstream past the gravelly beach. It looked like ten or twelve pounds, and my arms were shaking as I followed its run. The rainbow jumped again, forcing the fight into the swift-running currents below the Boca itself. The line sliced audibly through the water and the reel shrieked above the wind.

The rainbow exploded into another series of wild acrobatics, and when I forced it back, the fly came sickeningly free. It seemed like a tragedy, since that was the biggest trout I had ever hooked, but the bittersweet feelings did not survive the trip. Two weeks later, the Parabolic 17 performed beautifully in Tierra del Fuego, using its special distance tip to combat the winds that prevail below the Straits of Magellan. It was there on the Dos Palos water that it took a brace of magnificent sea-trout, weighing eight and twelve pounds, and I cannot take this rod from its case without remembering its baptism in southern Argentina.

WHEN *Life* MAGAZINE SENT ME TO NORWAY the following summer, my collection of fly rods seemed hopelessly unsuited to throwing a 5/0 double at the salmon of the Alta and Málangsossen and Årøy. My letter to Martha Young was answered with another rod from her late husband's collection. It was a muscular Parabolic 19, this time, one that Paul Young had built himself for tarpon fishing. It took a full WF-11-S line and was designed to punch out long casts on the windy flats off Islamorada. It seemed perfect for hundred-foot casts with a 5/0 Dusty Miller on the Jöraholmen water, or the angry chutes of the Årøy's Steeplechase.

It was a full nine-and-a-half feet, built from the dark flame-tempered cane that Young favored. The rod was powerful—and tiring to use until a caster sensed its peculiar rhythms. Its stroke did not really begin until fifty or sixty feet of line were working, and a brief session on the casting pond at Henryville taught me that the wine-bottle calisthenics that Charles Ritz prescribed in his *Flyfisher's Life* were needed to strengthen my wrist and casting arm. Later I found that refinement of my double-haul technique was also necessary to extract the full potential of the Parabolic 19, with its exacting stroke and muscular tapers. It was also fitted with a reverse-locking seat that permitted a two-inch extension butt, a feature I ultimately learned to appreciate when a heavy fish forced a fight into the wild Battagorski rapids of the Alta.

But whenever I remove this Young Parabolic 19 from its case, it is not the Alta I remember, although it was the rod I was fishing at Sautso the night I took three fish over thirty-nine pounds after losing a cockfish over sixty-five. That monster survived a fight that lasted almost two hours, and traversed several rapids in a wild two-mile odyssey that ended at Sirpinakken.

That night's fishing is recorded in the anthology called *Fishing Moments of Truth*, but strangely it is another night in Norway that I remember better when I handle the Parabolic 19. My "moment of truth" occurred a summer earlier on the Vossa, several hundred miles farther south in the steep-walled mountains of Hordaland.

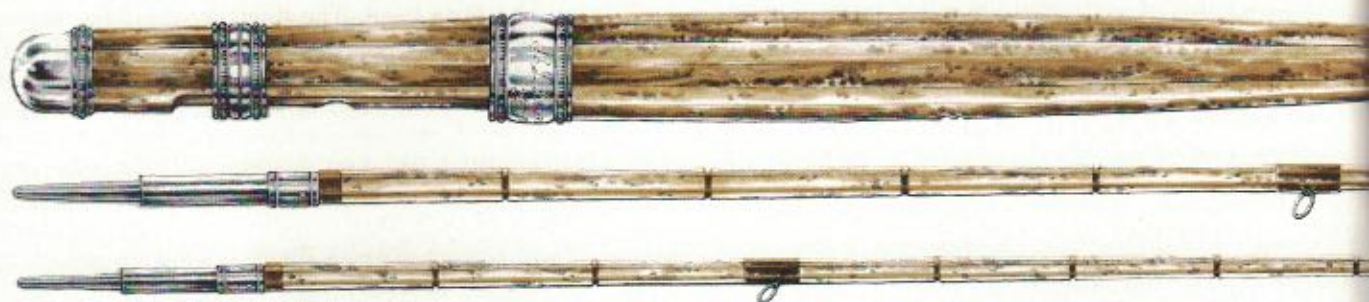
Nils Bolstad was waiting on the Langhølen beat, and we pushed out into its smooth currents. The pool is

The salmon rolled weakly in the surface, and the eddying currents carried it toward the beach. Bolstad stared hard into the dark water as I forced the fish, reached like a cautious heron with the gaff, and struck hard. There was an enormous splash that showered us both. Bolstad shouted and almost went down in the river, wrestling the huge salmon ashore. Its size seemed awesome in the growing darkness as the ghillie delivered the coup-de-grâce, and the great fish shuddered and died.

Twenty-two kilos, Bolstad guessed, and my fifty-pound scale gently touched bottom.

Fifty-one pounds! I thought happily.

Memories like that are few, and I never expect to take a larger salmon in my lifetime. Perhaps there is even more pleasure in the observation that it was a privilege



HIRSH LEWIS LEONARD 1875 THREE-PIECE CALCUTTA AND PORT ORFORD CEDAR

BANGOR, MAINE

four-hundred yards from its tumbling throat to its spreading tail-shallows. Salmon can hold throughout its length.

Fishing light was already waning as we started working the pool, and after a half-hour I changed flies, selecting a Dusty Miller with a bright silver body to catch the light in the gathering darkness. The fly dropped along a ledge, where the river eddied deep over unseen boulders. The line bellied deep across the current, and I felt the fly start to swim properly.

Suddenly it stopped swimming, and the line tightened with a weight that spelled "salmon." When I tightened back firmly, nothing happened. There was only a ponderous sense of power while the fish ignored my straining Parabolic. Bolstad worked the boat below the salmon and I stripped off line, forcing the fish off balance with pressure from downstream.

There were two brief runs, measured more in their sullen anger than their distance or swift acceleration. Finally the boat grated on the stones and I waded ashore. *I'm tired*, I thought, with surprise at my aching muscles.

The great fish seemed spent. It still wallowed powerfully in the huge counter-clockwise currents off the rocky beach. Several times we tried to coax the salmon within gaffing distance, and each time it stubbornly fought back into that nightmare of merry-go-round whirlpools. Bolstad waited silently with his gaff.

He's finally beaten! I thought.

to take such a remarkable fish on a rod from the collection of Paul Young—or the corollary thought that his split-cane handiwork still brings a deserved touch on immortality to his life.

DURING THESE PAST MONTHS, that feeling existed strongly through several afternoons at the Angler's Club of New York. My purpose was to examine the rare fly rods in the collection, and make a series of measured drawings of the most important artifacts. Those were quiet hours spent above Fraunces Tavern, studying the century-old memorabilia, with the street traffic strangely muted.

The fire gradually guttered out in its grate below the forty-pound Cascapedia salmon and the fly box of Theodore Gordon on the millwork mantelpiece. Each rod was examined in its turn, and each worked its unique magic of speculation about the past. There was a fine greenheart built by Ebenezer Green, and a pair of pale lemonwood rods from Thaddeus Norris in Philadelphia. The prize was perhaps the elegant six-strip bamboo built by Solon Philippe after the Civil War, although there was also an exceptional hardwood rod with a graceful handle wrapped in black celluloid from the workshop of William Mitchell.

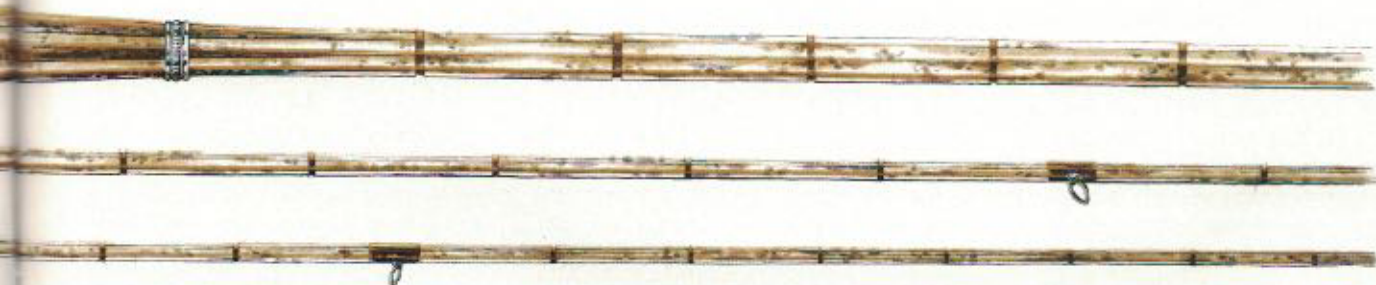
There was also a princely presentation rod built for John Lee Pratt, one of the founding officers of General Motors, its delicate split-cane sections in a butternut

case lined with faded velvet. It was a Wilkinson, its obvious artistry the work of Eustis Edwards, Fred Thomas and Edward Payne. These men were principal craftsmen in the Leonard shops from their Bangor days, and they formed a brief partnership after leaving Leonard at the close of the nineteenth century. This particular rod had peculiarly rococo embellishments of actual gold on its ferrules and reel-fittings. The gold-plated guides were embellished with gold thread, and the reel seat was polished gold-bearing quartz. The rod was kept in a glass-covered vitrine, and I had always viewed it with awe until I discovered that this cabinet also housed a Leonard that had once belonged to George Michel Lucien La Branche, and the graceful Payne that Theodore Gordon acquired from Edward Payne by bartering thirty-nine dozen of his exquisitely dressed flies.

Chalk Stream Trout Skues writes that its poetry and precise character played a major role in his chalkstream studies.

It is tragic that these irreplaceable artifacts of American angling history were either destroyed or badly damaged in the meaningless bombing that killed four people, and mindlessly scarred both the Angler's Club of New York and Fraunces Tavern early in 1975.

THIS PAST SUMMER AT SUN VALLEY it was a rare privilege to study a vintage Hardy that belonged to Ernest Hemingway. It was the classic John Hames Hardy, fitted with an elegant reverse-locking reel seat and gleaming back filler. The locking hook was richly engraved with the royal coat of arms that went with Hardy's designation by the Court of St. James's. Concealed inside the reel



PRESENTATION ROD FROM THE MAKER TO R.H. HOWELLS, FROM THE COLLECTION OF GARY HOWELLS

But the ultimate treasure was a solitary Leonard in its musty cloth sack, standing in the cabinet above the staircase. It was not a particularly pretty Leonard, its cork grip surprisingly clumsy to anyone familiar with the classic Leonard designs of the past half-century. Its tag identified the rod as the property of Otto von Kienbusch, a famous collector and antiquarian who has been a stalwart member of the Angler's Club since before the First World War. The tag whetted my curiosity, and when I opened the faded poplin, my heart almost stopped.

It belonged to Skues! I thought. Skues!

It was the Leonard that Hewitt had first demonstrated with tournament caster Edward Bate Mills, at the Crystal Palace Exposition in London in 1904. George Edward Mackenzie Skues had already acquired a heavier ten-foot Leonard the year before, through his American fishing companion, Walter Durfee Coggeshall. Skues was even then gaining fame as the father of nymph tactics—and some notoriety for his debates with Frederic Halford and his dry-fly disciples. Edward Bate Mills was part of William Mills & Sons, long the principal agents for Leonard, and Skues eagerly studied his catalogs. The following winter, Skues completed some particularly successful legal work in London, and a grateful client offered Skues the finest rod that British sterling could purchase. His fishing friends were shocked when Skues selected a Leonard, and in his *Nymph Fishing for*

seat was a turf blade unique among British chalkstream rods, and Hemingway had purchased it in London with the royalties that followed his *Farewell to Arms*. It was a remarkably fine Hardy, with delicate ornamental wrappings typical of British workmanship after the First World War.

Papa liked the country vintages, Jack Hemingway laughed as he poured two glasses of Corbieres. *It's a perfect wine for inspecting his Hardy—thought you might enjoy both!*

Why? Puck Hemingway teased with a merciless grin. You see one fish-pole and you've seen them all!

Not quite, I said.

THE FIREPLACE WAS GROWING ALMOST COLD NOW, and I put away a favorite Leonard to carry some fresh logs from the cordwood stacked under a sheltering eave. The coals quickly ignited the fresh logs with little coaxing, the fire flared eagerly toward the flue, and several of my rod cases remained.

One held a favorite Orvis Battenkill, the delicate eight-foot taper that weighs four ounces and takes a six-weight line. Although it is intended for trout fishing, its first baptism took place on the salmon rivers of Iceland.

That baptism was actually an accident, since it came when an angler from Zurich became ill, and I was offered the last hour of his beat on the Nordurá. It was early July, and the swift little river was filled with fish bright from the fjord at Borgarnes. The pool I had luck-

ily drawn was the Stekkur, where the river works smoothly against a steep cliff of lava, its currents gathering above the chutes downstream. Asgeir Ingolfsson is perhaps the finest fly fisherman in Iceland, and Ingolfsson was excited about fishing the Stekkur water.

It's a great pool, Ingolfsson explained. Some people even like it better than the Falls beat.

But we've only got an hour, I said.

When the Stekkur is right, he countered, you don't need the whole morning.

We walked down past a summer fishing house, with the pool still lying in its morning shadows. The current was smooth and swimming-pool green against the ledges, and while Ingolfsson explained its holding-lies, a salmon porpoised in its tail shallows. Arctic terns were quarreling shrilly among the rocks, and I slipped carefully into the Stekkur.

It feels right, I thought excitedly.

Those feelings were right, and my fly-swing stopped on the second cast. It was a six-pound henfish that jumped twice before I coaxed it away from the primary holding-lie against the ledges, and I tailed it quickly in the shallows. Less than five minutes passed before the bright flash of a salmon showed deep in the current, and I was into a second fish like the first. It cartwheeled wildly, and I was certain it had alarmed the other fish against the upper ledge. Finally it surrendered, and when the Little Blue Vulture was carefully re-knotted to the tippet, I started fishing again.

Apparently the salmon had frightened the others, because I worked through the pool without another taking fish, although a salmon rolled once behind the fly-swing. There was a four-pound grilse that came as a bonus fish, lying in the shallows away from the usual taking-lies, and I landed it quickly.

Try the fish that rolled, Ingolfsson suggested. Those fish along the ledge have forgotten you now.

Only five minutes left, I warned myself aloud.

The salmon that had followed my fly-swing was still there, and still in a taking mood. It rolled twice as the Little Blue Vulture teased past its lie. With two minutes left before the midday curfew, I changed to a small Black Fitchtail, and the Fitchtail worked. The salmon took with a lazy porpoise-roll and jumped wildly, its splash exploding in the sunlight. It was a strong fish, better than fifteen pounds, and it bulldogged upstream against the bellying line. Suddenly the line was fouled on a boulder at midstream. The throbbing tension told me the salmon was still hooked, and there was nothing to do except wade out and free it.

Your hour is over! Ingolfsson laughed.

The river was swift and strong, and icy trickles worked over my waders and down my legs. Finally I could reach beyond the boulder with my little Orvis, and the fouled line worked free. There was still another half-hearted run in the fish, and then I forced it toward the shallows and tailed it quickly.

That was something! Ingolfsson helped carry the salmon back along the path. That little Orvis really worked!

That was some hour we picked! I added happily.

It was an unforgettable baptism for the little Battenkill, but a week later I was fishing the Grimsá with John

Hilson, and took a thirty-pound salmon at Laxfosshylur that still holds the fly record for the river. That fish is memorable, too.

Such memories led me to a relatively new rod in my collection, and it has served me so well that I uncased it gladly. It is a nine-and-a-half-foot rod that takes a seven-weight line, its design a remarkable mixture of qualities. Its maker is Samuel Carlson in Connecticut, a fine craftsman who owns the patents and equipment of William and Eugene Edwards. The rod is a three-piece taper of four-strip construction, using the four-strip calibrations of William Edwards and the reel-seat fittings of his brother Eugene. Each of the Edwards brothers made rods under his own imprint in the Connecticut village of Canterbury. They were the sons of Eustis Edwards, one of the original Leonard apprentices in the Bangor days.

The casting stroke of this Carlson quadrate rod is lazily poetic, yet will handle both an entire WF-7-5 line and fish relatively light tippets with its delicate tip calibrations. The quadrate has traveled with me to Scotland, fishing the Invercauld beats from the Brig O'Dee to the Wain-House Pool opposite Balmoral, and on the classic Cairnton water fished by the late A.H.E. Wood above Banchory. It has also served me well this past summer on the Stillaguamish, fishing the early steelhead with Ralph Wahl and Wes Drain. Its performance at Blue Slough and Skier's led me to carry it west again in October, fishing the Umpqua with Jack Hemingway, Dan Callaghan and Frank Moore at Steamboat. It took a fine tail-walking steelhead at Wright Creek pool, and I can also remember hours of casting without luck, when I went fishless at Kitchen Pool in the cold rain. But the most exciting fish came on the Grimsá, where I hooked a twenty-three pound cockfish with a ruffling hitch, and had to follow when it left the pool over a twelve-foot waterfall.

There is another rod in my collection that I already fish with happy thoughts, a poetic Howells of seven-and-a-half feet and a delicate three ounces, designed to fish a DT-4-F line. It had its baptism at Hewitt's Flat on the Brodheads, handling 7X tippets perfectly during an April hatch of *Paraleptophlebia* flies. It has also fished the Au Sable, on a pilgrimage back to some of my boyhood rivers in Michigan, and it worked well on the Firehole at Biscuit Basin in August.

But its most pervasive memory involves a morning in early June, fishing the Longparish beats of the Test with Dermot Wilson. It was a surprisingly cold day, with intermittent periods of misting rain. Longparish is a charming village of thatched-roof houses, its beats divided at a mill that bridges the river. The keeper's hut is a hexagonal tower with a steep roof of thatch, its windows looking down into the pool under the mill. During lunch we spotted a five-pound fish nymphing quietly along a bed of undulating weeds. We fished up from the lower water after lunch, finding the trout concentrating on the nymphs in the smooth-flowing channels between the ranunculus. Dermot Wilson followed along the path, pointing out good fish and holding places, and I

was as surprised as anyone when the big fish we had spotted from the mill took my nymph while drifting out from its sheltering weeds.

Cooperative trout! Wilson applauded wilyly.

This exquisite Howells reminds me that a fine fly rod has the magic to evoke the future, as well as our rivers past. There is a second Howells in my collection now, unfished and smelling freshly of its flawless tung-oil varnish. Its tapers designed specifically for the cobweb-fine tippets under .007" and a DT-3-F British silk line. It is difficult for me to wait until the early-summer hatches on the Firehole and the Henry's Fork, where the fish are both big and tippet-shy feeders.

Thoughts of the Henry's Fork rainbows working steadily to thousands of tiny *Ephemerella* olives turn to another fly rod that I have never fished, although it is

hardly new. It is a remarkably delicate three-piece, eight-foot Thomas weighing only three ounces, and perfectly mated to a three-weight Kingfisher silk. Its weight and 3/64ths tip calibrations make it perfect for light-tackle work, and the number stamped on its butt-cap make it the thirtieth Thomas Special built. That should date its birth at the beginning of the century, and should humble the cracker barrel opinions that place the origins of ultra-fine fishing solely in our generation.

This rod is a Christmas present from my family, and it is only six weeks until the coltsfoot and dogtooth violets and willows play their faint prelude to springtime in our Eastern mountains—and that venerable Thomas can work its alchemy on the Brodheads, with a regatta of tiny *Baetis* flies hatching under the hemlock ledges.



Schwiebert with a typically fat fish from Hampshire's Test. Photo by Dermot Wilson.

