



R. ROSSMAN

LIVES of Fly Rods

Things have secret lives, according to Neruda. And the longer I live, the more I believe it. Things have secret lives, especially bamboo fly rods. Pablo Neruda was Chile's most beloved poet, and in an article urging poets to focus on simple things, he said it was "wise to scrutinize useful objects in repose." Good advice. Two or three times each winter, always on a sunny day, I haul out my half-dozen cane rods, slide their cloth bags out of the hard tubes, draw out the lovely, varnished shafts, and lean them against the bookcase. I study them, admire them. Talk to them. Show them a calendar and tell them how many days until we can go out and play together with the first BWO's. I sight down the slightly bent sticks and reflect on Einstein's equation: $E=mc^2$. Matter is energy waiting to happen. These rods are fly-fishing waiting to happen.

The bookrack they lean against bulges with books by Jim Harrison, John Gierach, A.K. Best, Haig-Brown, Maclean, Traver, Middleton, Chatham, Nick Lyons, Jerry Dennis, Charles Ritz, Ed Zern. And one copy of Robert Pirsig's *Zen* and the *Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. And seven or eight volumes of Neruda.

Worn surfaces, the wear inflicted by human hands, the sometimes tragic, always pathetic, emanations of these objects give reality a magnetism that should not be scorned, writes Neruda. Indeed. My bamboo rods and the hands that made them and held them have spanned the terms of 13 presidents, the Great Depression, wars, riots, assassinations, busts and booms. Like the objects of Neruda's poetry, they were stained by food and shame . . . with wrinkles, observations, dreams, waking prophesies,

declarations of love and hatred, beasts, blows, idylls, manifestos, denials, doubts, affirmations, taxes. Two of them were made the same year that France fell in rout and ruin to Hitler's onslaught, and shortly before England's armed forces were driven into the sea, losing almost all their weapons. But that was also the year that Spitfires over London probably saved civilization. It was England's finest hour, we would soon have a few of our own.

Before then, before our finest hours, while my Heddon Black Beauty and my Paul H. Young Prosperity were being wrapped and glued in Michigan, America was dragging itself scarred and patched and dirty out of the Depression, ready to go to work and then go fishing. The Heddon, I have reason to believe, was wrapped about 1939 or '40 in orange and black thread, then re-wrapped in all black at the factory in 1955 or '56. God knows what it went through in those 15 years. Almost no bamboo rods were made during the War. Companies like Heddon and Orvis built bamboo ski poles for mountain troops, and also built box kites, used by downed airmen to float antennas high enough to call for rescue. Lyle Dickerson made gauges.

One of my rods, the one my father bought me in the Montgomery Ward store in Chicago Heights, was made while I was in high school after WW II but before the Chinese Communist Revolution and the Tonkin cane embargo. One was built in Colorado during the Korean War from stockpiled cane in 1952, the year I quit college and joined the Army. That was also the year Dwight Eisenhower, fly fisherman, became my Commander-in-Chief. My overall

By Donald J. Goodman

favorite rod was built by Bob Summers two years before I retired from teaching. I ordered it when my wife and I returned from Spain, land of bullfights, Hemingway, wine, cork trees, and Ferdinand. We had, miraculously, a thousand dollars left from the vacation. Bamboo called—Quality bamboo.

Gierach, in his *Another Lousy Day in Paradise*, muses that “The thing about fishing is, at about the point where it begins to take over your life, it becomes a search for quality.” Well, the rods that marked turbulent events in an unsound century, and I’m sure both John Gierach and Robert Pirsig would agree, are possessed of enormous Quality. Pirsig was the populist writer-philosopher of the 1970’s who spent years searching out the meaning of Quality and lost his mind doing so. As treatment they shocked his brain silly and he came out of it, months later, either very wise or insane, but certainly on a quest. The real business of something like motorcycle maintenance, (the subject of his memoir) he decided after years of reflection, was “caring about what you are doing.” That is also the real business of making and using bamboo fly rods. Caring is the mark of Quality.

Along with Quality these rods have self-respect. Joan Didion once wrote that self-respect involves having a sense of one’s intrinsic worth, involves having a certain toughness, a kind of moral nerve—what was once called character. It involves a separate peace, a private reconciliation. These fine rods know what they are and you had better learn to respect them if you intend to use them. If you are a klutz that is your business. They will not complain. Klutzes are part of anyone’s life, and these rods do not spend their time trying to please idiots. And don’t try to rush them—they know their own rhythm and know when to bend. They’ll even teach you, if you’ll pay attention, might even teach you self-respect since, according to Didion, this is a habit of mind that can be developed, coaxed forth. My own Summers rod taught me how to cast. The other rods I bought later appreciated my being a good student. I have a rack of rods with character. I am blessed.

I hold these venerable rods, rotate the sections and, on warm winter days I take them out, clamp on a reel, and practice on the lawn. Later I try to make them feel at home in home waters. The first time I used my favorite, the Bob Summers, I fished beside Bob on the Boardman, right in front of his house and the shop where he’d built the rod. Like Yeats in his “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” I caught a little silver trout. Mine on a size 16 Adams. And the

Boardman was also the river where I first used my Paul H. Young rod, acquired in 2003, the grandfather more or less of the Summers rod. Bob started making rods in the 1950’s when he learned the trade from Young. He opened his own shop in 1972 in Traverse City, Michigan. I waited to take my Phillipson, a classic 1952 fly rod probably half-a-century old and yet pristine when I bought it in 2005, out to the South Platte to christen it in a Trico hatch. Since it had been manufactured in Colorado about the same time Phil had made President Eisenhower an 8½ foot 5-weight just like mine—well, maybe not *just* like mine—I like to think my own fly rod and Ike’s might have discussed mountain streams at night in the shop when no one was around. Or talked about the long ocean voyage from Kwangtung. Discussed favorite reels. I mean, it takes a year to build a rod; they might have shared a glue pot or a spool of thread. I use my rough-and-tumble Heddon Black Beauty in large Michigan streams like the Muskegon, the Manistee or even the White. I almost never fish with my own first bamboo, a 1947-era Sport King that is more noodle than Tonkin cane. But it still looks pretty. We need such things, too.

I don’t know when my father bought his rod; probably when he and the century were both in their twenties, just before he and my mother were married. Say the middle of Prohibition and five years before the Crash. When he was still working at the piano factory, maybe, thinking about getting his dance band started, a band that would play the dance halls and night clubs of Chicago and Milwaukee during the 1930’s but be vacuumed up by the draft just before Pearl Harbor. His wise-cracking drummer, Teddy Temlin, would survive the Bataan Death March. Pop never told me where or when he got that rod and, sadly, although it shows the injuries of serious use as well as the ailments of age, I remember seeing him use it on only one river, the Kankakee in Illinois on a Sunday afternoon. We were in a heavy green wooden rowboat my mother could hardly shove around with the thick oars, my father at the bow whispering, “Watch him come up now. Watch him come up to the fly!”

And sure enough, with all of us suspended on the mirror stillness of a cove, a sunfish magically rose from deep inside the water and ate the phony bumblebee. I don’t remember if Pop caught it, likely not, but I remember him stroking the air with that long, frail, varnished stick and the silk line floating across the summer day, the bright yellow-and-black fly plopping and floating for a tense second and the sun-

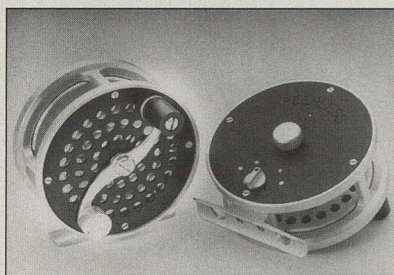
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fish rising like a finned palette from inside the river to rupture the glass water from beneath and then bite that bumblebee. I recall it because we were mostly a worm family, dunking crawlers into the Kankakee or into bottomless, flooded open-pit mines resembling cinder-cone volcanoes, hauling in dozens of stunted panfish, and once in a while, to supply a family cook-out, we poached channel cats at midnight on the river with 50 purple-backed crayfish on a trotline.

That raggedy fly rod now hangs on the wall of my den without a single identifying word or number on it; three sagging sections, dangling wrapping threads, silver-nickel sliding reel seat, no winding check, the crumbling cork cigar-shape grip once held by hands that built pianos, refinished furniture, fluttered the keys of a tenor sax in gangster-run Chicago nightclubs, hands that folded back the deadly spines of huge illegal catfish to work the hook out by taped-over flashlight, hands that later hammered their heads to a tree to skin them, hands stained by food and shame, with wrinkles, observations, dreams, prophecies and all the rest. Even doubts and taxes. It keeps its stories, that rod. The stories the hands told it. Tragically, I cannot remember a single time my father and I went fly-fishing together.

The observations, dreams and prophecies and even declarations of love, however, were invested in the fly rods first by their makers, only later by their owners. These were makers who installed Quality into every molecule. Every wrap and glue joint. Every Spanish cork in the grip and every ferrule. Every coat of spar varnish, every word and number jotted on the shaft. The fly rod is, when you get down to it, a machine. "The test of a machine," wrote Pirsig, "is the satisfaction it gives you. There isn't any other test." It was first the designer, and then the workers themselves, who built the satisfaction into the classic fly rods for all of us to discover when we are on the streams.

And who built them?


Not who you think. While we often imagine the rods being built by grizzled shop workers with gnarled hands and broken nails who rigged up machines from Model T differentials and washing machine motors, guys who gun-smithed on the side, people like Lyle Dickerson, maybe, Charles Orvis, Paul Young, Everett Garrison,

Hiram Leonard, and a dozen others, the truth is those rods were probably made by the lovely hands of young women. And why not? Fly-fishing is not only an event, it is also an abstraction. The fly rod and the way it behaves is a concept romantic, graceful, feminine in both its creation and its performance. Early descriptions of a fine rod, except for the crude mention of semi-parabolic construction, hardware, length, strength and POWER, could be describing a female dancer: "Really beautiful" (Bing Crosby and President Dwight Eisenhower both describing their brand new Phillipsons). And the ads? "Handsomely wrapped in pure black silk. Excites your hand and eye. Really comes to life, acquires a place in your affection, spirited and responsive yet delicate; grace, spirit, and vitality. Smooth, sensitive action; I fell in love with it . . ." And likely as not the classics almost all had a woman's touch in their manufacture.


A photo of a Heddon factory picnic in 1928 shows 54 females, 19 males. The wrapping of almost every classic bamboo rod, in all except for the small one-man shops, was done by a woman. Many of them were home workers who received a load of shafts each week to work on in their own dwellings. At Heddon, while Homer Hungerford was inspecting and sorting culms (the pipes of Tonkin cane as they arrived), and Don Bement cut and sanded them, Kitty Harding performed the most critical job: gluing and binding the triangular splits together. The finest grade rods were inspected by Frances Long; Cleo Hanley wrote "Heddon" in a spiral on panels 6, 1, and 2 on every Heddon rod made over a period of 33 years! Including mine. At Phillipson, Katie Bauer supervised the factory wrapping department, and by the 1950's she was also in charge of up to 175 home wrappers as well. The marking of all the Phillipson rods from 1949 to 1972 was done by Ann Smith.

There it is, the last secret of their secret lives: the fly rod is a *she*. Dame Juliana Berners knew all along.

Donald J. Goodman's prize-winning story "The Black Gnat" appeared in FR&R in 1996. A retired professor, Goodman has published fiction and magazine articles on everything from learning techniques to race cars to the guns owned by Hemingway. He lives in Michigan not far from trout.



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