

Collecting Rods

The freakonomics of a bamboo fetish

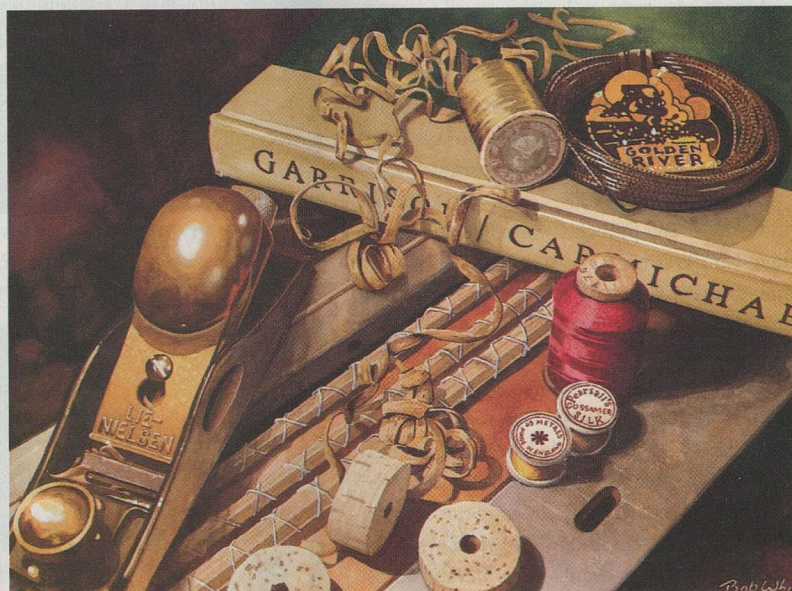
During one of those inane bookkeeping rituals where I had to make my life look more comprehensible on paper than it is in reality, I learned that my 30-year accumulation of bamboo fly rods is now worth more than my IRA. I remember staring at the figures thinking, *Surely this means something, but what?*

There are those who'd say it simply means I've spent too much money and squirreled away too little, making the prospects for retirement look grim, but I think it means that the whole bamboo rod thing has finally gone over the top. That would explain why I once retired some of my favorite old bamboo rods because they'd gotten too valuable to fish, then felt weird about it and started fishing them again. If they were too valuable to fish, they were also too good *not* to fish—and fishing won. I was proud of myself. After all, it's no mean feat in America to stare down money and have the money blink first.

Rising prices would also explain why, although I've fished predominantly with bamboo fly rods for most of my adult life, the last four rods I bought were graphite. If I felt I needed excuses, I'd have them. Two of those rods were 14-foot Spey rods, and that's a specialized length at which graphite just out-performs bamboo. Honestly, a bamboo Spey rod—if you can even find one—is stretching the point a little even for a purist. The other two were conventional five-piece pack rods (a 5/6 weight and an 8/9) that fit snugly into the duffel bag I check at the airport. At first I thought of them as emergency spares, but on a recent trip to Canada I strung up the lighter rod for no other reason than that I'd brought it. I ended up using it all week because it was just a really nice rod.

So one afternoon I was happily casting a foam stonefly pattern on a graphite rod when our guide said, "You know, if this gets out, you could lose your charter membership in the Old Fart's Club." Fair enough. I could rightfully say that I fish graphite sparingly—for steelhead and on trips that involve psychotic baggage handlers—but those of us who fish bamboo inevitably generate reputations as curmudgeons, and we're expected to take the heat graciously.

At least I'm not alone in straying. Several of my bamboo-nut friends have also gone over to the dark side with graphite and are only mildly sheepish about it. Some graphite rods are magnificent casting tools, and in recent years that includes several that are very affordable even by modern standards. They aren't flashy and



they don't carry those lifetime guarantees against clumsiness, but they're cheap, they cast beautifully and they hold up to hard use, which is all you can ask for. At the same time, the bamboo rod market has begun to simultaneously escalate and implode.

In my experience, the most desirable bamboo rods by the most legendary makers (the shorter, lighter rods by Garrison, Gillum, Payne, Dickerson and such) have always been out of reach for all but a few, and apparently they're going to stay that way. Somewhere in middle age the realization arrives that you are making as much money as you'll ever make, so if you can't afford something now, it will always remain a carrot on a very long stick.

The so-called production rods that were once my forte have also gone off the deep end. Rods by Heddon, Granger and Phillipson always top this list, but there are at least a dozen others that are also perfectly good, or even great, rods that were affordable before collectors discovered them.

Continued on page 70 ►

SPORTING LIFE

► Continued from page 72

Over the years I've come by a few big-name rods honestly, but I usually went with the bargains, and they *were* bargains. I can tell you from experience that, for instance, a model 208 Payne and a 9050 Wright & McGill Granger—both 9-foot, 5/6-weights—are virtually identical except for the huge discrepancy in price.

But those good old production rods are now collectable, and their values are rising accordingly—the 8-foot, 5-weight Granger I bought used in 1976 has now appreciated by a factor of over 2,000 percent—while at the same time the supply of those rods and others like them is drying up.

One bamboo rod dealer told me he now depends on the widows of former customers for his supply of used rods. Another dealer said that the good, affordable old rods were just plain “gone,” then added that of course there were still a few “hidden treasures” around for those willing and able to ferret them out.

If that were the whole story, bamboo fly rods would soon disappear except as curiosities. Eventually the few survivors would all be under lock and key somewhere, with any possibility of appreciating them simply as fly rods terminally crippled by their value. But there's been a quiet renaissance of bamboo-rod making going on that has resulted in scads of new makers.

Most date that resurgence to the 1977 publication of *A Master's Guide To Building A Bamboo Fly Rod*, by Everett Garrison and Hoagy Carmichael. It wasn't the first good book on the subject, but it came at a time when bamboo had become a quaint backwater in the mass market, graphite was obviously here to stay and the mid-range classic bamboo rods that were still going for a song at flea markets were beginning to be noticed by collectors. It was the moment when bamboo was either going to quietly fade away or just as quietly come back. It came back.

I can't guess how many new bamboo rod makers there are now. In 1987, Hoagy Carmichael told me that, aside from the 20 or so “established” makers, he knew of at least another hundred, “working in their basements and garages.” A few of those have gone on to become established in their own right, and there are now enough obscure, part-time and hobbyist makers around that all you have to do is mention bamboo and a maker you never heard of pops out from behind the nearest bush.

I also wouldn't know how to characterize these makers' attitudes, but they may be a little different than the nostalgic view I'm used to. A few years ago I interviewed a young rod maker who was just beginning to sell his rods at the local fly shop. I asked him the standard question, “Why bamboo?” expecting the standard answer involving tradition, craftsmanship and poetry. You know, if graphite is forced-air central heating, then bamboo is an oak fire in a stone fireplace.

Instead he said he was just interested in tapers, didn't think there was anything special about the material and actually had a soft spot for fiberglass, but it takes a factory to make glass or graphite, while you can make a bamboo rod on the kitchen table with hand tools, which is exactly how he got started.

This guy's rods sold for what you could call an entry-level price for bamboo and they were surprisingly good, but he said he had no aspirations about turning pro. There was a family to support and he liked his day job. He just made rods for fun and sold a few to finance his own fishing.

From what I can tell, the part-time aspect is fairly typical of new rod makers, while the high quality early in the game isn't. In one sense, it's not that hard to make a bamboo fly rod if you're patient, handy with tools and doggedly meticulous, but there are also the countless fine points that are only learned through experience. A bamboo rod dealer who handles several new makers told me he figures the average rod maker isn't worth much until he's produced around 50 rods, and even that isn't a guarantee. Some craftsmen constantly improve, he said, while others find a comfortable spot near the bottom of the ladder and stay there.

There are also some Chinese-made rods on the market now, and their prices are astonishingly low for bamboo. The few of these I've cast seemed like perfectly serviceable fly rods, although their finishes often leave something to be desired and I can't say how they'll hold up to hard use.

Of course imported bamboo rods have never done very well in America. Up until now, most of those were English and they were made for European fly fishers who have different ideas about casting than we do. There's also a kind of chauvinism in operation. We've always thought that the best bamboo rods were made right here, starting with Hiram Leonard in the late 1800's, and for other, subtly political reasons, many just want their bamboo rods to be made entirely in America, never mind that the bamboo comes from

China, the silk from Japan and the fancy wood in the reel seat from a vanishing rain forest in Brazil.

Things are further complicated by a handful of rod makers who have bought or licensed the names of defunct Golden Age rod companies and are now reissuing rods that you could call “reproductions,” “facsimiles,” “commemoratives” or something like that.

I don't really have an opinion on these, but I do see some potential problems for the makers. There will inevitably be comparisons to the original rods, and since the old classics are iconic, the standards will be impossibly high. Also, some of these new rods cost as much as the originals, leaving a buyer to ask himself, *Why get a reproduction when I could have the real thing?*

But then buying a well-known old name is one way to get your rods noticed in a crowded market. From what I've seen, the happiest new rod makers are like the guy I mentioned earlier: part-timers with a local following and no ambition except to make the best rods possible. It's more of a struggle if you want to start making all or even part of your living selling your rods.

I'm guessing at the figures, but I'd say that of that first generation of *Master's Guide* makers, a tenth stayed with it seriously for the next 25 years. Of those, an equally small fraction turned pro and are now successfully competing with the modern masters of the current generation, who somehow survived their own process of natural selection. As a business, bamboo rod building has a high mortality rate.

Aside from trying to be noticed in a crowd, modern bamboo rod makers have other problems. For instance, several rod makers have told me there's a class of customer who cares more about cosmetics than about how the rod casts. This guy literally goes over a rod inch by inch with a magnifying glass and throws a hissy fit when he locates a microscopic speck of dust in the varnish. When he calls to complain, it turns out he hasn't even cast the rod.

The client from hell usually claims to be a connoisseur of the classics, but when I go over some of my own classic rods that closely, I can find plenty of so-called cosmetic flaws that wouldn't pass muster. This has led some rod makers to pay more attention to how their rods look than to how they cast—with predictable results.

Many bamboo rods are now sold to fishermen who have never cast one before, and I've talked to two rod makers who are trying to make their bamboo rods cast like graphite so

they'll be more recognizable to those customers. I walked away from both conversations with the same unanswered question: *If you like graphite, why pay \$2,000 for a rod that casts like one you could get for \$200?*

Thankfully, most modern rod makers still work from traditional tapers, as they should. It's an article of faith among the older generation of rod makers that after well over a century of experimentation, there are no more than 30 basic tapers that work in bamboo. The common wisdom is, If a maker claims to have come up with his own new taper, the best you can hope for is that he's accidentally reinvented the Leonard Model 39-DF.

But then with most of the great old rods now out of circulation, many new makers have never seen or cast the rods they're trying to reproduce. That's the main reason you can try out a dozen rods supposedly built on the legendary 7½-foot, 5-weight Payne number 197 taper and they'll all be different. Some makers do repairs and restorations on old rods, not only as a service to their customers and for a little extra income, but also as a way to get their hands on some of those classic tapers.

I think bamboo rods are in a watershed now; there are probably more makers than there have ever been and the craft is alive and well. But it's also true that modern builders turn out rods in much smaller numbers, and we'll probably never again see anything like the best of the old production makers who turned out quality rods by the thousands per year. A man I know who has made bamboo rods full-time for the last 25 years has just recently cracked 600 rods and says he may not make a thousand before the end of his career.

A few of the modern rods are every bit as good as any ever made, regardless of price or pedigree. But without the national reputations buyers once relied on, these can be hard to find in a forest of rug beaters. Most of the best rods probably are made by established professionals, although there are also those sleepers made by craftsmen known only to a few dozen local customers. Tracking them down can be worth the trouble.

And, once found, good rods can still be hard to get. Some well-known rod makers now have waiting lists that stretch out four years or more and many part-timers also produce rods on a somewhat unpredictable schedule. A man I know recently summed up the bamboo rod buyer's dilemma succinctly. "If you order a rod from a new maker," he said, "he might quit before he gets around to building your rod. If you order one from an old master, he might die."

ENGLISH FLY FISHING SHOP

Classic flies for
Trout • Bass • Salmon
Steelhead • Bonefish

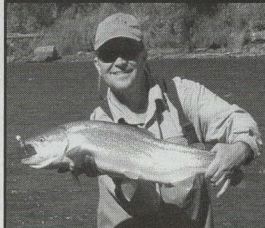
From \$0.50 • Postage free.
Based in England



Trading since 1978

www.flyfishing-flies.com

Alaska and Kamchatka, Russia



4th Generation
Guides, 37 Years
Experience. 27
years in business
in Alaska, 15
Years in
Kamchatka,
Russia. Rafting
& Fishing Wild &
Scenic Rivers.

OUZEL EXPEDITIONS

P.O. Box 935 Girdwood, Alaska 99587
800-825-8196 Fax: 907-783-3220
www.ouzel.com ~ paul@ouzel.com



Orvis Endorsed
Fly Fishing Expedition
of the Year 2003

Traditional Rods ♦ Exceptional Value
Immediately Available ♦ Satisfaction Guaranteed

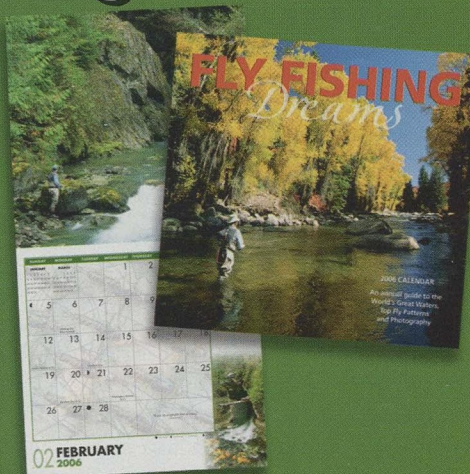
- Starting at \$375, shipping included
- Five standard models hand planed to classic tapers
- 6'6" 3-wt; 6'9" 4-wt; 7'0" 4-wt; 7'6" 5-wt; 8'0" 6-wt
- 2-piece with extra tip
- Ferruled blanks available at \$275
- Free 15-day trial

Headwaters
Bamboo Rod Co.

Order online: www.split-bamboo.com
Or call toll-free: 1.866.432-3928
P.O. Box 3533, Hillsboro OR 97123

FREE from
FlyRod&Reel
THE EXCITEMENT OF FLY-FISHING

Call 800-888-6890 or visit
www.flyrodreel.com to order today!



Stunning photography to inspire,
and a convenient bold layout to help you plan
your next fly-fishing excursion.

The 2006 Fly Fishing
Dreams calendar can
be yours free with a
paid subscription to
FlyRod&Reel.

Order a two- or three-
year subscription for
yourself or as a gift and
we'll send you this cal-
endar absolutely free!

Two Years (12 issues)
only \$34.97

Three Years (18 issues)
only \$49.97

SCAL05