

CANE MUTINY



There is a smell of revolution in the air as increasing numbers of fly rodders return to the tradition, performance and craftsmanship of split bamboo.

BY TOM KEER

PHOTO: JOHN CARPENTER



An ad on page 37 of my March 1974 issue of *Field & Stream* promotes the new Fenwick HMG fly rod. This rod was 25 percent lighter than fiberglass and 40 percent lighter than cane. The blank was constructed from a new material called “graphite” that was invented in 1965 by William Watt of the Royal Aircraft Establishment. Rod blanks rolled from this cutting-edge material set forth a standard that would change the face of fly rod construction for decades to come, for the material was universally accepted because it decreased vibration, added greater hoop strength and increased energy transfer. *“We expect imitators,”* the visionary advertising copy stated. *“Many graphite rods will appear in the years ahead, but there will be only one HMG, then as now.”*

IN WHAT SEEMED LIKE a blink of an eye, cane rods were hung on a nail by the loops in their cloth sacks in a first-floor closet, the preferred way to keep them from gaining a set. It was the end of an era, and marquee names such as Ed and Jim Payne, Pinky Gillum, Everett Garrison, Gene Edwards, Hiram Leonard, Paul Young and Wes Jordan were replaced by new names: Sage, Loomis, Scott, Temple Fork. Shops such as Orvis and Winston that began with cane quickly moved toward the new material. My order was bass-ackwards, just like the fish.

I started with glass, and my first fly rod was a Shakespeare Wonderrod. It was a pedestrian run-of-the-mill, but a middle school friend had a glass Clapp & Treat. His dad was the doctor in town, and a fly fisherman as well. Glass was fine for his sons, but Dr. Miller fished nothing but cane. He used short, light rods for local trout, heavier rods with fighting butts when fishing for Atlantic salmon fishing on the Miramichi and the Cascapedia, and so on. His study had a staggering collection of leather rod tubes in the corner, there were Wheatley fly boxes on every table and desk, and a candlestand full of perfect-bound magazines that he read in his leather chair by the fire.

When Chris and his brother Andy showed enough discipline with their



Flyfishing by Arthur D. Fuller

glass rods, they were permitted to use one of their father's cane rods. It was a Granger, a little beat up and worse for the wear, but good enough to take for a spin in the jon boat on a hot August day. We took turns rowing and casting with intervals of 15 minutes per clip. Casting that Granger was more fun than rowing the jon boat, and that meant we watched our watch's second hand intently. The bow man cast, the

middleman rowed and the fella in the stern netted the fish. The situation usually worked out for the best.

On one day, I was rowing, Chris had the rod and Andy handled the net. We approached a cove where rumor reported the biggest bass in the pond made their home.

“Cast to the left of that log,” I said.

“Forget that,” Andy said. “Those lily pads on the right are better.”

No, it's not/Yes, it is went on for the next five minutes until Chris made a cast. He was the Great Equalizer and cast over the log next to the reeds.

There is nothing quite like a Monday morning quarterback let alone a group of 'em.

“You're going to hang on the log,” I said.

“You're going to get stuck in the weeds,” Andy said.

Chris said nothing until after the eruption. A bass smashed the deer hair popper, blasted out of the water and landed on the right side of the log. It peeled off line, and the drag sang her wonderful, whirring sound. No one could have guessed that 12-year olds knew so many expletives.

Eventually, the bass tired and Andy pulled out the net. It was a tear-drop shaped trout net, far too small for the

drop-bellied fish. He lunged to net the beast while Chris pulled hard on the rod.

Snap. We almost forgot there was a fish at the end of the line. Cane rods require careful handling and the occasional rebuild, but they are more than worth the effort. That's why they're back in vogue and growing in popularity.

A LOOK BACK: BOUTIQUE VERSUS PRODUCTION ROD CONSTRUCTION

BACK IN THE DAY, some companies mass-produced bamboo rods in an assembly-like fashion. Theirs was a smart move, for before fiberglass the expanding recreational fishing industry needed cane rods and lots of 'em. Some were used for surf casting with squidding line and level wind reels, others were used offshore and still others found themselves in a rod holder in the stern of a boat for trolling. As fly-fishing gained traction throughout the 1900s, more and more rods were built to meet the expanding demand, one that was filled by manufacturing companies.

But cane fly rods also spurred a cottage industry, one that was boutique in nature, and one that is growing today. The old-school boutique rods attracted the most attention, mostly because they were produced by one or a few craftsmen on a small scale. Retailers such as the former Clapp & Treat, the original Abercrombie & Fitch, among others, carried a full inventory of exquisite rods that commanded such a presence that when we see one today we are in awe.

Some blanks offered a darker color made from flaming bamboo while classically dried and finished rods yielded a luxurious light tan coloration. Their ferrules were made from German nickel silver, and snake guides and agate stripping guides were wound with silk wraps and color schemes unique enough to identify a particular manufacturer without the need for a decal.

Grips were custom, too, ground from extra-flora grade cork in a variety of unique designs. Each had a purpose, and the standards, Gordons, half wells, fishtails, uniform Europeans, full wells and cigars, among others, contributed functionality to their aesthetics. A side note is that hotelier and Hall of Fame rod designer Charles Ritz (of Ritz-Carlton



When it comes to making a cane fly rod, attention to detail is key. Skeleton reel seats, bottle-swell butts and a half Wells grip are a few of many outstanding features. PHOTO: JOHN CARPENTER

fame), pioneered his own revolutionary grip. These cane rods were housed in cotton sacks that were stored in machined if not saddle-stitched leather tubes. Their presentation makes traditional fly fisherman weak in the knees.

The time for cane sort of stopped when the legendary Jim Payne died in 1968. His passing marked the ending of an era, one that also saw life's pace quicken. Several years later, graphite burst onto the scene, and the lifespan of cane was all over but the shouting. The past is thankfully not forgotten, for cane rods are part of fly-fishing's roots. A resurgence of sorts has been building, some in accordance with large-company manufacturing, but most coming from the boutique side. Many fly rodders are experiencing cane for the first time and they know what many of us have known for quite a while—cane rods feel even better than they look, and boy do they look good. The market for used cane classics is bullish, and more than that, a number of craftsmen are making new bamboo rods to support that current demand.

LEFT: Hand craftsmanship, whether it's found in a canoe on the bank of an Atlantic salmon river, a Bogdon fly reel or a bamboo rod, is cherished by sporting connoisseurs. PHOTO: MARK LANCE



PHOTO: KEITH ROSE-INNES

No details are overlooked in construction process of split cane fly rods from boutique roddmakers.

WHY ARE SO MANY FLY RODDERS CRAZY FOR CANE?

ACCORDING TO CANE ROD LEGEND

Ben Carmichael, “cane rod makers answer to a calling of legacy, craftsmanship and skill. Perhaps the greatest compliment a cane rod maker can receive comes from knowing a rod he made is an angler's first choice when he goes fishing. My father Hoagy made such a rod for me, and he presented it to me as my high school graduation present. Decades later that rod carries meaning far deeper than just about any rod I own. It's a 7-foot 9-inch 4 weight classic dry fly rod made from his own taper. When I fish that rod, I can smell the varnish and wood shavings from my dad's workshop, which was Everett Garrison's before his.

“Cane rods are different. They reveal every little casting deficiency, and they call for a precision that comes from a slower, relaxed movement. They offer a delicate presentation; they mend line smoothly and progressively. They fight fish in an unparalleled way—you feel truly connected, as they transmit every head shake, roll and jump. With bamboo, catching even a small fish is fantastic. They enhance our fishing experiences because they connect us to the roots of a tradition that run incredibly deep. It's a feeling, and a connection that can't be duplicated.”

Bill Elliott, a recent inductee to the Catskill Fly-fishing Center and Museum Hall of Fame, couldn't agree more. “I wouldn't even think about fishing the Beaverkill without a cane rod,” said the fly-fishing illustrator of 38 books and hundreds of articles. “I fish a lot of small-to-medium sized water, so short casts are essential. Nothing loads better than cane for a distance under 30 feet which, incidentally, is the range inside of which most trout are caught.



PHOTO: KEITH ROSE-INNES

Thomas & Thomas Rodmakers makes a split cane rod for saltwater gamefish. Whether you're fishing for bonefish in the Bahamas or striped bass along the coast, the feeling in every cast is unparalleled.

"We are a fraternity, too. Cane rod builders are not competitive, and instead they are collaborative. Their goal is one of quality and experience. Look at Brewster, New York's, George Halstead and Ridgefield, Connecticut's, Pinky Gillum. Halstead produced a milling machine for Gillum out of an old turret gunner motor from a B-17 bomber! A relationship like that proffers spirit, and it's one that comes from the heart and soul. I believe that part of the resurgence of cane rods comes from many anglers looking to connect with that kinder, gentler time."

The writer and philosopher George Santayana said, "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" and learning from our elders is an important part of continuing that legacy. Jed Dempsey is one of the few remaining apprentices of several legendary rod makers from Everett Garrison to Walt Carpenter from

Cane rod devotees hold their breath when they unscrew the engraved cap of every rod tube. Part of the anticipation comes from the rod makers' quest for perfection that carries into rod tubes, canvas sacks, nickel silver ferrules, silk wraps and extra flora grade cork grips. PHOTO: JOHN CARPENTER



PHOTO: MARK LANCE

Rod shops are a reflection of a creative mind that is combined with passion and dedication to craft.

Leonard and later on Payne himself. "Bamboo and German nickel silver don't create lightweight rods, a factor that isn't important to a cane rod devotee. Balance is of critical importance, though, and the rod, reel, line and backing should have a balance point of an inch on either side of the front cork ring. Balance contributes to the pleasure of every cast, we work in synch with our gear, and an outfit becomes an extension of each of us.

"Like many cane rod makers, I create every part of every rod myself. I mill the taper of each of the six strips that form my blanks, I draw down the German nickel silver to size and fit each ferrule and I finish every reel seat spacer from exotic wood. Like many others, I like to introduce fishermen to cane rod building and to share my life's experience. Every year I help with the Catskill Rod Makers gathering at the Catskill Fly-fishing Center where we offer classes in rod making. We've been known to do a little fishing as well....

"I think folks are coming back to cane because every angler can find a feel that makes them happy. Graphite and fiberglass both cast a line well, but cane has a soul to it. A little piece of a man's life goes into each rod. For thinking and feeling anglers, cane rods represent the pinnacle of our sport, which has always been rooted in our people."

COMPANIES THAT CONTINUE OFFERING CANE

MANY LONG-STANDING COMPANIES continue offering cane rods. R.L. Winston offers 42 models, Scott and Orvis each offer three, and Thomas & Thomas makes 27, including a series for the salt.

Troy Jacques, Thomas & Thomas Fly Rods' current bamboo rod maker, started as an apprentice graphite rod maker in 1991. His current vocation, which is more of a calling, is the combination of his life's experiences.

"Prior to coming to Thomas & Thomas I was a builder and also was a fly fisherman," he said. "That gave me a natural combination of skills. I started on graphite rods, and then moved into bamboo under Tom Moran's tutelage. Tom was a legend in the cane rod building world, but when he returned to England in 1995, I took over the department. I worked for a while, but then the financial demands of a young family forced me back into construction. That lasted for eight years, and I've been back at Thomas & Thomas for over a decade. Building cane rods is my calling. I like making rods that cause people to sing.

"What I love about bamboo is that the water loads the rods perfectly," Jacques said. "Recovery is slower than graphite and the cushioning aspect



PHOTO: JOHN CARPENTER

German nickel silver is highly prized for reel seats. When adorned by skilled engravers, they are small pieces of art.

sets up excellent casts. Graphite rods require lots of false casting, but you don't need to do that with cane. When fishing with bamboo, anglers spend more time fishing instead of casting. The feel is unparalleled. When a hooked fish runs, I feel the rod flex, I feel the fish's head shake and it's a far more tactile experience than fishing with rods made from other materials. If graphite is a hammer, then bamboo is a scalpel. Cane rods create intimate experiences, especially since they connect anglers to the heritage established in the past."

Recently Jacques pushed the envelope and created a true, saltwater performance cane rod. The idea came from a well-known bamboo fisherman, the Boston Red Sox, Ted Williams.

"I got the idea for the Sextant series of saltwater cane while staying at Ted Williams' old home in Islamorada,"

he said. "I looked out at the flats and thought that the Splendid Splinter himself must have fished for tarpon with a cane rod. On that trip I was fishing with graphite, but the inspiration was there. We built the Sextant series on that idea, and it's one of performance.

"The series is strong, has an excellent casting profile and has withstood several years of field testing on some of the ocean's most famous tackle busters. The Sextant subdued not only tarpon in Florida but also giant trevally in the Seychelles. The two-piece, two-tip rods have a fast action and a swelled butt. The milled aluminum reel seat is saltwater resistant, and a hard, synthetic finish keeps the nodes safe from abuse. A full wells grip and fighting butt makes for a true, big game rod. I look at every strip under a microscope to see if there are any fractures or blemishes. If I find a

blemish, then I no longer have a bamboo rod. Instead, I have a tomato stake."

Perhaps Paul Brooks, the founder of Colorado's Breckinridge Outfitters and currently the team leader at the White River Flyshop in Colorado Springs, Colorado, describes the awareness of cane rods the best.

"To my eye, a cane rod is the prettiest girl at the dance," he says, "and the more I get to know her, the more beguiled I become. I can feel all movement with a cane rod—from the gentle presentation to the lift and hook set. I can feel the fish move and tug, shake his head and run. Nothing, and I mean nothing, feels like bamboo. When I fish a cane rod, I am spellbound in the moment, and the natural material is the main reason for that."

This year, give cane a try. You'll be glad you did. ■