The American Fly Fisher

Journal of the American Museum of Fly Fishing

SPRING 2001 VOLUME 27 NUMBER 2

Gordon, More Gordon, and Dressing Flies by Hand

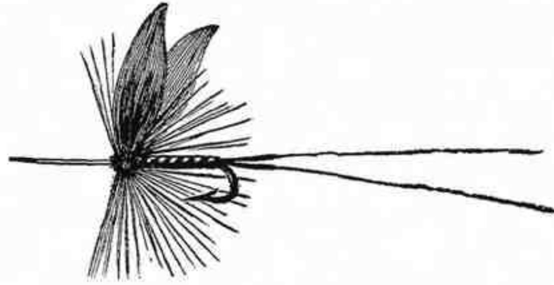

Fig. 21. Red or Claret Quill Gnat.

An illustration from Theodore Gordon's copy of The Book of the All-round Angler *(1888) by John Bickerdyke.*

Now that I live in Vermont, it seems strange that I don't get over to the Catskills to fish. I fish right around home or in the Adirondacks. I take the occasional trip to a far-off destination to wet a line. Mostly, I work, and think about fishing more than I actually get to fish.

I've been fishing in the Catskills only once. I was living in Washington, D.C., and my husband and I took a long weekend to explore the Beaverkill, the Willowemoc, the Esopus. It was the end of April and much less springlike than we expected. At the time, I doubt I could have told you much—if anything—about Theodore Gordon. But I caught my first trout on that trip, seventy-four years after Gordon died, almost to the day. My proud husband framed the black stonefly nymph in a shadowbox.

Twelve years have passed since that life-changing event, and now, as editor of a fly-fishing journal, I am happy to devote two articles of this spring issue to the famed Theodore Gordon, dry-fly angler of the Catskills. Both pieces give a bit of the history of this figure's life, as well as the authors' own interpretations of that history as they have found it. As Gordon Wickstrom states in his article, "The details of Gordon's biography are difficult, largely memorial, and little of it documentary."

The two pieces are delightfully different in tone. Michael Scott, in "Theodore Gordon and Bamboo Rods," attempts to distance himself enough from the mythology of Gordon to report on Gordon the man—even Gordon the curmudgeon. But the focus of his article is really Gordon's writings about fishing bamboo rods: the rods Gordon owned, his ideas about what constituted a good rod, his words about casting rods, and, like all of us, his changing opinions about particular rods over time. Scott also wonders about a rod that Gordon did *not* write about: a Payne rod that he is said to have passed on to his friend Herman Christian. Scott's article begins on page 8.

Reading "The Presence of Theodore Gordon," on the other hand, gives insight into why Gordon is so beloved and why he has become a mythic figure to so many. The words Gordon left behind are able to conjure a living presence for author Gordon Wickstrom, who recounts details of Gordon's biography in light of his importance to American fly-fishing and fly-tying history. The two articles gave the Museum an opportunity to include some photos of Theodore Gordon items from our own collection. Wickstrom's piece begins on page 2.

Although Gordon used a vise for tying flies, apparently he could tie by hand as well. Few people tie by hand today, but author John Betts can and does (he also makes his own hooks, leaders, lines, reels, and rods). Until the end of the eighteenth century, almost all flies were dressed this way. In "Truly Hand-Tied Flies," Betts reviews what it was like to tie flies 150 years ago with the materials and tools available. Then he applies some of the old procedures to dress a fly. Try hand-tying the Cassard, using directions that would appear in earlier days. Betts's article begins on page 18.

We welcome you to the spring issue and issue an invitation as well. Come to the Museum May 19 for our annual festival weekend and dinner/auction (for details, see announcement on page 26). We would love to see you here.

Kathleen Achor
Editor

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ON THE COVER: *Theodore Gordon with an unidentified woman, probably fishing on the Neversink.*

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The Presence of Theodore Gordon

by Gordon M. Wickstrom

. . . HIS SYLVAN LIFE IS OUR LOST WORLD.
—John McDonald[1]

It is a bitter cold winter's night and I am far away from the cheerful lights of town or city. The north wind is shrieking and tearing at this lonely house, like some evil demon wishful to carry it away bodily or shatter it completely. The icy breath of this demon penetrates through every chink and crevice, and the wood-burning stove is my only companion. It is on nights such as these, after the turn of the year, that . . . we return in spirit to the time of trout rising in the pools. We remember many days of glorious sport, and then somehow our thoughts take a turn and leap forward. Spring is near, quite near, and it will soon be time to go fishing.
—Theodore Gordon on the Neversink, 1906[2]

IN THE FALLING DARKNESS of a winter afternoon, I sat reading the notes and letters of America's foremost fly fisherman, Theodore Gordon. His personality, his voice, his spirit—whatever one calls it—gained on me by the page and by the minute until, in a wonderful way, my reading became what seemed Gordon's very presence. The experience was so compelling that it brought me to my feet, book in hand, amazed and feeling something like the very touch of that elegant, fragile, reclusive genius of the trout fly.

What I'd known of Gordon before, now, in this instant of his "presence," seemed fragmentary and unfocused. I knew that I must try better to understand this extraordinary man who more than any other gave a distinctly American cast to fishing the fly and suggested new and native ways of thinking and feeling about the experience.

Living his "sylvan life" in his beloved Catskill Mountains, Theodore Gordon devoted nearly his entire adult life to fishing the fly for trout. He was to become a mythic figure, a man whose life is for us a glimpse back into what seems a little golden age. In our myth-dreaming, he models the ideal American angler's life.

Gordon was born to fortunate circumstances in Pittsburgh, 18 September 1854. A small and delicate child who lost his father almost at once, he nevertheless became enthralled with fishing, especially during summers spent on the Pennsylvania limestone streams around Carlisle, holidays which his father's legacy provided.

The details of Gordon's biography are difficult, largely memorial, and little of it documentary. Several of his contemporaries knew a bit about him, dined out on it, and passed it on, but apparently none knew Gordon's whole story. He kept his counsel.

In any case, after spending the first half of his working life in finance in the Northeast and in Savannah where he had family connections and origins, his finances and health broke. In

This article originally appeared in the February 1998 issue of *Gray's Sporting Journal*. It will be included in *Notes from an Old Fly Book*, a collection of essays by Wickstrom, to be published by the University Press of Colorado in September. Its preview appears here through their generosity.

February 22nd 1890

Dear Sir, You must excuse my delay

With kind regards
Yours faithfully
Frederic M.

Theodore Gordon Esq.

The famous Halford letter and flies from the Anglers' Club of New York.

Photos by Enrico Ferorelli from *Land of Little Rivers* by Austin McK. Francis

early retreat from active life, he seems to have lived for a time in comfort in West Haverstraw, New York, at the home of a relative, Theodore Gordon Peck Sr. From here he made regular angling forays into the Catskills and Poconos.

Sometime before 1905, he left the Peck home in favor of residence on the Neversink River in the Catskills, perhaps in the hope of benefit of the mountain air. Whatever his motivation, it was a move to a fine trout stream where he lived almost as a recluse in a succession of uncomfortable farmhouses along the river.

Gordon's mother, Fanny Jones Gordon, chronically ill herself and anxious about her son's well-being alone there up in the mountains, paid Gordon regular summer visits. Bearing the burden of each other's illness, tensions rose. On occasion, Gordon complained to friends that his mother's condition was for him all too confining. But they got on—against the odds, both to die in 1915.

Gordon fished hard throughout the season, read everything about fly fishing he could get his hands on—especially the English authors. From his reading he taught himself to tie the flies that would make him famous. Season by season, he became more and more the master angler/fly tyer of the Neversink—the complete American fly fisher.

Following the collapse of the family railroad interests, Gordon's paternal legacy was seriously diminished. He was able to augment his meager income, however, by dressing flies to order at $1.25 the dozen for a clientele of prosperous, vacationing anglers from metropolitan centers who came to the Catskills as to Mecca, where they sought to lionize Gordon and fish his definitive dressings.

Gordon was an inveterate correspondent with family, friends, and other anglers. A letter of inquiry to England's great Frederic Halford, the father of the dry fly, got from Halford on 22 February 1890, a full set of his new and revolutionary dry flies. That was a seminal day in the post for American anglers; for thus the dry fly arrived in America to be naturalized to these shores by Theodore Gordon. Though Gordon was neither the only nor the first to take up the floating fly in America, his study, practice, and ensuing reputation were to do for the "dry" what Hamlet says the actor does for his time: show its "form and pressure."

Though Gordon took to Halford's dry flies with enthusiasm, he realized that they would not readily suit the requirements of our often rougher American rivers and streams, with their many more diverse hatches of insects. Halford's flies would require considerable adaptation and the addition of wholly new patterns of imitation. In 1890, there was no full and systematic entomology of American stream insects as was available in England, and Gordon fondly hoped that some American would soon rise to the occasion. His own efforts to classify the mayfly were only tentative.

Still, he was always learning. "We can never learn all there is

in fly fishing, but we can keep an open mind, and not be too sure of anything.... It is a fascinating business" (14 May 1912).[3] Constant learning was what he said he liked best about fishing, its never-ending challenge and novelty. He was as without dogma as any mortal could be.

Though companions in the culture of angling, Gordon and Halford were profoundly different. The English Halford, ever the dogmatist, insisted that as a matter of angling decorum, scientific rectitude, and social class status, fishing the dry fly, and fishing it properly, on his chalk streams, was the solely acceptable behavior. Not so for our Gordon, whose mind was of that restless, inquiring, pragmatic American breed, always experimental and always open to the next idea.

Gordon's work at his vise initiated perhaps the most significant movement in American fly tying: the Catskill School. On the assumption that a fly ought to suggest, if not imitate, insects actually encountered on our American streams, Gordon's dressings took on a sparse, somber-bright delicacy got by slender, nicely tapered, rather short dubbed or quill bodies. Hackles were selected for their stiff, glossy barbs in exactly the right duns, creams, gingers, and browns. The favored wing material, and basic to the genius of the Catskill School, was the lemon barred side of the wood duck. These delicately barred feathers suggested better than any other the even more delicately marked venation of a mayfly's wing. The tail, though in some cases also of wood duck, more frequently employed stiff, slightly elongated hackle barbs. These helped the flies to "cock," to sit up high and dry on the surface, as Halford insisted they must. Finally, the heads of Catskill drys are idiomatic, wonderfully slender and neat, and at the height of the style preserving a bit of bare steel between the head and the eye of the hook. These flies speak of Nature itself and astonish with their superb, withal, conservative beauty.

The Collection of the American Museum of Fly Fishing

Theodore Gordon as a teenage sportsman; he obtained some of his best fly-tying materials by hunting.

Photo by Enrico Ferorelli from *Land of Little Rivers* by Austin McK. Francis

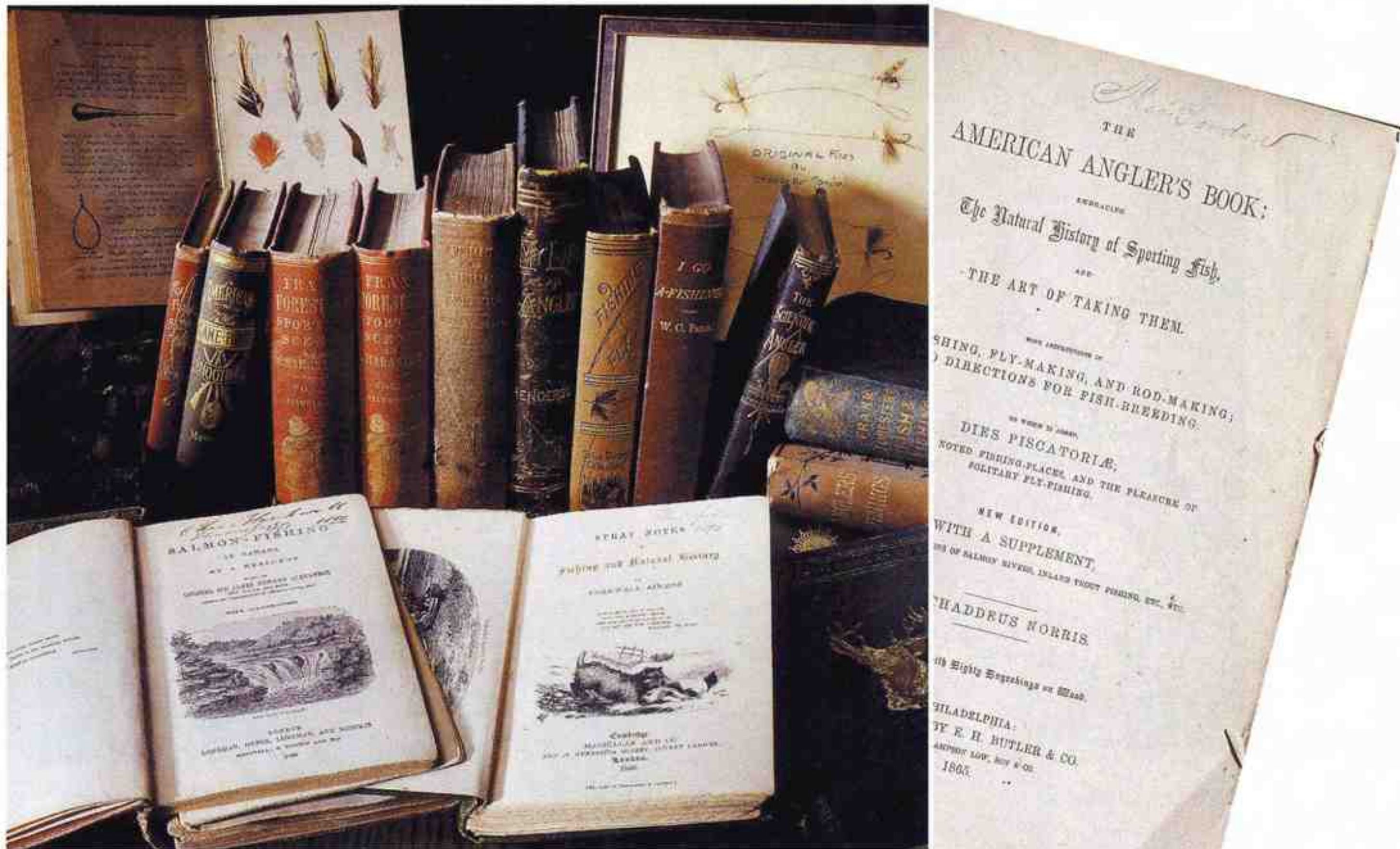
The Theodore Gordon fly box, which resides at the Anglers' Club of New York.

A representative half-dozen patterns developed by the Catskill tyers would include the Light Cahill, the Hendrickson, the March Brown, the Gray Fox, the Quill Gordon, along with that great searching fly: the Fan Wing Royal Coachman. The Quill Gordon was Theodore Gordon's emblematic contribution to what we might call "The American Collection." It remains essential to any well-appointed fly box.

In his earlier years Gordon remarked time and again on how difficult it was for him to get fly-tying materials, there being for practical purposes no American suppliers. Ordering from England, the only other alternative, was not without its frustrations. He wanted, particularly, stiffer, more web-free, glossier hackles than the English were content to use. He was a stickler for getting just the right shades of color and textures into his flies. Forever on the lookout for them on the birds he shot, in milliners shops, costumers, and among fellow fly tyers—wherever silk, feather, and fur might be found—he bummed, borrowed, and begged whatever he could. And returned in kind.

Far from becoming a Halfordian purist, Gordon never gave up entirely his straps of two or three wet flies fished up or

Photos by Cook Neilson



Above: A photograph from the Spring 1994 issue of The American Fly Fisher *of the American Museum of Fly Fishing's collection of books from Theodore Gordon's library, most inscribed by Gordon. Donated to the Museum in the fall of 1994. Right: An inscribed page from the* American Anglers' Book.

down the stream as conditions required. He was acknowleged a master of that technique. Nor did he shun the bucktail come a new spring with its high, rough waters. He loved everything about fishing and fish and wrote enthusiastic letters about the latest Hildebrandt spoons for pike, about casting for bass, and about his yearning to catch a muskie. He was the complete angler.

Unhappily, there were days when he could cast no flies or anything else, days when he was too ill to be far from his bed. He spoke of a *perishing goneness.* "I will be working cheerfully at something and this goneness will suddenly grab me" (12 February 1915).[4] On these days he contented himself with tying flies, reading and writing, or perhaps just dreaming of the river on which, he could admit, he was not as strong a wader as he would like to be, that his "thin legs" would sometimes let him down.

Some winter days, too impossibly cold in his drafty old farmhouse to sit at his table by the kitchen window to tie flies, he might be compelled just to hover over his woodstove, feeding it constantly. On one of those days, he discovered that he could sit by his stove and, without his vise, hand-hold the hooks on which he could tie quite nicely, especially the hackle patterns.

The 1880s were a watershed of development for fly fishing in America and in England. For Gordon the high point must have been the arrival of Halford's dry flies at the very end of the decade, but he had always taken a lively interest in the development of new tackle and techniques. He welcomed, for instance, flies tied on eyed hooks as Halford advocated. Their advantage over gut snells or loops wrapped onto blind hook shanks was clearly apparent to him.

He was enthusiastic about the new split-cane rods. Their fast, stiff, six-sided superiority, especially in the tapers of Hiram Leonard, were to carry the day for fly fishing. A Leonard tournament model of 10 feet and 6 ounces was Gordon's favorite, but how a man of his slight build could wield a rod of that magnitude all day, we might well wonder.

Essential for the new rods were the oil-impregnated tapered silk lines. Fly lines now had sufficient weight for long casts and could be greased to float. When cast from the new rods, they made possible dry-fly fishing as we know it—false casting to dry the fly, driving it well upstream into the wind, and then controlling its drift. It had to have been exciting.

On the dark side of things, Gordon witnessed the virtual disappearance of the beloved Eastern brook trout from its native range in the Eastern states. Floods, droughts, industrial pollution, lumbering, and overfishing all contributed to the

Photo courtesy *Land of Little Rivers* by Austin McK. Francis

Theodore Gordon with an unidentified young woman, possibly the one he referred to as "the best chum I had in fishing."

lovely but vulnerable "trout's" near demise. (Gordon always resisted thinking of the brook trout as a char. For him the brookie was a TROUT and that was that!) Rescue of the fisheries came with the introduction of the German brown trout in 1883. Gordon welcomed the foreigner. It was exactly the right breed at the right moment to close the circuit of success for the dry fly's development. The "yellow trout's" readiness to feed at the surface, its ability to thrive in warmer water and moderate pollution, be prolific, and grow big recommended it, even if it was not as succulent at table as the brook.

Later, when from California the rainbow began to appear in eastern waters, he was expansive in his approval of what he felt were the excelling qualities of that western trout now come east.

Today we may flinch at Gordon's frequent remarking on the many and heavy "baskets" of trout he killed. He writes, ". . . on one opening day I made a basket of thirty-eight good fish during a snowstorm. . . ."[5] We read on, somehow expecting him to regret his kill. But he does not. A quarter of a century into our practice of catch and release, we wonder how it could ever have been thus.

He deeply regretted the increasing privatization of the most productive stretches on the Catskill streams by the rich and powerful. The wealth of big-city club men was too much for many farmers along the streams to resist, and so they sold their leases. When these vacationing anglers sought out Gordon to claim him for their own, he would turn down their invitations to fish their well-stocked and private waters. The dean of the Catskills said that he preferred to work over the fewer and tougher trout in "free" public water.

Gordon was on every bit as intimate and eloquent terms with the natural world around him as was Izaak Walton two hundred years earlier. In fact, there are those who have called Gordon the American Walton. His notes and letters are punctuated with his keen and appealing observations on the rivers, forests, and fields around him. Not to fishing alone, he was devoted to his shotgun and upland shooting and was afield whenever his wintertime health and open season permitted. He responded to nature in one breath as a problem in conservation and the next in aesthetic pleasure.

He thought fly fishing an ideal activity for women and wondered that more had not taken it up. We know of but one woman, other than his mother, who played a role in his life, a mysterious young woman of whom he said, "The best chum I ever had in fishing was a girl, and she tramped just as hard and fished quite as patiently as any man I ever knew" (20 October 1906).[6]

Among the few photographs of Gordon, perhaps the most fetching is one with this unknown lady, wading in her skirts with fly rod well bent into a fish. [This photo appears on our cover.—ED.] Gordon wades at her side in an attitude suggesting admiration. Who was she? What became of her? We want her story—a story it seems we cannot have.

Our Gordon indulged in none of the cant and self-promotion of today's aggressive fly-fishing professionals who so dominate the sport. He would have rejected out of hand even the suggestion that he was what we regard today as an "expert." Modesty defined the man.

Out of his intense experience with trout and fly, he contributed what, in that modesty, he called his "notes" to England's influential *Fishing Gazette* where he won great

Photograph by Cook Neilson

Flies tied by Theodore Gordon displayed with letters from the Museum's collection written by Gordon to Theodore Peck.

respect and renown as the premier American angler. After 1900, his notes also appeared in the American magazine *Forest and Stream*, but during his lifetime, he would remain better known in England than in his homeland. Writing without any hint of self-consciousness or of the stylist, seemingly without plan, he appears merely to have wanted to talk with other anglers: to compare his notes with theirs in an effort to keep on learning about fishing.

Gordon's failure to collect, for whatever reason, his material into a book (he may have been doing so at his death) doubtless kept him from getting his definitive experience of fly fishing to a larger American angling public, and so he was to remain imperfectly known until 1947 when, with the publication of his letters and notes, edited by John McDonald, he at last took his pride of place in the fellowship of anglers.

Theodore Gordon, "The Sage of the Neversink," died at sixty-one years of age on the first of May 1915, in Bradley, New York, close by the Neversink. Tuberculosis, which may have been stalking him all his life, almost certainly was the killer. He lies in a family vault beside his mother in tiny Marble Cemetery in the East Village of Manhattan. His reach of the Neversink lies buried deep under a reservoir of that name.

Theodore Gordon defined a fully human life in the cast of a fly to a trout; and through his account of it, became a living presence to me on that special winter afternoon.

NOTE

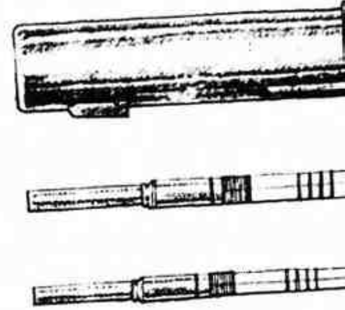
More than fifty years have passed since John McDonald and New York's Theodore Gordon Flyfishers club set out to recover the neglected Gordon. The first edition of *The Complete Fly-Fisherman: The Notes and Letters of Theodore Gordon*, collected and edited by McDonald, appeared in 1947 with later editions in 1968 and 1989.

ENDNOTES

1. John McDonald, *Quill Gordon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1972), p. 3.
2. McDonald, *Quill Gordon*, pp. 10–11.
3. John McDonald, *The Complete Fly Fisherman: The Notes and Letters of Theodore Gordon* (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1947), p. 466.
4. McDonald, *The Complete Fly Fisherman*, p. 507.
5. Ibid., p. 33.
6. Ibid., p. 154.

The Collection of the American Museum of Fly Fishing

This photo of Theodore Gordon appeared with his obituary in the June 1915 issue of Forest and Stream.



Theodore Gordon and Bamboo Rods

by Michael Scott

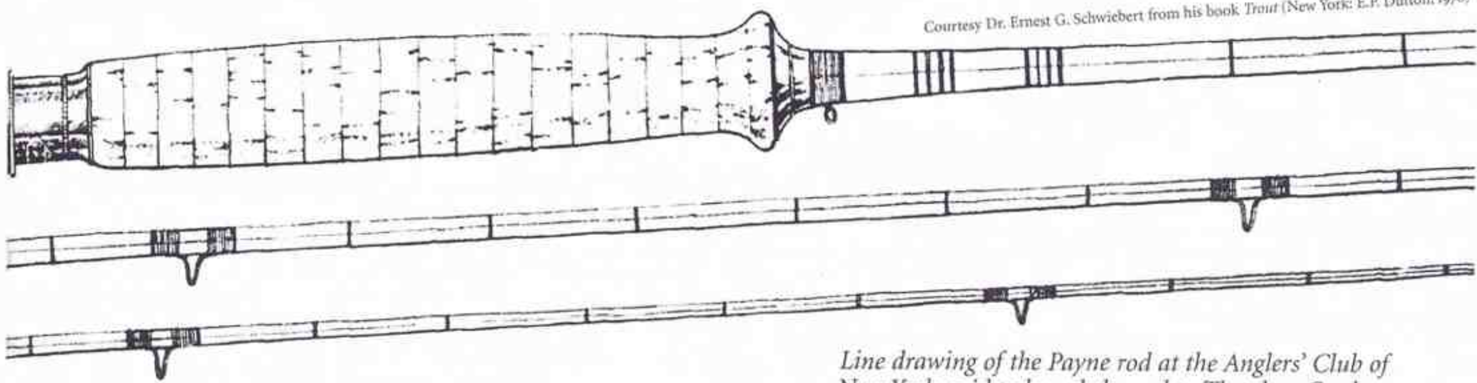
Though once a real person, he has become our myth.

—John McDonald[1]

ON THE LAST DAY of April or perhaps the first day of May in 1915, a small, consumptive man died lonely and obscure in a cold cabin in the Catskills. A few days later, his meager possessions were disposed of, after a brief, sparsely attended funeral service. These possessions included books, papers, letters, an artificial bait collection, and a few fly rods: a Hardy, a Heddon, and two—maybe three or four—Leonards. Some of his things were passed on to his few friends, others were taken by the two men and two women, apparently relatives, who appeared in Sullivan County for the funeral service. An unknown number of items, perhaps all that remained, were burned by his landlord's wife, who was fearful of the tuberculosis or the emphysema or lung cancer that finally claimed him. His body was taken away by train and its resting place passed from local memory (if it was ever known at all) and remained unknown for more than forty years. During that interval, the memory of the man would be transformed from that of a lonely, complex, obscure fly tyer and fisherman into the first major icon of American fly fishing, to many the "father of dry fly angling in America."[2] He was, of course, Theodore Gordon.

In his later years, Gordon wrote an ongoing series of short articles for the British and American sporting press—in particular, the *Fishing Gazette* and *Forest and Stream*—and conducted a wide correspondence with his Catskill neighbors

Courtesy Dr. Ernest G. Schwiebert from his book *Trout* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978)

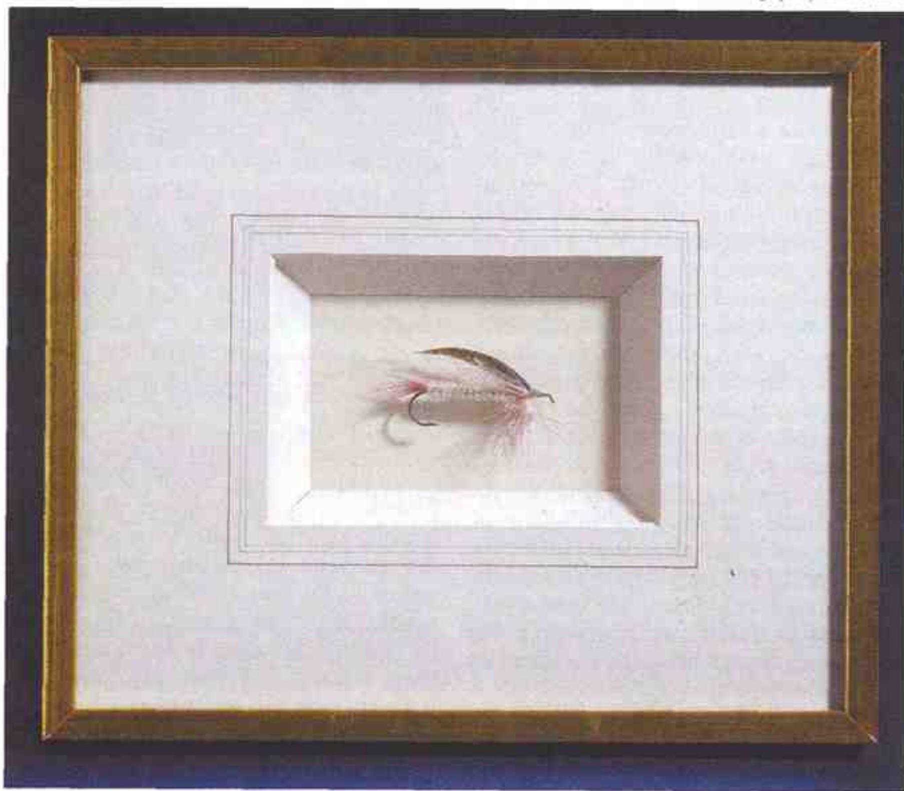


Line drawing of the Payne rod at the Anglers' Club of New York, said to have belonged to Theodore Gordon.

and with various fly-fishing luminaries of the time, among them G. E. M. Skues and Frederic Halford (who I believe *is* the undisputed father of the dry fly and its "proper" application). Perhaps on a par with actual fly fishing for trout was Gordon's interest in the artificial fly itself. One Catskill pattern still bears his name—the Quill Gordon—although he was perhaps just as satisfied with his Bumble Puppy, a pattern that, in a form similar to Gordon's design, is still used today for night fishing for big browns, primarily in the East. Gordon was also fascinated with and wrote at some length on the split-cane bamboo rods of his day (the period from 1880 through 1915).

Now, eighty-five years later, it is still possible to attempt a look at Gordon and try to say something about him and the rods he and his contemporaries used. I think it is appropriate, before delving into Gordon's writings on bamboo rods, that we take a look not at the myth he has become, but at the man himself: the fading, solitary curmudgeon struggling for economic, physical, and spiritual existence on the trout streams of New York while America was young and still full of possibilities.

Photograph by Cook Neilson

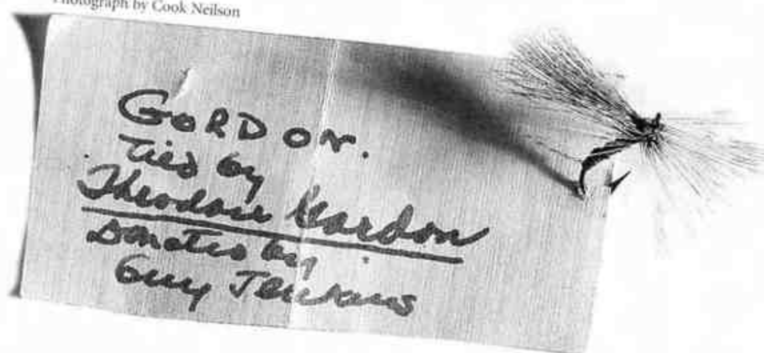


A Bumble Puppy, tied by Herman Christian and framed by William Cushner, from the collection of the American Museum of Fly Fishing.

I have extracted from John McDonald's *The Complete Fly Fisherman* a great deal of Gordon's own words concerning bamboo rods—their use, actions, makers—and some ruminations as to why he preferred some rods over others.[3] I have attempted to present Gordon's ideas, likes, dislikes, speculations, and experience with the split-cane bamboo rods he knew, owned, and fished more than one hundred years ago; rods that if most of us owned today would likely be carefully preserved and gently handled. Through Gordon's eyes we can get some feel for these fine, expensive fishing tools and the men who used them.

According to Paul Schullery, "Gordon was a perfect martyr, just obscure enough for his achievement to lie fallow and forgotten for a tasteful interval before his resurrection as a new, and wonderfully different person."[4] How did this happen? Other than Gordon's own published writings and the letters collected in *The Complete Fly Fisherman,* there is little of substance about Theodore Gordon in the literature of the sport. The most exhaustive work about Gordon to date appeared in *Fishless Days, Angling Nights* by Sparse Gray Hackle (Alfred Miller), who was a bit of a Gordon nut himself. The chapter in Miller's book, "The Search for Theodore Gordon," is composed mainly of edited interviews with Gordon's Sullivan County neighbors and friends, Herman Christian and Roy Steenrod, along with some of Miller's own conjectures and conclusions. Other writers' accounts are merely summaries of Miller's work or selected extracts from McDonald, often

Photograph by Cook Neilson



A Quill Gordon tied by Theodore Gordon from the collection of the American Museum of Fly Fishing.

Courtesy of the Catskill Fly Fishing Center

One of the few photographs of Theodore Gordon fishing from the collection of the Catskill Fly Fishing Center.

propagating errors in both or containing the writer's personal opinions disguised as fact.

An exception to such propagation of error, and a fine synthesis of the sources, can be found in Paul Schullery's chapter on Gordon in his ground-breaking *American Fly Fishing: A History*. Schullery explores many Gordon myths and effectively disposes of the more blatant ones. Although these myths are interesting and tell us some things about their creation and propagation, they don't say much of substance about Gordon the man. The myths did, however, serve to make Theodore Gordon the first—and so far only—American fly-fishing saint. When the myth-makers were done with the original Gordon, there emerged a new person. Schullery says, "What survives, then, is a tragic story, of a promising young man whose misfortune compelled him to lead a simple life, one that if he might not have preferred it, was at least what we would have preferred for him. He became the total angler, devoting his entire energy to learning and understanding fly fishing."[5]

Gordon the man remains alive and accessible to us because he was a prolific and capable writer, documenting his fishing and fly-tying experiences on American waters, discoursing on ethics, tactics, and ecology, offering the occasional insight into his personal affairs. He wrote no book on flies or fishing, although there is a tantalizing suggestion that a manuscript he wrote was one of those items fed into the fire by his landlord's wife after his death.[6] However, he wrote many articles in the *Fishing Gazette* and *Forest and Stream*. In the 1890s his writing drew the attention of Frederic M. Halford, who sent Gordon four dozen of his early floating (dry) fly patterns. Gordon kept most of those flies, perhaps recognizing their importance, and certainly was flattered to have received them direct from the master, although he never totally bought into the Halford cult. He corresponded with Halford and read many of his books,[7] but he never became a dictatorial dry-fly fanatic as did many others were who espoused Halford's ideas.[8]

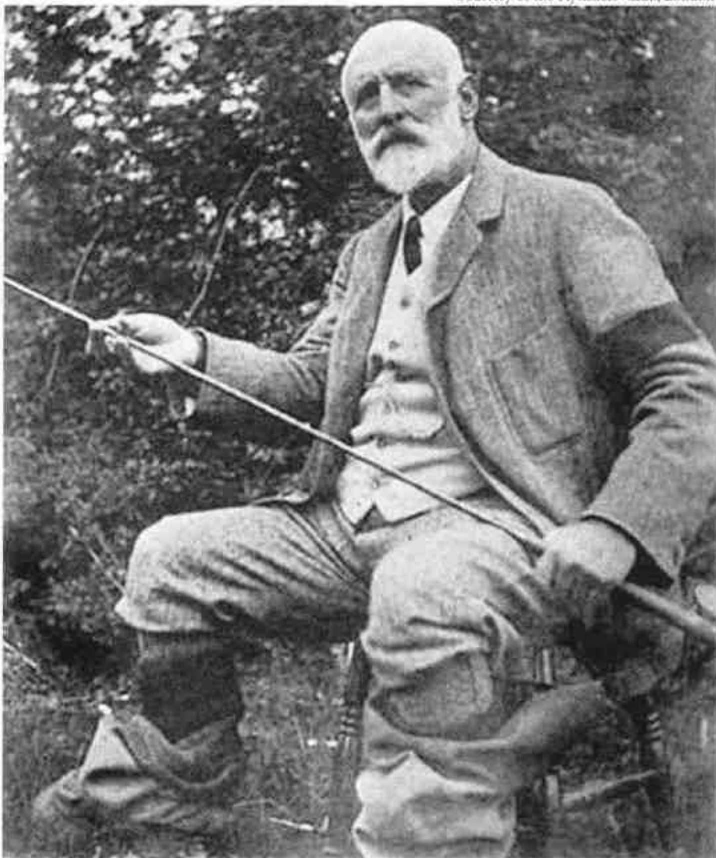
Gordon was not a member of the economic middle or upper classes, as were many of the prominent figures in fly fishing at the time—men like Halford, George Marryat, and Louis Rhead. He never made a solid business of fly fishing, which undoubtedly increased the purity of his legend. He may have scrambled for a living, especially after his health finally broke and he moved permanently to Sullivan County. He lived with and passed on his considerable fishing and tying skills in a relatively democratic way, although he always retained a degree of cranky, upper-crust Victorian prejudice against the "lower" classes. It is likely that if Gordon had been a member of America's wealthy sporting upper class, his writings would attract little attention today outside of obscure historians interested in tracing the technical and philosophical development of fly fishing.

His articles in the sporting press served as a bridge between fly fishers in the mother country and the new world at a time when fly fishing was undergoing considerable and fundamental change. New fly lines were introduced. New rods were being developed to cast the new lines upstream and into the wind when needed and to handle the quick and vigorous false casting required to dry the little flies for the next float. Ring-eyed, light-wire hooks were developed in England which, perhaps more than any other thing, made the development of small dry flies possible. Brown trout were introduced into British and American waters in spite of cries of doom and ruin. Halford was codifying dry-fly patterns and principles on the waters of the Test. Gordon was working out the American versions of those same fly patterns suitable for a rougher, more brawling strain of trout and fisherman. If there ever was a "golden age" of fly fishing, this was it.

A Brief Biography

Theodore Gordon was born in Pittsburgh on 18 September 1854 to a reasonably well-to-do family. His mother, Fanny Jones, came from upstate New York, but was orphaned early and raised

Courtesy of the Flyfishers' Club, London



Frederic M. Halford, pictured here with rod and waders, was an early and passionate proponent of dry-fly fishing. His correspondence with Gordon had a tremendous influence on Gordon's own thinking, although Gordon never abandoned fishing with other kinds of flies.

by her aunt and uncle in Mobile, Alabama. She married a Theodore Gordon, probably also from Mobile. Theodore senior died of malaria soon after young Theodore's birth—some sources say only three months later—in Mobile, where he is said to have returned for health reasons. Mobile is not known for its healthy climate, so this may have been one of those little lies we encounter so often in the recounting of the Gordons' economic history. In any case, the Gordons had moved back to the South shortly after Theodore's birth.

Schullery writes that Gordon's childhood was spent both in Pennsylvania and in the South where he became an avid outdoorsman. It is possible to infer that during this period Theodore and his mother were well-off financially and traveled back and forth between north and south in the years before the Civil War. Theodore's attraction to the outdoors was amplified because it also got him out of the house and away from his domineering mother. He had respiratory problems as a child and his general health was bad. His mother, as a result, increasingly kept him indoors and away from school. He probably had few playmates. This was likely the origin of his lifelong dislike of and embitterment toward her.

As a teenager and a young man he lived in Savannah, Georgia, and Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and likely traveled frequently between the two towns. Then, about 1893, his health and the family fortunes failed. We don't have the details, although Gordon does provide a clue in one of his letters to G. E. M. Skues: "That was before the midnight receivership of the Georgia Central Railroad, which practically ruined your humble servant and thousands of better men and women."[9] Fanny and Theodore, who was then about thirty-nine or forty years of age, were forced to move to New Jersey and depend on the generosity of relatives.

Financial insolvency and dependence on his kin possibly further embittered the middle-aged Theodore. There are indications that he never forgave his mother for this downturn in their fortunes and social status. Later, when Theodore was living in the Catskills, his mother would come up to Liberty for the summer and Gordon would go visit for a week or two. She never came to him. And late in his life, when his mother was sick, Gordon made many excuses as to why he could not manage to travel the few miles to see her.

He evidently had some schooling or training in finance as there are indications he worked at accounting and bookkeeping. He also wrote obliquely of doing office work in the city. About 1900, when he was only forty-six, in addition to his respiratory problem, his general health failed. This was probably the result of the developing tuberculosis combined with either lung cancer or emphysema, or both, all of it exacerbated by his ravenous cigarette habit. Now a semi-invalid, he moved in permanently with his relatives, the Pecks in Haverstraw, New York, who furnished him with separate quarters for living and tying flies. It was probably during this period when he turned to commercial tying, an activity natural to him and of increasing importance as a means of livelihood.

For the next five years, he made frequent trips with some of his Peck nephews to the Beaverkill, Neversink, and other Catskill rivers. About 1905 he decided, for reasons still unknown, to move permanently to the Catskills, giving up any occasional employment he may have still maintained in the city. Why? Perhaps he found it easier and cheaper just to stay in the country near the rivers. Or, perhaps there were other reasons. Living poor in the Catskills is not easy; winters can be brutal, especially if one is old, sick, and alone in paltry

accommodations.[10] But for whatever reasons, he spent the remaining ten years of his life in Sullivan County living sometimes in hotels, sometimes in various inadequate quarters, fishing, tying flies, and writing near the rivers he loved.

From 1906 or 1907 until 1908 his mother's health took a bad turn. He was with her—probably in the Hall House in Liberty, New York—during this time, seldom leaving to fish. In 1908 she went to stay with relatives in South Orange, New Jersey, and Theodore wrote of finally being free to devote his time to fishing again.[11]

Gordon wrote and fished and worked on his flies. He endured lengthy spells of bad health, sometimes unable even to walk to the river to cast a line. He bought a small typewriter and pecked out articles on fishing while huddled near the woodstove. He purchased trout fry and planted them secretly in depleted streams. He regularly brought neighbors a brace of trout; drank to excess (or rarely drank at all, depending on whom one believes); spat on the floor while tying flies; chain-smoked cigarettes, rolling each quickly, twisting the ends of the paper to make them stay, and quickly discarding one after a few puffs, then rolling another. Of his closest friends and neighbors he called one by his last name, Christian, always, and would show him nothing of fly tying; but the other he always called Mr. Steenrod and taught him to tie with and without a vise.

He was a local enigma. As Steenrod said, "If Gordon liked you, it was all right, but if not, you had better keep out of his way; he was kind of a cranky old cuss."[12]

If we consider this latter period as the life of Gordon the man, rather than the final passion of Saint Theodore, it appears that he became increasingly alienated from his family, his mother, and from society in general. He complained about Fanny right up to the end, and, a few days before he died, he greeted a relative who had been summoned from New Jersey by a worried Steenrod with a testy, "What did you come up here for?"[13]

Something happened about 1912 or 1913 that signaled a real change in Gordon's situation. He was staying over winters in cold accommodations, sometimes tying flies over the stove to keep his fingers warm. He wrote more often of being sick and weak, too weak at times to walk the few yards to the river.

The night of 30 April 1915, Gordon penned a late, short letter to his great friend and correspondent G. E. M. Skues, and sometime before dawn succumbed to his lifelong illness and died. I personally prefer to believe Gordon actually died on the first day of May, as would have been only fitting for the man who spent most of his last years studying, fishing, and trying to capture with hook and feather the mayflies of the Catskills.

Gordon on Bamboo

Gordon wrote much about fly rods. He wrote more about flies, the artificial and the natural, but he also devoted much thought and ink to fly rods. Between 1889 or 1890, when he became enamored of the British dry-fly method, and 1915, the year he died, Gordon's views about what constituted a "good" fly rod changed considerably. Gordon *and* fly fishing underwent dramatic changes during that twenty-five-year period, and his writing mirrors that fact.

Before Frederic Halford's publication of *Floating Flies and How to Dress Them* in 1886, most fly fishing was done with long, whippy rods of 12, 14, even 16 feet, which flipped a cast of wet flies—usually three or four flies to a "cast"—across, but not far across, a stream. The angler then followed their progress down and across with the rod. The lines were light, not having to bend a powerful shorter rod so as to load enough power to shoot line upstream, sometimes into the wind.[14] Such rods were necessary to prevent breaking off the fish on the downstream take, especially since everyone who was not still using braided horsehair fished with gut for leaders, and gut, especially old gut, was notoriously fragile. As rods began to change and became lighter and more powerful, the best solution to connect heavy fly line to light fly was still gut, and it was always the weak link. Gordon complained frequently of this.[15]

The development of the lightweight, ring-eyed hook by Henry Hall and others was a major factor in the development and spread of the "modern" dry-fly method—that set of fly design and fishing practices embodied in Halford's works. The new hooks were smaller, lighter, better tempered, and were manufactured with an eye of some sort, which not only permitted a small fly to be dressed on them that would not be sunk by a heavy hook and snell, but also allowed frequent and relatively easy onstream fly changes.

Hall, Halford, Marryat, and others used this type of hook to develop small, high-floating dry flies for the slow chalkstream waters they fished. They created these flies and developed a methodology for fishing them, a methodology that also relied upon heavier woven lines and the new split-cane bamboo fly rod, especially the ones being built in America by makers such as Leonard and Payne. Fly fishing with small flies, casting upstream to rising and often spooky fish, required an appreciable degree of accuracy and delicacy in presentation not possible with the old wet-fly rods. Also, a lighter rod was a virtue because one might have to false cast a few hundred times a day when fishing dry flies, and those old wooden or wood-bamboo hybrid fly rods were heavy. Even the early English dry-fly rods were heavy. Although Gordon was not a strong man, he favored heavy rods for most of his life, but even so, he complained that a Hardy bamboo rod acquired in the 1880s was so heavy that it wore him out.[16] The early English bamboo rods must have been heavy indeed.

A Brief Look at Gordon's Rods

It is possible to identify some of the fly rods Gordon owned and used, but, as with so much about Gordon's life, this is not an easy task, for the sources are ambiguous and incomplete.

Gordon evidently fished fresh and salt, bait and fly—mostly wet fly—until he discovered Halford. He admitted, "The bacilli or microbe of the dry fly entered my system about the year 1889 or 1890 and the attack which followed was quite severe. I imported an English rod, dry flies, gossamer silkworm gut and all other prescriptions which I presumed were necessary to effect a cure."[17] Although this new, imported rod was a genuine English dry-fly rod, it damn near killed him. In Gordon's estimation, this rod changed from "an imported rod by the most celebrated maker" to " . . . a big rather soft stout rod, no more fit for dry-fly fishing to my mind than a coach whip."[18] Gordon's initial impressions of this rod were glowing:

> About ten years ago I imported an English rod by the most celebrated maker, and have used it cruelly in much heavy fishing. The handle is very long, and it has a rubber button and spear. The tapered ferrule with lock joint struck me as funny. For a long time it rattled and had a slight tendency to turn. The rod was about 10 ft. 3 in. in length, in two joints, and was rather inconvenient in traveling. The weight is about 10 oz. All things considered, it was a fine, durable weapon, up to any amount of work, and almost unbreakable. A 20 lb. salmon would not be too much for it if backed by sufficient line. It is a thoroughly well-made, serviceable article. I have never found it very fatiguing to fish with,

> although I am not a strong man. It lacks, perhaps, the sharp, quick action of many American rods.[19]

However, about seven years later, Gordon complained that this rod was unnecessarily heavy and caused him great fatigue.[20]

Gordon's constant favorite was his old Leonard, a 10-foot, 6¼-ounce split-cane rod he called " . . . the best most perfect 10 foot Leonard rod I ever handled. . . ."[21] Gordon came by it in the mid-1880s through a friend who offered it to Gordon for forty-five dozen flies. The rod originally sold for fifty dollars. Gordon said, "I was idle at the time and jumped at the chance to get that rod on any terms. How I did enjoy fishing with it."[22] Leonard was not working in Tonkin cane when this rod was made, but even so, Gordon kept it always, even when his tastes turned to shorter, more powerful, and lighter rods. This rod might have played a part in the mystery of the Payne rod, which is discussed later.

On 8 April 1912, sixteen friends presented Gordon with two rods, both Leonards. One was a Catskill, a 9-foot, 4¼-ounce dry-fly rod; the other a 9-foot, 5¼-ounce Leonard Tournament rod that, according to Gordon, was the equivalent of Skues's favorite rod, also a Leonard. Writing to Skues that April, he said, "Yesterday I received two beautiful Leonard rods and was informed that several angling friends had clubbed together to present me with a new rod."[23] Of the two, Gordon kept the 9-foot, 5¼-ounce Leonard.

In March 1915 he wrote to both Guy Jenkins,[24] a young friend and neighbor, and to Roy Steenrod,[25] the postmaster at Liberty at that time and his best friend, about two new rods. These were considerably lighter than any previous rods Gordon had owned or even considered: 3⅝ ounces and 3 7/16 ounces, respectively. This is interesting because Gordon had gone to some length earlier on the disadvantages of the light rod after many years of writing in the *Fishing Gazette* and *Forest and Stream* about the superiority of the heavier rod. Perhaps this change in attitude derived from both experience and his increasing weakness. He wrote:

> Very light rods may be used in boat work, particularly if one has a good man at the paddle or oars. One can cheat the wind, and if a big fish is hooked the guide will back up the rod, in playing it, doing quite half the work.[26]

And:

> Personally, I do not consider weight on the scales of great importance in choosing a rod. Of course, it is pleasant to be able to say, "I killed a ten-pound salmon on my five-ounce rod," but that same rod might have been far more agreeable to fish with if it had a bigger handle, and weighed an ounce or two more. It is the weight outboard, the leverage against you, that paralyses the grasping hand. I have said this before, however.[27]

Of the two light rods, it appears that he kept the lighter. He mentioned to Steenrod that it was a " . . . small dainty fly rod and you like to handle and fiddle with it."[28]

Courtesy of the Flyfishers' Club, London

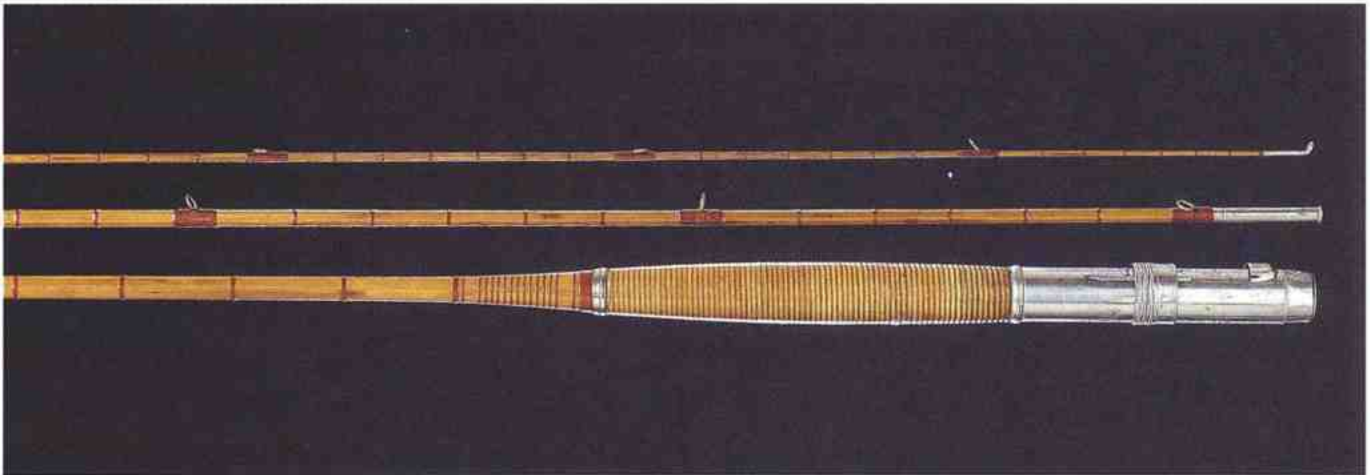
G. E. M. Skues, to whom Gordon wrote his last words just before his death.

The Best All-Around Fly Rod

Near the end of his life, Gordon evidently spent a great deal of time thinking about, possibly dreaming of, the best all-around fly rod. For a man who loved fishing above all else, who did not have the financial means of his peers—men like Halford, Skues, or George La Branche—a man who possessed only four or five fly rods over a span of twenty-five years, it must have been hard to read about the new rods, to see them in use on the streams he haunted and to know that he would never have even a few of all that he craved. He instead dreamed of the one best rod for all fishing, which, if not perfect in all situations, would be serviceable and perhaps attainable. In this excerpt from McDonald, Gordon tells us a great deal about the "ideal" rod and about his own preferences.

> I think a great deal about the man of limited means and opportunities. He may be a fine fisher and love the sport passionately. He loves a fine rod and will deny himself many things to get it, but he can have but one for all his fly-fishing, from the most delicate casting in hard-fished brooks to playing successfully some monster of the river, the prize of a lifetime. If he is a dry-fly or up-stream fisher he requires a rod with considerable backbone (power), which will enable him to cast into the wind with accuracy. It is exasperating to be obliged to make half a dozen casts to place the fly correctly.
>
> Very little has been said about the handles on fly rods, and in the effort to obtain light weights on the scales the hand grasp has been cut down to an extremely small diameter. Ask any fly-fisher who is not ambidextrous, and fishes only occasional-

Photograph by Cook Neilson



One of Gordon's favorite rods was his 10-foot Leonard. Although the rod Gordon owned disappeared shortly after his death, this example from the Museum's collection, made in the 1880s, gives an idea of what the rod probably looked like.

ly, where he feels most fatigue and he will be apt to tell you that it is in the grasp of the right hand. Personally, I like the old Wells hand grasp and I see that it has been copied in England. They have been imitating our best rods for years, but we doubt if they can duplicate the life and responsiveness of the American. One can become accustomed to any action, but to have a rod that suits your style and temperament is delightful. It adds greatly to one's pleasure, and the mere casting of the fly is enjoyed even when the trout are down and will not rise. If you are limited to one rod, do not select one of the extremes in weight, although the tendency is apparently in the direction of short and light rods. A six-ounce rod of ten feet may be far more comfortable and satisfactory in use than a three-ounce of eight feet. Some of the best fishermen use the nine-and-a-half-foot rod, although the nine-footer is a great favorite with dry-fly men; but suit *yourself*, that is the great desideratum. One man wants a rod that plays freely right into the hand, another prefers a firm butt and fine point. The best rod I ever had measured ten feet, yet I once had a very short weapon that was quite perfect for small streams or boat work. But we are selecting one rod for its suitability to all sorts of conditions that will afford us the greatest pleasure in casting and effectively handling hooked fish. We may have to cast the smallest of midge "flies," or a bass fly, upon occasions. Compare a number of rods in the shop with reel in place, make them play from the wrist in a small figure of eight. Revolve slowly and see that there are no weak points.[29]

Not surprisingly, Gordon never found his one best rod. If just throwing out a fly and hauling in a fish was all that was wanted in a rod, any middle-of-the-road tool would do. But there is little art and no grace in that. To a fly fisherman, the rod is the instrument that expresses the art.

The Casting Lesson

In one article published in the *Fishing Gazette*, Gordon describes his casting method in some detail. It is not much different from the way many of us learned to cast a fly. Notice the reference to a practice rig for indoor casting. A similar product recently sold as the "Fly-O."[30]

> There are some good rods that one loves to cast with, even when there are no fish. It is best to have water to practice on, but a lawn or open field is good enough. You can get the idea of how to cast in a room, with a switch and a piece of string. Use the wrist in short casts and keep the elbow down near the side. In the back cast never allow the point of the rod to go much beyond the perpendicular. It is the spring of the rod and the wrist that do the trick. It is only in long casts that the whole arm comes into play. Make the rod spring with the wrist; don't just wave it to and fro. Begin with a short line, not much longer than the rod, the longer the line the more difficult it is to allow the correct time before coming forward. . . . A high back cast is most important. Never allow the fly to touch ground or water behind you. A great many people throw the points of their rods too far back in casting and then wonder why so many hooks are broken and flies ruined. I have known men who could cast a long distance and who were quite successful in killing trout who never got over this habit of smashing flies. It is ugly work and it is very expensive.[31]

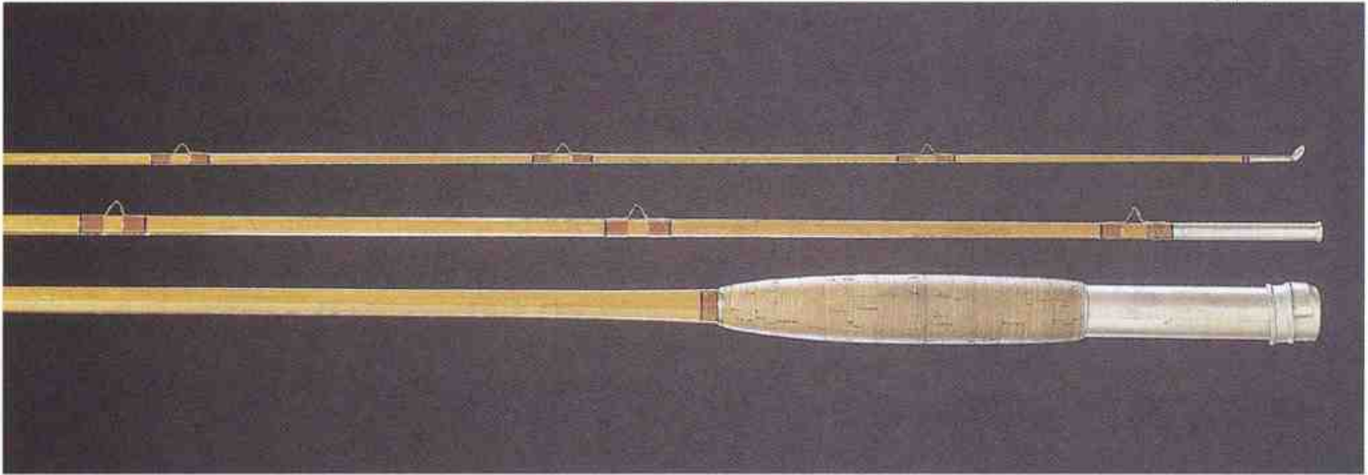
This advice is esentially the same as that offered in modern fly-casting schools, books, and videos. Keeping your elbow locked to your side is a bit Victorian, but the rest is still current (see Joan Wulff's techniques for a modern approach to making "the rod spring with the wrist").

The Mysterious Payne

Now we come to the question of the Payne fly rod. In Miller's recounting of Gordon's story, he writes that Herman Christian told him, "Ed Payne made Gordon a rod about 1895; Gordon tied him thirty-nine dozen flies to pay for it. About 1912, when he was staying at DeMund's Hotel in Neversink, I took him down some feathers and he went in and got this rod and said, 'I don't know anybody who would appreciate it as much as you would,' and gave it to me. I still have it and use it. It is nine and a half feet, three pieces, and of course, soft, wet-fly action."[32] This rod is now in the collection of the Anglers' Club in New York.

In Miller's book, there is a photograph of Christian standing outside his house holding a rod. Perhaps it is a Payne; however, it is not clear that this is the rod referred to by Miller as being given to Christian.

Photograph by Cook Neilson



A 9-foot Leonard, c. 1900, from the Museum's collection.

Ernest Schweibert reproduced a line drawing of this rod in his book *Trout* (see page 9). The interesting thing about this rod is that Gordon never mentions owning a Payne, or even using one, in all his writings published in the *Complete Fly Fisherman.* The only mention of Payne rods by Gordon is in passing and in reference to American rodmakers.

Gordon did write extensively about the rods he owned and fished—and these were not many, considering his long association with fly fishing, nor would this be unexpected, considering his long deteriorating health and poor finances. Consequently, the same rods appear over and over in his letters and articles. But there is no mention of this Payne or of Gordon even owning a Payne rod.

He did, however, acquire his favorite "old Leonard" circa 1885 by tying forty-five dozen flies and mentions this episode a number of times. This rod is always a Leonard, never a Payne. A few examples:

• "I wish you could have cast with my old Leonard before a careless servant crushed the point. It was simply fascinating to use the old thing. Before you knew it you could be casting twice the length of line necessary, just for the pleasure of doing it. It was 10 foot 6¼ oz. rod made of extremely light stiff bamboo. A new top was entirely too heavy for the old butt and middle. It is over 20 years old and the ferrules are worn quite loose."[33]

• "For years I have been in love with a rod which belonged to a friend of mine and one day he said, 'I do not care to sell that rod but if you will tie me all the flies I want, I will give it to you.' I rose to that fly with the greatest eagerness and told him to send me a list. It came and the total was 45 dozen. (The rod cost originally $50.00) It was quite an old rod, but I was well repaid in the pleasure I derived from its use."[34]

• "When I was north a friend who had the best most perfect 10 foot Leonard rod I ever handled offered to give it to me for 45 dozen flies, and another friend begged me to fill up a box and large fly book with flies all moth eaten or used up. I was idle at the time and jumped at the chance to get that rod on any terms. How I did enjoy fishing with it. It is not a poor rod now, though so old and a servant once moved a wardrobe on it when it had fallen down, shortening tip and middle joint. It was far better finished and handsomer than present-day rods. It was *individual.*"[35]

One wonders if Gordon actually had a Payne rod for seventeen years and never once wrote about it, or if he did, why references to it do not appear in *The Complete Fly Fisherman.* It might be that Gordon actually gave his old Leonard to Christian, and this has been wrongly thought by Christian and Miller to be a Payne rod. However, that doesn't make sense, in that it would be immediately obvious whether a rod is a Payne or a Leonard, and, we are told, this same rod is in the possession of the Anglers' Club of New York, an organization imminently capable of making such a distinction. Christian also recounted to Miller that Gordon used the rod's tip case as a walking stick; however, Miller remarks that the same case, now housed with the rod, shows no sign of having been so used.

In a recent phone conversation, Ernest Schwiebert verified that he had used the Payne rod in the Anglers' Club as the model for his drawing of it in *Trout.* It was certainly a Payne and carried a small tag that identified it as Gordon's rod. Schwiebert said the inscription on the tag appeared to be in a "nineteenth-century" hand—certainly old. He also said that many respected fly fishermen of his acquaintance who were close to Gordon's friends also were certain that this Payne belonged to Gordon.

Perhaps. However, it is very unlikely to be the rod Christian described to Miller. Gordon never writes of tying thirty-nine dozen flies for Ed Payne. He did tie forty-five dozen flies for a friend's "most perfect 10 foot Leonard rod . . ."[36]

If the Payne held by the Anglers' Club was Gordon's, it would be interesting to know how this relationship was established, especially in light of Gordon only mentioning Payne rods in passing, never as having owned one or fished with one extensively.

Perhaps new information will come to light to lay this question to rest. Long forgotten letters may appear. Gordon's rumored manuscript may have survived his landlady's fire. It is unlikely, but one can hope.

The Rod Never Fished

By the end of 1914, Gordon's health was on a downward slide from which he

The Payne rod at the Anglers' Club of New York, said to have belonged to Theodore Gordon.

would not recover. The winter of 1915 was deep, hard, and especially difficult for him. He spent time reading, tying, and poring over catalogs and his collection of artificial baits, on which, he admitted in letters to Skues and Steenrod, he was always spending too much of his scarce cash.

In February 1915, he purchased a little Heddon and wrote to Steenrod, "Man alive—you know I went up to $2.25 on a Heddon rod to get over 5 feet. Well, it came this afternoon and a nicer looking, handier little tool for casting and trolling one could hardly want. It is stiff and light as a feather. I never saw a cheap rod finished so well and the guides are file proof metal as hard as an agate. How the devil do they do it?"[37]

In March, he wrote to Steenrod about another new rod.[38] Which rod this was is not certain. It appears that somehow Gordon was actually shopping for a new rod. He wrote to Jenkins about these rods being "sent up," which could mean on inspection prior to a purchase.[39] "The longer I have the rod the better I like it. It is the stiffer of the two sent up and weighs 3⅝ oz., wonderful quickness and power for its weight. What a pleasure one has in a rod if it is a success. I am better this week and am now working on flies for friend No. 2. Of course there will be no fly fishing in April, but men expect flies because the season opens early and it crowds me to try to get enough for a few friends."[40]

As May 1915 approached, the weather worsened along with Gordon's health. He was fated never to fish with this new rod. This early in the year the streams were still closed, and he was far too weak to consider fishing, even had that been possible. In April, Gordon continued to weaken, writing to Skues of "queer nights and short days."[41] And to Steenrod he also revealed how weak he was: "I have fished fly rods of 9½ to 10 ft. 3 inches (the latter 10 oz.) without undue fatigue, and all day, but man, I couldn't stand 2 hours of it now. I must go in for easy things."[42]

This is almost the end. In hindsight, it is easy to see a poignant foreshadowing of Gordon's death the following night. However, Gordon demonstrated no inkling of this in his final letters. He had been sick before, up and down, and this probably seemed no worse than tough times he had overcome in the past.

> I have spent 6 out of 7 days in bed during the past week. Caught cold and had rheumatism in the knee. The foot and ankle swelled so that at last I could not get on a tight leather slipper and sock. I can remedy that, if I can be well and I hope to tie flies, if I wish, tomorrow.
>
> Queer nights and short days. I had quite a little fever and you know what a peculiar effect that has on a man.[43]

His last words were to Skues, the great friend he never met, and they were concerned mainly with flies, insects, and personal matters. The only hint of the seriousness of his condition appears in the postscript to the letter.

> Every season I intend, or promise, to give myself the pleasure of tying up a dozen May flies and trusting you to give to any dry fly man to try. It is an interesting insect and I should be glad to kill a few English trout with it. I have studied many patterns and lots of illustrations and have a fancy for the yellow leg or soft buttery body. Then I saw a lot of the yellow Esopus fly that I often tied and have often used successfully on the Esopus in Ulster County. If not a true may fly it certainly makes a very creditable effort to be. It is a lovely large fly. About 1st of November I sent for 3 May fly boxes to be given as Christmas present [*sic*]. They did not arrive until March 20, 1915. They are a nice article for the dry-fly man, and I would like to have a dozen to give to angling friends.
>
> —Theodore Gordon
>
> Am writing in bed.[44]

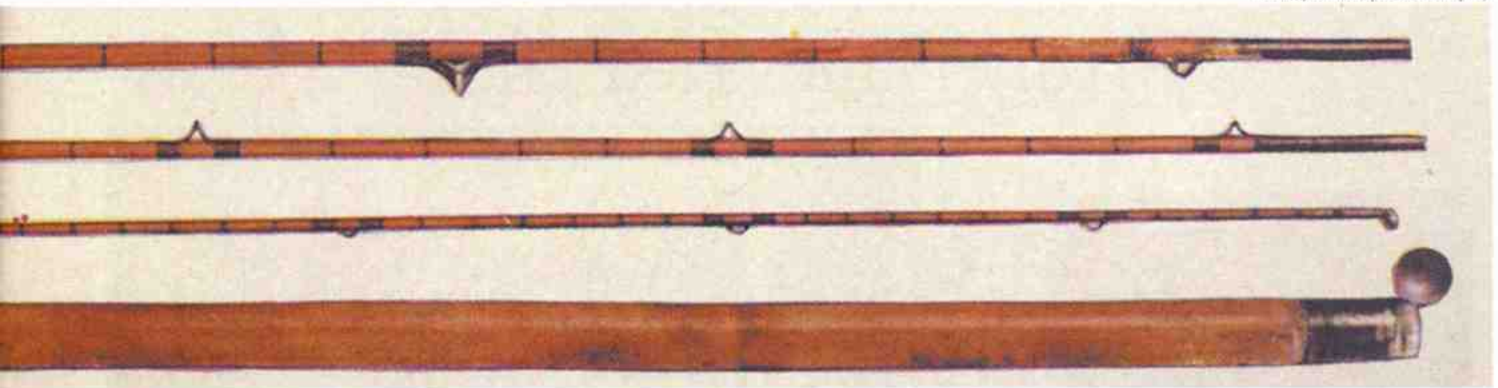
So finished his last words and the life of Theodore Gordon, dry-fly saint, curmudgeon, recluse, naturalist, innovator, and lonely heart. It is possible that, at least at the end, Gordon did live out the fantasy: "Live to fish, fish to live." He is alive through his flies and his words and the works of those who seek to find and understand fly fishing as it was and as it has come to be.

Perhaps the best epitaph was given by his friend Herman Christian, who said, "He was a good fisherman and, particularly, a careful stalker. He paid a lot of attention to the sun and things like that. He used a big rod but with a very light line; and although he did not cast far, he cast very delicately and put his fly on the water 'just so.'"[45]

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to Dr. Andrew Herd—gentleman, author, historian, physician, and fly fisher—who provided advice and encouragement. A fine overview with

Courtesy of the Payne Rod Company



images of Gordon, Halford, and others is available through his website at www.flyfishinghistory.com. Also, my gratitude goes to Dr. Ernest G. Schwiebert for his personal insights and to Paul Schullery for his editorial comments, which have made this a better work.

ENDNOTES

1. Quoted in Paul Schullery, *American Fly Fishing: A History* (New York: Lyons & Burford, 1987), p. 111.

2. Sparse Grey Hackle (Alfred Miller), *Fishless Days, Angling Nights* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1971), p. 123.

3. John McDonald, ed., *The Complete Fly Fisherman: The Notes and Letters of Theodore Gordon* (New York: Nick Lyons Books, 1989).

4. Paul Schullery, *American Fly Fishing: A History* (New York: Lyons & Burford, 1987), p. 121.

5. Ibid., p. 115.

6. In a letter to R. B. Marston on Gordon's death, George La Branche wrote, "He [Gordon] wrote me some time ago that he had a manuscript which he was going to send me to read, but never sent it. If his relatives will let me have it I will see that it is published . . . " (McDonald, *The Complete Fly Fisherman*, p. 549).

7. Among the books owned by Gordon at his death were *Modern Development of the Dry Fly, Dry-Fly Entomology,* and *Dry-Fly Man's Handbook*, all by Halford. Nearly all of Gordon's possessions were burned in a house fire two years before his death, so it is telling that of the nine books given to Steenrod after Gordon's death, three were by Halford on the dry fly. One other was *The Dry Fly and Fast Water* by LaBranche.

8. Even though it has been written elsewhere to the contrary, Gordon himself recounts fishing with the wet fly and using anti-Halfordian dry-fly tactics long after he had become enamored of the dry fly. Gordon was no purist on the stream, even though he fancied himself a social aristocrat.

9. McDonald, *The Complete Fly Fisherman*, p. 396.

10. Christian said that Gordon was in the Neversink valley from about 1896 or 1897. Although he did not have much at the end of his life, he didn't start out there in poverty. "He always stayed in as good accommodations as there were in the locality, and so far as I can tell, always had enough to live on. . . . While his mother was alive he used to stay winters at the Liberty House in Liberty, New York, with her, and in summer he would live in Neversink, Claryville (at the forks of the Neversink) or Bradley, close to the river. He would go from river to river in earlier years, staying a week or two at each place. In later years, probably because of his failing strength, he no longer went from one stream to another" (Herman Christian, quoted in Sparse Grey Hackle, *Fishless Days, Angling Nights*, pp. 135–136).

11. McDonald, *The Complete Fly Fisherman*, p. 404.

12. Sparse Grey Hackle, *Fishless Days, Angling Nights*, p. 145.

13. Ibid., p. 134.

14. "The native anglers made their own rods of two pieces of hickory, lashed or ferruled together and painted green. Usually they cared not for a reel, but wound the surplus line in one place on the rod, carrying it from that point and hitching it at the extreme tip. As a rule they used but one fly, and cast about 35 ft. to 40 ft. When a trout rose and was hooked the rod was dropped into the hollow of the left arm, and the fish was played and landed by hand" (McDonald, *The Complete Fly Fisherman*, p. 112).

15. "The tapering of the last ten to fifteen yards is certainly an advantage, and the gut casting line should continue this tapering to the fly. The last two or three lengths of gut next the fly [*sic*] should be as fine as we can use successfully, without leaving too many flies in the fishes' mouths on the strike. Even the finest of gut will endure a steady pull from a big trout. It is the sudden jerks that are dangerous. Where there are many obstructions, finest drawn gut torments the angler, as he cannot butt his large fish quickly and surely" (McDonald, *The Complete Fly Fisherman*, p. 267).

16. "Englishmen are supposed to prefer stiff rods of considerable weight, but their practice has certainly been considerably changed or modified by the advent of the light yet powerful American dry-fly rod" (McDonald, *The Complete Fly Fisherman*, p. 359). One Irishman, according to Gordon, put it clearly: "Charles Kingsley considered any man a weakling who objected to single-handed rods weighing one pound or more" (Ibid., p. 359).

17. McDonald, *The Complete Fly Fisherman*, p. 245.

18. Ibid., p. 539.

19. Ibid., p. 13.

20. Ibid., p. 245.

21. Ibid., p. 514.

22. Ibid., p. 514.

23. Ibid., p. 428.

24. Ibid., p. 477.

25. Ibid., p. 524.

26. Ibid., p. 358.

27. Ibid., p. 88.

28. Ibid., p. 523.

29. Ibid., p. 357.

30. The "Fly-O" was a product first offered some years ago by Joan and Lee Wulff. It consists of the tip section from a graphite rod to which is attached a length of heavy, wool yarn. This sufficiently imitates the action of a real fly line being cast by a real fly rod so that one can practice the necessary skills indoors.

31. McDonald, *The Complete Fly Fisherman*, p. 163.

32. Sparse Grey Hackle, *Fishless Days, Angling Nights*, p. 134.

33. McDonald, *The Complete Fly Fisherman*, p. 393.

34. Ibid., p. 410.

35. Ibid., p. 514.

36. Ibid., p. 514.

37. Ibid., p. 516.

38. Ibid., p. 523.

39. Ibid., p. 477.

40. Ibid., p. 477.

41. Ibid., p. 462.

42. Ibid., p. 534.

43. Ibid., p. 462.

44. Ibid., p. 462.

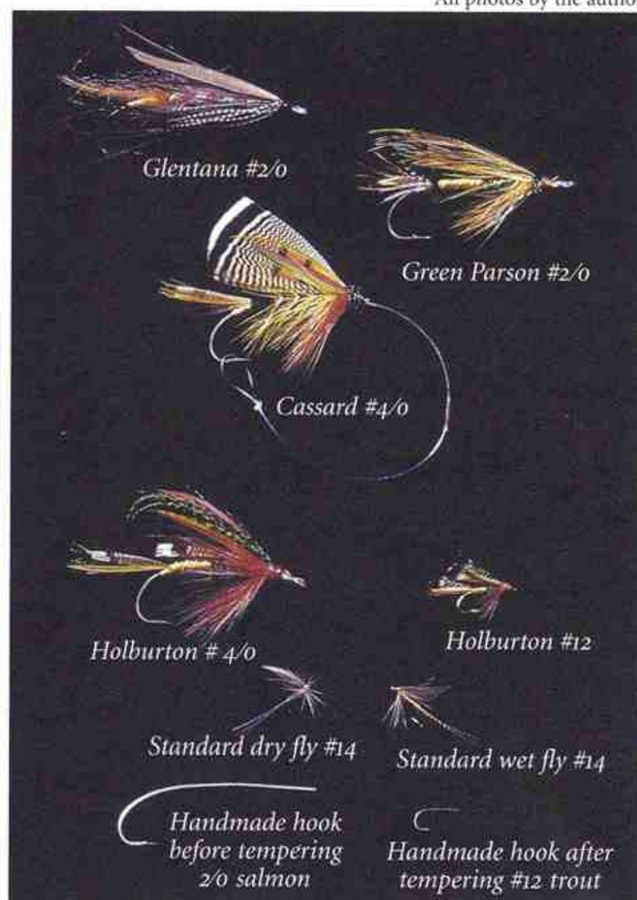
45. Sparse Grey Hackle, *Fishless Days, Angling Nights*, p. 149.

Truly Hand-Tied Flies

by John Betts

All photos by the author

Bass and fancy lake flies. All of these are tied on the author's own 4/0 hooks and are dressed without a vise.



Assortment of flies.

Above all, he can find at every turn the aesthetic pleasures of both an artist and of a craftsman; the artist concerned perpetually with the problem of form and color, the craftsman with his skill in delicate and satisfying work, which will be "signed," as definitely as a painting, with his own technique.

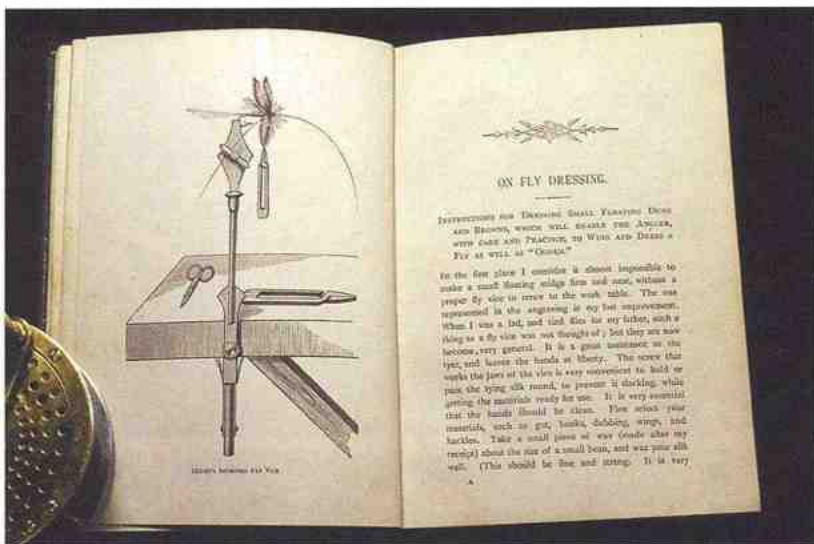
—*T. R. Henn*[1]

IN 1950, THE ABOVE PASSAGE appeared in T. R. Henn's *Practical Fly Tying.* This is the only book written that uses the technique of hand tying without a vise as its main theme.

Nowadays, tying without a vise is generally regarded as an oddity, but until the end of the eighteenth century, virtually all flies were dressed in a person's hands. Samuel Taylor first mentioned the use of a vise in his book *Angling in All Its Branches,* published in 1800. Taylor wrote that a vise can be used "to dress flies more neatly as well as more perfectly."[2] For the next half-century, however, vises were only occasionally included in fly-tying texts. They were considered by some as tools for beginners that could be set aside once the tyer had progressed beyond the early stages of training.

By the 1870s, vises had become widely accepted and had begun to appear in illustrations. The trend continued, and by 1890 most flies were tied in vises. Since 1895 there have been only three books in which hand tying plays an important role. One is Henn's book, and the other two are George Kelson's *The Salmon Fly* (1895) and T. E. Pryce-Tannant's

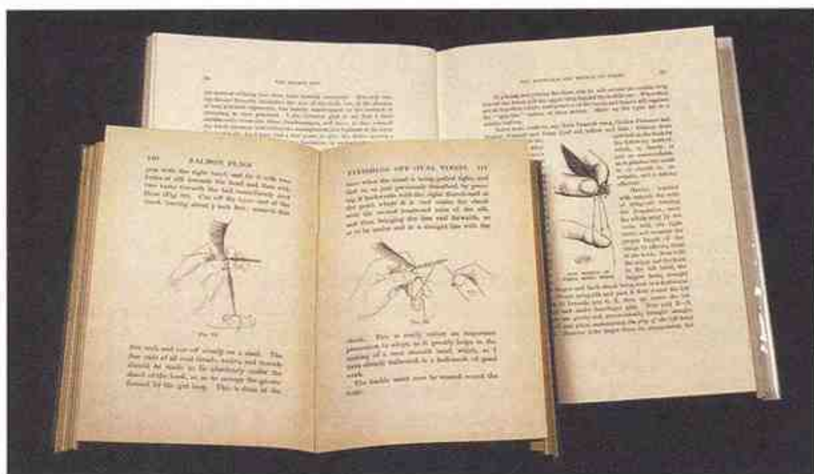
An earlier version of this article originally appeared in the Autumn 1997 issue of *Fly Tyer* and appears here through their generosity.



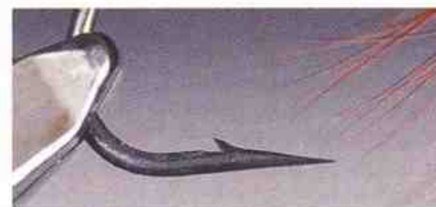
An engraving of James Ogden's vise as it appears on page 1 in his book, Ogden on Fly Tying, *published in 1879.*

The author "pulling" a hook into its shape in a "wrest."

A fully functional hook made by the author. The blue color indicates the temperature at which the steel was tempered.



Illustrations depicting steps in hand tying. The one on the left is from T. E. Pryce-Tannant's How to Dress Salmon Flies, *published in 1914 (pages 110 and 111). The engraving on the right is from George Kelson's* The Salmon Fly, *published in 1896 (page 95).*



A hand-filed point on one of the author's 4/0 hooks.

How to Dress Salmon Flies (1914), both standard texts for tying traditional Atlantic salmon flies. Modern salmon-fly tyers, in their quest for tradition, often overlook or ignore the one technique upon which everything else in those books is based: tying by hand.

The acceptance of fly-tying vises brought about many changes in traditional practices. Advances in technology and the growth of modern economies caused other changes in fly-tying techniques. Whether these changes have resulted in better flies or more thoughtful tying is debatable. Certainly, many aspects of traditional tying have been lost.

Fly tyers of earlier times operated in conditions very different from those in which modern tyers work. Let's look at the situation of a fly tyer of 150 years ago, and then apply some old procedures.

A Wealth of Materials

Until recently in our angling history, all hooks were made by hand, one at a time, using processes similar to those described in *A Treatyse of Fysshynge wyth an Angle* (1496); *Salmonia* by Sir Humphrey Davy (1828); *The Angler in Ireland* by William Belton (1834); and *The Practice of Angling as Regards Ireland* by James O'Gorman (1845).

Starling wing plumage. On the left is the tannish bird less than a year old. On the right is the darker mature bird.

Above: Assorted silk flosses, metal tinsels, mohair, and crewel.

Right: An old classic Atlantic salmon fly, the Black Doctor, tied without a vise by the author on his own 2/0 hook. The entire process took about fifteen minutes.

Some tyers made their own hooks. Others purchased hooks from local craftsmen who ran one- or two-man shops or from a larger commercial enterprise such as Charles Kirby's of London, which was in the hook business by the mid-1600s. Almost without exception, hooks did not have eyes, and a snell or link of horsehair, or silkworm gut, and occasionally Indian weed was needed to attach a hook to a line.

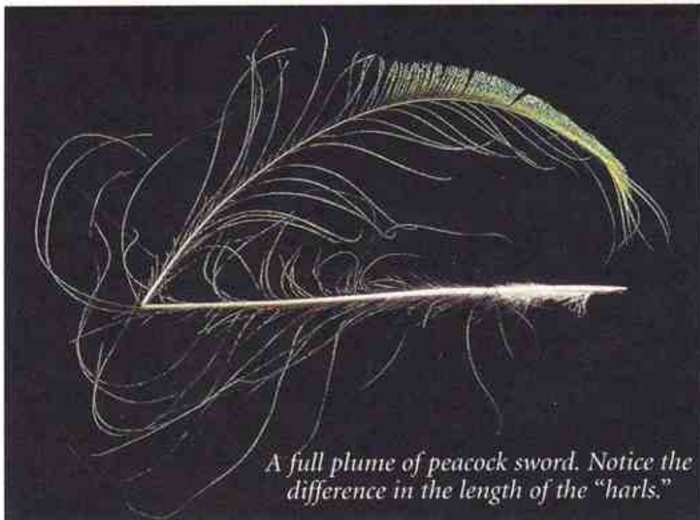
Once a tyer had made or procured his hooks and snelled them, he had to find the materials with which to tie flies. This was not so difficult as you might think. Before the advent of modern supermarkets, towns had butchers, poulterers, grocers, green grocers, milkmen, and bakers. English and European towns and villages had (and still have) weekly market days during which all manner of household items and food could be purchased. Wild birds, fish, animals, and plants augmented farm-raised supplies and were often found alongside local produce. Where both farm and wild species were made available, a fly dresser had a huge range of materials from which to select.

In season, there were hare, pheasant, partridge, duck, goose, woodcock, pigeon, salmon, trout, pike, and grayling for sale in stalls and shops. Some of these game animals can still be purchased at local markets. Missing from shops today are protected animals and birds; however, both shore- and songbirds were once part of everyday fare and therefore available to the fly dresser.

Many of the animals and birds for sale in markets were unplucked and unskinned, allowing customers to see different color phases. Those killed early in the season differed from those killed later, northern specimens differed from their southern cousins, and young differed from old. Starlings, part of early diets, could be found in two forms. The young or "unsunned" birds, barely out of the nest, have thin, strong, translucent wing quills that are light tan in color. The mature birds sporting the familiar dark iridescence and "stars" have wing quills that are heavier and gray. Both types of feathers are specifically mentioned in old books for winging well-known wet- and dry-fly patterns. For fly bodies, there were silk flosses; crewel and mohair; and gold and silver tinsels, wires, and twists. All of these and more could be found in great variety wherever seamstresses and tailors served the military and the gentry. Raffia and horsehair were widely used by fly tyers, along with the fur of mice, rats, voles, moles, pigs, cows, hares, foxes, stoats, and seals. Most of these were easy to locate. Another fly-tying material was "slunk" (the hair of an animal, particularly a calf, born prematurely).

Classic, full-dressed Atlantic salmon flies did not reach their heyday until the second half of the nineteenth century. The exotic plumages used in such dressings may have been harder to get at that time than they are now. Rats and other vermin chewed on skins and feathers transported by ship or stored even briefly in seaport warehouses. And, of course, some ships were lost at sea. The uncertainty of supply may have helped to restrict the use of rare materials to a very small part of fly tying.

Most natural materials were available in greater variety than they are nowadays. Tyers could choose from many



A full plume of peacock sword. Notice the difference in the length of the "harls."

Left: This Green Parson was tied without a vise by the author on his own 2/0 hook. The pattern was originated by Michael Rogan and uses peacock sword for the front half of the body.

Right: These capes were imported into the United States from China and the Philippines before World War II. Selecting from a variety such as this was common until the mass introduction of genetic hackle.

species of birds and animals that came as entire skins, or at least as complete sections, and in a variety of colors, sizes, and ages.

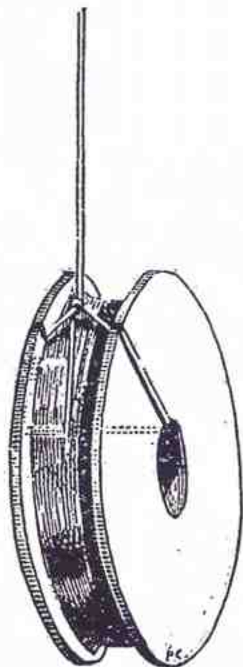
Michael Rogan, a great Irish fly tyer and the founder in 1836 of a studio where flies are still tied by hand, listed peacock sword as a body material for some salmon flies. He did not mean that one should wrap in dozens of the short little pieces we see on the 18-inch plumes found in fly shops. The whole feather is about 3 feet long, and further down the shaft are "harls" that are more than long enough to wrap the body of a large fly. Peafowl were not rare—they had been raised and eaten in the British Isles for centuries—and Rogan no doubt had complete skins in his stock of materials. A modern tyer, familiar only with the packaged pieces sold in fly shops, might wonder how Rogan made big salmon-fly bodies with peacock sword.

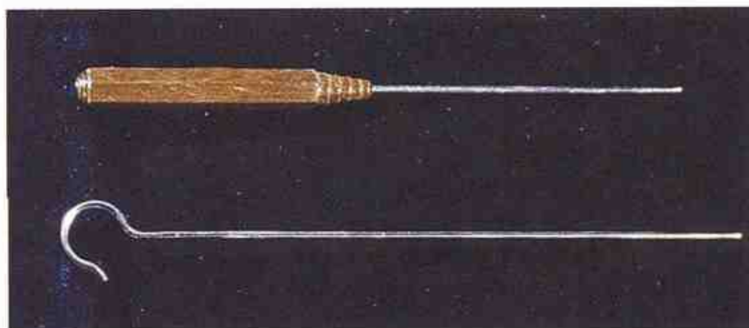
The almost limitless variety of hackle capes for sale even thirty years ago is now virtually gone. Because there were no genetic breeders of any size then, you bought whatever had grown on the farm. Now, with few exceptions, the genetic grizzly neck you bought yesterday will be almost identical in appearance and character to one you purchased last year or might buy next year.

Standardization—the reduction of random variety—is essential to the success of any large modern society. It may not, however, be good for fly tying. The fly-tying community is neither large nor modern. A relatively small number of people, both amateur and professional, using techniques and materials that have remained the same for centuries, are producing the same product in the same way they have always done it—one unit at a time, by hand. If a tyer has a large quantity of hackles uniform in appearance and quality and they are almost identical to capes hanging on the local shop's pegboard, he may not need to buy another cape of that type. Before genetic breeding, there were fewer usable feathers on each cape, and only occasionally were there two capes of the same color. In order to maintain an inventory, a serious tyer had to be a regular visitor to the tackle shop, where, human nature being what it is, he might buy more than he went in for. Frequent visits also exposed a customer to materials new since his last visit, providing information for both immediate and future purchases. With standardization and, therefore, restricted inventories, the customer today knows a lot about what will be available even before he walks into a store, and this may restrict his purchases. There is no question in my mind that the standardization of hackle capes and other materials has affected fly design and thus appearance and effectiveness. Fly dressers nowadays, without the huge selection of traditional materials from which to choose, cannot display the same imagination and resourcefulness that our forebears showed years ago. To some extent, losses in natural materials have been offset by the rise of man-made ones. The increased use of synthetics has probably, to some extent, reduced the demand for traditional materials. Certainly one result of this shift would be a disappearance of natural materials because of a lack of demand, from both shops and articles. The public will not ask for what it doesn't know about.

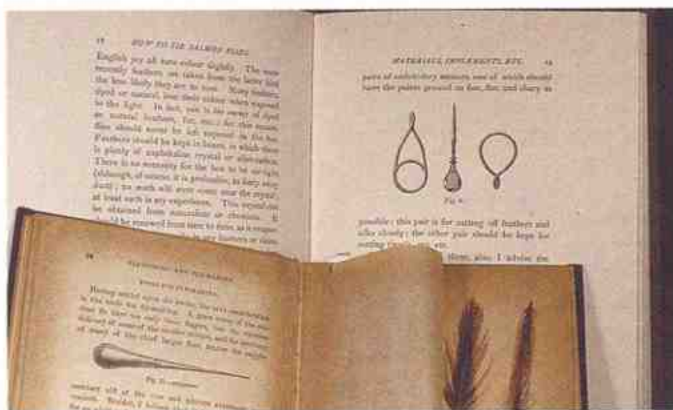
Right: This "bobbin," an arrangement of thread around a spool, appeared in F. M. Halford's Dry Fly Entomology, *published in 1897.*

Below: "Stilettos" or bodkins illustrated in John Hale's How to Tie Salmon Flies *(1892, FFCL reprint 1992, page 19), top right, and J. Harrington Keene's* Fly Fishing and Fly Making *(third edition, 1898, page 66). Some of the materials pasted into the book are visible on the adjoining page.*

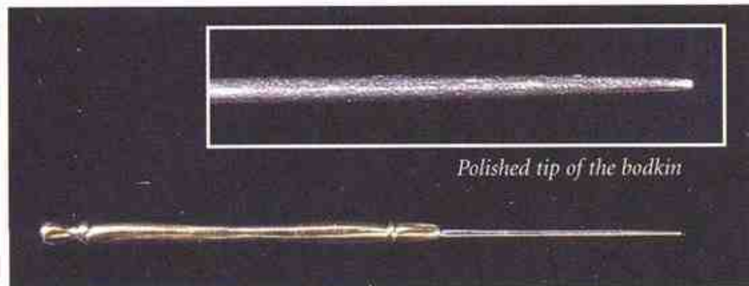




Above: Two modern dubbing needles.



Below: The author's reproduction of a "stiletto" or bodkin. The handle is turned from solid brass and threaded at one end to receive the steel point.



Tools in the Old Days

The tools of early fly tyers were few and simple. They consisted of wax, thread, a bodkin or "stiletto," "scissers," tweezers, and later something that could be used for hackle pliers. Notice that the list does not include a bobbin. Hand tying with a bobbin is nearly impossible.

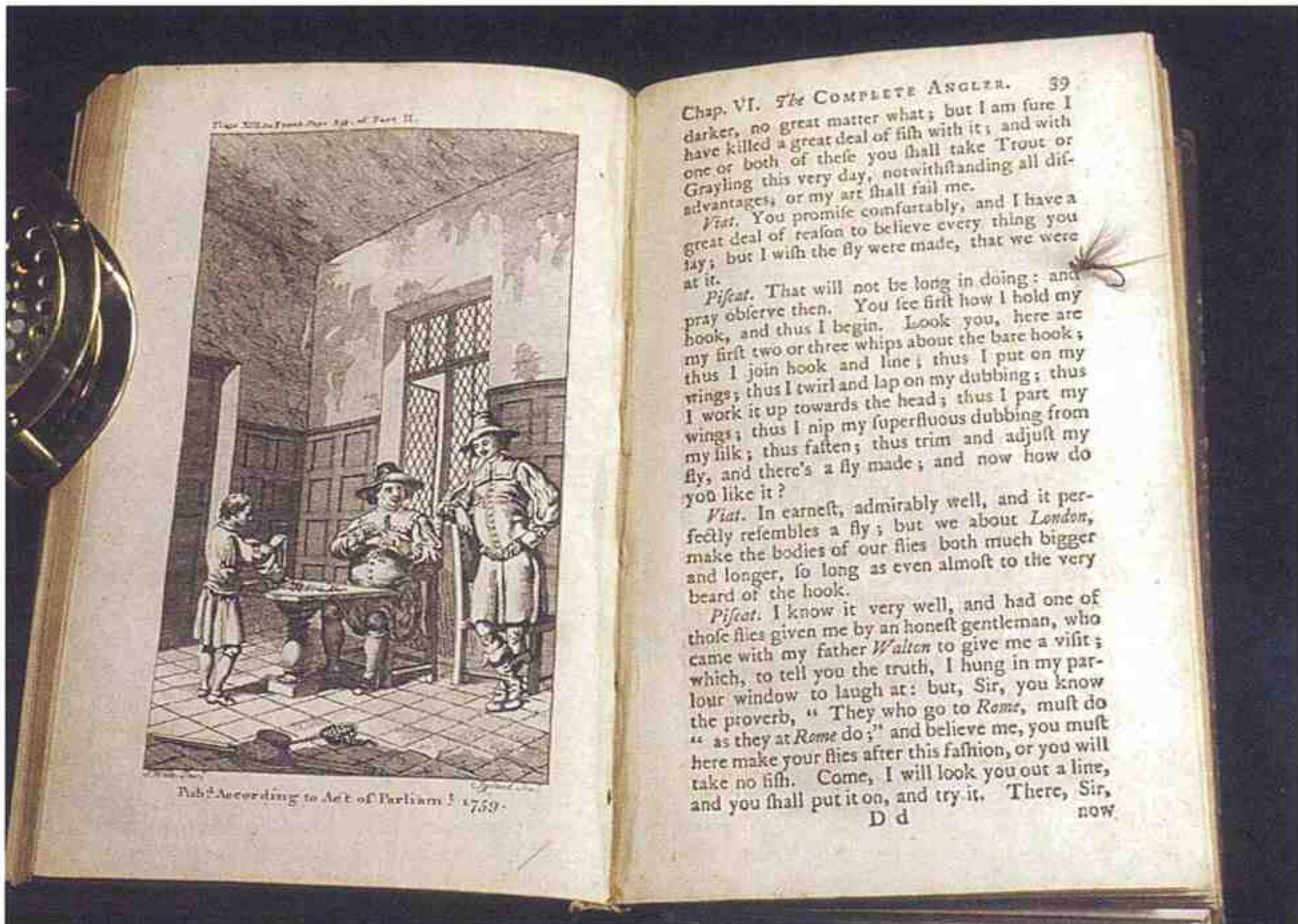
Fly-tying wax is the most important of all of the tools. Early on, it was cobbler's wax. An eighteenth-century recipe still used in Williamsburg, Virginia, consists of two-thirds pitch and one-third rosin, and probably a little tallow. This wax is black and has a wonderful smoky odor. A piece of thread is rubbed with or pulled through a cake of wax. Friction melts the wax so that it can be deposited on the thread. When the thread is later pulled through the shoe leather, friction again melts the wax and helps lubricate the thread. As soon as the thread is pulled tight, it stops moving, and the wax cools immediately, cementing the thread in place. This helps keep the stitch tight while the next stitch is being made. Because the thread we wax for tying is not pulled through anything during the procedure, it cannot melt again. As a result, the makeup of fly-tying wax must be a bit stickier than cobbler's wax and kept between normal room and body temperatures.

By the nineteenth century, fly-tying writers began listing their "best of the best" fly-tying wax formulae. Specialized dubbing waxes were not really heard about until later. There are significant differences between the makeup and purpose of *tying* and *dubbing* waxes.

In fly tying, just as in shoemaking, the wax is cement and the thread is its delivery system. The formula for a good wax must be held to fairly close tolerances if it is to work well within a normal temperature range. Beyond that range, in extremely warm weather, it should be of a harder type, whereas in colder conditions it should be of a softer one. The men and women who dressed flies years ago often relied on body heat to keep the wax at the right temperature between applications. The difference between the melting point of the wax and its consistency at body temperature is not great. It can be controlled with considerable precision by the formula of the wax. If the wax is too hard or too cold, the thread cannot be pulled through it at all. If it is too soft or too warm, it will spread all over everything.

Attempts have been made to wax and spool long lengths of silk thread. At the very least, this is a difficult and messy procedure. It is only fairly recently that prewaxed thread, in this case nylon, has become a viable product. It took years for the Danville Chenille Company to perfect the process.

Fine silk thread has been recommended for tying flies for centuries. Its real advantages are found in its great strength, even in small diameters, and that it is composed of continuous filaments. Small threads made up of staple or discontinuous fibers, such as linen, wool, or cotton, tend to sepa-



Chap. VI. *The* COMPLETE ANGLER. 39

darker, no great matter what; but I am ſure I have killed a great deal of fiſh with it; and with one or both of theſe you ſhall take Trout or Grayling this very day, notwithſtanding all diſadvantages, or my art ſhall fail me.

Viat. You promiſe comfortably, and I have a great deal of reaſon to believe every thing you ſay; but I wiſh the fly were made, that we were at it.

Piſcat. That will not be long in doing: and pray obſerve then. You ſee firſt how I hold my hook, and thus I begin. Look you, here are my firſt two or three whips about the bare hook; thus I join hook and line; thus I put on my wings; thus I twirl and lap on my dubbing; thus I work it up towards the head; thus I part my wings; thus I nip my ſuperfluous dubbing from my ſilk; thus faſten; thus trim and adjuſt my fly, and there's a fly made; and now how do you like it?

Viat. In earneſt, admirably well, and it perfectly reſembles a fly; but we about *London*, make the bodies of our flies both much bigger and longer, ſo long as even almoſt to the very beard of the hook.

Piſcat. I know it very well, and had one of thoſe flies given me by an honeſt gentleman, who came with my father *Walton* to give me a viſit; which, to tell you the truth, I hung in my parlour window to laugh at: but, Sir, you know the proverb, "They who go to *Rome*, muſt do "as they at *Rome* do;" and believe me, you muſt here make your flies after this faſhion, or you will take no fiſh. Come, I will look you out a line, and you ſhall put it on, and try it. There, Sir,

D d now

An early and possibly the first illustration of someone tying flies to appear in a book. Presumably the central figure in Charles Cotton, and the activity seems to be taking place in the Fishing Hut on the Dove. The engraving is from the third Hawkins edition of The Complete Angler *(1775, Part II, page 39). The engraving probably dates from 1760 originally.*

rate under tension and are for that reason undesirable.

Silk is for all practical purposes inelastic; it is also springy and slippery. These are valuable properties if one is pulling it through fabric, but real liabilities in fly tying. In order to keep both it and the materials being secured to the hook in place, the thread must be waxed.

In fly tying, a piece of thread 10 to 16 inches long is pulled through the wax in a single movement, which melts the wax so that it lubricates the thread. If the pull is interrupted, the wax will cool at once and seize the thread, which will usually break when the pull is restarted. With practice on heavy thread, a tyer may be able to pull it through twice.

The only silk fly-tying thread still available is Pearsall's Gossamer. For heavy work, standard silk sewing thread may be used. No other thread can match the luster and color of silk. The best fly bodies are those in which the color of silk shows, however subtly, through a thin layer of dubbing. There has never been a more secure fastening for fly-dressing materials than properly waxed silk.

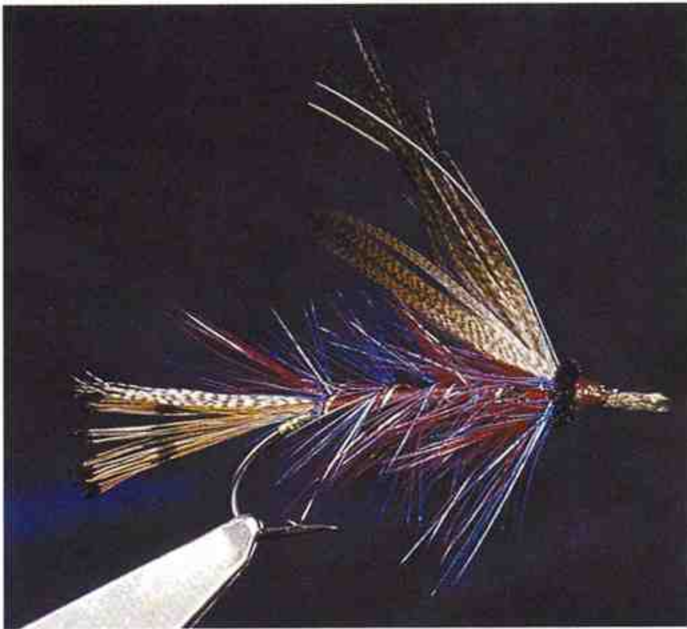
The stiletto or bodkin has become the dubbing needle and is less functional. To work properly, the point should be rounded a little and then polished perfectly smooth. This will prevent damaging or cutting the thread when picking out the fibers. A sharp sewing needle jammed into a dowel is not at all the same sort of tool.

Although seldom mentioned nowadays, good tweezers are often preferable to scissors when cleaning up a fly.

The light in which you tie can range from artificial and expensive to natural and free; the latter is what was used for the most part until the end of the nineteenth century. Gaslight was in use by the early 1800s, but it was unsafe and poisonous (sometimes it was piped through musket barrels discarded after the Napoleonic Wars), and was usually available only to those who lived in cities or had their own coal roasters. Electricity was not in common use until the end of the 1800s. Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, Frederick Halford electrified his house and was quite happy tying under a 32-watt bulb.

Sunlight, the original light, is still the best light for fly tying. It is, after all, the light in which we fish and the light in which gamefish and their prey live. Checking colors and effects in sunlight is advice that goes back centuries.

> VIA(TOR). This dubbing is very black.
>
> PISC(ATOR). It appears so in hand; but step to the doors and hold it up betwixt your eye and the sun, and it will appear shining red; let me tell you never a man in England can discern the true color of dubbing any way but that, and therefore choose always to make your Flies on such a bright sun-shine day as this, which also you may the better to do, because it is worth nothing to fish in. Here, put it on, and be sure to make the body of your Flie as slender as you can. Very good! Upon my word you have made a marvelous handsome Flie.[3]



One of two 4/0 Nicholsons tied without a vise by the author on his own hook, held in a vise under an overhead lamp.

The other Nicholson fly held in the sunlight out of doors.

Natural light almost always approaches you at an oblique angle. When hand tying in it, you will hold the fly in many positions and the angle of the sun will light up the fly in ways you never thought possible. It is a phenomenon that cannot be experienced with the fly held stationary in a vise under a lamp directly above it.

As the sun changes position, so must you in order to maintain maximum illumination and keep your hands and body from casting a shadow on your work. Gripping and regripping a fly in sunlight will provide insight into formerly obscured parts of the design that were often consciously incorporated by someone years ago, ideas that you may never have suspected existed. All of a sudden you will see why great patterns fully deserve their reputations.

Sitting back in a comfortable chair, tying flies in your hands, is not only therapeutic, but has a practical side as well. You will produce better flies.

Over the last four or five hundred years, fly-tying instructions have become steadily more voluminous. In early works, tying directions were brief—often less than half a page—and not illustrated. They relied heavily on the reader's vocabulary, experience, and background. For those reasons, old instructions are sometimes hard to interpret in the twenty-first century. The sidebar opposite gives some simple instructions with photographs. In some cases, these directions are more explicit than old ones. Cover the pictures and tie the fly using just the text. You won't go very far before you realize how much you needed to know before you began. The fly being tied is the Cassard.

Putting Old-Fashioned Skills to Work

Before starting, we should dispose of certain myths about hand tying. Tying on blind-eye, snelled hooks is no more difficult than tying on eyed hooks; if you'd like to try some antique-style dressings, don't be afraid of the snells. Small flies, down to size 22, are no more difficult to tie in your hands than are larger patterns, though size 12 flies are easier to learn on. Tying by hand does not require great experience. Indeed, children and women with little experience are the people most receptive to learning; as a rule, experts have the most trouble. The need to hold a hook in hardened steel vise jaws is a myth. Consider how many beautiful flies have been tied in fingers no harder than yours. The most common mistake is holding the hook too tightly. How and where you hold it is much more important than how hard you hold it. Relax, and trust your hands.

With practice, a standard wet or dry trout fly can be completed in one's fingers in about five minutes. When you tie by hand, a lot of the work will be covered and, therefore, hidden by your fingers. You'll know what's going on more by how things feel than by how they look. Too much material will feel like too much, and too little like too little. Materials that are loose will feel that way. You will find that your instincts, even if untutored, are quite accurate.

Tying in your fingers requires you to select materials that will withstand repeated handling. This adds a dimension to selection that is every bit as important as appearance.

Because there is no vise to hold the fly as you go from step to step, all of the materials should be layed out in a useful array ahead of time. The process, once it is started, keeps on going and is hard to stop. This is much easier to deal with than it sounds and soon may become preferable to the stop-and-start techniques that are part of using a vise. In a very short time, you'll develop a sense of flow that will become part of the appearance of the fly. It will be the signature of your style.

Endnotes

1. T. R. Henn, *Practical Fly Tying* (London: A. & C. Black, 1950), p. 8.
2. Samuel Taylor, *Angling in All Its Branches* (London: Longman and Rees, 1800), p. 250.
3. Charles Cotton, *The Complete Angler, Part II* (London: Richard Marriot, 1676), pp. 45–46.

Tying Steps for the Cassard

TAG, SILVER; jib, topping, barred wood duck, red and green slips; butt, black chenille; body, claret ribbed with silver lace, palmered yellow cock doubled or stripped on one side; shoulder hackle, red cock doubled; wing, barred wood duck, tippets; splits topping, red and green slips; head, herl.

A matched pair of barred wood duck are combined with the cheeks and splits to form the entire wing. This is then set aside. The hook is then armed with the snell using claret thread, which is closely wound down the shank to a place above the beard. After tying in the silver tip, the various pieces for the jib are selected and tied down; a black chenille butt covers these wraps. The silver rib and well-tapered yellow rooster hackle is set in by its tip. The thread is then evenly wound, covering the materials' ends up to the tip. Here the claret floss is fastened and warped down to the butt and back in smooth, even turns. If the underwrap of thread is smooth, there won't be any unsightly lumps. Care should be taken not to dull, soil, or fray the silk while it is being applied. The silver rib is taken up, and after its winds are evened, it is made tight and secured. The yellow body hackle follows the rib. Once secure, the claret thread is exchanged for red, and a doubled crimson rooster hackle is secured. The fibers spread by the first turn should be the length of the last turn of the yellow feather. The next turn of red will be a bit longer. Only two full turns are made before tying off. The wing unit is set on and made fast, being sure it is straight. Very firm turns are made here. A herl head is wound, and the final turns and half hitches are made just before it. The wing butts are trimmed but left long enough to prevent any turns from slipping off. They will be visible above the end of the shank. Avoiding the herl, the entire area in front of it is well varnished. When dry, the wings cannot be pulled out.

Annual Festival Weekend & Celebration

at the

American Museum of Fly Fishing

May 18th & 19th

Friday Evening

Join us at 5:30 pm for a cocktail party to kick off our annual celebration.

Saturday - Open House

Stop by for our Open House between 10:00 am and 4:00 pm and visit with the talented craftspeople and artists who plan to join us for the day. Longtime Museum friend and rodmaker Fred Kretchman will provide insight into the making of bamboo rods, Kathy Stout of Wildscape will illustrate how she makes her unique caddisfly jewelry, and glass blower John Soward will demonstrate his technique for making his one-of-a-kind works. Artist Carol Rowan, members of the Green Mountain Fly Tyers, sculptor Bill Card, and the folks at Adirondack Guide Boat are among those who will also be on hand to demonstrate their talents and share their enthusiasm with visitors.

Saturday Evening

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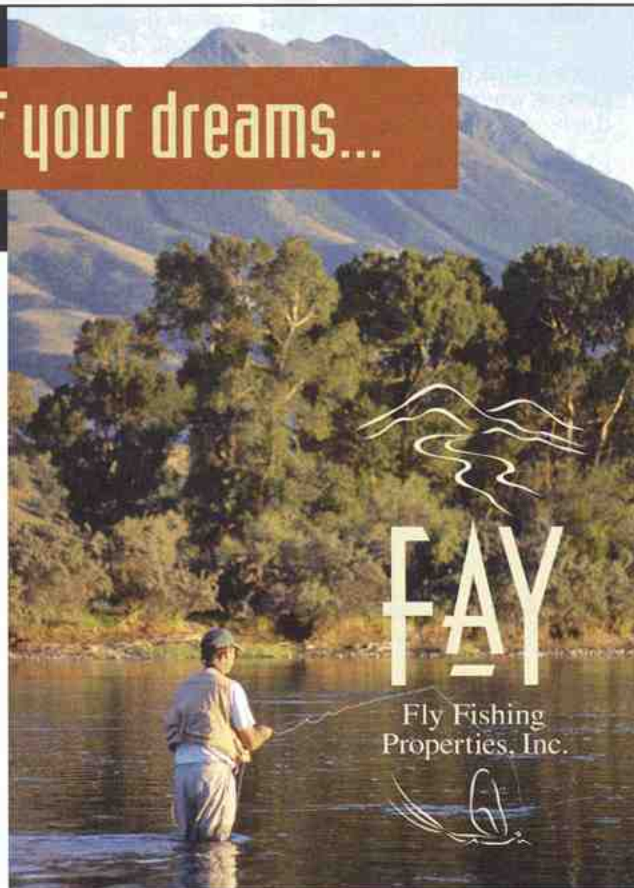

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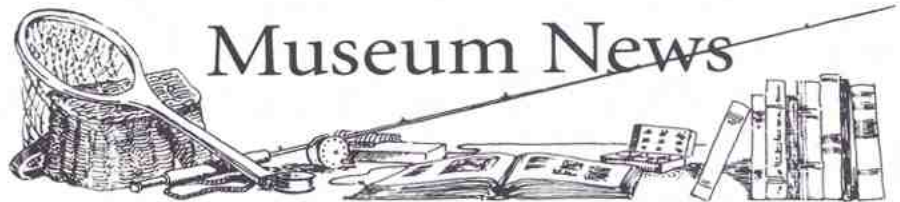


Museum News

Photo by Diana Siebold

Art Director John Price and Collection Manager Yoshi Akiyama put the finishing touches on the time-line panels at the Fly Fishing Show in Somerset, New Jersey.

Fly-Fishing Shows

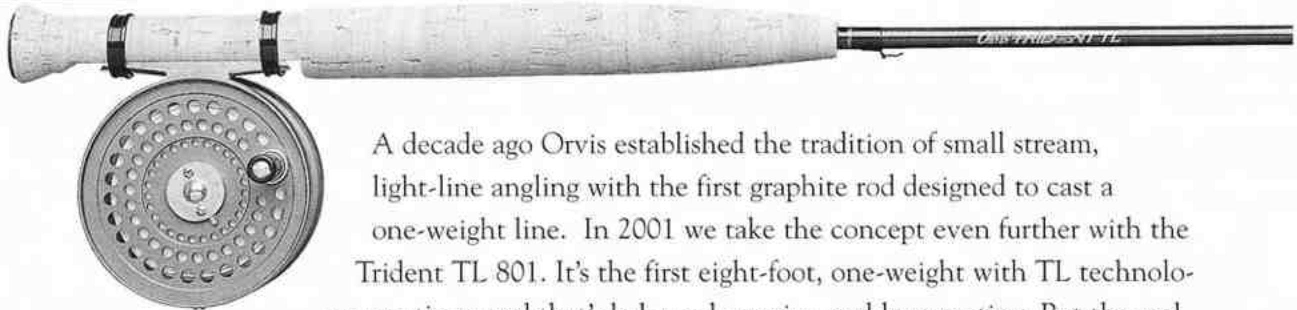
In January, volunteers and staff represented the Museum at fly-fishing shows in Denver, Colorado; Marlborough, Massachusetts; and Somerset, New Jersey. As has been the case for the past several years, our booth spaces were courtesy of the Fly Fishing Show's directors, Barry Serviente and Chuck Furimsky. We are grateful to them for providing these opportunities to bring the Museum to the fly-fishing public at no cost to the Museum. We could not participate otherwise.

In Denver, our good friends and frequent contributors to *The American Fly Fisher*, John Betts and Gordon Wickstrom, spent their entire weekend working in our booth with Executive Director Gary Tanner. This was a first-time show, and it was a great success. Gary reports that spending time in a booth with John and Gordon has become one of the very best aspects of his job.

The Massachusetts event saw Special Projects Coordinator Sara Wilcox, Events and Membership Coordinator Diana Siebold, and volunteer Bob Warren setting up for the weekend action. We had a steady stream of curious Georges, as well as some old friends and many new ones.

In simple terms, the Somerset, New

Where Traditions Begin.



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Jersey show is massive. Art Director John Price, Collection Manager Yoshi Akiyama, and Diana Siebold staffed the booth at this gathering. This year, in an effort to spice up the lobby/entrance to the show, we brought along our five time-line panels, highlighting the history of fly fishing. The exhibit totaled 22 feet in length and weighed 400 pounds. We received many compliments on the display, not only from attendees, but from our peers who were exhibiting at the show. A great show once again for us: we were fortunate to renew some memberships and acquire some new friends.

Thanks to all of our current members and trustees who stopped by to wish us well and to just say hello!

Recent Donations

Donald A. Wilson of Newfield, New Hampshire, gave us smelt flies, artwork, and catalogues that were used for photography in his book, *Smelt Fly Patterns.* He also sent us a first edition (1996) of the book.

Sachiko Ashizawa of Tokyo, Japan, donated a collection of fly-fishing items belonging to her late husband, Kazuhiro Ashizawa, a famed fly fisherman and nature writer and author. The items included a Hardy 6-foot, 10-inch, 5-weight bamboo fly rod, the "Phantom Parakona"; a Hardy 4-weight reel, "the Flyweight"; books authored by Ashizawa; and fly-fishing magazines featuring his life story and more.

Ted Comstock and the Adirondack League Club of Old Forge, New York, gave us a copy of *A Tradition of Excellence: The Adirondack Fishery Research Partnership of the Adirondack League Club and Cornell University, 1950–2000.*

Guy Grima of Franconia, New Hampshire, and **Virginia Robinson** of Easton, New Hampshire, donated a box full of rare catalogues and brochures from the 1940s and 1950s in memory of **James Robinson**. Among these catalogues were a 1949 Ashaway, a 1949 Orvis, a 1948 Harters, a 1948 Montague, and a 1949 Paul Young. **Sara Wilcox** of Manchester, Vermont, provided us with missing issues of *Fly Rod & Reel, Fly Fisherman, American Angler,* and *Trout* magazines.

In the Library

Thanks to the following publishers for their donations of recent titles that have become part of our collection (all were published in 2000, unless otherwise noted).

The Lyons Press sent us Wayne Cattanach's *Handcrafting Bamboo Fly Rods* (revised and augmented edition); Seth Norman's *The Fly Fisher's Guide to Crimes of Passion;* Mallory Burton's *Green River Virgins and Other Passionate Anglers; The Sports Afield Treasury of Fly Fishing: One Hundred Years of Superb Stories and Articles* (edited by Tom Paugh); Tom Rosenbauer's *The Orvis Guide to Prospecting for Trout;* and John Merwin's *Streamer-Fly Fishing* (2001).

Frank Amato Publications sent us Thomas Ames Jr.'s *Hatch Guide for New England Streams; Fishing Journal: Angling Legacy;* Philip Rowley's *Fly Patterns for Stillwaters: A Study of Trout, Entomology and Tying;* and Paul Ptalis's *Century End: A Fly Tying Journey.*

OSU Press sent us *Fishing the Northwest: An Angler's Reader* (edited by Glen Love).

Upcoming Events

April 19
Cleveland Dinner and Sporting Auction
The Country Club
Pepper Pike, Ohio

May 3
Heritage Award
Honoring George Harvey
Nittany Lion Inn
State College, Pennsylvania

May 18
Festival Weekend
Cocktail party 5:30 pm
The American Museum of Fly Fishing
Manchester, Vermont

May 19
Festival Weekend
Open House 10 am to 5 pm
The American Museum of Fly Fishing
Manchester, Vermont

May 19
Dinner and Sporting Auction
Equinox Hotel
Manchester, Vermont

June
Saltwater Tournament
Date to be announced

November 17
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See Wildlife Glass Artist John Soward create fresh and saltwater gamefish in miniature from glass.

John and many other artists and craftsmen will be demonstrating at the Museum during our Open House on Saturday, May 19th.

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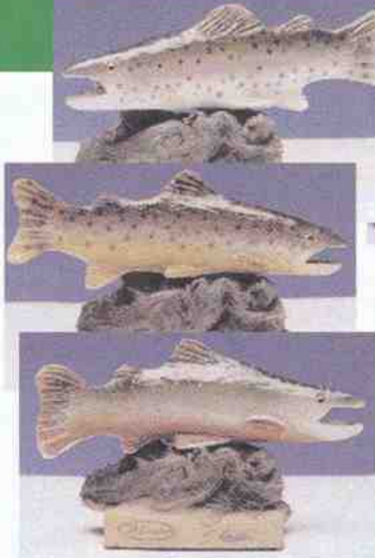

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"The Uncaged Woman"

CONTRIBUTORS

John Betts began tying flies for his livelihood in 1976 and published his first article a year later. He is a regular contributor to *American Angler, Fly Tyer, Fly Rod & Reel,* and *Fly Fisherman.* His work has also appeared in *Field & Stream, Outdoor Life,* and *Sports Afield,* as well as the major fly-fishing magazines of Europe and Japan. In 1981, he was featured in *Sports Illustrated* and is one of only a few tyers to be so acknowledged.

The Museum featured the artistic works of Betts (drawing, paintings, and mixed media of painting and tied flies) in an exhibit in 1997. His last contribution to the journal was "Fly Lines and Lineage," which appeared in the Fall 2000 issue.

Michael Scott works as a project manager with IBM, a job that keeps him too long away from the streams. He approached junior trout bum status for a few heady years in Colorado, tied flies for a sub-subsistence income, then moved inexorably into family, fatherhood, and the digital highway. Somewhere along the line, he developed an ongoing and deepening interest in the Victorian fly fishers, rodbuilders, hook makers, and book writers. He now lives in northern California with his wife, friend, and partner Barbara, son Travis, daughter Kayla, cats Timbo and Stripes, dog Cisco, and Rosie the tarantula.

Gordon M. Wickstrom is professor of drama emeritus and was longtime chair of that department at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. In 1991, he retired to his native Boulder, Colorado, where he fishes, writes, and produces a theater group for which, at this writing, he is appearing as Faustus in Christopher Marlowe's play of that name. His collected essays, *Notes from an Old Fly Book,* which will include several essays that first appeared in this journal, is expected to appear in September. The note "Tups Indispensable: A Dubbing Dilemma," in the Summer 2000 issue, was the latest of his frequent contributions to this journal.

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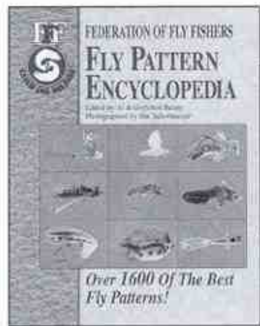

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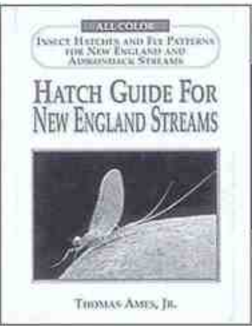

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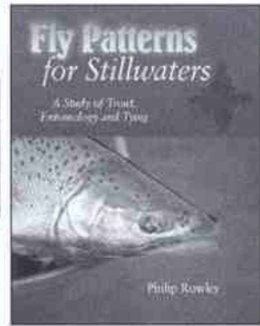

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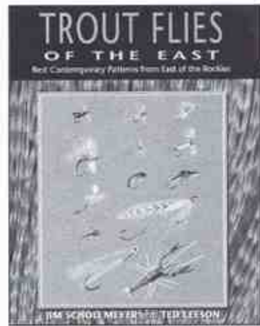

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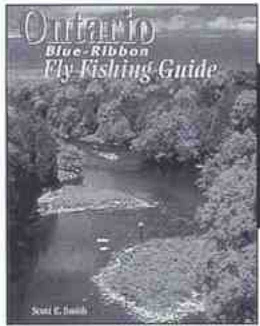

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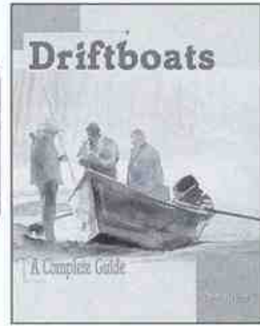

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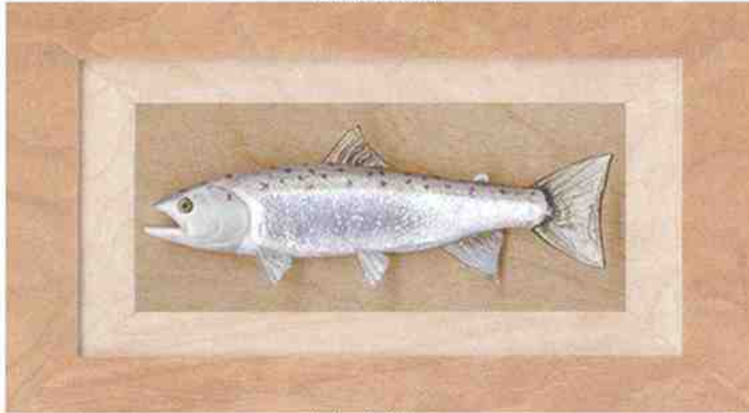

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Will Wonders Never Cease?

Margot Page

It's late February. Each morning, as I cross over Rupert Mountain down into the Metawee River Valley on my way to work, the Vermont Department of Transportation reminds me, with several yellow diamond-shaped signs, of an irrefutable fact of life and wonder of nature: frost heaves. It sure does. Every spring it pitches fence posts, rocks, and poorly designed house foundations out of the ground, not to mention me toward the roof of my pickup truck as I fly over what the DOT was really warning me about—frost *heaves*—severe bumps and dips in the road. But I like to read the signs as active indicators that some force is doing something that is sure and true. For once, even the government is right: frost does heave. It is a wonder.

Where am I going with this? To something far less sure and true, to my mind, than the above, but based, we are told, also on "wonder." A new book, with the rather unfortunate title *Deep Trout: Angling in Popular Culture,* purports to examine, in scholarly fashion, just that: angling in popular culture. The author, a University of Wisconsin anthropologist, discusses—among other institutions, organizations, and individuals—the American Museum of Fly Fishing. He offers his insights into our institution that, unlike the action of frost in early spring, may not be irrefutable, but that, he argues, are based on our use of "wonder."

The author offers us his opinion that our exhibits, particularly our "Politicians in the Stream" and "Personalities in the Stream" exhibits, as they appeared on the day he and his wife visited us in Manchester, "cannot help but lead patrons to think of fly fishing as a noble *national* [his italics] pastime." "Why," he asks, "has the AMFF selected presidents, movie-stars, sports figures and other larger-than-life individuals to tell the story of fly fishing?" He answers his own question by stating, "In fly fishing, as in law, power and authority obviously count for a great deal." Perhaps, but in this museum, "power and authority" figures accounted on that day for only six percent of the total gallery wall space dedicated to exhibits. Hardly a "great deal." I can't figure out where "the nationalistic tone and style persist through its [the AMFF's] exhibits." And why should we hide presidential tackle—what museum in its right institutional mind would?

"Wonder, in the context of museums, refers to the 'power of an object displayed to stop the viewer in his tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention,'" according to the author and the reference he cites. He goes on: "But, in AMFF's case, the quest for 'wonder' is worrisome to the degree that it furthers the objective of establishing fly fishing as a feature of American national identity." He even asks the question: "But what about museums elsewhere that focus on regional angling experiences? Are they similarly dangerous?" As I have been known to utter on occasion: "Huh?" Dangerous?

And the capstone: "What is the AMFF's fault, however, is that 'wonder' is used strategically to shield and insulate angler-patrons from their own participation in the destruction of wilderness." I personally know only two of my four predecessors, but I am pleased to go on record as saying that none of the three of us strategically (or otherwise) use(d) "wonder" to that effect. The best I can come up with is that the author of this book looks at the world as if his glass is half empty. I say it's half full—our exhibits inspire people to protect, preserve, and conserve, as appropriate, our natural resources.

Frost heaves, a wonder of nature, are bumps and dips in the road. I think of this book as just a kind of a bump in the road. Fortunately, not enough of a bump to make me hit the roof, not like those wonders on Rupert Mountain Road.

GARY TANNER
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The American Museum of Fly Fishing, a nationally accredited, nonprofit, educational institution dedicated to preserving the rich heritage of fly fishing, was founded in Manchester, Vermont, in 1968. The Museum serves as a repository for, and conservator to, the world's largest collection of angling and angling-related objects. The Museum's collections and exhibits provide the public with thorough documentation of the evolution of fly fishing as a sport, art form, craft, and industry in the United States and abroad from the sixteenth century to the present. Rods, reels, and flies, as well as tackle, art, books, manuscripts, and photographs form the major components of the Museum's collections.

The Museum has gained recognition as a unique educational institution. It supports a publications program through which its national quarterly journal, *The American Fly Fisher,* and books, art prints, and catalogs are regularly offered to the public. The Museum's traveling exhibits program has made it possible for educational exhibits to be viewed across the United States and abroad. The Museum also provides in-house exhibits, related interpretive programming, and research services for members, visiting scholars, authors, and students.

The Museum is an active, member-oriented nonprofit institution. For information please contact: The American Museum of Fly Fishing, P. O. Box 42, Manchester, Vermont 05254, 802-362-3300.