

Some of Marbury's Favorite Bass and Fancy Lake Flies

by John Betts

TWO WOODEN BOXES at the American Museum of Fly Fishing hold treasures more than 100 years old: the original flies used for the Milton Bradley (lithographers) color plates in Mary Orvis Marbury's 1892 book, *Favorite Flies and Their Histories*. These flies, sewn to framed cards, are the exact models for the color plates. Classic salmon and trout patterns are featured, as well as flies that are distinctly American: fancy lake and bass flies.

When Europeans began coming to what would be the United States and Canada in the seventeenth century, they brought with them fly-fishing and fly-dressing practices that had been fully established well before their emigration. This body of knowledge had been developed almost exclusively around Atlantic salmon, searun brown trout (sea trout), resident brown trout, sewin, and grayling. Upon arrival, the colonists settling along the northern coast found the same salmon and a brook trout (really a char) that was both resident and anadromous. The habits of these fish were quite similar to those of the ones back home.

As people moved west, they found grayling in the north-central part of the country; cutthroat and rainbow trout in the Rocky Mountains; and resident and searun cutthroat and rainbow (steelhead) trout, as well as several species of salmon, on the Pacific Coast. These fish were also readily caught with imported procedures.

But the new species that immigrants encountered were three: largemouth bass (found in fresh, brackish, and salt water), smallmouth bass, and landlocked salmon. Although these fish could be taken with flies, it seems that anglers felt that they required *different* flies.

By the mid-1800s (after the early stages of settlement, when survival was the foremost issue in people's minds), sportfishing became an activity that a relatively large number of people pursued. Many of the metropolitan and nearly all of the rural waters were by today's standards virtually untouched. With a lot of places to go and a lot of fish that had never seen a fly fisherman, just about anything would work, and Americans (being who they are) worked with anything.

Small wonder then that the large flies tied specifically for the bass, large brook trout, and landlocked salmon were full of Victorian and 1920s exuberance. These flies flourished

roughly during the period between the Civil War and the Great Depression of the 1930s. No doubt some inspiration came from the "gaudy" and "fancy" flies tied for the sea-run fish of England, Ireland, and Scotland, but far and away the bulk of the development of fancy lake and bass flies is the product of American enthusiasm.

To say that these patterns are solely an expression of unbridled imagination would be inaccurate, however. Many, such as the Ferguson, would have little trouble passing for a sunfish, perch, or gamefish fry imitation in color, shape, and size.



THE MUSEUM IS THE LARGEST available repository for bass and fancy lake flies. Editions of the three most significant books dealing with the history, origin, and design of these flies (as well as trout and Atlantic salmon flies) are also here: *Favorite Flies and Their Histories*, by Mary Orvis Marbury (1892); *Fishing with the Fly*, by her father, Charles F. Orvis, and A. Nelson Cheney (1883); and *Flies*, by J. Edson Leonard (1950).

Charles Orvis and his daughter Mary ran a large and successful tackle business and fly-tying studio—Charles F. Orvis and Co. (now the Orvis Company)—in Manchester, Vermont. The company supplied flies dressed after existing patterns and copied or modified patterns from models received from customers. They also supplied their own originals, such as the Californian. The actual models are found in three places: sewn to cards that were used for the Milton Bradley plates in *Favorite Flies*, sewn to cards that were used in the tying studio every day, and mounted on the large framed plates prepared by Mary Orvis Marbury for the Columbian Exposition of 1893.

When comparing the flies in the illustrations found in *Favorite Flies and Their Histories* with the actual flies, several things of considerable interest may be seen. First, in a good number of cases, the type of feathers used for the whole feather wings on the bass and fancy lake flies are matched pairs of undercoverts, usually from waterfowl. This satin-finished translucent plumage is ideal for the purpose, not only because of its appearance, but for the asymmetry of its shape,

Photographs by Cook Neilson



BASS FLIES, PLATE CC.



which allows it to set properly above the hook.

Second, the finish or head of these flies merit discussion of a point that I don't believe has been reported before, although it has surely been observed. Fly dressers are encour-

aged to be as neat as possible, particularly when it comes to the head of the fly. Many of the bass and fancy lake flies in the Marbury illustrations have red heads, as do the real flies themselves. In the book the heads seem to be quite small. In

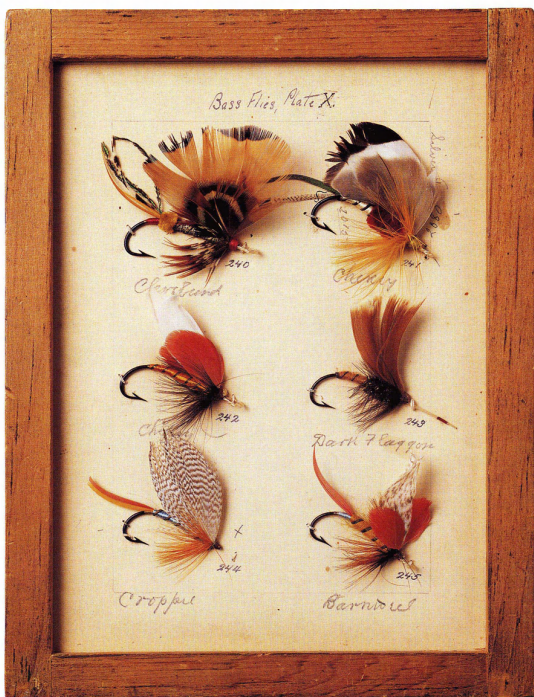


BASS FLIES, PLATE W, shown beside the corresponding page of Mary Orvis Marbury's Favorite Flies and Their Histories.

fact, some of the actual flies are just the opposite, being substantial and with good reason.

On classic salmon flies, finely crafted heads have been the standard for a very long time. Wings of many parts had to be

set atop heavy bodies, gut snells, and often multiple hackles. They went between shoulders and cheeks and under horns, topping, and a roof. The people who dressed these flies were aware of their competition and knew that they had to meet



BASS FLIES, PLATE X.

it. Jock Scotts are Jock Scotts regardless of who ties them. It was not only how well they held together and worked, but also how nicely they were crafted that created the tyer's reputation and future. Poor craftsmanship never sold well for very long.

With American bass and fancy lake flies, some changes appear to have been made in the treatment of the head. Some of the acceptance of these changes may have been due to the nature of the audience itself. It was much larger, more diverse socially and economically, and more relaxed than its per-



BASS FLIES, PLATE Y.

snickety English counterpart. The large whole feathers used in the wings of the American flies often had large stems that were, and still are, hard to hide. In the case of quill fiber wings, large amounts were used, often in a bunch, and these were sometimes reversed. In other words, instead of occa-

sionally being tied back over the hook to start with, the quill was secured extending forward over the eye, and then brought back over the hook to be tied down in the normal position.

The problem of hiding the whole feather butts, quill stubs,



LAKE FLIES, PLATE H.



and reversal folds was solved by ignoring it altogether. To finish the fly, a few turns and half hitches were all that was used, leaving the ends, butts, or folds fully visible beyond the final winds and hitches. Once secure, the entire head was well

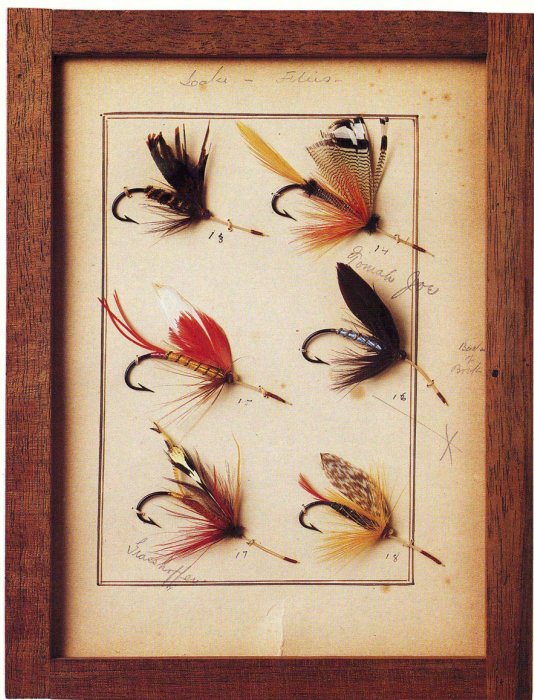
soaked with varnish, which over time has changed the bright red to a dark one. In some cases, there was an attempt to buff things up a bit with some herl, chenille, or wool around the head wraps.



Lake Flies, Plate E, shown beside the corresponding page of Mary Orvis Marbury's *Favorite Flies and Their Histories*.

Last, the flies in the plates of *Favorite Flies* are, in nearly every case, faithful representations of the actual flies. There must, of course, be some leeway given in the area of color. Time has brought about some unanticipated changes in both

the flies and the results of early color reproduction processes. Even though photography was well established, the use of color photographs of flies does not, I believe, appear in a book until W. Earl Hodgson's *Trout Fishing and Salmon*



LAKE FLIES. This plate does not appear in Mary Orvis Marbury's Favorite Flies and Their Histories.

Fishing, and these are both English publications issued in 1904 and 1906, respectively.

The flies at the Museum are hand tied in the original sense of the word, that is, without a vise. When this is done, the fly is held in whatever position is comfortable and convenient.

This causes the light (usually from a window, and therefore natural and oblique) to illuminate the dressing in a way completely different from what is seen today when the fly is held vertically in a vise directly under artificial light. With the old methods, the amounts and qualities of the textures and col-



LAKE FLIES, PLATE F.

ors of the materials produce a visual effect that, no doubt, contributed greatly to the overall design. Beyond that, constantly handling the entire fly during the tying process lends a character to the finished product that cannot be duplicated by any other means. It is not unusual to find that a fly tied

with modern procedures only superficially resembles the dressing being copied.

Although the heyday of the bass and fancy lake flies was over in the thirties, it was still possible to buy them, often tied by the Weber Tackle Co., as late as the early 1960s. ~