

# Carrie G. Stevens

## Originator of Modern Streamer Design

by  
Susie Isaksen



*Most of us think of Mary Orvis Marbury when we think of women in the fly fishing historical perspective. However, women have participated since Dame Bernes and her famous Treatyse. Paul Fisher commented on the women he had seen fly fishing in his Angler's Souvenir, published in London in 1835. Brown's American Angler's Guide, published in 1847, states that a number of ladies had been seen fly fishing. It comes as no surprise, then, that a number of women have contributed to the development of the gentle sport.*

*One of America's leading ladies of fly tying, Carrie Gertrude Stevens, is commemorated with a plaque which lies beside Upper Dam in Rangeley, Maine. It says, "This tablet is placed here to honor a perfectionist and her original creations which have brought recognition to her native state of Maine and fame to the Rangeley Lakes region." It was dedicated on August 15, 1970, twelve days after Mrs. Stevens died in a Skowhegan hospital.*

*The following article tells the story behind the plaque, the story of Mrs. Stevens and the flies she tied.*

Carrie Gertrude Stevens, originator of modern concepts in streamer fly design, was born to Albert and Nellie Wills in Vienna, Maine, on February 22, 1882. As a young woman, Miss Wills moved to Mexico, Maine, where she worked as a milliner and became adept in the use of feathers and combinations of their forms and colors. Fishing and flies meant nothing to her until she married Wallace Clinton Stevens, on May 1, 1905.

Wallace and Carrie made their first home at Camp Prospect where Wallace guided and served as caretaker of the old Boston Club camps on Upper Richardson Lake in the Rangeley Lakes area of Maine, a region which enjoyed a well-deserved reputation for the size of its brook trout. Upper Dam pool, the deep and swirling waters below the wide log dam which separated lakes Mooslookmeguntic and Richardson, was, at the turn of the century, considered one of the world's top trouting spots.

It was near this pool, on the Upper Dam portage road, that the Stevens moved when, in 1919, they purchased a little-used deteriorated cottage. Camp Midway, as the Stevens called their home, was renovated into a comfortable year-round woods cottage which became a meeting place for Wallace's clients and their angling friends. It is likely that the Stevens took anglers in as overnight boarders.

Mrs. Stevens maintained an orderly household, always ready and stocked with food and refreshments for the anglers who were apt to come in at most any time of the day. Her life as the wife of a guide was ordinary in every respect. However, she was sincerely interested in the people who came by and her bright,

hospitable charm and pleasant beauty won her many friends among the fraternity of anglers who visited the Upper Dam pool. One of these anglers, Shang Wheeler (rodmaker, artist, decoy carver and state senator from Stratford, Conn.) asked Mrs. Stevens if she had ever tied flies. The answer was "no," so Wheeler gave Mrs. Stevens some long-shanked hooks of the kind he had introduced to the area. He also gave her some feathers. It is not known whether or not any further instruction was provided. As the story goes, it was Wheeler's materials that Mrs. Stevens experimented with in making her first fly.

Also as the story goes, while trying out the first fly she had ever tied, Mrs. Stevens, on July 1, 1924, landed a brook trout which took second place in the 1924 *Field and Stream* Fishing Contest.

"This magnificent brook trout," the magazine said in its published story of the record-breaking catch, "weighed 6 pounds 13 ounces, was 24¾ inches long and 15 inches in girth. It was taken with a Thomas rod, a Hardy reel, an Ideal line and on a homemade fly, made by the angler."<sup>1</sup>

Describing how she felt at the moment of landing the great fish, Mrs. Stevens wrote, in the original manuscript she sent to *Field and Stream*, "not until my fish was safely landed did I realize the extent of my excitement. Without waiting to remove the fly from the fish's mouth, taking the fish and net in one hand and the rod in the other, I rushed up to the hotel to have my fish weighed."

There, at the hotel to witness Mrs. Stevens' catch, were some

of the country's most affluent anglers, men whose private rail cars were parked beside the railhead at Middle Dam. As Mrs. Stevens showed off her fish, the assemblage of anglers became curious as to what fly she had used. Thus, the story of the heaviest brook trout to be taken from Upper Dam pool in 13 years began to take on a significance which attracted greater meaning to the fly and its tier than to the size of the fish or the sex of the angler.

The fly was rather large with two gray hackle feathers for a wing and under the shank, white bucktail. It had been tied with the idea of imitating a smelt but it was no great beauty.

"My first flies left much to be desired," Mrs. Stevens later recalled. <sup>2</sup> "I found that with too much hair and only two feathers the fly would ride bottom up in the water, but by using less hair and four feathers the trouble was corrected."

Mrs. Stevens first improved the fly by using four or six hackles instead of the original two. To insure a more correct position in the water, the wing was made heavier and the underbody was made lighter. A third improved pattern called for the addition of white or gray chicken plumage to simulate the gill covers of a bait fish. This third variation, which Mrs. Stevens named the Rangeley Favorite, was the now-famous Gray Ghost in embryo.

Mrs. Stevens continued to perfect her fly, as she met the rush of orders which resulted from the *Field and Stream* article and from the attention she received among Rangeley Lakes anglers. "Because this prize-winning fish had been caught on my fly, it caused great excitement," Mrs. Stevens told a reporter for the *Lewiston Journal*. <sup>3</sup> "Suddenly, overnight and with mushroom like growth, I had developed a fly tying business."

Also, by distributing her unconventional flies, Mrs. Stevens popularized her colorful stream-lined dressings, completely ignoring the then-fashionable method of tying streamers of bucktail with high wings on short-shanked hooks. The Stevens' flies were so different from any others that it is doubtful that she studied or was influenced by other fly designs.

Any such influence, if it existed, may have come from the brilliant old Atlantic salmon fly and the traditional long wing of the original American streamer. Also, Louis Rhead had introduced the idea of imitating bait fish with long-shanked hooks. His *Fishermen's Lures and Game Fish Food*, published in 1920, contains a colored illustration showing two very curious "Maine" dressings. These dressings are shown on a double hook and consist of shoulders of pheasant and long streamer feathers tied in at the rear. However, the Rhead patterns were so far out that they do not appear to have had any real use.

It was Carrie Stevens and her widely-used and much-imitated Gray Ghost that popularized the long-shanked streamer hook and the long wing parallel to the shank. Also, all indications are that she was the first to use shoulders of various body plumage in the modern concept.

It is no surprise that Mrs. Stevens was such an innovative tier. Her methods, drawn from her background as a milliner rather than from fly fishing experiences, were strictly her own. "I do not know anything about tying flies except what I worked out myself," she said in a letter to H. Wendall Folkins dated November 27, 1953.

"She originated patterns more from whim than reason," Col. Joseph D. Bates recalled in an article he wrote for *the Fly-fisher*. <sup>4</sup> Bates used to frequent Upper Dam pool, often taking advantage of the Stevens' old Maine hospitality.

"Sometimes I design a pattern to fit the name I have selected for it," Mrs. Stevens once told Bates. "Other times I choose a name suggested by the pattern."<sup>5</sup> It made little difference because the fishing at Upper Dam was so good in Carrie Stevens' day that the actual pattern of a fly mattered little.

What did matter was that Mrs. Stevens' flies were tied in a way that gave them a fluttering swim-like action which made them more effective than the use of live bait. The following report in the Madison, Maine, *Bulletin* attests to this:

"Mr. Stevens was out fishing with Judge Charles E. Wells of Connecticut. They trolled with live bait for several hours without catching any. Finally, Mr. Stevens said, 'I am going to try one of Mrs. Stevens' big flies.' The judge began to laugh and asked, 'What do you expect to get with that trolling?'

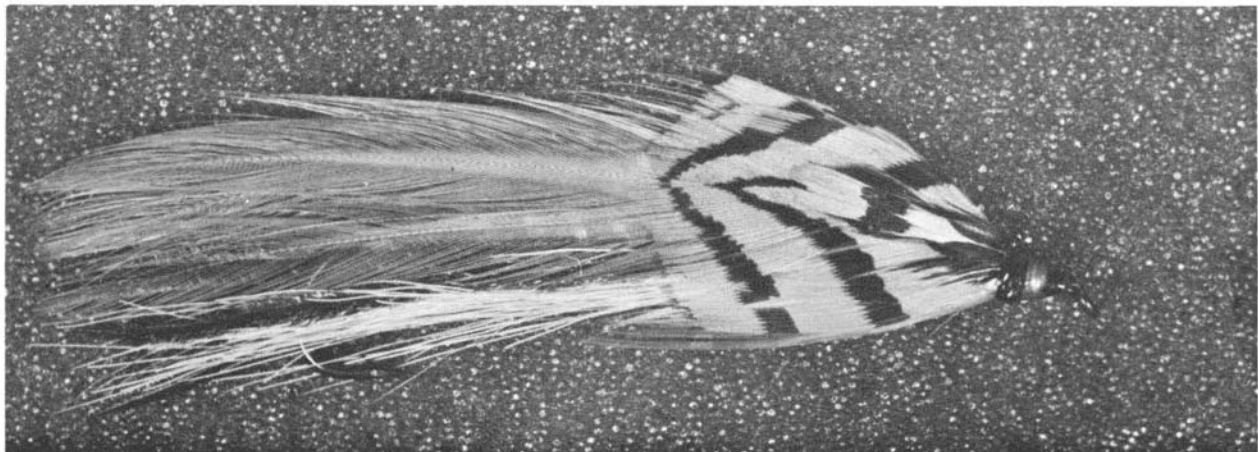
"Well," said the other, 'We can't get any less than we have.' "The bait was removed and replaced by one of the flies' (very likely the pattern which became known as The Judge) 'and within five minutes they had hooked a four pound salmon. Judge Wells then decided to try trolling with one of her flies and within a short time they had taken their limit while all the other fishermen around using live bait were not getting a thing."<sup>6</sup>

It was success stories like this that made Mrs. Stevens' flies so popular not only on the Rangeley Lakes but, eventually as Mrs. Stevens' customers travelled, throughout the country.

As the word spread, Mrs. Stevens could not keep up with all the orders she received. She was, primarily, a housewife and therefore could not devote all her time to tying flies. She fulfilled as many orders as possible, making flies in one-person assembly-line fashion, bringing several flies through each separate stage of construction. She was very careful in seeing to it that none of the many visitors to Camp Midway ever witnessed her entire process from start to finish. She maintained demand for her flies by keeping her unique methods a secret. It was probably this caution that prevented her from enlarging her business and profits by taking on an assistant or partner.

So, working alone and at the height of her fame, Mrs. Stevens took in an annual sum of \$3,000, not a large sum but one that could be considered good for a lone, part-time fly tyer.

Mrs. Stevens called her business Rangeley's Favorite Trout and Salmon Flies. She had at least 50 named patterns of her



An example of the Stevens' Gray Ghost tied during her last years as a professional. The first streamers were much more delicate with a far better grade of saddle hackle and underbody hair.

Alexander photo

own design and several other exclusive ties to meet customers' special requests. Some of the well-known patterns she developed include: Governor, Pink Lady, Queen of the Waters, Mickey Finn, Silver Doctor, Colonel Bates and Shang's Special. Most famous of all, and a pattern which still receives much use and attention today, is the Gray Ghost.

All of Mrs. Stevens' flies were tied by the use of half hitches to hold things together in lieu of a vice. They were complex ties consisting of three components: 1) a flat wing, shoulder, topping and jungle cock cheek; 2) a standard body and tinsel ribbing with herl laid on top; and, 3) an underbody of hair, hackle fibers and throat of a very unusual construction. The variations in patterns were usually only in color and material.

Each of Mrs. Stevens' streamers was tied with her often-imitated patent mark, a ring of colored thread finishing off the head. Also, each fly was attached to a printed one-and-one-half by four-and-three-eighths inch card indicating the pattern number and hook size and the words "Made by Mrs. Carrie G. Stevens, Upper Dam, Maine." Frequently, the name of the pattern would appear in Mrs. Stevens' own hand.

The Rangeley Favorites sold for \$1.50 each through stores and camps. The biggest outlets were Herb Welch and Middle Dam House. Also, they were sold directly through the mail and to such famous fly fishers as Herbert Hoover and the author Zane Grey.

Thus, for a quarter of a century, the cottage industry flourished beside swirling waters and amongst birches at Camp Midway and, after 1927, at the Stevens' winter home in Anson, Maine.

Then, in 1949, the Stevens moved to establish a permanent year-round residence in Madison, Maine. By this time the Rangeley Lakes fishery had declined. Upper Dam House and Camps had closed as commercial operations and the affluent guests who wanted guides no longer came to stay at Upper Dam. Furthermore, Wallace Stevens was in his 80's and not of firm health. The exertion of maintaining the Camp Midway building and the rigors of life in the woods had become a burden.

Gradually, Mrs. Stevens gave up her fly tying. Housekeeping duties and caring for her husband left little time for her avocation. In addition, her eyesight was failing and all flies tied after 1945 were of increasingly poor quality. By 1953 many customers were complaining and Mrs. Stevens was unable to fulfill most of the orders she was still receiving. She wrote George F. Fletcher, a Rangeley tackle dealer, and asked him if he would be interested in purchasing her business.

Fletcher forwarded Mrs. Stevens' letter to his friend, H. Wendall Folkins of Tamworth, New Hampshire, a professional tier.

On November 27, 1953, Mrs. Stevens wrote Folkins saying, "I was pleased to hear from you and that you are interested in my flies and fly tying materials. I am enclosing the fly you sent me - it is beautifully tied and it should not be at all difficult for you to duplicate my work . . . I estimate that I have 300 dollars worth of material . . . If you buy my material I will show you how I tie my flies and give you the names of my customers."

Folkins took Mrs. Stevens up on her offer. In early December, 1953, Mrs. Stevens mailed Folkins a box of miscellaneous fly tying materials. Also, Mrs. Stevens sent a list of customers and a collection of flies she had tied with instructions on how to tie them. An exchange of letters followed whereby Folkins sent samples of his first efforts at the Stevens' patterns and she replied with praise or additional instructions. She also offered suggestions on how to sell to her various clients.

Among the correspondence was a gracious invitation from Mrs. Stevens offering first-hand instruction. Thus, in early 1954, Folkins and Fletcher went to Madison, visited Mrs. Stevens and saw her tie one of her flies from start to finish.

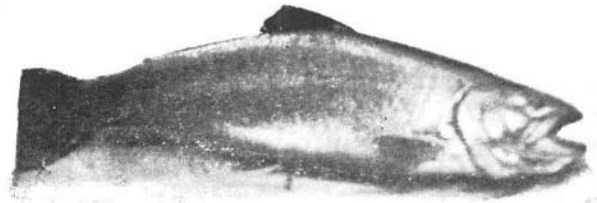
Folkins remembered the occasion in a letter dated April 10, 1965, to Austin S. Hogan: "Mrs. S. insisted that she had never allowed anyone to watch her dress flies. I was the only one, with George Fletcher sitting in, who ever watched her dress a fly. It was a true Pink Lady and I have it."

Eventually, Folkins mastered the Rangeley Favorites as Mrs. Stevens' letters acknowledged his skill. However, the materials Mrs. Stevens used were expensive and her methods were complicated. Folkins could not sell many flies at the high price he needed for the time and materials required to make an authentic Stevens' streamer. The three dollars Folkins needed for each fly was not competitive.

For this reason, Folkins modified and improved the dressings. The authentic Stevens' ties faded from the market and were no longer of interest to the fly-buying public.

The secret to the success of Mrs. Stevens' flies may have been lost under these circumstances had not Austin S. Hogan of Cambridge, Mass. taken an interest in them. In 1965 he bought from Wendall Folkins a part of the Steven memorabilia - letters, handwritten tying instructions, some flies and wing assemblies Mrs. Stevens had tied, newspaper clippings and other articles about Mrs. Stevens and her work. Also Folkins taught him how to tie the Stevens' patterns. However, Hogan states, "It was his modified dressing that he taught me, and which I in turn, for pur-

## The Rangeley's Favorite Trout and Salmon Flies



Red Spotted Genuine Brook Trout, weighing 6 pounds and 13 ounces, taken at Upper Dam by Mrs. Stevens, on one of her flies.

In ordering, give pattern number and size of hook desired, and address

MRS. CARRIE G. STEVENS,  
Upper Dam, Maine

Pattern No. Hook size

Made by  
Mrs. Carrie G. Stevens Upper Dam, Me.

Pattern No. Hook size

Made by  
Mrs. Carrie G. Stevens Upper Dam, Me.

*The Stevens' last show card. Twelve mounted flies were displayed. Herb Welch of Haines Landing and Larry Parsons the hotel keeper at the Upper Dam, Maine, kept large stocks of Stevens' streamers in glass cases.*

poses of record gave to Joe Bates for his book, *Streamer Fly Tying and Fishing* 7, never really knowing that Folkins had not taught me the entire Stevens' method."

"Eventually realizing this, I studied her original flies, duplicated them and then tested them by trolling. Ultimately I learned the secret which was to make the tail ends of the saddle wings flutter."

Thus, thanks to Hogan and his perception of the historically significant and the research materials supplied for this article by him, are we made aware of the basic concepts of the Stevens' dressings and why they have been defiant of imitation. Heretofore, this lack of understanding as to precisely how Stevens' streamers were made to swim has been a serious defect in the pattern descriptions which have appeared in print. Even with the full knowledge, the streamers are exceedingly difficult to tie.

Another factor obscuring the true Stevens' tie occurred because professional tiers adapted the Rangeley Favorite patterns to smaller hooks for casting. "The Stevens' streamers were meant to be trolled and were so designed," explains Hogan. "The very skilled fly maker can put them on hooks of No. 8 or less but a properly proportioned saddle hackle in that size or smaller is very difficult to find. Unless the hackle is proportionate the characteristic action is lost."

The essence of the correct Stevens' tie lies in the choice of thin-quilled saddle hackles and the use of a light touch of lacquer on the fore part of the body to form the basic wing at-



## Stevens' Patterns



Once established, about 1930, the Stevens' method of tying streamer flies for trolling seldom varied. Tail, tinsel and body material were tied on 8X, long shanked hooks, sometimes 6X. Body windings extended 3/4 the length of the shank, then bucktail, slightly past the hook bend, next a series of white, stripped hackles, next the topping of Golden Pheasant crest on top of the shank and lastly the throat of Golden Pheasant.

The characteristic peacock herl was lacquered to the top of the shank and the hook assembly set aside to dry.

The wing assembly consisted of two saddle hackles lacquered together at the butts. Various dyed and natural feathers were used for shoulders and the Jungle Cock lacquered to the shoulder. The assembly was duplicated for the opposite side. It should be noted she cut off the extending butt pieces. This was because the final wing assembly was made by catching the shortened butt with her tying thread then lacquering the shoulder edge, the saddles and Jungle Cock tip to the base of the topping. This is a delicate operation but determines the action of the saddle tips when trolled.

The head is finished off with a winding of orange silk.

Carrie Stevens tied many one of a kind patterns for her customers. Many of the following listed were tied only for friends and never reached the common market as did the Gray Ghost. Because her method never varied, only the distinctive features are listed. Patterns are taken from her hand written notes.

### MORNING GLORY

Body: Red silk. Wing: Yellow saddle, black silver pheasant crest, red pheasant breast shoulder.

### CARRIES' SPECIAL

Silver hook. Body: silver tinsel. Wing: red violet saddle, thin dark badger against this, shoulder black and yellow body plumage.

### THE JUDGE

Body: Silver tinsel. Wing: Grizzly saddle dyed dark red wine color. No shoulder. Jungle Cock.

### PINK BEAUTY

Body: Silver tinsel. Wing: Bright pink saddle. Shoulder: brown barred mallard side feather. Jungle Cock.

tachments. The aft portion of the wing saddles are left free to swim when trolled.

Authentic patterns may be obtained from Wendall A. Folkins of Tamworth, New Hampshire on special order.

Carrie Stevens changed and made fly tying history. If her method of tying trolling streamers is complex, her original concept of the wing lying parallel to the hook shank has been adopted by fly tiers internationally and is now characteristic of the American streamer.

### References . . .

1. Plumley, Ladd, editor *Tales of Record Fish and Fishing, Field and Stream*; September, 1925; pp. 39, 95, and 96.
2. Anonymous; *Carrie Stevens*; a commemorative brochure published by J. S. McCarthy Co., Inc.; July, 1970.
3. Sawyer, Mina Titus; *Fly Tying Business Was Started with Catching of a Big Trout*, *Lewiston Journal*, Lewiston, Maine; January 31, 1952.
4. Bates, Col. Joseph D., Jr.; *Carrie Stevens and the Gray Ghost, The Flyfisher*; Volume VI, Number 4; 1973; pp. 4 - 7.
5. Ibid.
6. Anonymous; *Trolling with Flies Popular with Fishing Devotees*, *Madison Bulletin*, Madison, Maine; February 29, 1940; pg. 9.
7. Bates, Col. Joseph D., Jr.; *Streamer Fly Tying and Fishing*. The Stackpole Co., Harrisburg, Pa. 1966. Contains pattern descriptions and a color plate of Stevens' patterns.

### GEE WHIZ

Body: red silk. Wing: Grizzly saddles dyed dark yellow. Shoulder: blue. Jungle Cock.

### GOLDEN WITCH

Body: Orange silk. Wing: Grizzly. Shoulder Chinese pheasant tippets. Jungle Cock.

### GREEN GHOST

Similar to Gray Ghost except green saddles. Mrs. Stevens tied her Ghosts in all colors of the spectrum.

### SILVER DOCTOR

Body: Silver tinsel. Wing: Thin blue gray saddle over a wider orange saddle over a yellow saddle. Jungle Cock.

### ALLIE'S DELIGHT

Body: Silver Tinsel. Wing: Red saddle over black. Brown and black shoulder, plumage unknown. Jungle Cock.

### NO NAME

Wing: white. Shoulder: Bronze mallard. Jungle Cock.

### GOVERNOR

Body: Orange silk. Wing: Thin grizzly against yellow saddle. Shoulder: barred mallard side feather. Jungle Cock.

### GREEN HORNET

Body: Silver tinsel. Wing: Green saddles. Shoulder: Silver pheasant breast.

### GRAY GHOST

Body: Yellow orange silk. Wing: Bronze gray. Ripon pheasant. shoulder. Jungle Cock. Time fades the original gray to a pinkish cast.

In the Folkins and Hogan collections are numerous varicolored wings without names. Undoubtedly, these were for customers who had their own ideas or experiments. She also tied commemorative patterns such as the General MacArthur and the Rangeley Special for a village commemorative celebration. In her late years, goat hair was often substituted for bucktail. Listings of the Stevens' most popular patterns may be found in standard fly tying reference books such as Bates, Jorgensen, Leonard, Herter, etc.