

Thomas Rods: Connected to Place, Cosmic in Reputation

by Richard Jagels

There comes a time to the business man when he can no longer stand the strain and heat of the city life; when in fancy, he sees the rippling waves on lakes and streams, and hears the voices of the forest where nature is as wild and primitive as the aboriginal names of her leaf-fringed waters.

—James Churchward

A Big Game and Fishing Guide to
Northeastern Maine

INTRODUCING AN 1898 Maine hunting and fishing guidebook produced by the Bangor and Aroostook (B&A) Railroad, these words illustrate the transformation of the United States from a pre-Civil War farming, logging, and commercial fishing society to one that was fully engaged in the industrial system, but longed to occasionally return to its bucolic roots.

Railroads and steamships allowed urbanites from cities such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia to find mental and physical respite in northern New England and upstate New York. Particularly alluring was the state of Maine. Steamships regularly sailed from Boston to Bangor, the rail hub for the Maine Central and B&A rail lines.¹ From Bangor, sportsmen could travel to the Moosehead Lake region on the B&A or Down East to Princeton on the Maine Central. A small steamship then took passengers across Big Lake to Gould Landing, where a 3-mile wagon ride brought “sports” to the village of Grand Lake Stream, replete with lodging, meals, and guides.

As the nation evolved from natural resource harvesting to industrial production, two men (brothers? father and son?) began publishing a journal in Bangor. E. M. and W. F. Blanding started the weekly *Maine Mining Journal* on 2 January 1880. By 1882, the name was changed to *Mining and Industrial Journal*, and in 1885, it became just the *Industrial Journal* until it ceased publication in September 1918.² This widely read journal provided not only commercial business information to its readers, but also a steady diet of recreational possibilities. (For simplicity, all three versions of the journal will be

abbreviated as *IJ* in this article.) The editors reported on hotels and summer resorts and ran a regular column titled “Fish and Game,” in which they culled articles from newspapers and magazines like *Forest and Stream*, but also provided their own local reports on fishing and hunting activities in Maine and occasionally maritime Canada. From the 24 July 1891 issue of *IJ*, we learn:

The landlocked salmon season at [West] Grand Lake is ended. More than the usual number of sportsmen have visited

the famous haunt, and the fly fishing has been beyond the average of late years. Mr. R. F. Wellington of New York, so the record shows, has led the score this year for the greatest number of fish taken in a single day. The largest fish taken was captured by Mr. N. T. Smith of Lynn, Mass., who went to the Stream in company with Mr. S. S. Pineo of this city. Mr. Smith hooked the fish with a “silver doctor” fly just below the dam, and was forced to struggle for nearly two hours before he brought his prize to the net. It required all the skill of an accomplished rodsman to manage and secure the



Portrait of Fred E. Thomas (date unknown). From the collections of the Maine State Museum, Augusta.

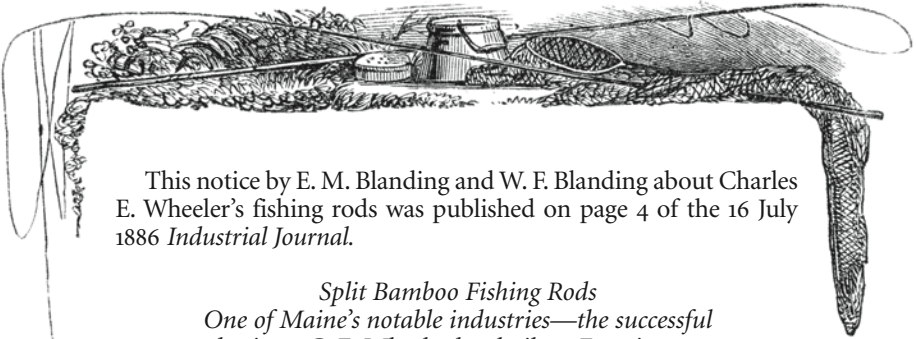
gamy salmon in the rough water at the spot named, but he was equal to the thrilling occasion. The fish weighed 8 pounds and 7 ounces, and was served at a dinner given by Mr. Smith to a party of 17 friends at the Boundary House in Milltown [near Calais]. This is claimed to be the largest landlocked salmon ever captured at Grand Lake. The fishes of greater weight that have been taken were either togue [lake trout] or genuine sea salmon. Mr. Smith says he will come again next year.³

I expect that dozens of readers of that news clip (as well as Smith's seventeen close friends) had similar dreams about a trip to Grand Lake Stream the following season. Until the late 1880s, Bangor was primarily a starting point for excursions to more remote destinations in Maine. Only in subsequent decades would this change. The 1860s, by contrast, saw the beginning of a rush of sportsmen to Farmington, gateway to the Rangeley Lakes area of western Maine, where anglers could test their skills against huge native brook trout. By the late 1870s, anglers were being actively courted to that region by Cornelia "Fly Rod" Crosby.⁴

TWO ROD MAKERS CROSS SWORDS

Amidst this backdrop, two Maine gunsmiths began producing split-bamboo fly rods: one in Bangor and one in Farmington. Hiram L. Leonard of Bangor needs no introduction, having been chronicled by numerous authors. Less well known until fairly recently was Charles E. Wheeler.⁵ Wheeler built his first split-bamboo rod in 1868 and Leonard in 1870 or 1871. Until Leonard was coaxed away to Central Valley, New York, a decade later, the Leonard and Wheeler operations were the primary "production" rod-making shops in Maine.⁶ They both entered rods in the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1876, and each received bronze medals. Today Leonard rods are much better known, but in the 1870s and 1880s, Wheeler may have produced a larger quantity (see sidebar).

According to Dwight B. Demeritt Jr., Wheeler's rods sold for \$14.50 to \$16.50 at the time that Leonard rods sold for \$20 to \$30.⁷ Most Wheeler rods were sold under the trade name of Acme in the cities of Boston, New York, Cincinnati, and Chicago. Wheeler had two other early advantages over Leonard. First, the "trout rush" to the Rangeley region began in the 1860s, at a time when Bangor was still a



This notice by E. M. Blanding and W. F. Blanding about Charles E. Wheeler's fishing rods was published on page 4 of the 16 July 1886 *Industrial Journal*.

Split Bamboo Fishing Rods *One of Maine's notable industries—the successful business C. E. Wheeler has built at Farmington*

Among the novel industries of Maine the manufacture of split bamboo fishing rods by Charles E. Wheeler of Farmington is entitled to a prominent place. Mr. Wheeler was a gun-smith by trade, when, helping to make a rod for a party, he became convinced that rod-making had possibilities before it that his old business had not.

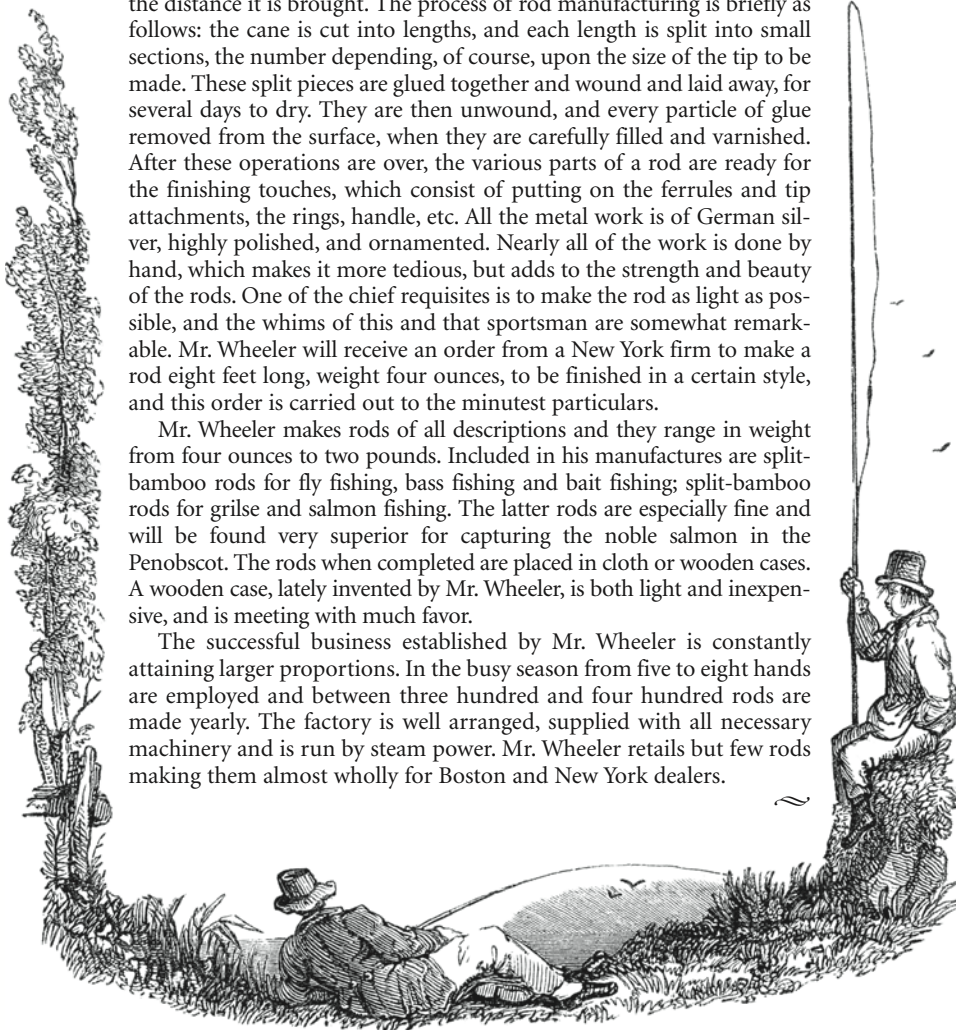
Mr. Wheeler soon began to turn out some rods. This was in 1868. His rods quickly found favor and the demand for them has been steadily increasing. In 1876 he received a bronze medal on an exhibit made at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. Mr. Wheeler was likewise represented by a very creditable display at the late New Orleans Exposition. In the eighteen years he has been engaged in this business, the manufacture of rods has changed very remarkably, and not a few of the improvements are the ideas of Mr. Wheeler, while various machines used in their manufacture were first made by him.

The bamboo used in the manufacture of rods is from Calcutta. The bamboo comes in long canes and is not so very expensive considering the distance it is brought. The process of rod manufacturing is briefly as follows: the cane is cut into lengths, and each length is split into small sections, the number depending, of course, upon the size of the tip to be made. These split pieces are glued together and wound and laid away, for several days to dry. They are then unwound, and every particle of glue removed from the surface, when they are carefully filled and varnished. After these operations are over, the various parts of a rod are ready for the finishing touches, which consist of putting on the ferrules and tip attachments, the rings, handle, etc. All the metal work is of German silver, highly polished, and ornamented. Nearly all of the work is done by hand, which makes it more tedious, but adds to the strength and beauty of the rods. One of the chief requisites is to make the rod as light as possible, and the whims of this and that sportsman are somewhat remarkable. Mr. Wheeler will receive an order from a New York firm to make a rod eight feet long, weight four ounces, to be finished in a certain style, and this order is carried out to the minutest particulars.

Mr. Wheeler makes rods of all descriptions and they range in weight from four ounces to two pounds. Included in his manufactures are split-bamboo rods for fly fishing, bass fishing and bait fishing; split-bamboo rods for grilse and salmon fishing. The latter rods are especially fine and will be found very superior for capturing the noble salmon in the Penobscot. The rods when completed are placed in cloth or wooden cases. A wooden case, lately invented by Mr. Wheeler, is both light and inexpensive, and is meeting with much favor.

The successful business established by Mr. Wheeler is constantly attaining larger proportions. In the busy season from five to eight hands are employed and between three hundred and four hundred rods are made yearly. The factory is well arranged, supplied with all necessary machinery and is run by steam power. Mr. Wheeler retails but few rods making them almost wholly for Boston and New York dealers.

Line art from P. Fisher, *The Angler's Souvenir* (London: Charles Tilt, 1835).





Re-creation of a corner of the workroom at the Thomas Rod Company; a display at the Maine State Museum, Augusta. From the collections of the Maine State Museum, Augusta.

weir-fishing port; second, Cornelia Crosby received three “gift” rods from Wheeler, the first in 1878, which was, in fact, the rod that initiated her to fly fishing and later led to her hugely successful career as a Maine outdoor promoter. Crosby’s endorsement of Wheeler rods must have been very helpful to his business.

How much this competition influenced Leonard’s decision to move to Central Valley we don’t know, but we do know that during the depression of the mid-1870s, he reduced rod prices and offered other incentives, such as a free rod to angling clubs that sold a certain number.⁸ It is interesting to speculate that if Leonard had stayed in Bangor, the Thomas Rod Company might never have been formed. Fred E. Thomas might have simply continued work as a rod maker in the Leonard firm.

But, of course, that didn’t happen. At the urging of William Mills, Leonard took Fred Thomas, “Billy” Eustis Edwards, Edward Payne, and Hiram and Loman Hawes to Highland Mills, New York, in 1881.⁹ For various reasons, Thomas, Loman Hawes, and Edwards formed their own company in 1889 and began producing rods using the double-saw beveler designed by Loman at Highland Mills. In 1891, Loman left and was replaced by Ed Payne; this formed the Thomas, Edwards, and Payne group that began producing the now-famous Kosmic rods. In 1893, Thomas traveled to Chicago to promote his Kosmic rods, winning a gold medal for the rods and an expert artisan diploma for himself. (This diploma currently hangs on the wall in the shop of Steve Campbell, current owner of the Thomas Rod Company, in Brewer,

Maine.) Four or five years later, the partners sold the business to U.S. Net and Twine, providing them with capital to boost production. But then, around 1896, Fred Thomas returned to Maine and settled in Brewer, just across the Penobscot from Bangor.¹⁰

SALMON SPORT FEVER SETS THE STAGE

In my research, I have not discovered exactly why Thomas decided to leave what appears to have been a successful business in New York State to strike out on his own in the Bangor area. Perhaps he just grew tired of his life away from home. Even today, young people leave Maine for jobs elsewhere and then spend years hoping to return.

Another possibility is that Bangor in the mid- to late 1880s was transforming from a primarily commercial port for weir-caught fish to a destination for fly fishing for Atlantic salmon. The earlier trout rush in the Rangeley region became the salmon rush of the mid-1880s in Bangor. Examination of issues of *IJ* reveals a marked change in reporting during this period. In 1882, the editors reported:

Orland derives quite an annual income from her fisheries. . . . The markets are Boston and New York. . . . The salmon weirs are arranged on a large scale and at considerable cost. The shores from Orland extending to Fort Point are well occupied by weirs extending into the river, but many [salmon] are taken at different points along the shore, extending nearly up to Bangor.¹¹

But then in 1885, on July 3, *IJ* revealed: “Messrs. F. W. Ayer and E. M. Hersey have taken good sized salmon with the fly rod at the Water-Works dam, Bangor, this season. Mr. Ayer has been particularly successful, having landed several fish in the most artistic way.”¹² (For more on Fred Ayer and the history of fly fishing on the Penobscot, see John Mundt’s article in the Summer 1996 issue of this journal.¹³)

On 15 January 1886, *IJ* published a letter from State Fisheries Commissioner E. M. Stilwell of Bangor to U.S. Fish Commissioner Spencer F. Baird, in which Stilwell complained:

I suppose the newspapers have reported our success in introducing salmon angling to our Maine rivers. For the last twenty years we have been continually annoyed with the question as to why Maine salmon would not rise to the fly? My continual success in capturing them with the rod in the waters at Bucksport, where they were packed for spawning purposes, seemed to have no influence in removing the doubt.¹⁴

Suddenly, the flood gates were opened. On 7 May 1886, *IJ* reported:

Fly fishing for salmon has frequently been attempted on this river, but has not been attended with success until last season when a large number of fine fish were landed by expert fishermen just below the Water-Works dam. Since then, Bangoreans of angling propensities have been in a state of excitement. The dealers in sportsmen’s outfits have experienced a run on their stock of tackle and flies, and there has daily been a lively scene at the fishing grounds, every trade and profession being represented among the crowd of enthusiastic anglers.¹⁵

Finally, on 8 April 1887, *IJ* noted:

Police Officer Allen of this city, who recently secured a ten year’s lease of the shores comprising the salmon fishing privileges at the waterworks dam, is forming an anglers’ club, to be known as the Penobscot River Salmon Club, with a membership fee of \$10. It is intended when the organization is perfected to erect a fine clubhouse at the fishing grounds, to be fitted with all conveniences and comforts for the accommodation of members and their guests.¹⁶

FRED THOMAS BUILDS A BUSINESS

Was Fred Thomas watching this angling transformation from New York and plotting a return to Maine? We only know that around 1896 Thomas moved to Brewer and in 1898 encouraged



Thomas Rod Company building at 168–170 Park Street, Bangor, Maine. Photo taken sometime between 1923 and 1938. From the collections of the Maine State Museum, Augusta.

Edwards to join him, but despite their friendship (they lived in houses across the street from each other), the partnership soon dissolved.

The first Fred E. Thomas listing in the *Bangor Directory* is in 1901, at 52 Center Street, Brewer. Fortunately for Thomas, his fame as a rod maker preceded his return. In a widely distributed 1898 B&A railroad publication, author James Churchward provided detailed instructions to potential sportsmen planning angling trips to Maine. In choosing a fly rod, Churchward suggested, “The best and most reliable rod in the world is a genuine hand-made split bamboo, and the worst is a machine-made one got up to imitate the genuine article.”¹⁷ He recommended only three rods, one of them a Kosmic, and his only recommendation for fly line was Kosmic.

In the 1903 *Bangor Directory*, Thomas had moved to 117 Exchange Street, Bangor (the same address as the offices of the *Industrial Journal*—coincidence or connection?), where he stayed until 1923. I wondered if the Thomas shop survived the great fire of 1911. With assistance from Dana Lippitt, curator at the Bangor Museum and Center for History, I learned that embers from J. Frank Green’s hay shed, where the fire started, blew diagonally across Kenduskeag Stream, setting fire to the buildings on both sides of Exchange Street between York and State streets. Fortunately for Thomas, his shop was spared by less than a hundred

feet. Had the wind been blowing directly across the Kenduskeag, the Thomas shop would have been one of the first casualties in that April conflagration.

In the 1921–1922 *Bangor Directory*, the listing changed to “Thomas Rod Co. (Fred Thomas and Leo A. Broad).” No one I spoke with could identify this partner. Did Thomas need more capital? Deeds (copies in files at the Bangor Museum) show that the Thomas Rod Company purchased half of the property at 168 Park Street in 1921 and the other half in 1922. Perhaps Leo Broad helped with this purchase, but his name does not appear again in the *Bangor Directory*. In

1923, Thomas moved into his new two-story, 32-by-60-foot brick building.¹⁸

The rod model most emblematic of the company, from beginning to end, is the Dirigo. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines *dirigo* as “I direct,” but in Maine, we interpret the state motto as “I lead.” Thomas appears to have possessed both attributes. Within a few years of establishing himself in the Bangor area, demand for new rods and repair of old ones compelled Thomas to hire additional workers.¹⁹ His son, Leon, joined the firm around 1911. Many of those hired over the years had no previous experience but developed into skilled craftsmen. In 1920, Fred Thomas hired his brother-in-law, woods worker Edwin Houston, who developed into a first-rate machinist and rod builder, eventually becoming foreman. When Leon sold the company in 1958, he anointed Ed as the person to continue repairing and building Thomas-style rods (but without the Thomas name, which was bought by Clarence “Sam” Carlson).

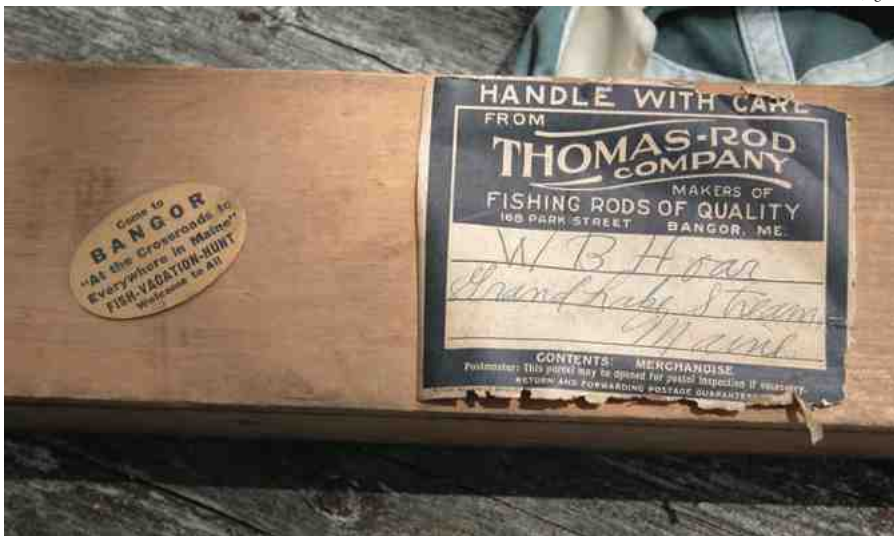
ATTENTION TO CUSTOMERS AND QUALITY ENHANCES REPUTATION

In a 1982 interview with Ed Houston by Sandy Ives, folklorist at the University of Maine, Houston reported that one of his fondest memories from an impoverished childhood was finding a three-piece steel rod in the woods and taking it home and sanding off the rust. It was his first real fishing rod. Decades later, his tastes had barely changed. Despite more than sixty years of bamboo rod making, Houston felt compelled to tell Ives about his wonderful old telescoping steel rod (probably a Bristol) and avowed he “wouldn’t sell it for nothin’.”²⁰

Richard Jagels



The Thomas Rod Company building today. Steve Campbell dreams of turning this building into a museum.



Sturdy wooden box used in 1936 to ship a Thomas rod (while promoting Bangor). Box owned by Chris Wheaton, owner of Grand Lake Lodge and grandson of W. B. Hoar.

We generally blame the advent of fiberglass rods as the cause for the demise of bamboo rod making; Leon Thomas gives this as a reason for selling the company in 1958.²¹ But in earlier decades, telescoping steel and beryllium copper rods were actively competing with bamboo. In a 1919 edition of *Forest and Stream* (June 1919, vol. 89, no. 6), the Horton Manufacturing Company (Bristol steel fishing rods) took out a full page ad (10 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 7 inches), whereas a Thomas Rod Company ad occupied a tiny corner of a page (2 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches). Even revered companies like Abbey & Imbrie and Abercrombie & Fitch had only partial-page ads in that issue. Yet through good business instincts and excellent people skills, Fred and Leon Thomas persevered and built a thriving business that spanned six decades.

From the Bangor and Dirigo models to the Specials and Browntones, from wet-fly to dry-fly and streamer versions, from trout to salmon, and later, to casting and trolling rods for other fresh- and saltwater species, father and son tried to meet all the needs of actual and potential customers. Leon Thomas's daughter, Sue Cox, remembered her father always welcoming anglers into the shop to discuss having a rod designed to their special needs. He would even lend a rod for someone to try, sometimes never seeing it again.²² During the peak years, Thomas Rod Company employed fifteen to eighteen highly skilled craftsmen and produced as many as 1,200 rods per year, which were sold all over the United States as well as in England, Norway, Ireland, and Australia. Thomas rods won a gold medal at the Chicago World's Fair (1933) and a silver medal at the World's Fair in San Francisco (1939).²³ Displaying rods at sportsmen's shows was a key strategy

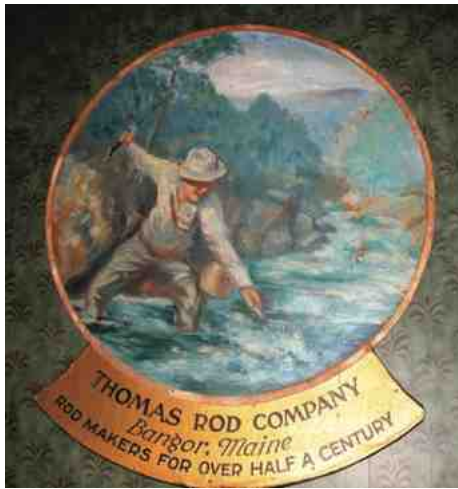
of the company. Sue Cox recalls traveling to shows in Boston and New York with Leon, and she showed me a 6-foot, 6-inch Thomas fairy rod that baseball legend Ted Williams had used to demonstrate fly casting at a Boston show.

But it was customer testimonials that probably helped sell more rods than World's Fair medals. A 1940 letter to Leon Thomas from Donald H. Wilson, owner of Wilson's on Moosehead Lake (a sportsmen's lodge still in existence), says, in part, "I have used practically all of the best known fly rods and it is my opinion that the Thomas Rod is the finest rod that can be bought. They not only have the best action, but their durability cannot be surpassed."²⁴ As owner of a sixteen-year-old Dirigo, and with his father in possession of a forty-year-old Thomas, Don Wilson probably convinced many anglers who visited his camps to get a Thomas rod for themselves.

Both Sue Cox and Barney Thompson,²⁵ who worked for the Thomas Rod Company in the 1940s, independently confirmed that quality control was critical to the success of the business. Thompson noted that any subgrade rods were immediately destroyed; not even the shop craftsmen were allowed to take less-than-perfect rods home. Final assembly of rods and testing of their actions was performed by Fred or Leon. Thompson recalls seeing Leon bend a tip nearly double to test for



Leon Thomas at work in 1939. From the collections of the Maine State Museum, Augusta.



Left: Thomas Rod Company advertisement used at trade shows. Currently owned by Leon Thomas's daughter, Sue Cox.

Below left: The Leon Thomas home from 1947 to 1958, on the banks of the Penobscot estuary in Winterport, Maine.

Below: Tom Hennessey's bargain special-edition Stan Bogdan fly reel.



any defects. *Bangor Evening Commercial* writer Earle Doucette wrote, "To get a perfect three-section rod, many sections have to be tried in combination until Leon Thomas is satisfied. This task he trusts to no one but himself."²⁶

ARTISTIC PERSONALITIES TAKE VARIED FORMS

In their quest for perfection, Thomas craftsmen needed to spend long hours focused on the tiniest of details. This artistic but repetitive concentration seems to have spawned some quirky personalities among the crew (or perhaps quirkiness was a prerequisite for bamboo rod building). When I first met Barney Thompson, he indicated that Ed Houston had a reclusive personality and worked by himself in a separate room away from the other rod builders. Sue Cox revealed even less complimentary opinions; yet for Fred and Leon Thomas, diligence and rod-making skills clearly trumped personality quirks.

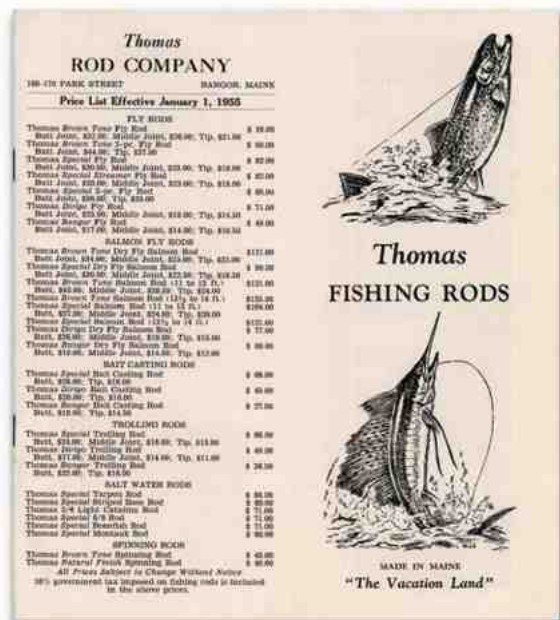
For many of the Thomas craftsmen, socializing while fishing at the Bangor Pool seemed to provide mental release. Tom Hennessey, outdoor writer and artist now living in Hampden, Maine, grew up in Brewer and began fishing the Bangor Pool in his teens, often meeting the old-timers there. He visited the Thomas Rod Shop at the top of Park Street, where he was mesmerized "by the rows of gleaming rods and cases of colorful flies."²⁷ He credits Leon Thomas for getting him started with fly tying by giving him a Hardy catalog that contained fly patterns. Among the fishermen he met during this period was one who would become Tom's longtime fishing partner: Arthur "Pug" York. After World War II, York went to work for Thomas, filling in for craftsmen who did not return from the war.

In keeping with other Thomas rod makers, Pug had his quirky side—in his case, a life hobbled by deeply held superstitions, according to Hennessey. Pug once refused to accept a Hardy reel he

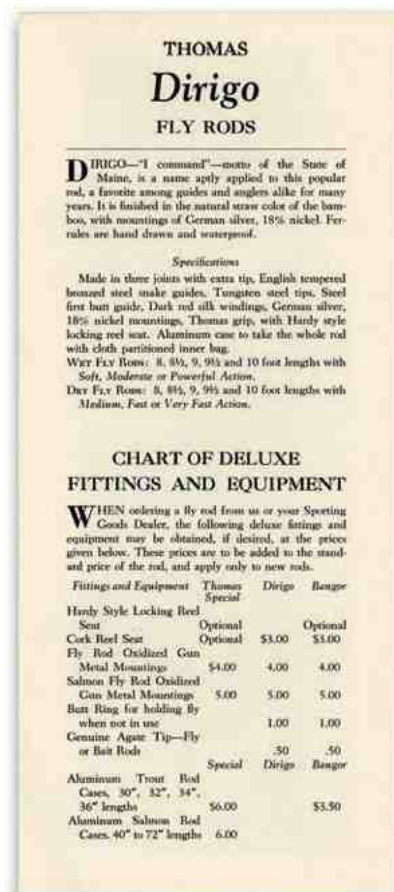
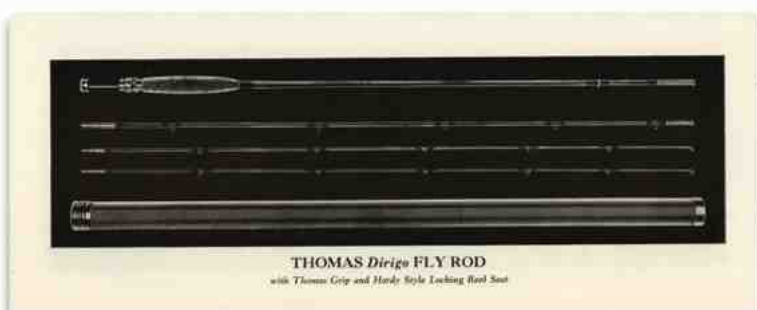
had asked Tom to purchase for him because it was a Marquis-2. Anything that ended in an even number was jinxed for Pug. Tom still has the reel, but made up for it another day while fishing with Pug in Tom's double-ender at the Bangor Pool. Pug hooked into a good-sized salmon and played it for quite a while, but then it broke off. Pug immediately blamed his reel and told Tom he would never use it again. Tom asked if he would sell it and offered \$150. Pug immediately took up the offer and handed over the reel. Tom still has this Abercrombie & Fitch, special edition, gold-anodized Stan Bogdan reel.

THOMAS RODS HIBERNATE

In *Casting a Spell: The Bamboo Fly Rod and the American Pursuit of Perfection*, George Black quotes Clarence "Sam" Carlson (who bought the company): "Leon Thomas, at the end, from what I understand, he just drank his way out of the thing."²⁸ Sue Cox stoutly



Pages from the 1955 Thomas Rod Company Catalog. From the collection of the American Museum of Fly fishing.



denied this to me. She pointed out that Leon had early stages of Parkinson's disease by that time (possibly his tremors were interpreted as alcohol shakes). After World War II, some of the craftsmen didn't return to the company, sales were declining, and the house and property that Leon had bought in 1947 in Winterport (a few houses down the road from where I live) were draining his resources. Combined with Leon's declining health, Sue indicated he was just ready to retire. In 1958, at age sixty, Leon sold the company to Sam Carlson, the building to Husson College, and his home in Winterport to Canadian marine artist Jack L. Gray, and he moved his family to Deer Isle, Maine.

From 1958 to 1999, Sam Carlson owned the Thomas name and company, but his Edwards-inspired quadrate rods were sold under his own name. During those decades, Carlson rods gained an increasingly high reputation and value—the latter, in part, because he made so few. But most of the value appreciated in the owner's pocketbook, not in Sam's. When he finally sold the company to Steve Campbell of Brewer in 1999, he had already divested himself of several

Thomas Rod Company components. Some went to the Maine State Museum in Augusta.

I spent a pleasant summer day (8 August 2011) in Farmingdale, Maine, chatting with my old friend Steve Brooke, who, as the Maine State Museum curator (and avid fly fisherman), brokered the deal with Sam in the early 1980s. Steve told me that a Maine lobsterman he knew named Cecil Pierce had suggested contacting Carlson. When not lobstering, Cecil built bamboo rods, experimenting with laminations of carbon fiber and bamboo strips, one of which Steve showed me. When Steve Brooke met Carlson, he was hoping the museum could get the famous Hawes-designed double-saw beveler, but Carlson had already sold it to rod maker Walter Carpenter of Huntington Mills, Pennsylvania. The items purchased from Carlson are now featured as a prominent exhibit at the Maine State Museum.

A COMPANY IS REBORN

I asked Steve Campbell if he would use the Hawes beveler if he had it (he currently uses a Dickerson-style milling

machine built by Al Belanger). He assured me he would much prefer to use the old Thomas/Hawes beveler as it was faster and more efficient, especially for the delicate tips. Interestingly, Barney Thompson complained of getting a lot of splinters in his hands when he used it in 1948–1949, and Ed Houston, in his 1982 interview, talked longingly of the wonderful Montague milling machine that Thomas and Thomas obtained. (Speaking of Thomas and Thomas, the company formed by Tom Dorsey and Tom Maxwell, Sue Cox told me that Leon was upset by their use of the Thomas name but never pursued it legally.)

Steve Campbell, now forty-five (2012), began fly fishing at about age ten. His first rod was a fiberglass Wright and McGill purchased at Dakin's Sporting Goods Store (a major Bangor outlet for Thomas rods, now out of business). Steve told me that he always liked old cars and wood and canvas canoes.

In his early twenties, Steve started picking up old bamboo rods at antique shops, fixing them up, and reselling them. His father had a vending machine company and knew an employee at the local Pepsi plant, George Sneddon, who

was also a fly-rod maker. Steve asked George to make him a graphite fly rod and George, according to Steve, said “Make it yourself.” But while Steve was in George’s shop, he saw and smelled the bamboo splinters on the floor, and that was a transforming moment for him. He started getting into books on bamboo rod making and eventually found Everett Garrison and Hoagy B. Carmichael’s 1977 classic, *A Master’s Guide to Building a Bamboo Fly Rod*.

As he was undergoing this mental transformation, he got a phone call one day from artist and bamboo fly-rod maker Arthur Taylor, who had seen one of Steve’s ads for a refurbished bamboo rod. For Steve, that was the final push; they became friends, and Taylor became his mentor.²⁹ According to Steve, Arthur knew everyone in the rod-making world. I only met Arthur Taylor shortly before he died, but he was one of the kindest, most modest gentlemen I have met.

Arthur began to introduce Steve to Maine rod builders like Cecil Pierce, and eventually to Sam Carlson. That introduction set Steve to thinking about bringing the Thomas Rod Company back to its home base, something he finally accomplished in 1999.

The new home of Thomas Rod Company is Steve Campbell’s converted garage attached to his house at 19 Sargent Drive, Brewer. As a one-man shop, his rod production for the past decade has been about a dozen per year, limited in part by holding down a full-time job at a local paper mill and a year-long deployment to Iraq with the Maine National Guard. But then in March 2010, Steve received a phone call from Jeff Miller (senior product developer, hunting and fishing) at L.L.Bean. He asked Steve if he could produce twenty-five special-edition rods to be sold through L.L.Bean for their one hundredth anniversary in 2012. I learned about this

deal from Steve in fall 2010, and he was on cloud nine.

The centennial rods were to have the look of early-twentieth-century F. E. Thomas ones with the red intermediate wraps. When I interviewed Jeff Miller at corporate headquarters in Freeport (11 August 2011), he said that he was very excited about the partnership between two old Maine companies and expressed an interest in marketing future rods from Steve. He expected that the centennial rods would sell quickly, as samples that he had taken to a Salt Lake City show had generated considerable interest.

In the era of graphite and boron rods, it is unrealistic to expect that the Thomas Rod Company will ever have the output of the 1920s and 1930s, but it is good to see that Maine pluck, ingenuity, and dogged determination has returned a venerable company to its home place.

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Steve Campbell splitting a bamboo culm in his shop in Brewer, Maine. On the wall behind him is a 1982 Bangor Daily News article by Tom Hennessey about Thomas rods and Ed Houston.

Photos by Richard Jagels



Bamboo strips in Steve Campbell’s workshop, ready for node filing and milling.

Steve Campbell setting up the milling machine to run a bamboo strip through.

ENDNOTES

1. "Bangor History" *Bangor Daily News* (28 June 1984), B1.
2. Bangor Public Library microfilm archives, Bangor, Maine.
3. E. M. Blanding and W. F. Blanding, "Fish and Game," *Industrial Journal* (24 July 1891), 7.
4. Julia A. Hunter and Earle G. Shettleworth Jr., *Fly Rod Crosby: The Woman Who Marketed Maine* (Gardiner, Maine: Tilbury House, 2000).
5. Dwight B. Demeritt Jr., *Maine Made Guns and Their Makers* (Augusta, Maine: Friends of the Maine State Museum, 1997), 171–78; A. J. Campbell, *Classic and Antique Fly-Fishing Tackle: A Guide for Collectors and Anglers* (New York: Lyons and Burford, 1997), 39–43.
6. Campbell, *Classic and Antique Fly-Fishing Tackle*, 49.
7. Demeritt, *Maine Made Guns and Their Makers*, 174.
8. Mary Kefover Kelly, "Early Leonard," *The American Fly Fisher* (Winter 1979, vol. 6, no. 1), 27.
9. *Ibid.*, 28.
10. Campbell, *Classic and Antique Fly-Fishing Tackle*, 133.
11. E. M. Blanding and W. F. Blanding, "Fisheries," *Mining and Industrial Journal* (27 January 1882), 59.
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19. Fred E. Thomas obituary, *Bangor Daily Commercial* (18 July 1938), 14.
20. Recorded interview between folklorist Sandy Ives and Edwin Houston, 12 August 1982; on file at the Folklife Center, University of Maine, Orono, Maine.
21. Bill Geagon, "Famous Thomas Fishing Rod Industry at Bangor Is Sold to Connecticut Firm," *Portland Sunday Telegram* (17 August 1958), B4.
22. Author interview with Suzanne (Sue) Cox, 4 August 2011, at her home at River Road, Orrington, Maine. Sue also kindly allowed me to photograph a Thomas Rod Company promotional item hanging on the wall of her dining room.
23. Geagon, "Famous Thomas Rod Industry at Bangor Is Sold," B4.
24. Donald H. Wilson, letter to Leon Thomas, 11 November 1940, Maine State Museum Archives, Augusta, Maine.

25. Author interview with Barney Thompson, age eighty, at his home at Beacon Street, Brewer, Maine, 18 July 2011. Thompson, related to Leon Thomas's wife Marion, worked in the Thomas Rod Shop from 1948 to 1949, while still in high school. He said he would have stayed on but was enrolled in a "commercial" program and was required to take an industrial internship. He did this with Great Northern Paper Company and after that became a professional arborist until he retired.

26. Earle Doucette, "Thomas Fish Rods A Noted Maine Product," *Bangor Evening Commercial* (24 August 1953), 1B.

27. Interview with Tom Hennessey, 1 September 2011, at my home in Winterport. Hennessey is an outdoor writer and artist, and longtime columnist for the *Bangor Daily News*.

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29. For more on Arthur Taylor, see James E. Butler and Arthur Taylor, *Penobscot River Renaissance* (Camden, Maine: Downeast Books, 1992).

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Richard Jagels



Steve Campbell operating a motorized rod lifter at a varnish dip tank (similar to what Sam Carlson used).

Richard Jagels



Steve Campbell inspecting a recently completed two-piece, two-tip Browntone rod at his bench.