

Steve Woit



THE WORLD OF  
FLY FISHERS AND COLLECTING

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2018

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Popham pattern salmon fly from the Jason Lewis collection

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## PREFACE

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My motivation for writing this book is to share an inside view of a community of extraordinary people: the leading collectors, dealers and auctioneers of antique fly fishing tackle.

Their profiles span across society, including individuals who have achieved a measure of fame and others from more modest backgrounds whose contributions to the field have earned them the respect of their fellow collectors.

Many of the most avid collectors have amassed collections that would be worthy of some of the top museums in the world. They have spent their lives studying, learning and negotiating their way to possess not only the objects of desire, but also a record of the history and provenance of the flies, reels, rods and books that they covet.

However, this book is not meant to present only treasures found in museums, but also items that collectors have found at local garage sales, flea markets and online via eBay or other means. This is a pastime that can be pursued by all with a bit of determination and knowledge, and a high net worth is not a requirement.

I have had the pleasure of interviewing collectors, experts and craftsmen from all walks of life. Each of these men and women has a story worth listening to and learning from.

Some of the rarest pieces have been found in the most unlikely spots and tales abound of rods, reels, flies and accessories bought for just a few dollars, or through barter.

Those in the antique tackle trade embraced my endeavor with great interest, sharing generously from their ample reservoir of stories about the quest that unites them. They have also supplied valuable advice for the novice and expert collector alike.

I also hope to capture the thrill of the chase, often pursued against great odds, spanning continents over long periods of time, sometimes over the protestations of bemused family members who find it difficult to understand the drive that propels the collector.

If fly fishing is often referred to as “the gentle art,” then surely the desire to surround oneself with totems recalling time spent in nature pursuing the sport qualifies as a worthy pastime. Collectors’ fascination with the evolution of fly fishing typifies man’s constantly evolving relationship with nature, one of the deepest and most primal instincts.

If there is one common thread that unites these collectors it is a conviction that their quest is a noble one—one intimately tied to preserving the very best and most beautiful examples of human artistry and achievement in the sporting field.

Collectors are by nature a bit obsessive and the psychology of collecting is itself quite fascinating. I found that many collectors associate their treasures with time spent fishing during their youth, often with a father or grandfather who introduced them to the sport.

Their favorite finds are deeply imprinted with fond riverside or lakeside memories—time surrounded by the peace and beauty of the natural world. We are fortunate to have found a sport that takes us to the most pristine and beautiful places in the world to enjoy a contemplative, immersive experience that we then replay in our minds as we survey our collections, all the while searching for the next great thing.

While we relish the possession of these incredible treasures, we also know that we are but the stewards of a time long past. Our possessions will flow to others in due time, not unlike a salmon or trout caught and released again for another angler to enjoy.

I have by design not chosen to pen another purely historical treatise on flies, reels, and rods, since there are many fine volumes available on these subjects. I have also not applied the most stringent journalistic standards to vet many of the stories that appear here. After all, how much fun would it be if your fellow fishermen questioned every detail of every fish tale? Fish are the only species known to continue growing after death.

I’ve chosen to profile individuals who have made a contribution to the field and to share their stories that, left undocumented, would risk the extinction of a lively, vital part of our fly fishing craft and tradition.

As an American, I also felt that it was very important to cover not only our purely American experience with our sport, but to provide a respectful appreciation of its British origin and its rich history on the other side of the Pond.

My British subjects received me with characteristic grace and patience, often tolerating my American directness and debatable command of the English language.

I have also found that our knowledge of the history of these treasures is constantly evolving. There is often no “last word” on any of the great debates among collectors and experts. The fluid nature of our understanding of the fly fishing craft is one of the compelling features of tackle collecting, often enhanced by new technology and advances in online search and scholarship.

For those who feel that this book was too long in its preparation, you need look only look at your own fishing schedule. Subjects often proved elusive during the fishing season and many of those I have profiled travel frequently, living proof of the adage that “it is always fishing season somewhere in the world!”

So, thanks to those who put down their fly tackle long enough to talk to me and to field my many inquiries with grace. You are the lucky ones—the flyfishers who regularly take up a rod, but also manage to collect a great deal of wisdom about our sport in your quest.

“It is very difficult for a person who is keenly interested in life at first hand to enter into the joys of a collector. What is new, what is in the making, what holds in it perhaps the seeds of the future, has little attraction for the picker-up of rarities: he dredges for the wreckage of the past.

“And yet, by an odd inconsistency, he is most vividly alert to capture something that shall make the past seem present—some piece of flotsam which, instead of suffering the common fate, has lingered in a back eddy, and now passes, belated, on its way to annihilation of all material objects, from which his dragnet can give it a short or a long reprieve. My metaphor, which is none of the newest demands a bank to the stream of time, on which may be carefully repositied and lifted out of the flux of things such articles as the world or fate decides shall be not altogether transitory.

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1. *British Sports and Sportmen*, 1914

2. Popham pattern fly, Jason Lewis collection

“The collector, as I conceive him, has a double function. Sometimes he brings up out of the flood objects whose real beauty entitles them to the reprieve—things of intrinsic value. But, more often, his choicest spoils are such as in themselves have no claim to be rescued from the general doom, yet, for the sake of some man or some event whose memory has been preserved, inherit a worthy place in our regard.

We are grateful to the collectors, almost as to the historians, yet I cannot but wonder at them.”

—*Fishing Holidays* by Stephen Gwynn, 1904

## Acknowledgements

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It took a village to complete *Fly Fishing Treasures*. My journey with this project was one of the most satisfying and enjoyable experiences of my life. The community of antique tackle enthusiasts, collectors, experts, authors, curators and auctioneers was supportive from the beginning and I formed many wonderful friendships in the process.

I would first like to acknowledge the efforts of my editor, Val Landi, who applied his discerning editorial eye to every word and punctuation mark in the text, while suggesting brilliant corrections, additions and deletions that greatly enhanced the work. His knowledge of fly fishing and support for this project proved invaluable. The use of his casita in Taos was also much appreciated.

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Hoagy Carmichael’s early support for my project got me off to a great start, and his suggestion to contact Jerry Girard proved to be one of the most productive ones that I received.

Jerry’s wealth of knowledge of the history of fly fishing, rodmaking, and ephemera is unparalleled and his kind nature, friendship and tireless support and helpfulness have been critical to the completion of my journey.

Thanks to Jim Brown for his help with the history of the American fly reel and access to his extensive knowledge and reel collection.

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## Dedication

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I would like to dedicate this book to my wife Janet, the love of my life, whose patience and support helped me overcome the many challenges associated with this adventure. Thanks also for her understanding of my fly fishing tackle collecting mania.

Our daughter Hannah and son Mark were also unwavering in their support and belief in their Dad, which I treasure every day.

Also, to my father Erik P. Voit, who we all miss.

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