

ROD TREASURES



THE HISTORY OF THE INNOVATIVE AMERICAN BAMBOO FLY ROD

“Anglers are apt to become fastidious as to the spring and taper of their rods, especially those used in fly fishing.”

Thaddeus Norris, *The American Angler's Book*, 1864

Thaddeus Norris fly rod, Norris flies and his book *The American Angler's Book*, 1864



After the American Civil War, Americans and Europeans were seeking recreation and started traveling to remote locations to hunt and fish. The gunsmiths in these areas and in cities like Philadelphia started to make fishing tackle. English tackle was routinely imported to America since the founding of the Colonies. Even Benjamin Franklin had English tackle at the ready in his printing shop.

The history of the American bamboo fly rod is one of innovation and craftsmanship dating back to the 1830s. Early rod makers benefited from knowledge and expertise gained from wooden rod makers, who had made rods from hickory, ash or ironwood, and then from imported greenheart and lancewood.

Early wooden rods were made from several different woods, including ash for the butt and mid-section and lancewood for the more flexible tip section, which was also made commonly from solid bamboo, native cane, whalebone or baleen.

There were early tackle importers in Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore and New York City. Soon, American tackle makers started to make, modify or improve fishing tackle based on British designs. For instance, Hiram Leonard, a gunsmith in Maine, turned to making split bamboo fly rods starting in 1869.

The first use of longitudinally split and glued bamboo was for the tips of these early rods. While before the 1850s many early rods had reels positioned up from the bottom of the butt section, this wasn't always the case. The placing of the reel below the handgrip became more common over time, and standard in later fly rods.

On most wooden rods, the handle itself was part of the butt. Metal reel seats were introduced more commonly in the late 1870s and 1880s, although used earlier in the 1870s by Leonard.

Split bamboo rods were then introduced in the 1860s to take advantage of the lighter weight and elasticity of the split bamboo. These rods produced a faster action to drive the fly for dry fly fishing, which was becoming more popular.

Early British rods could be as long as 19 feet or more, and 12-foot trout rods were made after the American Civil War, then progressively shorter rods of 10 and 9 feet became the standard as dry fly fishing was popularized by Halford and others in Britain in 1885.

In the early split bamboo rods, the cane was sawed into thin pieces, with the pieces then beveled on each side so that they fit together to form a solid rod. This process of marrying together six or twelve strips while using a gauge to measure the exact taper in the rod required great skill.

Fred Mather, a noted angler and writer described his first encounter with split bamboo at the Conroy tackle house in his book *My Angling Friends*:

“I listened with wonder to the talk of angles, tapers, gluing and other details, until I thought that the building up of a split bamboo rod required more careful attention than the grinding of a lens for a great telescope...”

While there is some controversy about who made the first split bamboo rod, a few of the most important early rod makers were Samuel Philippe of Easton, Pennsylvania, Thaddeus Norris of Philadelphia, and C.F. Murphy of Newark, New Jersey. Only Philippe was trained as a gunsmith. No guns or rods of his make have been identified, but much has been written about him as a rodmaker.

Pennsylvania was a very important center for early bamboo rodmaking and the cradle of American fly fishing. Philadelphia merchants actively imported rods, hooks and fishing tackle from England by the mid 18th century, with Edward Pole being the primary importer.



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1-2. B.F. Nichols fly rod from Boston, circa 1880s 3. Kosmic 10 ft., four-piece pack rod with Kosmic multiplier reel, circa 1904 4. John Krider pack rod, pistols and medals won for his guns and pistols from the Franklin Institute of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1874

Philadelphia also had a number of early fishing clubs, including the Schuylkill Fishing Company, which is believed to be the earliest fishing club founded in the American colonies in 1732.

Samuel Philippe found the English rods of the 1840s too heavy, weighing over an ounce per foot, and typically including only a bamboo tip section with heavier woods below. Philippe rods were described as having an ash butt section with the middle and tip sections of four strip bamboo to produce a lighter and more flexible American fly rod.

“Old Sam Phillippe knew just what a trout fly rod should be in its action,” fishing historian James Henshall would write in his *Book of the Black Bass*, “both in casting a fly and in playing a trout; and it is on these qualities of a rod that its merits should be judged.”

The first commercially available rods were complete four-strip versions (1862-1864) made by Charles Murphy, which were sold by Andrew Clerk of New York in 1864 and after. Murphy produced the first six strip bamboo rod sometime after.

Other early makers included Ebenezer Green of Newark, Thaddeus Norris of Philadelphia, A. H. Fowler of New York and William Mitchell, who claimed to have made one of the first American complete Tonkin bamboo fly rods in 1869. John Mitchell, William’s father, made complete bamboo rods from Calcutta cane in the 1860s.

One of the true American fly fishing treasures is a finely engraved bamboo fly rod made by Samuel Phillippe’s son, Solon Phillippe, around 1870, that includes an ornately carved grip, and sterling silver engraved ferrules, rod seat and butt. The rod also includes a finely machined fly reel with mother-of-pearl siding.

The detailed design on the side plates of the reel hold an interesting story. It appears that Solon Phillippe was asked to crack the safe of a local bank when it was locked improperly by mistake. When he requested a sizable fee for this specialized work, the bank initially refused.

After a few days of reflection, the bank manager returned to Phillippe’s shop to offer him the sum he had asked for. It is said that Phillippe then enshrined the pattern from the bank vault’s door on the side of the reel as a tribute to his skill in opening the safe.

No authenticated rod made by his father, Samuel Phillippe, has ever been found, although one was displayed at the Anglers’ Club in New York City, where it was destroyed in a fire. The fire was the result of the FLAN (Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion Nacional Puertorriquena) (Armed Forces of Puerto Rican National Liberation) terrorist bombing that killed four and injured 43 people in 1975.

Many consider a true Samuel Phillippe rod to be the “Holy Grail” of fly rod collecting.

As an avocation, Thaddeus Norris, a Philadelphia clothing merchant and tailor, sold tackle and made rods in his home in Rittenhouse Square. He was one of the most famous early American fly fishermen and authors, known as “Uncle Thad.” He was also making bamboo fly rods by 1860.

Phillippe was known to have fished with Norris, who is often referred to as “America’s Izaak Walton” because of his influential *The American Angler’s Book*, published in 1864.

Thaddeus Norris’ book explained how to fish flies upstream for trout using existing wet fly patterns, fished dry. Theodore Gordon learned to tie flies from Norris. He then proceeded to create a number of new patterns optimized for dry fly fishing, informed by anglers such as



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1- 4. Solon Phillippe presentation fly rod and silver and mother-of-pearl reel, circa 1870 from the State Museum of Pennsylvania

PHOTO CREDIT: Courtesy of the State Museum of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission

Frederic Halford, who popularized classic dry fly chalk-stream fishing for trout in England.

Gordon had imported English fly-fishing tackle and flies. He altered the English flies to precisely match the insects hatching in the Catskills in New York, on the Neversink and Beaverkill rivers, and Willowemoc Creek. Later he made his own flies from scratch. He also read British fly fishing literature of the time, and corresponded with notable British fly anglers Halford and G. E. M. Skues to perfect his fly tying skills.

Fishing dry flies required false casting to dry the fly. Fly rod development evolved to incorporate action that would facilitate false casting and longer casts. Norris' book described false casting to dry the fly. William Cowper Prime's *I Go a Fishing* book mentioned a cast of 105 feet in 1873 with a Norris rod using fine diameter silk or horsehair line.

Norris produced tapers with high accuracy. Philippe and Norris produced the first truly American bamboo fly fishing rod. The Conroys made a standard "pool cue" rod of British design with a thick butt and with less taper.

The progression of the American fly rod was in large part due to the evolution of more sophisticated tapers, which produced a variety of actions for different types of fly casting. Early tapers, described as having "slow" action for wet fly fishing, may have been the result of the solid materials. Once materials were developed that were stiffer, faster actions were possible for making longer casts and fishing dry flies.

John Mitchell, father of William Mitchell, another early rodmaker from New York City, was making complete bamboo rods, with six strip bamboo tips and four strip butts and mid-sections in 1866. Most of the rods made by William Mitchell were of various woods with only a few

bamboo ones. He was a highly regarded maker and his clientele were generally wealthy.

After the American Civil War, an entire cottage industry of rod makers emerged, including Charles Murphy (1860s), John Landman (1880s) and John McHarg (1870s) in New York City and Charles Wheeler (1868) and Hiram Leonard (1870s) in Maine.

While rodmaking did not apply the same apprenticeship process as the gunmaking profession, where different schools and styles of gunmaking were passed down from master gunsmiths to their apprentices, rodmakers did learn from earlier designers and makers.

H. L. Leonard of Bangor, Maine is sometimes credited with perfecting the six-strip rod, which became the standard from the mid 1870s on. He reported improved upon an early design by Charles Wheeler that he had seen retailed by Bradford and Anthony. In 1881 he moved his factory to Central Valley, New York and sold rods through William Mills of New York.

Initially, the output of the individual rod makers was small, with Leonard eventually hiring eight people in his shop in 1875. In the mid 1870s, he was scrambling for business due to an economic depression. He eventually entered a partnership with the Kidder family, and the Kidders then sold their half of the business to William Mills in 1879, acquiring Leonard's stake in 1880.

Other rodmakers followed, including Charles F. Orvis of Manchester, Vermont, who began making bamboo rods in the early 1870s. The Thomas H. Chubb Company of Post Mills Vermont was also making bamboo rods by the late 1870s. George Burgess of Norristown, Pennsylvania, and John Krider of Philadelphia, B. F. Nichols of Boston and J. B. Crook of New York were making bamboo rods by 1880.



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1. Fred Thomas's personal trout rod, 1914—inscribed "If not in Fred. E. Thomas hands, this rod is stole" 2. Charles F. Murphy 11 ft. rod, circa 1865 3. Charles F. Murphy 12 ft. rod with two midsections and three bamboo tips, circa 1865 4. Cosmic H.A. Whittemore 16 ft. salmon rod, circa 1910, with 6/0 Vom Hofe salmon reel 5. Early Orvis fly rod and gold-plated Orvis fly reel from 1874

The Thomas H. Chubb Company and the Bartlett Brothers from Massachusetts also sold rod components such as rod blanks, reel seats, ferrules, guides and handles both retail and wholesale, encouraging many amateur and other professional rod makers to built rods with their parts.

By 1890, a number of Leonard's best rodmakers had left and founded their own companies, leading to what many consider to be the Golden Age of the American Bamboo Fly Rod.

These highly skilled makers including Loman Hawes, E. W. Edwards and F. E. Thomas and later E.F. Payne manufactured the Kosmic rod for A.G. Spalding, owners of the Kosmic trademark in 1891.

In 1894 the package of the trademark owned by Spalding and the manufacturing rights owned by Thomas, Edwards and Payne were sold to United States Net and Twine Company, later sold to H.A. Whittemore in 1898.

The Kosmic motto was "Perfect in Form and Action"— Their rods were outstanding in quality and remain rare and desirable collectibles.

Thomas returned to Bangor, Maine where he and his son, Leon, made rods until 1958, when the F.E. Thomas Rod Company was sold to Sam Carlson. E.W. Edwards and his sons produced rods under their own name as well as others and E.F. Payne set up the Payne Rod Company in Highland Mills, New York in 1898 after the early contract expired in August of 1898 and his son James excelled in fine rodmaking until his death in 1898. Hiram Hawes, Leonard's son-in-law, founded the Hawes Rod Company in Canterbury, Connecticut in 1903.

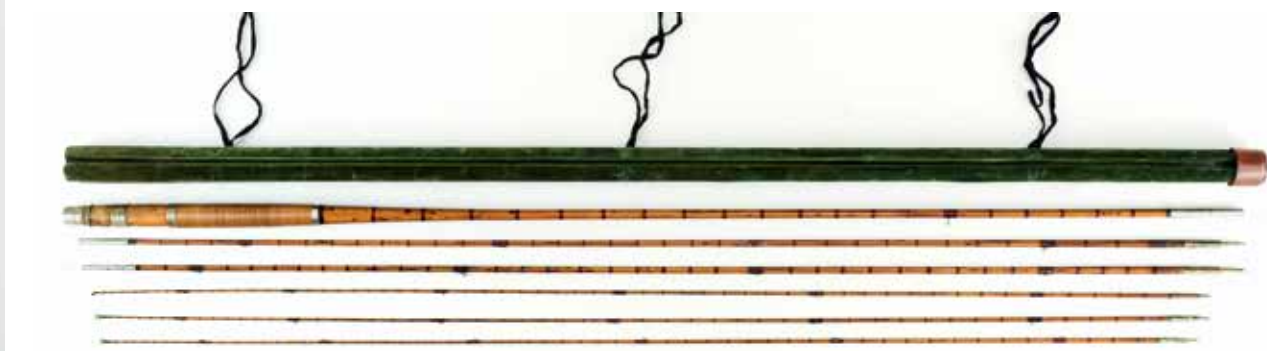
Split bamboo fly rods, which required hundreds of operations and strict tolerances to produce, have always been expensive to produce and their price tags reflected the high labor content and skill required.

Most of these early bamboo fly rods were sold to the wealthy, although they were available to anyone who could afford them. These rods were supplied in finely crafted form cases with fine workmanship on the fittings.

For example, a Krider salmon rod was priced at \$60, a princely sum in 1878, and Leonard trout rods were \$50 in 1877. Crook rods were known to sell for \$75, with early C.F. Murphy rods priced at \$45.

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1. Kosmic Golden Rod and Kosmic flies 2. B. F. Nichols rod and German silver Clinton side-mount reel 3. Thaddeus Norris 12 ft. rod with flip ring guides, red wraps and rolled and soldered ferrules, circa 1860s, only one of 4-5 known to exist 4. Thaddeus Norris 12ft. rod with rosewood handle and reel seat with original bags, including one with mahogany stiffener to preserve tip sections 5. Thaddeus Norris rod detail of rosewood reel handle and seat 6. John Krider 14 ft. rod, four-piece, two tip, 8-sided bamboo with original mahogany wood case 7. Early H.L. Leonard 10 ft. rod from Bangor, Maine with rattan handle and reel seat made of strips of alternating bamboo and cedar 8. Charles F. Murphy 12 ft. Calcutta bamboo six-strip rod with original green velvet wood form case



Dating early split bamboo rods can be much easier than dating solid wood models, since bamboo rods often carried patent dates on their ferrules or reel seats, and the better makers engraved or stamped their names in the butt cap or reel-retaining ring.

Very early bamboo rods may be found with fewer than six strips (usually four) and almost all of these rods made from 1860 to 1875 were planed round, instead of the polygonal cross section evident in later rods. There was a great debate of round versus hexagonal design, about which was better. Hexagonal was judged to give the rod more strength. Leonard planed his rods round until about 1882, although as late as 1894, he advertised round planed rods on a special order basis.

The exception was the Kelso Company's "steel vine" rods that were round planed six strip rods made from 1910 to 1920.

The split bamboo rod went through many evolutions in its design and in the hardware used. For instance, loose ring guides were generally replaced by the more modern snake guides from 1890 to 1900 on.

Intermediate wraps were often used to strengthen the rod, and were then omitted over time as stronger bonds and construction were developed.

Early British rods were joined by splicing the sections together until screw-locking ferrules were developed. Simple ferrules could be found in Norris rods in the 1864, spiked ferrules in early Murphy rods.

The methods for gluing the bamboo strips and finishing the rods also evolved over time, from early fish or hide glues to enamel glues for joining strips together and then epoxies and synthetic glues to impregnate the bamboo for more lasting strength.

The handgrip in earlier models was made of rattan or cane throughout the 1870s and then replaced by cork in the 1890s.

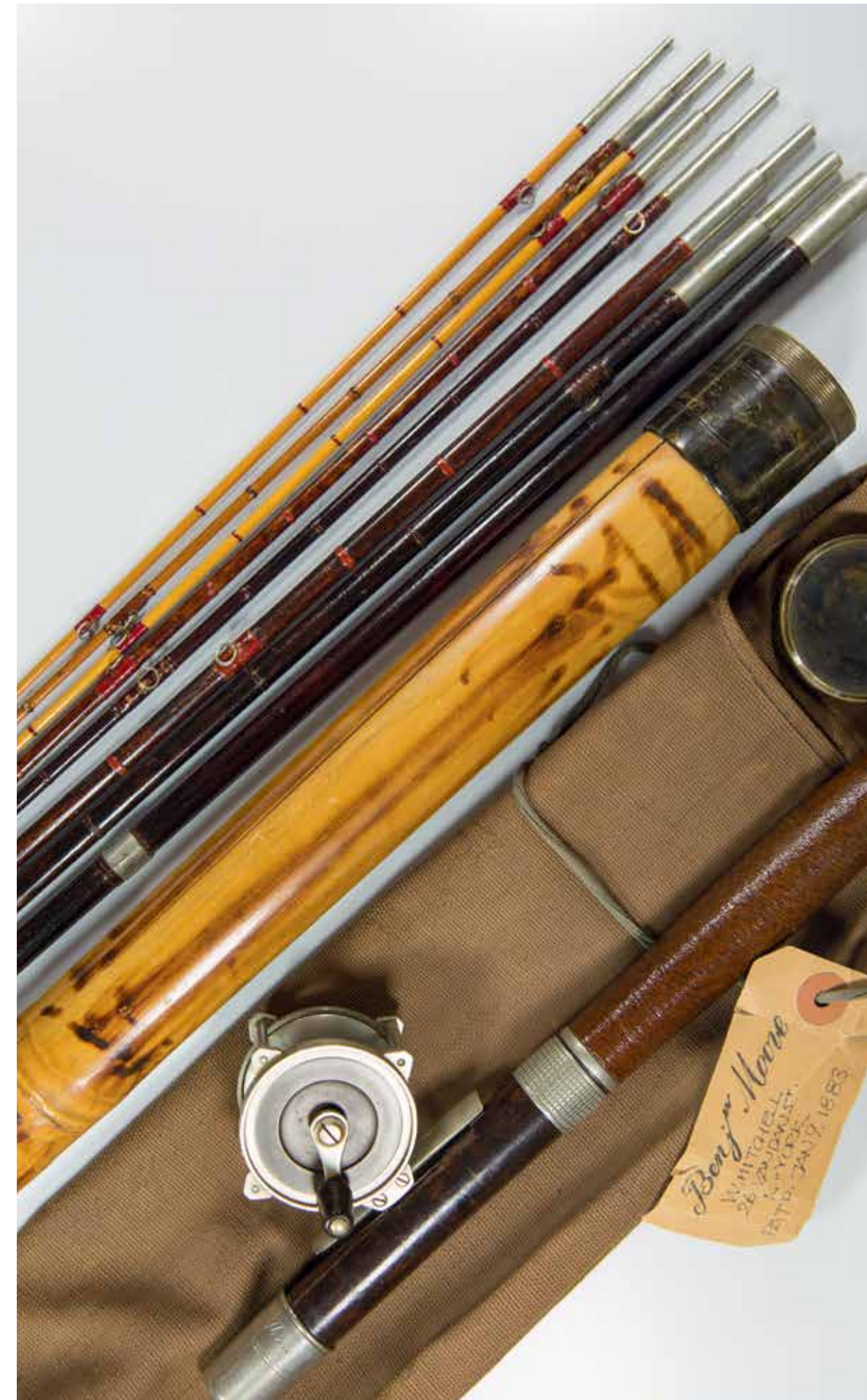
Fly rod tapers became even more sophisticated over time, applying stress curves in the 1920s. The rodmaker Everett Garrison is credited with applying engineering principles and stress curves to the development of fly rod tapers, as opposed to earlier methods of trial and error.

The strips in bamboo fly rods are hand-planed or beveled and milled, requiring great skill, with the sections then being glued together. When the string holding the glued sections are filed off, the taper tolerances can be affected, and every piece of individual cane is different, so will affect taper subtly as well.

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1. William Mitchell rod, circa 1883, owned by Benjamin Moore, with Leonard reel 2. Leonard rods from the late 19th century 3. Different woods used in early fly rods: **Left to right:** Orvis lancewood rod with handle in sumac, circa 1890, then William Mitchell rod with mid-section and butt in snakewood and lancewood tip circa 1870s and then a lancewood rod with a rattan handle **Top to bottom:** Rods in cedar, greenheart and ash

PHOTO CREDIT: Lang's Auction, American Museum of Fly Fishing, Steve Voit from Jerry Girard Collection



Every bamboo rod is therefore unique from the cane and production process alone.

The desirability of a particular rod maker for collectors can be influenced by dealers, auctioneers, other collectors, other rod makers, as well as the rarity, history and cachet of the maker.

Values in the antique and classic bamboo fly rod are notoriously fickle, based on the bidding behavior of individual buyers and collectors, and the vagaries of style and fame accrued to specific makers.

Classic rod makers Garrison, Grainger, Payne, Gillum, Thomas and Edwards—all produced distinctive split bamboo fly rods in later years.

The publication of *A Master's Guide to Building a Bamboo Fly Rod* by Hoagy Carmichael, co-authored with Everett Garrison, was extremely influential, and led to a revival of interest in the craft of bamboo fly rodmaking.

Split bamboo fly rods retain the highest standard of craftsmanship for fly rods today; with a strong revival of the bamboo fly rodmaking tradition, which is actively celebrated at such institutions as the Catskill Fly Fishing Center and Museum in Livingston Manor, New York.



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1. Detail of Thomas Mack rod 2. Early Thomas Conroy wood, a two-handed bamboo tip salmon rod in four parts with two tips. Butt and mid sections are made of ash, with three four-strip Calcutta bamboo tips, circa 1860-1870 4. Thomas Mack rod seat detail 5. Early Conroy four-section "pool cue" wood rod with Conroy reel 6. Thomas Mack rod with gut-eyed double salmon flies and vom Hofe salmon ree

PHOTO CREDIT: Lang's Auction, the American Museum of Fly Fishing and photos from the Jerry Girard collection by the author

