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Driftless Days . . .

In recent years a great deal has been written on the subject of fly fishing with split-cane rods, both in outdoor periodicals and books. When you think about it, virtually all authors writing on the subject of fly fishing from the mid-nineteenth century through 1950 would more than likely have been fishing with split-cane rods. A few would have been fishing with solid wooden rods such as greenheart, a rod still available through the English Partridge company; virtually all authors prior to 1870 would have been fishing with solid wooden rods of some type. The first technological advancement beyond split-cane or solid wooden rods was of course the fiberglass rod, introduced shortly after World War II. The modern graphite rod came into common use in the 1970's and is now by far the preferred fly rod for most fly fishermen. G.E.M. Skues, Frederick Halford, George La Branche, Roderick Haig-Brown, Theodore Gordon, Sparse Grey Hackle, Gordon MacQuarrie, Robert Traver, A.J. McClane and Ray Bergman, just to name a few favorite authors of the past 120 years, would have all been fishing split-cane rods by default. Rarely do these authors have much to say about their rods other than in the area of size; more specifically, weight and length. Haig-Brown wrote lyrically about his "small" ten-foot trout rod and getting caught off-guard with it upon encountering an unexpected steelhead run. Normally he fished a twelve to fifteen foot rod for steelhead and salmon, and preferred a single-handed rod over a spey (or two-handed) rod; a rather strong man I take it. Most fishermen now think a nine-foot rod too long, particularly when it comes to split-cane.

So why the current mystique over split-cane rods? (I believe the preferred phrasing is "bamboo rod", perhaps rightfully so; but "split-cane" is also generally accepted in the literature, as well as in conversation. Personally "bamboo" reminds me of too many other products; it also reminds me of a section of T.S. Eliot's unfinished poem "Sweeney Agonistes", which I'd rather not think about when fishing. At least not too often.) At any rate I think there are many reasons for the current interest in reviving the split-cane rod; every fisherman who fishes them probably has a unique set of reasons for their preference.

I came around to purchasing my first split-cane rod more out of curiosity than anything else. I'd caught a lot of trout on a variety of graphite rods, all very happily, and I really didn't have a problem with graphite rods at all. I'd read a lot about split-cane rods and occasionally even saw a fisherman using one, but I'd really never had the opportunity to own one. And the fishermen I saw using split-cane rods had that "Sunday drive" aura about them; it seemed to be the type of rod used only now and then on special occasions, weather permitting. Then one Sunday afternoon some years ago I found myself visiting with a gentleman named **Sam Fox**, appropriately at a "Fox and Coon Club" event in Decorah, and he ended up solving the whole issue for me. For a reasonably negotiated figure I left the sale with a nine-foot single-tipped

Heddon rod, year and model unknown; half an hour later I drove out to North Bear Creek and landed my first trout ever on a cane rod, very late in the season as I recall. There were still a few Blue Wing Olives on the water and a nice brown trout fell for a #18 Blue Wing Quill in the Sacquitne Pasture. Isn't it odd how we can remember every detail of some of our fishing experiences in the incredible blur of rivers, weather and fish that we all experience . . . the classic "stellar moment". Sam lived in Louisiana at the time, though he has now moved up to Northeast Iowa and become a member of our local TU Iowa Driftless Chapter, building custom rods to order, refinishing cane rods and who knows what all else other than **lots** of fishing. That first trout on a split-cane rod hooked me worse than I hooked it, and I've been more or less happily in trouble ever since.

I managed to fall into a few more cane rods shortly thereafter. After all, you can't fish with the same rod all the time, can you? I thought it was important to "rest" a cane rod now and then, and in order to do that I needed a few more so I could "rotate" them . . . I procured a Montague, a South Bend and three Horrocks-Ibbitson rods to work with in addition to the Heddon. Normally, these first three rod brands are among those that most fishermen acquainted with cane rods will tell you to **avoid at all costs**. They are "hardware store" mass-produced rods manufactured roughly during the first half of the twentieth century, and in some cases the quality of workmanship can be poor; but most of the time so am I, and money can certainly be a factor with cane rods. I couldn't afford the upper-end brands and models, so I made do with what I could handle financially. But good rods can be found amongst these "hardware store" brands; I have a 1951 Horrocks-Ibbitson "Spinner" model in nearly mint condition, fished very little before I got hold of it. It happens to be a very fine rod. I think I had about twelve-hundred dollars into all six rods, including the price of a few repairs, and a lot of fishermen spend considerably more than that on graphite. But with relatively inexpensive rods I was able to learn a bit about the "ins and outs" of fishing with cane without falling down and busting a fifteen-hundred dollar stick on the second trip out. I think I was able to "cut my teeth" on rods that are not particularly valuable and that could be repaired, sometimes rather unprofessionally by myself (as in epoxy glue and polyurethane varnish) without compromising the integrity or classic value of the rod. In other words, I got some "practice". I don't think it was a bad way to start out; it was cost-effective and I was able to try out a lot of different rods under many different and sometimes adverse conditions. Like winter in Iowa, for example.

I was also very lucky to find someone in northeast Iowa who refinishes and repairs cane rods more for the love the sport than anything else. **Roger Wheatman** has had his skillful hands on all of my older cane rods at one time or another, from minor repair work to making second tips for single-tip rods. New split-cane rods and some older rods usually come with two tips, but often with older rods the second tip has either been lost or broken along the way and you may end up buying one with just the single tip. Two of my Horrocks rods were purchased at local chapter TU Fundraiser Auctions after Roger had refinished and donated them to the cause.

In my humble opinion, the *coup de gras* in split-cane rods undoubtedly is the custom-built rod, made to specifications by a builder of new cane rods. There are a growing number of extremely competent split-cane rod builders in the United States at this juncture; there are probably thirty or forty of them you can call right now to order a custom-built rod, although you'll have to be prepared to wait awhile, sometimes over a year, depending on the maker and his volume of

business. You can order a new split-cane rod right out of the Orvis or Winston catalogues if you like, to name just two who actually have rods in-stock for sale. But **my** first new split-cane rod was built by one of our very own local rodmakers, **Chris Wasta** of rural Decorah, who doubles as part-owner of a very successful timber-framing business when he's not in his rod shop. In my case, I asked Chris if he could build me a nine-foot three-piece two-tip 5 wt rod that would handle everything from a small streamer on 4X tippet to a #24 dry fly on 7X tippet; I figured if I was going to spend the money, I wanted it to cover all the bases. It was an incredible experience for me to "talk a rod through" with a local rodmaker and participate in the process of selecting the rod type, the taper and the hardware specifications **and** end up getting **exactly** what I wanted in the way of a split-cane fly rod. The rod casts better than anything I've fished with previously, in part I suppose because of my fishing style, whatever that is . . . But Chris had it pretty well pegged and I would certainly recommend you give him a call if you're interested in a beautiful and reasonably priced rod, fit to your own style of fishing. I can attest to the fact that he definitely can work with payment plans! **Wasta** split-cane rods are also entirely hand-planed; no machine work is used in the process, a feature not entirely necessary but one I very much appreciate and respect.

Whole books have been written on the subject of split-cane rods and a short commentary really doesn't do sufficient justice to the subject. So we shall hear about it again from time to time. But I wanted to share the fact that a fisherman can still enter the world of fly fishing with split-cane rods without spending a small fortune, and have a lot of fun doing it. A.K. Best once said "If you're gonna hook a twenty-inch trout on 7X tippet with a #24 dry fly, you want to have a cane rod in your hands." That about says it all. Until the subject comes up again, that is!

The Winter Rain

*The leveling of water, its increase,
the gathering of many into much:*

*in the cold dusk I stop
midway of the creek, listening
as it passes downward
loud over the rocks, under
the sound of the rain striking,
nowhere any sound
but the water, the dead
weedstems soaked with it, the
ground soaked, the earth overflowing.*

*Chris Wasta with
Tim Fleming's
"Leonard"*



Be Vigilant!

*And having waded all the way
across, I look back and see there
on the water the still sky.*

*"Red" Canoe
Trout Unlimited
Iowa Driftless Chapter*

Wendell Berry, from Traveling At Home