

It's a story of a cane rod-maker, of a man who has perfected the art, to his own demanding satisfaction, over a period of fifty years. Not a commercial supplier, but certainly not an amateur, Everett Garrison could be called the rod-maker's rod-maker. It's the story of . . .

the Garrison Rod

by Hoagy B. Carmichael

ONE OF AMERICA'S PIONEERS in the art of building bamboo fly rods was Hiram Leonard of Bangor, Maine, who began selling rods in the year 1870. After six years he moved his shop to the village of Central Valley, New York, where a handful of disciples began observing the young man, taking their new knowledge back to their own basements for further work and refinement. The taught became the teachers, and one of the students was Dr. George Parker Holden who, in 1920, wrote a book called *The Idyll of the Split-Bamboo* which to this date continues to be the classic primer for those interested in learning how to build bamboo fly rods.

In 1922 Dr. Holden was introduced by a mutual friend to Edmund Everett Garrison. Garry, as his friends call him, was building shafts for his own golf clubs and wanted to try bamboo instead of hickory, hoping that the supple material might make a good substitute. The two men soon began to share their mutual interest in flyfishing and it was not long until Garry's thoughts turned to making fly rods. Over the next three years Garry fashioned three rods from several stalks of Dr. Holden's cane using tapers measured from a two-piece Payne that a friend had loaned to him. With this rather crude beginning Everett Garrison began what was to be one of the most painstaking assaults on the art of creating bamboo fly rods that the craft has known.

Everett Garrison was born in Yonkers, New York on December 23, 1893. He went to the local high school and eventually got his B.E. in Electrical Engineering from Union College in 1916. He found a job with the Curtis Airplane and Motor Corporation checking the metallurgical qualities of the steel going into airplane motors. After two years in the Army Air Corps during World War I, Garry began a long association with the Pennsylvania and New York Central Railroads, assisting in the design and construction of many of the track-bearing trestles and bridges.

During much of this time Garry was also improving his skills as a fisherman. He tells of the summer in 1905 when he spent many afternoons fishing for bass on the lower Esopus with a worm and his father's good buggy whip. "I caught a lot of fish that summer," recounts Garry, "and I caught hell from

my father when he got wind of the rod I was using." He began fishing the streams of the Catskills with a fly, when time permitted, and started a love affair with the Rondout River that lasted until it was dammed to make way for progress and the Rondout Reservoir in 1930.

After some years spent working with odd pieces of cane and other rod makers' tapers, Garry decided, in 1932, to apply his engineering background to the problems of designing new tapers for rods. With the aid of a Payne two-piece eight-footer he began calculating the working stresses of the bamboo at five-inch intervals from the tip-top guide during periods of maximum deflection. He calculated that the highest point of stress was five inches back from the top guide, and that the cane must be tapered in such a way to perform evenly with maximum loads of up to 15,000 lbs. per square inch. With the use of calculus and moment-of-force diagrams, and at the same time applying the principle of wave linear action, Garry came up with his own taper for a two-piece, eight-foot rod.

He had already begun the search for tools needed to fashion six evenly tapered pieces of cane from the raw stalk. Tolerances were critical to Garry and it was not long before he realized that Dr. Holden's original design for planing forms was not critical enough, as they were made of wood and had a measurable tolerance of no more than one-half of a 64th of an inch. He decided to make his own forms out of three-quarter-inch cold-rolled steel to settings measurable to one one-thousandths of an inch. He hand-planed the 30-degree angle bevels on both corners of the steel bars with a fine wood plane until each was perfect. He then designed differential screws to bring the two bars accurately to the taper desired. "One full turn of each of the screws opens or closes the gap in the forms by eight-thousandths of an inch," Garry says with some pride. He also developed a motorized device, (closely resembling one of Rube Goldberg's higher achievements) that pulls the finished rods out of three tanks filled with varnish at a determined rate of speed thus applying the varnish with equal surface tension on all six sides of the rod. And he also developed a cord binder for holding the six strips together while preparing for heat-treating and glueing.



Everett Garrison at his bench in his Ossining, N.Y., home workshop. Photos courtesy of author.

The first two Garrison rods were completed in the spring of 1933. He gave one to John Alden Knight who used the rod in his classic book, *Modern Fly Casting*, the black-and-white plates of which bear the name of the maker. The second of the two rods he gave to his good friend and fishing companion Vern W. Heiney who had just been laid off by the railroad and was planning to spend the summer on the Beaverkill. "Heiney wasn't sure about that rod at first," Garry remembers, "but by the end of the season wrote me with orders for fourteen rods of the same taper." Garry was by no means an established rodmaker at this point, doing some repair work and filling orders for new rods in the evenings and weekends when not fishing or putting up the storm windows for his wife, Charlotte. But, in the winter of 1933, Garry was asked to give a talk on rod building at the Anglers' Club of New York. "This really put me on the map," Garry recalls, "I drove to New York City with the trunk of a friend's Model A filled with rods and came away empty-handed save for one rod."

Garry began to build in earnest from this point on. Most anglers wanted eight footers in those days and he soon was busy filling orders for salmon rods and rods mostly longer in

length than the seven footers that anglers prefer today. In 1945 Garry built 28 eight-footers alone and estimates that as an "amateur" he has built over eight hundred rods of all lengths, all with his own specially designed tapers. Several years ago he built, for his own amusement, a five-foot rod out of an old eight-foot tip section with all of the nodes cut, with invisible precision, horizontally out of the strips before they were glued. "I just wanted to see if I could do it," Garry confesses, "and with a AFTMA #7 line on it you can turn over a leader from about forty-five feet."

Any man fortunate enough to own a Garrison rod knows what a piece of excellence is in his hands every time he takes it fishing. Garry, wanting to protect his finished product, has always made his own rod cases out of heavy aluminum tubing, using hard yellow brass for the case caps. He does all the threading work for those caps and even cuts and sews the poplin carrying bags before the job is complete. He has tried to protect the lasting qualities of the action in his rods by adding either a red or green winding just below the tip-top guide, which is his innovation and a trademark of the Garrison rod. "Every time a man takes his rod to the stream he should alternate the tips," Garry advises, "so that the two tips will break down evenly with use and the user will have two tips that have the same action and feel for as long as he uses the rod."

Everett Garrison is today busy building rods for a rather select clientele. He no longer builds them with quite the same vigor that he was able to muster in earlier days, preferring rather to improve and maintain his own tools and homemade equipment, as if wanting to leave nothing that doesn't have his

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Hoagy B. Carmichael is an avid fly fisherman who whiles away the days between seasons as a TV producer. He requests that his middle initial be used to avoid confusion with "that other fellow who writes songs." The initial stands for "Bix," the first name of a cornet-playing friend of his father, and for whom he was named. He also admits that the first lullaby he remembers was "Stardust."

Garrison examines two completed rods. See pages 18-19 for close-up view of Garrison rod.



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own mark of perfection. He warns that today's amateur rod maker is up against serious problems when trying to find the proper fittings, good cane, cork, and high quality tools to do the job. With the scarceness now of the old Super Z ferrule, Garry, at the ripe old age of 80, has begun to turn his own fittings out of solid Everdur bronze to his own specifications. "Ferrules are the biggest problem," Garry laments, "I don't understand why somebody doesn't take the time to build them right."

Building them right has always been Everett Garrison's goal. He has never tried to build rods in quantity, preferring, as an example, not to assemble a rod during the humid months for fear of getting undue moisture locked in the cane during glueing. He has spent the time to learn to build them with the action and precision that few rod makers have ever been able to attain, a fact to which those lucky enough to have had the opportunity to stand in a stream with a Garrison will readily attest. ■

Mr. Carmichael has produced and directed a 45-minute film entitled "The Garrison Rod" for the Angler's Club of New York — featuring the building of a Garrison trophy "from culm to cast." The film is available to interested groups; contact Fly Fisherman Magazine for details.

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