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Fly Fishing History Makers: Bill Oyster



Bill tames a healthy rainbow with his Oyster Bamboo rod

The first time that Bill Oyster witnessed fly fishing was while growing up in the northwestern town of Powell, Wyoming. Ironically, it wasn't until Bill moved to the warmer climate of north Georgia that the obsession really stuck. Bill would often hike for many miles and camp alone along the crystal clear trout streams

of the Appalachian wilderness. With trout in the back yard, Bill soon discovered that it was a half day drive to the Gulf of Mexico or the Atlantic to pursue, sea trout, redfish, and tarpon. In other words... this area had virtually no limit to keep entertained even the most enthusiastic fly fisher on a year round basis. While attending the University of Georgia in Athens, Bill met his wife Shannen who would be a large part of his success at turning his passion into a career. Soon after leaving college to compete as a professional road racing cyclist, Bill and Shannen were married and moved to Gainesville, GA. Just after the '96 Olympic Trials Bill suffered a career ending fall while training. Suddenly he had time and energy to spare and poured it all into his fly fishing interests. He spent time doing anything he could in the fly fishing world from tying flies at the trade shows to teaching casting and guiding for area fly shops.



Still in his twenties, he soon took an interest in bamboo fly rods. He loved the beauty and history and hoped to obtain one for himself. The more he learned about these rods, the more he became intrigued by the craft itself. At that time there was no one around to mentor his interest in rodmaking and no internet with its endless stream of information. So it was through a small stack of dusty books and countless hours of trial and error that Bill slowly put together his own style of employing these traditional techniques. Each rod produced was a bit better than the one before, and his experience in all manner of fly fishing (as well as his casting knowledge and abilities), quickly put him on the road to creating classic rods that could satisfy a more modern expectation of performance. His art training led to an aesthetic that set a new standard for the kind of beauty that could be achieved in the most high-end niche of the market.



Many hours are spent at the engraving vise creating his hyper customized rods for clients from around the world. When he's not crafting rods for customers, he shares his craft through the Oyster rodmaking school. Drawing on his own experience and struggles with all techniques and methods of rod construction, he has created what is by far the largest school of rodmaking in the world today. Each year over a hundred students travel from around the world to spend a week with Bill completing their own rod using the very same techniques employed on every Oyster rod. When not working, Bill often leads groups of his clients on fishing expeditions where they put their creations to the test in some of the most exotic and beautiful destinations in the world. These days Bill and his wife run their production shop and rodmaking school in the quaint north Georgia mountain town of Blue Ridge, where they live with their two small children Cutter and Veronica.



Bill and family at home on the river

Q & A With Bill Oyster:

What were your beginnings in fly fishing? Who got you into it?

Its really just something I stumbled into on my own. Nobody in my family had any interest in fishing, but I was captivated by it from my earliest memory. I first saw fly fishing as a kid growing up in northwest Wyoming. At the time I wasn't too impressed as my Zebco and can of worms seemed to do the trick just fine. It wasn't until college when I picked up a fly rod to chase the trout in north Georgia that I was really struck by, not just how effective it was (and not very at first), but how beautiful it was as well.



Why bamboo?

I have always had what you might call an artistic sensibility. The romance of a bamboo rod, a wooden sailboat, or classic motorcycle - it's not something you can explain, and certainly not something you can justify. It's just either something that stirs your senses, or it isn't. For me it was, and still is.

Are there any rod makers that have influenced your technique?

For me it was every rod maker who ever wrote a book. I've read them all many times over. I think that Everett Garrison's book might have to top the list. It made the whole process seem like such a serious and impossible undertaking that I just had to give it a try!

What do you do differently than everyone else?

Strangely, I think the biggest difference between me and other rod makers is that I don't take it too seriously. Fly fishing and fly rods should be fun. Yes, I am serious about always trying to make the finest fly rods I can, because to me that IS fun. I don't mind if others like different styles or use different methods. I'm not interested in debating tapers or plane sharpening angles. I know what works for me and enjoy every minute of it.

How did you learn to engrave and what goes into that process?

Early on I experienced a demand from my customers for personalization. I took a chance on myself and travelled to an engraving school in Kansas to see if it was something I might be able to do. Fortunately, it stuck. I talk directly to the customer and combine their interests and history with my experience to design and create the custom engravings. I sometimes spend upwards of a hundred hours designing, drawing, and cutting the most elaborate pieces.



A few fine examples of Bill's engraving prowess

What is the creative process that you go through when making fly rods?

It all starts with the customer. I need to know how and where they will use the rod. Also, if they have any strong preferences in rod action or feel. All of the practical considerations come first. Only then do we discuss aesthetics. First and foremost the rod must perform properly, consistently, and reliably. Otherwise I might as well just paint them a picture instead! Some are only looking for a simple and understated style, and we are happy to comply. Many of our more complicated rods are ordered as heirloom pieces and my engravings are based on highly personal ideas that will stay in that family for generations.

What was your favorite fly rod that you have made?

There is no question that it is the first rod I ever made #001. It took me six months of trial and error, reading and re-reading, head scratching and cussing, but I finally achieved something I had dreamed about for years. I'll never sell this rod. It's MY family heirloom.



What was it like fishing with and making a rod for President Carter?

I guided Pres. Carter again last week, and it's always the same - highly rewarding, thoroughly enjoyable, and more than a little stressful. He is after all a serious dry-fly

man, and those big boys aren't always looking up on demand. He's a hell of an angler though, and we always get a few to the net. The rods were originally purchased as a fundraiser by the Carter Center. The idea they had was that he would autograph it before I varnished it, he would fish it for awhile, then it would go to auction as a fundraiser. However, after fishing the first rod for about thirty minutes, he decided that a new rod should be commissioned because that one wasn't going anywhere! It was a real honor for a young guy from a one red light town working all alone (at that time) in his basement!

Were there any challenges or adversity you had to overcome?

Well, starting out as a twenty something year old kid in the Deep South didn't really help me fit the stereotype for a bamboo rod maker. None of the "big" guys in the industry really gave me the time of day back then. That's when I decided that I wouldn't spend too much time worrying what others thought of me. Instead I set out to make rods that were so fine, worked so well, and looked so good that it didn't matter who made them, or where. That still pretty much sums up our business philosophy, although with the grey beard things are getting easier! In fact, all of the closed doors I experienced when starting out is what lead me to teaching rod making classes. I found that rejecting the enthusiasm of would-be rod makers just plain felt bad. That wasn't the feeling I wanted mixed up in my life's work. Instead, I decided to find a practical way to make people feel good. To this day I've helped more people complete their first bamboo rod than anyone in history, and that makes ME feel good. See how that works?



Busy at work at the Oyster rod shop

What is your favorite fish to go after - do you prefer chasing hard to find fish and experiencing the different places you catch them in or staying local and going after the football rainbows in Georgia?

I will fish wherever I have the opportunity, and have certainly spent my share of time harassing the local trout. However, like any drug, a real junkie always needs

more. This year alone I've fished for trout and stripers in Ga, bull reds in Louisiana, big Browns in Patagonia and tarpon in the Keys. Next month I'll be heading to northern Argentina for golden dorado, and in November it's Andros Island for bonefish. I am an addict through and through.



Any special memories from the rod shop or people you encountered?

The shop is my home, where I sleep is less important. Employees, friends, and fishing buddies are one in the same. My wife handles the business end of things from her office, my kids do their homework sitting in bamboo shavings, our dogs sniff everyone who walks in. This is where we hang out on our days off, and meet up when we go out. This place and the people that frequent it are what allows us all to live the life we want.

Have you taught your kids to fly fish or have they shown interest in picking up the rod building torch?

My kids enjoy fishing like most kids naturally do when given the chance. I am careful not to push them too much, since I don't want to chase them away. I would love it if they choose to carry the torch someday, but only time will tell.

What are your thoughts on fisheries conservation?

I've seen first hand the effects of development, deforestation, pollution and

overcrowded waters. It's a problem we've all created and must find a way to manage. Mother Nature simply can't keep up if we continue in a thoughtless and careless manner. Still there are those (fisherman even!) who act like there's no tomorrow and take without giving. It's a problem for sure, but one that could be managed if enough people would stop thinking about their tomorrow and instead think about their children's. Rant over...



Bill puts the Oyster 9 wt. taper to the test in Big Pine Key

Ok. One rod, one reel, one fly and you're on a deserted island. What do you take?

Hmmm, an island, must be saltwater, gonna need to eat... 8'9wt Oyster bamboo (solid built for durability) with my trusty Tibor Signature Series reel, and a good old Clouser Minnow. Let's go fishing!