



Exquisite hand engraving is a signature element on each of Oyster's split bamboo fly rods, each one a custom design. JERRY MUCKLOW PHOTO



A Fisher of Men

Bill Oyster

If fly-fishing is an art, fly rods are the paintbrush. But for the true disciple, fly-fishing is a religion—and the split-bamboo fly rod is their altar.

“For the American fly fisher, this is our samurai sword,” says Bill Oyster, a master craftsman who’s perfected the intricate and elusive skill of making split bamboo fly rods.

At his studio in Blue Ridge, Georgia, fly-fishermen enamored by the mystical bamboo rod will camp out for hours at the viewing window overlooking Oyster’s workshop.

“That’s the question—what is it about the lure of the bamboo rod?” Oyster poses. “As a fly-fisherman you always notice them. Any time someone pulls out a bamboo rod there is always some reverence that goes on.”

Making a bamboo fly rod is a meticulous craft. There’s far more involved than peeling off a strip of bamboo cane and whittling it down to form. Each rod is the fusion of long thin bamboo slivers, derived by splitting the stalk and hand-planing strips into slender triangles, each one tapered to an infinitesimal

point and then seamed into a hexagon bundle.

For Oyster, every rod is a labor of love, a fitting homage to the intricate pursuit of fly-fishing. “Fly-fishing is so involved and so beautiful and so artistic. I call it fishing for grown-ups. It is not just about catching the fish,” Oyster says.

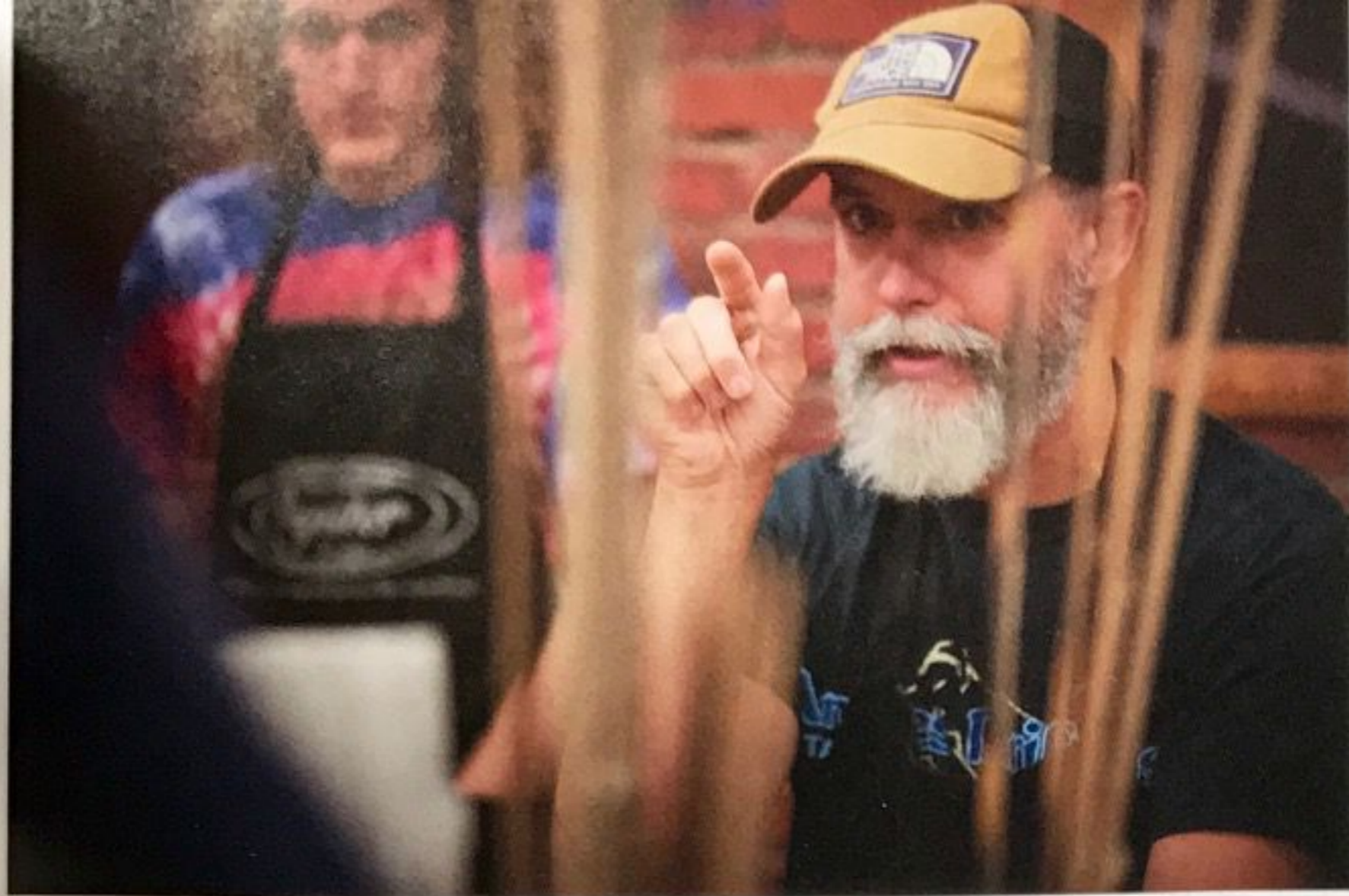
When Oyster isn’t building rods, he’s leading workshops to carry on the traditional art form. The split-bamboo fly rod is a uniquely American invention, dating to the mid-1800s. It’s more whippy and nimble, an adaptation coined for the narrow trout streams of Southern Appalachia where flies must be landed among the hazards of laurel thickets and low-hanging hemlocks.

“There wasn’t room for the big wooden rods like the English used. Here, we needed something shorter and more flexible,” Oyster says.

Oyster’s own foray into bamboo rod-building was a hard-fought journey, however.

“The only guys who knew were other professional rod makers, but they wouldn’t tell you anything. It was a very closely guarded secret,” Oyster says.

There was no Google back then, no YouTube instructional videos, no online forums. Oyster tried combing the reference section of libraries for historical fly-fishing literature, but in the



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end, it came down to old-fashioned reconnaissance. Oyster sniffed around fly shops, asking anyone he came across if they knew the craft.

“They’d say ‘Go see old Jerry, he’s a master craftsman and he’s made them,’” Oyster recalls.

But when he got to Jerry’s, he came up empty. It turned out old Jerry made a noble stab at bamboo rod, but got stumped and gave up. Oyster rooted out many men who’d tried, but none who’d pulled it off.

Once, Oyster thought he’d finally hit the jackpot. His slippery but fearless quest led him to New England, home to a known network of old bamboo rod builders. He tracked them down during a fly-fishing rendezvous and sauntered up to their circle, but was met with silent disdain in return.

“That knowledge was their career and they were protecting their livelihood,” Oyster says. “I knew that was not good for the craft. The average age of a bamboo rod maker was like 150. That means it was dying out.”

Oyster came away more determined than ever, but realized he was on his own to reinvent the time-honored craft of split bamboo-rod building.

“I worked until I needed the next tool and said OK, now I can safely buy this tool because I made it this far,” Oyster says.

After Oyster mastered the process, he soon found the wader was on the other foot, with curious anglers now probing him for the secret. Initially, he followed the same creed of secrecy that had dogged his own pursuit.

“Because that’s the only the only thing I knew. I thought you weren’t supposed to tell,” Oyster says. “But I didn’t enjoy telling people, ‘Go away I don’t want to talk to you.’ I felt like I had been in an argument.”

Oyster’s next move was a game changer, one that quite likely saved the craft of bamboo fly rod building. He not only shared the process readily, he launched workshops to teach others the art.

“People said, ‘Oh you are just going to train your competition. You are going to put yourself out of business in a few years,’” Oyster says.



Top: Bill Oyster holds sold-out workshops at his studio in Blue Ridge, Georgia, where fishermen work under his tutelage to build their own fly rod. Above: Carrying on his father’s tradition, Cutter Oyster, 11, built his first fly rod this summer.

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But the vast majority who came to him were hobbyists, just interested in building a rod of their own to cherish, and to deepen their personal connection with the art of fly-fishing.

“I discovered there was a whole market of people who thought it would be cool to make their own bamboo fly rod,” Oyster says.

There’s another reason he wasn’t too worried. “It is a very acute peak of the mountain, and if you aren’t at the top, you aren’t making a living,” Oyster says.

Oyster, 45, is indeed at the top, one of the most revered rod builders in the world. Oyster’s

finely crafted rods are highly-sought—his most notable customer is probably former President Jimmy Carter, adorned with an engraving of the presidential seal.

Every Oyster rod includes a custom engraving job on the handle—he can replicate any image a customer dreams up—a signature element that sets his rods apart.

A hand-crafted bamboo fly rod is a hefty investment, at least compared to their mass-produced graphite counterparts. But they aren’t just for the elite. A brick layer made \$200 monthly payments for three years to get one.

Oyster’s wife, Shannen, is his right hand and biggest champion. She schedules his workshops, manages orders, runs their retail store front, and regales the procession of spectators who come by to see the bamboo fly rod master at his craft.

Their two young children are part of the shop’s daily rhythm as well. This summer, his 11-year-old son likely became the youngest fly fisher in history to build a bamboo rod, taking a seat behind the workbench as a student in one of Oyster’s rod-building workshops.

Hundreds of fly-fishermen have cycled through Oyster’s rod workshops over the past 15 years. In high demand, his workshops are booked solid a year in advance. Red pinhead cover a map tacked to a wall of the studio, a testament to the many anglers who’ve made the pilgrimage to northern Georgia to study under Oyster’s hand.

The real journey for the novice rod builder, however, is a spiritual one, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity where fly-fishermen forge a profound bond through the craft.

“It is extremely rare to have a class where a grown man doesn’t cry the night of the last dinner,” Oyster says.