

Boise, Bamboo, and the Big Sky

Article and photos by Bob Maulucci

The bags were packed. This was it. This would be my first trip out West that did not mean sitting in the middle of a hotel lobby in downtown Los Angeles's business district. The itinerary: Buffalo to Las Vegas to Boise. Then, I would make the four hour drive to Idaho Falls to participate in the 2003 Federation of Fly Fisher's Conclave and Ralph Moon's Bamboo Rod Symposium. Four hours? Was it worth the money that I saved by flying Southwest Airlines? It paid for the rental car, but I am still not sure.

There was no in flight movie as you can imagine, but I was able to read all of Kathy Scott's new book en route to Idaho. Between trips to the slot machines in Las Vegas that is. What a change from life as I knew it back East, where just days before I was standing in the parking lot of a music club smoking a cigarette between sets because you are unable to smoke anywhere in the bars and restaurants of New York State. Las Vegas seemed like a smoke filled den of iniquity, and I had never even gotten out of the airport.

Headwaters Fall as Snow is a wonderful book, captivating the reader and bringing them straight into the world of Kathy and her husband, rodmaker David Van Burgel. It is such a charming text, engaging the reader at every turn with the wonders of the great outdoors, the joy of friendships, and the potency of lifelong commitments. I was in a haze the whole way to Boise, between the smoke of LAS and the rapture of *Headwaters Fall as Snow*.

The drive to Idaho Falls in the middle of the night has to be one of the most uneventful things I have ever done. There was road and there was the black of night all around me. No stars, no mountain landscapes, just the occasional sage brush silhouetted by an obscure moonlight. Hello Super 8, hello Idaho Falls.

The Symposium lasted Wednesday through Saturday, capped off by the Cast from the Past event. Wednesday found me in a large convention hall banquet room, addressing questions and meeting conclave visitors as they walked through the display. I felt bad that I only had a few rods out to show, as I had no real opportunity to drag out the beveller or any of the more impressive tools that adorn the various benches of my shop. Idaho is simply too far away for that kind of thing. Even the torch lighter I had was confiscated at the Greater Buffalo International Airport. No flaming demo this year.

I had the chance to meet some brilliant rodmakers in Idaho, and also had the chance to see old friends like Robert Kope and John Zimny. My booth was next to Marty Karstetter's display that included his Morgan Hand Mill and various rods from 7 to 14 feet in length. I felt under prepared with only my diminutive trout rods on my table. Maybe, I could tape them all together and make a spey rod of sorts. Hexagonal butt with a quadrate tip! Okay, maybe not. I felt like the guy at the very beginning of a Viagra commercial.

Ralph Moon held court to his ardent friends and followers. It was a great pleasure to meet him, his wife Pat, and their charismatic granddaughter. What a wonderful family. I listened with great interest as Ralph relayed stories about his greenheart rod



Bamboo Symposium Organizer, Ralph Moon



Cast from the Past organizer, Bradley Love

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making experiments and how he had come full circle, having fun with greenheart after having had his way for years with bamboo. Looking around the room, I could see that the participants there, despite long distances and financial strains, had come to stand once again in Ralph's presence. Unlike the industry sales people that packed the room next door, no one had come here for money making; they had come here for camaraderie and for knowledge's sake. They had come because Ralph had asked them to.

The Symposium was full of wonderful bamboo rods and rod making, but it was Thursday's diversion to Montana that really left me awestruck. Robert Kope and I took off early in the morning to make the trip to the wonderful R.L. Winston Company's bamboo rod shop, somewhere in the backstreets of Twin Bridges, Montana, USA.

I have known Jerry Kustich for only a little while now, but I feel like I have known him well for many years. We have passed once or twice on the Lower Niagara where big rainbow trout roam the fast running waters. Jerry had also been active in his brother Rick's Oak Orchard Fly Shop, a place where I am embarrassed to say that I have spent too much of my income on fly tackle. I was excited to have Jerry say that a visit to the bamboo rod shop would be welcome. He said not to expect master rodmaker, Glenn Brackett, but you never know. Robert had also been corresponding with Winston rodmaker, Jeff Walker, and with both invitations, we were confident that we would enjoy our stay.

When we arrived, there was no Jerry, but the owner of the local fly shop pointed us down the dusty backstreets to the bamboo shop. He explained that we would see Jerry eventually, and he reminded us that in Montana things run a bit more carefree than in other places.

We hesitantly peeked into the shop to find that we had struck the mother lode. Standing there were Glenn, Jeff, and another man. All talking and smiling, we had hoped that we had not interrupted a personal meeting. When Jeff greeted us and introduced us to Glenn and the stranger, *The Lovely Reed's* author Jack Howell, we knew that we had timed our visit just perfectly. After a few minutes of nervousness, Jeff began to show us around the shop and the fun had begun. Glenn and Jack were just about to head over to Wayne Maca's "Beaver Head Rods" shop down the street, and Robert and I stayed behind to get the Winston shop tour.



Glenn Brackett's rod making bench



The "casting lawn", downtown Twin Bridges

Jeff Walker is one of the most truly gracious men that I have ever met. He has such a sense of modesty and benevolence about him, that it is no wonder that as we later walked the streets with him, small children on bikes called out to him, "Hi, Jeff!" He seems like a legend in Twin Bridges having worked for many years under Glenn, slowly himself becoming a master rodmaker in his own right.

The thing about the Winston shop is that there is no "ancient Chinese secret." Every aspect of their shop and their construction seems open for discussion.

"Pictures?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"Secret varnish recipe?"

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“Sure it’s _____” (I am not telling you, go find out for yourselves)!

By the way, Jeff even gave me three pints to take back with me. They use one pint every time they spray, and use a new can every time. Heck, I am not so modest, I took three half filled pints! Thanks Jeff.

I stared at the milling machine for about ten minutes before Jeff explained every aspect of it. Robert and I also got to see some wonderful rods at all stages of completion that adorned the racks on Jeff and Glenn’s benches (Note to self, make a rack for your bench, Bob!). Several other makers’ rods were in the shop for one reason or another. We passed a beautiful Michael Montagne rod between us, and saw several E.C. Powell rods in for repair.

Shortly, the three of us headed over to Wayne’s little shop to catch up with Wayne, Glenn, and Jack. I had cast one of Wayne’s rods prior to this, as Jerry had brought one along to May 2003’s Grand Gathering in Fergus, Ontario, Canada. It was fast and light, it was amazing. I looked forward to getting some insight from Wayne, a former snowboard maker turned rodmaker.

Wayne’s rods are all fast action hollow built rods. They push the limits of one’s casting ability, and they throw a tremendous amount of line. Because of his complex knowledge of resins and composites, Wayne uses composite ferrules for many of his rods, adding a light in hand feel that is unmistakable. It doesn’t hurt to have the Winston graphite shop right down the street to roll up special weaves for you either!

We watched as Wayne showed his blank making process, moving deftly between the belt sander, node press, band saw, and the Tom Morgan Handmill. He worked with an efficiency that only a professional rodmaker attains. I really admired the ingenuity that he had displayed in his layout and making of the rods. We cracked open a few beers and we chatted about rod making, all the while the Winston bamboo production was grinding to a halt for the day!

Glenn declared that he was off to, “fish for his soul” as he put it. These guys really do live life in a way so much different from the fast paced life of the East Coast. I think Glenn said exactly what he intended to do, and I stood in awe of him for a moment wondering, “Where do I go to fish for that?”

We were fortunate enough to have Jack stick around, as the remaining five of us went out to cast some of Wayne’s rods beneath the watchful eye of the Twin Bridges water tower. No, I will not bore you with the details, every rod was wonderful. I could not believe what a long line that even I was able to throw with his big 9 weight cannon. And yet, I would have sworn I was holding a graphite blank in my hand, it was so light.

Afterwards, we were off to Jeff’s pizza parlor, where we enjoyed some of the best pizza I have ever had outside of Buffalo (we may have snow, but the food is great here). How do you beat a trip to Winston where not only do you get to meet Jeff, Glenn, and Wayne, but you also meet Jack Howell, and Jeff is paying for the pizza and beer! Heaven really does have a place on Earth, it is the



Jack Howell, Wayne Maca , and Jeff Walker oversee the casting



Winston HQ, graphite rod shop, and museum

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Winston bamboo rod shop in Twin Bridges.

Stuffed with pizza, we headed back over to the shop. I wondered why the drivers had stopped to let us cross the street. How did everyone in town know Jeff? Was that the beginning and end of town that I could see when I turned left to right? Where was the rest of it? How do I find a house out here?

Good old Jerry finally showed up, and he said he had been checking in to see if we had arrived all day. We talked at great length about things back home, about the rod making, and about Jerry's new book *At the River's Edge*, which Robert and I quickly got our own copies of before leaving. Later during the flight and connections home, I had the chance to read the book from cover to cover. It is hands down one of the finest books about angling and living that I have ever read. It also started me reading one of Jerry's favorites, Roderick Haig Brown, and *At the River's Edge* has become a really important book for me. Not only was it a fulfilling literary experience, but it was a really life changing event. It taught me that fishing is more than a sport, it is a pastime; it is a life worth living. I guess I had never realized its magnitude so clearly until I read Jerry's book.

Jerry also prodded me into asking Jeff to show me the spray booth set up that I had been corresponding with Jerry about. I had not realized that while Jerry and I were yapping away, Robert had just received the tour of the spray booth from Jeff. As I would expect, the amiable Jeff obliged. Standing there in the spray booth discussing his and Tom Morgan's method of spraying, I tried my best not to miss a word. When in the presence of guys like these, their matter-of-fact ways speak volumes of their experience and commitment to rod making. They reinforced to me what I have believed for some time now; the best way to learn about rods is to simply keep making them. There is no tool, magazine, conversation, or book that will make up for time spent in the shop. Jeff's mastery has come from twenty plus years of doing a job, the job of making bamboo fly rods.

We had arrived at just after 10 am, and now it was 4 pm. We had taken up nearly the whole day's work at the Winston rod shop. We headed towards the museum with Jerry, as Jeff waved goodbye and stoically got back to work. Robert and I bid Jerry farewell eventually, and we took time to visit the museum and look down on the graphite shop. It had been a great day, one to remember for a lifetime.

The trip back to Idaho Falls was full of conversation about how wonderful the day had been going. It was filled reviewing tips and secrets that Robert and I had learned that day. We had a nice dinner and a few beers back in Idaho Falls, all the while shaking our heads in disbelief over how gracious Jerry, Jeff, Glenn, and Wayne had been.



Passing by on the way to the Madison



The author with the inimitable Ms. Joan Wulff (photo by Dave Mosely)

On Friday, we helped our fellow Symposium mates to make more of the rod that was being built during the Conclave. It was nice to see five or six different approaches to each step along the way. The nice thing was how accepting everyone was of the differences among us. To each his own, I guess.

Saturday finally arrived with the Cast from the Past, organized by Brad Love. Brad, Virginia Karstetter, and Betsy Zimny did a really fantastic job running the day's events. People from all kinds of backgrounds got to cast classic and modern rods throughout the day. It was hot, and it was busy, but it was fun. The best came last, as Ms. Joan Wulff came by and cast some of our rods. I owe Dave Mosley

big time for getting one of my rods into her deft hands. What a caster she is! Dave made it even better by taking my camera and pushing me over to stand by Ms. Wulff for a quick photo opportunity. How could my day have possibly gotten any better?

All good things must come to an end, and I sadly said goodbye to my old and new friends. Nearly everyone was gone by early Sunday morning, and so I headed off to Montana's Madison River for a morning fishing. The fishing was great, but the catching was poor as they say. Nevertheless, it was a wonderful three hours spent under Montana's big sky. Casting and watching the majestic horses that roamed the stream bed was a great experience.

Idaho and Montana were two wonderful places to visit. Wonderful sites, wonderful people, and wonderful fish (or so I am told). I hope to get back there some day, maybe to visit for good.

Bob Maulucci is currently trying his best to get fired from work in Buffalo so that he can move to better fishing grounds. He is anxiously awaiting another venture out West, and is going to make sure that his lovely wife comes along next time.



The powerful Madison River



Horses roam the Madison's banks