

Rodmaker Profile:
Jim Bureau, J.W. Bureau Classic Rods

Interview by Bob Maulucci

I first met Jim Bureau in Grayling, Michigan at the 2001 Gray Rock Rodmaker's Gathering. Over the past three years, I have kept close in touch with Jim, and he has been an invaluable help to me with both rod making and casting questions. In addition to being a world class rod maker and casting instructor, Jim is an accomplished canoeist and carver, and he even knows a thing or two about coaching softball. I guess in a way, the term "coach" fits Jim to a tee. He is the gentle, knowing man who graciously passes on to me what others have passed on to him.

When catching up with Jim at last year's gathering in Grayling, he was kind enough to show me some of the secrets that resided in his trunk. Rod after rod, hexagonal case after case, and each handcrafted piece was a perfect balance of function and beauty. The figure of the woods that Jim used in his reel seat fillers and cases was like none I had ever seen. It possessed more "eyes" per square inch than any other bird's eye maple I had ever seen, and the figured curly maple was equally stunning.

I was intrigued when Jim clued me in on his new business venture. He was ready to bring his splendid wood and reel seat designs to the rod making community. Clearly, the time has come. I hope you enjoy this brief conversation with my friend and master rodmaker Jim Bureau.

What first got you started in rod making?

I actually was doing quite a bit of duck decoy and realistic animal carving when the rod making bug hit me. I was on a fly fishing trip to the Grayling area and happened to stop at a local fly fishing shop. During a conversation with Steve Southard, owner of the Fly Factory, I learned about a bamboo rodmakers gathering that was to take place on the following weekend. I'd always been interested in bamboo fly rods, but I had no idea that anyone other than a few seasoned professionals were making bamboo rods. I showed up for the Grayrock Bamboo Rodmakers Gathering on the following weekend, and I've been making bamboo rods ever since.

You had mentioned Al Medved a bit when we talked. Tell me more about your connection.

Al Medved was the first bamboo rodmaker I ever met. While at Grayrock, I happened to walk up to the picnic table Al was sitting at, with his bamboo rods and his brand new beveller he'd just invented. I introduced myself and we've been friends from that day on. I was amazed at the quality of Al's fly rods and I knew I wanted to learn to make rods of that quality. It's now ten years later and I'm still trying. When I returned home I immediately started making the beveller and had it completed in short order. Ever since my introduction to bamboo rod making, it's been Al who's been my inspiration, and my mentor.

How would you describe yourself as a rodmaker? How do you like to go about building a rod?

I consider myself a self taught rodmaker, but I have a real appreciation for the help I received from others who've been there before me. I've always tried to make each and every bamboo rod better than the previous rods I've made. That's what motivates me to go on with the next rod.

I hand plane my rods but I do use a rough beveller to get my initial strips to 60 degrees. I really enjoy the hand planing process and use mostly hand tools when building. I usually have two or three rods in different stages of production at the same time. I like it this way because it gives me the flexibility to work on whatever I feel like when I go into my shop. It may be sort of a non-conventional way to go about things, but it's what works for me.

What are your thoughts on sharpening? So many new rodmakers struggle with getting and staying sharp.

I like to get all of my tools shaving sharp. No matter if I'm using a plane blade, gouge, knife, or chisel, I find rod making much easier and more enjoyable when I have tools that cut with ease. For anyone who's just getting started in rod making I'd highly recommend power sharpening over sharpening by hand. Not only is power sharpening faster than sharpening by hand, you'll find yourself sharpening much more often, thus keeping your tools razor sharp. I've invested considerable money into a hand sharpening system in the past and those stones and jigs now sit idle. With my simple power sharpening system I can sharpen a plane blade to a razor's edge in a minute or two. All that's really needed is a powered leather wheel and some white buffing compound to do the cutting. I personally have a setup with three wheels which I'd bought when I was making wood carvings. One of the wheels is the leather wheel and the other two are covered with varying grits of emery cloth. This setup allows me to sharpen anything from a miniature v gouge to my lawn mower blades.

There has been a lot of lively discussion about heat treating as of late. What do you think about oven treating a rod versus flaming, temp, time, etc...? What is the right way to heat treat a rod?

I oven treat all my rods, whether they're flamed or not. I flame rods for color and I personally don't consider this flaming to be a part of my heat treating process, although it obviously has an effect on the bamboo. I heat treat in my oven for three reasons. One, to drive off moisture which prevents sets from occurring later on. Secondly, to help relax the strips so they fit into the planing form better. Third, to create a desired color, such as in an oven toned rod. Oven treating bamboo does have an effect on the springiness of the completed rod. However, I don't vary temperatures to try to create different actions. I've found the temperatures that work for my oven and I stick with those temps. If I want to make changes to a rod's action I'll vary the taper rather than experiment with varying oven temperatures. For me, the most critical part of preparing a rod to plane is in the way I go

about flaming the culm. I much prefer to have a rod medium, or even lightly flamed, then to have them very dark. I've noticed that with the darker rods I've made in the past, the bamboo strips often become somewhat brittle and more difficult to plane to final dimension. You end up with those stringy, damaged fibers that you never can seem to get rid of during planing. The right way to go about heat treating will vary from one rodmaker to another. What's really important is to heat treat so ones rods don't later end up taking a set, and to end up with a nice springy action with strips that aren't damaged from the heat treating and flaming process. As long as you can get results such as this, then it really doesn't matter how you go about doing so. When I first started making rods I heat treated for about 8 minutes at 375 degrees. Why? Because that's what everyone else I knew was doing. It's now ten years later and I've changed because of conclusions I've come to through my own observations. For my flamed rods, I heat treat at about 330-340 degree's for 20 minutes. If I'm heat treating a rod to be oven toned, I'll use a temperature of 275-300 degree's, and 45 minutes to one hours time duration, depending on the way the bamboo takes the color. I move the bound up strips back and forth in my oven from time to time, which helps to even the color somewhat.

You seem to make every part of the rod from blank to case. When do you decide to make a part and when do you decide to buy?

The parts I make are the ones I feel I can make better than manufactured parts. I tried making my own guides several years ago and gave up on the idea. I just couldn't produce guides that were of the precision quality of manufactured guides so I now buy them instead. Reel seats fillers were something I learned to make from nearly the beginning because of the high quality local wood I was able to obtain. I didn't care for the straight grained woods that were being offered on most manufactured reel seat so I started making my own fillers. I started making hexagon rod cases because I wanted a fancy case to put my bamboo rod into.

What are your favorite tapers? I know you like the Payne 98 quite a bit.

For dry fly fishing to rising trout I'll take the 7613 or 8013 Dickerson. I'd also choose either of these rods as nymphing rod favorites. When I'm fishing dry flies to trout that aren't rising, I'd prefer a slower action rod for the hundreds of casts that I'll be making when doing this type of fishing. The 4wt Perfectionist is my favorite and any of the Garrisons would also be great for this type of fishing. If I'm fishing brookies in tight brush I'd like a faster action rod with a tip that isn't too small. I also want something short in length for the brush with about 7ft as a maximum. A great little brookie rod for tight brush is the Paul Young Midge. It's short, somewhat fast in action, and has a good sized tip. My steamer rod favorite is the Paul Young Para 15 wet fly tipped rod. It's got a good sized tip and bends into the handle. I really like a streamer rod to do most of its work in the butt section due to the stress I put on the rod when stripping streamers under water. This rod also has the ability to pick up a lot of line off the water.

The Payne 98 is a cannon to say the least. If someone were to just own one rod, for all types of fishing, and in a 7ft length, I don't know how you could make a better choice than the Payne 98.

Have you developed any proprietary tapers?

I haven't designed any of my own tapers but I have modified existing tapers with good success. My idea of designing a great fly rod would be to take an existing rod that I've fished and like very much, and to make what I consider to be slight modifications to this rod. These modifications would be based on casting style (aggressive caster, or lazy caster) and give me the exact rod I was looking for. Would this new rod be better than the original, not really, but it did accomplish what I was trying to achieve.

What about the short rod vs. long rod argument? What do you base rod selections on?

My choice for fly rod length is based on the type of fishing I'm doing at the time. I like the shorter rods in tight cover simply because they're easier to get into position to cast and much easier to haul around in the woods. For waters where I'm wading deep, I like a longer rod of 7 1/2 to 8ft. I'm short in stature and the longer rod makes it easier to keep my back cast elevated and out of trouble. I also like a somewhat longer and stiffer rod for nymphing. The stiffness helps to detect the take and the longer length allows me to keep more line off the water when dead drifting the nymph. Short rods are fun to cast but I do find them to be much more limited than longer length rods.

How has your casting instruction influenced your rod making?

My being a certified casting instructor has had very little influence on the way I go about rod making. What's really influenced me is the fact that I now have much more time to go fishing and to evaluate rods, and their design, now that my children are raised and gone. I'd much prefer to go fishing with a friend who's an excellent caster and evaluate a rod through casting and fishing then to use any kind of a computer program to design a rod. These on stream evaluations have done more for me in choosing a fly rod to build than my becoming a casting instructor.

You have just recently started a component business. What are some of the products you are offering? What inspired you to enter the business end of things?

My new business has only one product for sale at the moment, reel seats with highly figured stabilized wood fillers. I'm offering fifteen species of high quality stabilized woods with nickel silver hardware. This is the foundation of my business. In the very near future I'll be adding matching winding checks for sale. I entered this business because I know I can offer something special to rodmakers in the way of special highly figured woods and nickel silver hardware that is functional, and of the highest quality.

What is the business's working name?

I consider my internally tapered slide band to be a major improvement over straight bore cap and ring reel seats. What's really nice about this design is that it seems to fit every modern fly reel foot to near perfection. The internal taper of my slide band is a direct match to the taper of a modern fly reel foot and it results in a great fit. I think that once tried, it will be hard to dispute, that this design is superior for fitting and holding a fly reel then a straight bore style slide band.



I think the world will be hearing a lot from Jim Bureau in the next few months. I know that already he has caused quite a stir on the Rodmaker's List and in phone conversations I have had with fellow makers. His beautiful reel seats are sure to be adorning rods everywhere.

As I sit here looking at one of the lovely maple and nickel silver seats that Jim has sent me, I cannot help but smile. Beyond the pure beauty of it, I smile knowing that it came from a great guy, my friend, Jim Bureau.