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BY MARTIN SILVERSTONE

Sixty degrees to Perfection



PAGE 28-29 PHOTOS, COURTESY OF STEVE CAMPBELL

Once again you can buy the best of fly rods in Brewer, Maine.

UP ON A SMALL HILL, LOOKING DOWN ON the Penobscot River from the Maine burg of Brewer is a statue of a local professor, Joshua Chamberlain. Without a sliver of military experience he left these bucolic riverbanks and volunteered to fight for the Union Army during the Civil War. When the gun and cannon smoke cleared, the mild mannered teacher was as authentic an American hero as you can get. At Gettysburg, despite being wounded, he snatched victory from defeat on a different hill, Little Round Top. In other action, he was so seriously wounded he had to stick his sword into the ground to stay upright to continue commanding the 20th Maine Regiment.

Is it my imagination, or all the real heroes gone? Men and women, like Chamberlain, who never question why, but serve, and sometimes, die. Don't get me wrong; maybe it's just the flurry of election activity, the televised debates, the worry over the stock market, and all the talk about dire times.

One thing it all proves beyond any reasonable doubt is that there are plenty of people who can talk the talk. Thus my question, can anyone, like Joshua Chamberlain, still walk the walk? Well, fortunately, and despite the dire warnings about our frail paper economy, there are still a lot of doers, builders and fighters. It was only coincidence that I climbed to the top of that hill to get a picture of the Penobscot in the dawn light, and found out about Joshua there, but it was no coincidence I was in Brewer that morning in the first place.



Thomas Rod through the ages: Famous anglers like Ted Williams (above with Sam Carlson) placed orders for rods built by the original company's craftsmen (facing page). Today, Steve Campbell (top left) continues a tradition in bamboo.



Bamboo culms are heated (above), split with a mallet and butcher's knife (facing page), and then carefully milled to precisely 60 degrees (top).

COURTESY OF STEVE CAMPBELL



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Finished blanks are lowered into varnish-filled tubes in the wall. Down below (top, right), a strategically placed cabinet allows the varnish to be warmed via heat from lightbulbs. At right, Campbell checks the rod order line.



Word was out that a genuine Thomas Rod Company bamboo fly rod would soon be donated to help raise money for the Penobscot River Restoration project. Even to a lightweight angler like myself, Thomas Rod is a keystone name in angling history and an affirmation of quality craftsmanship.

Payne, Edwards, Leonard, Thomas, these were the barons of bamboo rods from the late 1800s to the middle of the next century—men who made Maine the bamboo-rod-center of the universe. All eventually fell victim to an embargo on Chinese products, which included the Tonkin bamboo crucial to rod production, but also to rapidly changing consumer tastes that embraced cheaper graphite rods, which began flooding the market.

Well, there is somewhat of a bamboo rod renaissance going on and one man who is bucking the mass production trend is Steve Campbell. As it turned out I had misunderstood my source. The rod being donated to Penobscot restoration was not an antique but a brand new rod to be built by the rejuvenated Thomas Rod Company. The Tonkin bamboo will come from the original Thomas stock that Campbell inherited when he purchased the company from Sam Carlson in 1999.

From Chamberlain's statue, it's no more than a minute to a quiet cul-de-sac in Brewer—the new home of Fred Thomas' creation. For Campbell, the quaint two-story house at the end of Sargent Drive is his ancestral family home. He was born and bred in this small town of around 4,500. He used to jump on his bike when he was a kid and speed down Sargent to fish the Penobscot's salmon pools.

Like most anglers in the Bangor area, the Brewer teenager must have felt devastated when these runs declined drastically in front of his own eyes. Now, this year those same pools filled with salmon in numbers not seen in years and Campbell is not only here to see it, but to revel in the possibility of his own son catching a Penobscot purebred salar one day. And he has also become part of the area's proud angling tradition himself.

When Fred Thomas' rod operation was at its peak, it employed 12 craftspeople in a red brick factory on Park Street in Bangor. Now, it's Campbell and an assistant—his 17-year-old son Patrick. Patty, his wife, sews the rod bags with her own helper, daughter Caitlin. Oh yes, there is also a team in charge of security—four hounds, led by a crack beagle named Bogdan.

No matter the size of the employee roster, a Thomas

rod still begins with the straight part of a stalk, or culm, of the same Tonkin cane used by all serious bamboo rod builders. Named for the gulf made infamous during the Vietnamese war, most bamboo actually grows further north along the Sui River in China. Whatever its exact location, it is the feeling and natural strength of the "beautiful grass" that gives these rods their timeless attraction to anglers.

No wonder salmon anglers like Cornelia "Fly Rod" Crosby, the very first Registered Maine Guide and famed outdoorswoman, used a Thomas rod as did President Dwight Eisenhower during his well-publicized fishing trip to Maine in 1955. Presidents Teddy Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover also fished with Thomas rods. Ditto Carrie Stevens, the famous Rangeley fly tier, and Ted Williams. Into the present, no greater defender of the Penobscot has ever cast a line than renowned artist and conservationist Arthur Taylor. He owns a Thomas rod from the current shop, and has owned dozens of others over the years.

These fly-fishing luminaries knew what many now are discovering. Born in nature, honed by careful, loving care, which only a select few craftspersons possess, angling with a bamboo rod is like holding a living creature, its hidden power poised for release.

"Here, hold this," says Steve Campbell, handing me a completed rod from a display case now housed in his renovated garage, the bottom floor of which serves as the Thomas Company store. The rod, an absolutely gorgeous Browntone, strikes me as fragile to the core. Bamboo, however, is an extremely tough, resilient material. Upstairs is where Campbell turns this "poor man's timber" into a rich man's toy. Well, toy might be a bit of an exaggeration. A bamboo rod is both precision instrument and shrewd investment, growing in value over time.

In the beginning, however, there is just the culm and a pair of hands. Well, not just hands, but also the brain behind them. In Campbell's case, a MacGyver-type mind that has adapted and configured his bright second story workshop in a perfect, yet eclectic way. For example, back in the original Thomas factory, finished rod blanks would be varnished by hand painting, a technique that Campbell discovered meant a less than perfect finish.

In a tiny closet-sized room in the workshop, he has installed four PVC tubes into the floor that run into the wall below. Clever, yes, but not nearly as innovative as the tiny motor that is geared to lower a hanger holding 4 rod sections at a slow, smooth speed into the tubes.



COURTESY OF STEVE CAMPBELL

When duty calls: From Brewer to Baghdad and back. Campbell had to put rod making on hold for a year when his reserve unit was shipped over to central Iraq.



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Winters in Maine, however, can be cold making the varnish too viscous to cloak the bamboo properly. I'd be ready to give up on the tubes in the walls at that point, but not Campbell. At the bottom of the stairs I notice a small closet, which looks like a place to hang keys.

Campbell opens the doors to show me the light bulbs which when turned on keeps the varnish at a perfect spreading consistency. Touches like this are found throughout the shop, but in the end it's only the hands of a patient craftsman that can make a faultless bamboo rod.

And that skill doesn't come by magic or overnight. Campbell read, learned, practiced, and spent hours apprenticing under Arthur Taylor.

"He has a real talent, a knack," Taylor told me. And apparently the pupil has surpassed the professor. "He is far better than I ever hoped to be," he added with more than a touch of pride, discernible even over the phone.

Time can't be manufactured nor care counterfeited. When Campbell exposes the raw culm of cane to an open flame to achieve the browntone finish, its done slowly, constantly turning the bamboo so that the flaming is only done to the extent necessary to darken the finish of the rod, since applying too much heat can cause the bamboo to weaken and break.

The work on the cane is equally low tech. A butcher knife and mallet are used to split the raw culm of bamboo. Then the individual pieces of bamboo are cut into tapered strips on a milling machine. The magic number is 60, degrees that is, so that the six strips make a perfect circle, right down to the tiniest tip. It's hard to believe someone can work in such tight geometry, especially

down to a 25 thousandths of an inch. Maybe it is magic, certainly it must be considered an art.

A homemade device for wrapping the rods helps with the gluing. Later there will be further finishing, the building of the grip with cork from Portugal, and addition of the guides. But that is more than enough for today, tomorrow holds new promises and there is a day job in the turbulent world of finance to consider.

The work is satisfying, Campbell so obviously a hands-on type of guy. Yet he emanates a deeper calm, a well of cool, patient contentment that hints at grittier experiences. Campbell served in an infantry unit that fought all over central Iraq, including Baghdad, Fallujah, and Ramadi. A Staff Sergeant and lead driver in convoy security escorts, known as the "Roughriders," like Chamberlain, he, too had left Brewer to serve in the reserve. Few details given, a humble Campbell will only say quietly that the time in Iraq gives him, "a better appreciation for his life back home."

Whoever wins the rod Campbell will make in aid of the Penobscot, will be lucky indeed. He or she will feel the strength and action of the bamboo and will certainly appreciate the handiwork that goes into building a Thomas taper. My advice to the winner if he wants to appreciate the rod even more: go down to the end of Sargent Drive. The Thomas shop is like a mini museum of artifacts from the original factory. You'll see that they still "walk the walk" up in Brewer. Just make sure you are expected, because that beagle Bogdan, he can sure howl up a storm.

Martin Silverstone is the Editor of ASJ. 🐕