



Farmington to Rangeley:

Bamboo Fly Rods and Tourism in

19th Century Maine

David P. Van Burgel
Kathy Scott
29 Sept. 2005

The post Civil War popularity of fly fishing and the development of the six strip bamboo rod owes much to Maine and specifically to the Farmington and Rangeley Lakes area. In 1860, Henry O. Stanley, later (1883) to become Commissioner of Fisheries for the State of Maine, returned home from “an expedition to the Rangeley Lakes” and with him was an early proponent of trout fishing for sport, George Shepard Page of New York. George Shepard Page made a second trip to the Rangeley area in 1863 taking home with him brook trout of amazing size even by standards of the time: eight brook trout weighing 8 3/4 pounds, 8 1/4, 7 1/4, 6 1/2, 6, 5 1/2, 5, and 5 pounds.

Page returned in 1867 and with a fellow angler caught in ten days fifty-nine trout weighing 293 pounds for an average of about 5 pounds per fish. In 1868, the Oquossoc Angling Association was established for the purpose of preservation and protection of the exceptional fishing. The Association was formed at Indian Rock with George Shepard Page as president. The post Civil War expansion of transportation into the wilds of Maine combined with veterans’ camping skills, pensions, and desire for solitude further led to the popularity of the Rangeley Area.

George Page fished the Rangeley Area with a fly rod made by C. R. Murphy of Newark, New Jersey, who most agree was the first maker of a complete laminated six strip bamboo fly rod. These bamboo rods are made by splitting strips from the circumference of a stalk (culm) of bamboo, machining them into a tapered triangular cross section and gluing six of them together to form a tapered rod of hexagonal cross section. Among those who fished the Rangeley Area with Page was Isaac Cutler, a New England businessman benefiting from the post war New England business climate who had the means and time to recreate in the Rangeley Area. The Rangeley Area could be accessed at this time by stage from various towns, including

Farmington. Having traveled to Farmington via the railroad, “sports” could continue to the Rangeley Area on the stage.

Isaac Cutler was impressed enough with the fly rod of George Page to inquire about the possibility of the making of a similar one by some local gunsmiths.

Nineteenth century gun making in Maine was mostly dominated by the gun makers of Bangor and Augusta, but Albert Galletin Wheeler of Farmington certainly made his mark as the survival rate of his work to this day is high. Albert was born in Farmington in 1816 and was listed as a machinist in the Maine Business Register of 1856. In all of the following years until his death in 1883, he was listed as a gunsmith. During his approximately thirty year career, A. G. Wheeler trained young men in the profession including his son Charles E. Wheeler, born in 1847. Charles had other interests including music and studied cornet in both Boston and Portland.

In 1868, C. R. Wheeler, after hearing Isaac Cutler’s request to have a bamboo fly rod to handle the Rangeley trout made like the one made by C. R. Murphy, produced a laminated hexagonal cross section six strip fly rod made of split Calcutta cane. This was the first documented making of a laminated six strip fly rod east of the Hudson River of New York. Charles continued his interest in music, too, and became the leader of the Farmington cornet band in 1873.

A bit northwest of Farmington in Phillips on the stage route to Rangeley, in the year 1854, Cornelia Thurza Crosby was born to Lemeul and Thirza Crosby. Cornelia’s father died of tuberculosis a little before she was two years old. As it happened many times, once one family member contracted tuberculosis, others did. Cornelia’s prescribed treatment for the disease was

to spend as much time as possible in the fresh air and she gladly roamed around Phillips learning love for the outdoors.

Cornelia attended St. Catherine's School, an Episcopal girls' school in Augusta, and as a result was better educated than many of the women of her day. After graduation from St. Catherine's, Cornelia worked as a bank clerk in Franklin County. Her health continued to be a problem as she wrote in the 1870's

“...after long months of weary illness from a severe lung trouble from which I was not expected to recover... I was carried one day to the very foot of Mt. Blue...Here at a farmhouse I was to try the healing power of nature. A brook full of trout came laughingly dashing down the mountainside, and from there I took my first trout with an alder pole, it is true...” (Hunter, 2000)

On a fishing trip in 1878 to Tim Pond, Cornelia used a bamboo fly rod given to her by its maker, Charles Wheeler, and this trip probably inspired Cornelia Crosby to explore a journalistic career. She wrote for various papers, and the editor of the *Philips Phonograph* first used the nickname “Fly Rod” when Cornelia was thirty-one years old. Over the years, Fly Rod Crosby continued working at a bank as well as writing. In her column of May of 1892, she praised the craft of Charles E. Wheeler whose handiwork she carried to the trout waters of Maine.

As the number of people traveling to the Rangeley area increased, Fly Rod became concerned with the supply of fish and game, and she picked up the cause in 1893 of licensing guides. On March 19, 1897, the Maine legislature passed the Guide Bill which established a relatively mild program aimed at bringing in revenue for fish and game protection and created a

list of those guiding. Guides would be required to obtain a license at the cost of one dollar. In recognition for her work and the enjoyment of the outdoor life in Maine, Fly Rod Crosby was given the number one license.

Fly Rod continued to promote the Rangeley Area as a vacation spot through thirty years of writing and work at the Sportsman's Expositions in the 1890's. Her belief was that Maine was the greatest state in the greatest nation on earth, and that Rangeley was the best of all. Cornelia "Fly Rod" Crosby combined her skills and her charisma to promote "Maine, the Playground of the Nation". Over the years, Fly Rod would promote increasingly restrictive catch limits and the practice of catch and release in order to conserve the resource. At the age of ninety-three in 1946 Fly Rod died in Lewiston. The *Rangeley Record* ran an obituary on page one ending with:

"Rangeley has lost one of its most famous people and America has lost its most famous woman sportsman. May her soul rest in peace"? (Hunter, 2000)

Meanwhile, Charles Wheeler, having made the first six strip bamboo fly rod east of the Hudson, continued his interest in the making of bamboo fly rods. He concentrated on their manufacture and moved away from the making of guns. Wheeler's rod manufacturing business grew in both the retail and wholesale realms. He became the only major rod maker to confine his total production within Maine. In 1876, Wheeler sent samples of his work to the International Exposition in Philadelphia and was awarded a Medal and Diploma of Excellence "for the manufacture of split bamboo fishing rods." In June of that year, an advertisement in the *Farmington Chronicle* indicated the substance of Wheeler's business: "Chas. E. Wheeler

Manufacturer and Dealer in Fishing Tackle, Fishing Rods, and Fishing Hooks.” Also stated in the ad: “Any kind of rod made to order at short notice. Split bamboo trout and salmon rods a specialty.” Wheeler’s business was located on the corner of High Street and Broadway, right next to the Music Hall (now Reny’s) where he served as bandleader. His shop, which is now occupied by part of the Sugarwood Gallery, still stands despite the ravages of fire that plagued many Maine towns including Farmington.

By the mid 1800’s, the Wheeler shop employed six to eight assistants, and the two-story 25 by 40 foot manufacturing facility was equipped with the latest steam powered machinery. Wheeler himself designed much of the manufacturing equipment. His rods were beautifully finished and ornamented, with some retailing for \$50 in the 1880’s. His annual sales in the wholesale trade exceeded \$5,000 indicating that much of his output was marked with the retailer’s name rather than the maker’s. During Wheeler’s forty-nine year rodmaking history, a conservative estimate puts his output at 5,500 rods, most being made during the most active years between 1875 and 1915. Wheeler had many customers who became close friends, including Fly Rod Crosby, who always used a Wheeler for her exhibition casting at David T. Abercrombie’s Camp in New York. Wheeler rods were without a doubt a mainstay on the Rangeley and Kennebago Lakes.

While Charles Wheeler was pioneering the manufacture of bamboo rods in Farmington, another and soon to be more famous rodmaker was following a similar path in Bangor. Hiram L. Leonard, hunter of legend as characterized by Henry David Thoreau in *The Maine Woods*, was also a gunsmith turned bamboo rodmaker. H.L. Leonard produced his first bamboo rods in 1871 and they were described as looking remarkably like the Charles Murphy rods that Charles Wheeler had also seen. Hiram Leonard stressed production and would eventually acquire

investors, move his facilities to New York State and become quite well known. Charles R. Wheeler stayed in Farmington, Maine, crafted bamboo rods and led the band until shortly before his death in 1916. The readers of the *Franklin Journal* of April 21, 1916, learned that their beloved leader of Wheeler's Band died of tuberculosis, the same affliction that plagued Fly Rod Crosby. The paper eulogized Charles Wheeler as a "Pioneer in the Bamboo Fishing Rod Industry."

Campbell, A. J. *Classic and Antique Fly Fishing Tackle*. New York : Lyons and Burford, 1997.

Demeritt, Dwight B, Jr. *Maine Made Guns and Their Makers*. Hallowell, Maine: Maine State Museum, 1973.

Ellis, Edward. *A Chronological History of the Rangeley Lakes Region*. Wilton, Maine: Rangeley Lakes Region Historical Society, 1993.

Farrar, Charles A. J. *Illustrated Guide Book to Rangeley, Richardson, Kennebago, Umbagog, and Parmachenee Lakes*. Boston : Farrar and Johnson, 1876.

Hunter, Julia and Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr. *Fly Rod Crosby*. Gardiner, Maine: Tilbury House, 2000.

Priest, Gary N. *History of Rangeley Hotels and Camps*. Rangeley, Maine: Gary Priest. 2003.