

As the Cro Flies
Patterns Born and Bred on the Upper Sac
Chip O'Brien

The homespun flies of the upper Sacramento River bring back my childhood so fast the reaction could cause whiplash. They return me to a time of innocence, when I was seduced by the woodsy images found in outdoors catalogues. I would slowly flip through their pages and imagine myself a country gentleman fishing a willowy bamboo rod and, at the end of a silk line and gut leader, perhaps a Parmachene Bell, McGinty Bee, Kite's Imperial or Invicta.

But there's fantasy, and there's reality. To a ten-year-old kid who financed his fly tying through window washing and lawn mowing, obtaining adequate materials required much sweat and not a little ingenuity. I learned to create flies out of anything I could get my hands on, with Mom's sewing kit and the neighborhood pets playing prominent roles as suppliers. Because our cat and the household drapes were both regular sources, it amused me how one would invariably get the blame for shredding the other.

Although my flies didn't look like much, they were the scourge of local sunfish. This success let me develop a healthy cynicism toward tradition that still influences how I see the world. Vanquished are such doctrinaire assumptions that still lead otherwise rational fly fishers to believe they need the "urine-stained fur from the underbelly of a female fox" to tie a proper Light Cahill.

Perhaps that's what I like about the flies that were developed for the upper Sac. They show a startling originality that seems unencumbered by the strictness by the strictures of traditional tying and fishing practices. Each fly has a real person and story behind it (some lost, some not), and each proves that necessity, as always the stern mother of invention, serves also as a darned good fishing partner.

The First Ted

So maybe the upper Sac isn't one of Catskill streams where legends like Theodore Gordon first popularized fly fishing in America. But the river has a few legends of its own.

The first fly fishing guide on the upper Sac was an Indian named Ted Towendolly. His people, the Wintus, lived along parts of the Trinity, Sacramento and McCloud Rivers. As far as we know he developed the first flies designed specifically for the roiling waters of the Sacramento, namely the Bomber, the Spent Wing, the Peacock and the Burlap. In so doing, Ted started in the 1920s a local tradition of fly tying with common materials that remains to this day.

Flies in the Towendolly series are all tied on #8 Mustad 3948A hooks with an underbody of ten turns of .25 thousand-inch lead wire. Though obviously designed to sink quickly, each pattern is tied with stiff dry fly hackle instead of the softer feathers

usually reserved for wet flies. The stiff hackle affects the flies' motion in the river's current, and may be partially responsible for their effectiveness in taking trout.

The Bombers have grizzly hackle tails, sloping black or reddish-brown acrylic yarn bodies, and a grizzly hackle wound dry-fly fashion at the collar. The Spent Wings are exactly the same as the Bombers, with the addition of grizzly hackle wings standing upright from the collar in a V-shape (also like a traditional dry fly). The Peacock and Burlap are virtually the same patterns as the Bomber, except they use peacock herl or burlap, respectively, for the body.

Precious little is known of Ted Towendolly. Records indicate that Grant Towendolly, the last Wintu shaman, lived with his family along the river at Soda Creek. Ted may have been his son, but records are sketchy. No one seems to know where Ted Towendolly came from or where he went. One thing is clear: At some point he met Ted Fay and introduced him to his Sacramento flies. It was serendipitous: Fay was to become a popular guide and fly fishing legend along the river for the next thirty years.

The Second Ted

Ted Fay moved from Oakland to Dunsmuir in 1951, where he and his wife Vivienne purchased the Lookout Point Motel. Although the motel was eventually torn down to improve road access to Interstate 5, Fay's free guide service for motel guests drew many anglers to the area for over 20 years. In the beginning, Fay purchased his flies from Ted Towendolly. But Ted Fay also made his own contributions to the upper Sac fly series. The Caddis Larvae, the Maggie and the Cro Fly were Fay additions.

For a time in the late '70s and early '80s, Fay's fly patterns were hot items- so much so that "authentic" Ted Fay flies began appearing on the shelves of other fly shops. In an effort to differentiate his flies from the copies, Fay began using #9 hooks. When this unusual size was discontinued by Mustad, Fay went back to his traditional #8s.

There is some debate over which Ted actually devised the now-accepted short-line, weighted-fly tactic known as "short-line nymphing." Fay popularized his version of the pocket-water technique, which usually involved two flies; one tied at the end of the tippet, the other some distance above as a dropper. Perhaps it's fancy on my part, but I've always considered the possibility that Ted Towendolly adapted the technique from ancient Indian methods, and then taught Ted Fay. The Wintus use to tie bone hooks to fishing lines fashioned from the sinewy bark of certain streamside plants along the Sacramento. Baited with salmon eggs, the hooks were gently dropped behind spawning redds in the hope of catching a greedy trout. Nothing has been documented, but it's easy to imagine how one could evolve from the other.

The Fay technique was straightforward: With no more than about two feet of fly line beyond the end of the rod, the nymphs were driven down into the current slightly upstream of a pocket suspected of harboring trout. While keeping the line and leader taught by pointing the rod upwards and moving it downstream at the same speed as the current, the object is to watch the leader for any unnatural movement, setting the hook if

the leader stops, twitches or moves side-to-side. This technique is still used virtually every day of the season to catch wary upper Sac trout.

A simple fly in the Bomber tradition, Fay's Caddis Larvae has a black hackle tail, a burlap body with yellow yarn ribbing, and stiff black hackle wrapped dry-fly-fashion at the collar.

Although the Maggie is not a dry fly, it is the only pattern in the series lacking lead wire. Fay used the Maggie to mimic an October Caddis emerger, fishing it on a dropper just below the surface during autumn. The pattern has a flared elk hair wing tale, burlap body with orange yarn ribbing, grizzly hackle and an elk hair wing tied vertically at the collar. The head of the fly is finished with fluorescent orange thread.

The Cro Fly was actually created by Ted Fay's friend Frank Crosetti. An ardent angler, Crosetti played shortstop for the New York Yankees from 1932-48. Then coached third base for the team until his retirement in 1968. "The original pattern had peacock wings, says Crosetti. "I gave it to Ted to copy, but he changed it." (Fay's version had no wings.) "I kept asking him, why not call it the Crosetti Fly? It would sound better. Ted and I fished together quite a bit. Now if I don't fish with two flies, I feel naked."

The Cro Fly has a ginger hackle tail, yellow chenille body, ginger hackle palmered through the body and a strand of black chenille brought up over the top of the fly and secured at the collar.

The Fay era came to an end with Ted's death in 1983. There is a memorial to Ted Fay, the "Sage of the Sacrament," alongside the river in Dunsmuir City Park.

Smokin' Joe

If you think fly fishing these days lacks its share of characters, Joe Kimsey will disabuse you of your misconception. Current owner of the Ted Fay Fly Shop, Kimsey has carried on the tradition entrusted to him by adding his own style and contributions to the lineage of the upper Sac flies. While talking to Joe in his shop this summer, I witnessed what I'm sure must have been a familiar scene. A customer walked through the doorway and enquired enthusiastically, "Where are the fish?" "In the water!" Joe replied in a blink. "What can I get them on?" "Mostly dynamite and hand grenades," came the answer. As the two got down to serious conversation, I wondered whether the walls would have collapsed if Joe's responses had been any different.

After retiring from a military career, Kimsey started guiding for Ted Fay and working in his shop in 1973. Following Fay's death, Kimsey moved the shop to its present location in the Garden Motel on Dunsmuir Avenue. Joe's contributions to the fly series are (so far) the Larry, Mary, Leah, and Emu patterns.

The Larry and Mary flies are named for Larry and Mary Green, close friends of Joe's. Larry, a well-known fishing writer, and an outspoken advocate for the Sacramento

River fishery after the disastrous Cantara Loop chemical spill, passed away in October 1994. “Larry came up with the pattern,” says Kimsey, “and it’s a darned good fly too.”

“Larry and Mary both fished,” Joe recalls with a smile, “but it was Shasta [their dog] who did most of the fishing. Mary Green still makes her home in Dunsmuir. When asked how these friends got the lofty distinction of having their own upper Sac fly patterns, Kimsey responds in typical fashion. “Well, I had to call ‘me something.” The Larry sports a short, black marabou tail, a copper wire butt, peacock body and black hackle collar. The Mary has a yellow acrylic yarn body, brown hackle and tail, and a black thread rib.

Of the Leah pattern, Joe says, “It’s a hum-dinger, made out of a burlap sack.” The pattern also calls for a brown hackle tail and collar. “Leah’s an old girlfriend of min,” he adds, “but we’re no longer on speaking terms.”

The Emu is Joe’s latest contribution, and is tied with a curly emu feather tail, black yarn body, copper rib, and a stiff emu feather collar set off by a small gold bead. “You might say it’s a Brown Trout Special,” says Kimsey. Two friends of mine recently caught a couple of twenty-four-inch browns on it over on the McCloud. The emu feather looks like porcupine quills to me.”

Over the years, other patterns have been included in the upper Sac series, but were dropped due to lack of effectiveness. Under the watchful eye of Joe Kimsey, subtle changes are still being made in an effort to maximize each fly’s productivity. But the patterns also remain true to a rich and intriguingly idiosyncratic tradition. Too true, perhaps. “Get after Kimsey,” Frank Crosetti tells me, “to name it the Crosetti Fly.”
