

Ted Towendolly and the Origin of Short-Line Nymphing on the Upper Sac:

How the Wintu Indians, the 49ers, Ted Fay, and Joe Kimsey Impacted Modern-day Nymphing with a Fly.

BY ERIC PALMER
October, 2017

*A shorter version of this article first appeared in the April 2015 "California Fly Fisher".
The following is an expanded version of that article.*

It's known by many names: Tight-line nymphing, short-line nymphing, high-stick nymphing, pocket water nymphing, and even Czech Nymphing. But in the end, they are all the same deadly nymphing technique that was first fished on the banks of Northern California's Upper Sacramento River as far back as the 1920s at the hands of Wintu Indian Ted Towendolly. So for simplicity's sake, let's just agree to call it "short-line nymphing" since we're trying to catch a trout that's virtually at our feet with no more than a fly rod's length of leader extended beyond the rod tip — a "short-line".

But, how the heck can we catch trout while standing right on top of them without spooking them? It's easy. Short-line nymphing is a pocket water technique; that highly agitated water just below large rocks and boulders with the boiling, frothy dense cover fish crave. It provides safety and security from predators in a zone with abundant oxygen, cold temps and an infinite conveyor belt of food drifting right by their nose. What's not to love about that if you're a trout? If they only knew what clever schemes fly fishermen have contrived to fool them. It's almost enough to make you feel guilty.



The short-line nymphing lob — not pretty, but very effective.

The short-line cast is quite simple since it's hardly a cast at all, and you will never see it at casting tournaments. In fact, we often just call it a "lob". You typically start with a two fly rig, but some use three flies, and a single fly will work too; either weighted flies or lighter nymphs with sufficient split shot to get down on the bottom fast. With no more than a rod's length of leader outside the rod tip, there's a downstream roll cast to load the rod followed by raising the rod to about 10 O'clock then vigorously slapping (or lobbing) the flies down hard on your target just a few feet above the pocket water or seam that you suspect to be inhabited by unsuspecting trout. You want to get the flies down fast. It's not an elegant cast. You then rake the flies along the bottom while finessing the leader just-so in order to match the current speed at the *bottom* of the water column; not the top as occurs with an indicator, and therein lies the secret to the success of this method; a natural drift at the current speed where the fish live!

But, it's not my purpose here to teach you how to fish this technique, as that's been done before by many. If you're new to the method or need a refresher, see the recommendations at the end of this article.

What I plan to do here is unravel the mystery of Ted Towendolly's role in the development of this nymphing method on Northern California waters, principally the Upper Sacramento (Upper Sac to locals), the McCloud, and Pit Rivers and their feeder streams.

I didn't know it at the time, but my research effort began Sunday October 13, 2013 as I was browsing the fly bins in the Ted Fay Fly Shop in Dunsmuir California while chatting with shop owner Bob Grace, and speculating about the origin of short-line nymphing. I was trying to work out where the technique came from, and who taught what to whom before it reached Bill Carnazzo, the Upper Sac guide, master fly tier, and Granite Bay Flycasters club co-founder. For me, and for most of my fly club cohorts, and neighboring fly clubs too, Bill was our short-line nymphing guru who championed the technique for years through his many club sponsored clinics before his untimely passing earlier that same year.

I thought I'd just about had the technique's lineage between Bill and the legendary Ted Fay worked out for a simple article idea I was noodling on. The late Ted Fay (1904-1983) being the renowned founder of the fly shop I was standing in, and the master fly angler generally credited with inventing what old timers in the 1960s-70s referred to as the "Ted Fay Method", aka short-line nymphing to us today.

Then Bob threw me a curve ball with: "*Well, don't forget Ted Towendolly...he figured in there somewhere*". What?!?! This was a totally new name to me, and threw me off-kilter as I pondered "who the heck was this new Ted with the odd last name, and what did he bring to the party— if anything?"

On interrogating Bob further, he had little to offer. This new Ted seemed an enigma within a conundrum; all that appeared to be known was that Dunsmuir native Ted Towendolly was pure Wintu Indian, invented the heavily weighted Black Bomber fly in the 1920s, soon followed by a few other weighted flies, all of which he shared with Ted Fay years later; end of story. This was rapidly getting too complicated. As I continued browsing, and my lazy streak gave me a nudge, I thought: "*Aw to hell with it — too many moving parts — too ambiguous — who cares where this nymphing technique came from anyway?*"

Then on the long drive home south down I-5, I had an epiphany. I was pondering the odd spelling of Dunsmuir's Tauhindauli Park – which I struggled to spell and pronounce for years – and which obviously honored a Wintu family name, and the name Towendolly; they're pronounced exactly the same. It suddenly hit me that in fact it's the same name! There's something so special about this family that the city of Dunsmuir created and named a city park after them. There had to be a good story there somewhere, and is there ever!



Bill Carnazzo leading his North Fork Yuba River short-line clinic.

Once back home with Google at my fingertips, there were many online references attributing the nymphing technique to Ted Fay, but also a tiny smattering of vague references implicating Ted Towendolly; nobody was quite sure, and there was no “smoking gun” or eye witness account to nail it down one way or the other; the plot thickened.

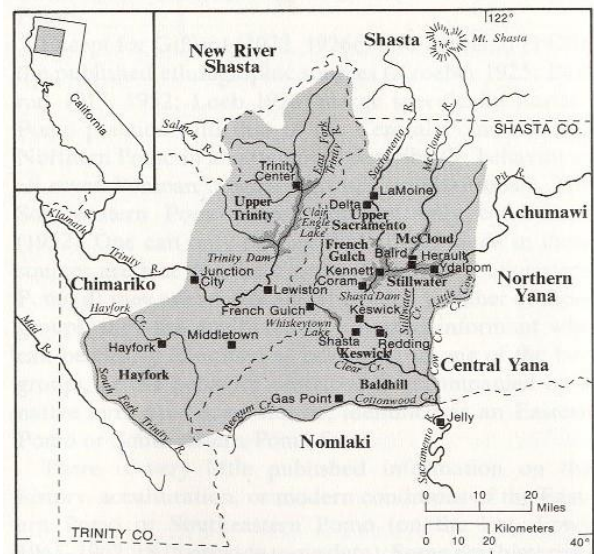
What I found troubling was this niggling little thing that everyone seemed to agree on: Ted Towendolly’s Black Bomber and his other weighted flies did in deed date from the 1920s and 30s, well before Ted Fay arrived on the scene in the mid-1940s. How the heck would you fish these heavily weighted flies that sink like a rock (and decades before indicators were invented) other than with a technique like short-line nymphing? Always enjoying a challenge, I was soon off and running on a quest to solve the mystery of Ted Towendolly. And, in the interest of honoring his rich Wintu heritage, I decided to begin at the very beginning.

The Wintu Nation

Roughly twelve hundred years ago, a large group of diverse indigenous peoples began migrating from southwestern Oregon to northern and central California. They would, over many years, coalesce into a more cohesive group now known as Wintu or Wintoon, Central Wintu, and Nomlaki. They were the most populous of the California tribes and occupied extensive territories within Shasta, Trinity, and Tehama counties. They claimed the headwaters of the south fork of the Trinity River, portions of the Sacramento and McCloud Rivers, and Squaw and Cottonwood Creeks (which intersects I-5 at the town of Cottonwood 17 miles below Redding). Their most heavily populated areas were on the west side of the Sacramento River in what is now the greater Redding area extending west into Trinity County, and north up to and along both sides of the McCloud River. The nucleus of the Wintu nation was in the middle and North Forks of Cottonwood Creek¹. It’s believed that the Wintu were the last group of Indians to migrate to the state from the more northern territories of Oregon and Washington.

Why they came is uncertain. Perhaps they were seeking better hunting and fishing prospects or responding to encroachment from neighboring tribes. Or maybe it was just a continuation of the slow but inexorable migration south from Siberia to Alaska via the temporary land bridge over the Bering Sea and south to the warmer and more hospitable Americas.

The Wintu were relative newcomers to Northern California. Archaeological evidence now confirms that earlier peoples had inhabited certain areas of Shasta and Siskiyou Counties for over fifteen thousand years. Over time, these newcomers would become a cohesive tribe with a common language, culture, and customs. They were organized into smaller bands (or tribelets) strategically scattered along waterways for mutual support across their established range including up and down the Upper Sacramento Valley.



Range of Wintu Nation at its peak in late 18th century before significant Euro-American contact. (LaPena, 1978)

¹ Map from *Handbook of North American Indians*, Frank LaPena, 1978. LaPena is Ted Towendolly’s nephew and formerly Director of Native American Studies at Sacramento State University.

The Wintu band of greater interest to us for our story is the Nom'ti'pom ("in-the-west-ground") or Trinity Band of Wintu who were settled on the banks of the upper Trinity River. Their encampment was approximately across from Trinity Center at the confluence with the East Fork, now under Trinity Lake.

Anthropologists describe the Wintu as sedentary hunter-gatherers who lived by gathering a wide range of nutritious edibles from roots, tubers, grasses, acorns, and of course hunting and fishing. The "sedentary" part means they were not nomadic but stayed put for the most part because their highly efficient hunting and fishing methods allowed them to do so. And what did they do during their "downtime"? Interestingly, they gambled, played games, visited neighboring bands trading trinkets, or just generally goofed off. They could afford to because they were masters of their domain.

In Richard H. Dillon's *Siskiyou Trail* he reveals more than one interesting anecdote providing insight into the Wintu and how they interacted with the first outsiders they would encounter, typically in the form of British (French Canadian) or American trapping parties. In 1841 the official U.S. Exploring Expedition under Navy Lt. George Emmons was working its way south along the lower Sacramento, and on reaching the confluence with the Pit River encountered a small group of Wintu. The Indians were described by a member of the party as not only friendly but "full of jest and merriment"². They engaged in target shooting demonstrations with bow and arrow, greatly impressing the visitors by hitting buttons fastened to trees at 30 yards three tries out of five. They could also easily take down birds on the wing.

The above amusing interaction is in stark contrast to the reception American trapper Jedidiah Smith and party received 13 years earlier in the spring of 1828³. They were driving a herd of 300 horses near the route of today's Highway 36 west of Red Bluff in seeking a hoped-for, but never found, shortcut to the coast and then north to Oregon. Following a clever Wintu reconnaissance effort employing children popping up and down from holes and from behind bushes ahead of them as they advanced up the trail,



Ted's uncle "old Johnny". Sketch by Charles Masson from "A Bag of Bones", Marcelle Masson. Reprinted with permission of Naturegraph Publishers, Inc.

Smith and company were suddenly greeted by showers of arrows falling from the sky in waves. Similar harassment would continue on and off all the way west to the limits of the Wintu range at the Trinity South Fork and Hay Fork Creek. They had likely encountered the Hay Fork band of Wintu. This sort of intimidation and worse was typical throughout the entire Pacific North West as sentiment toward outsiders would vary wildly from one Indian band to another and even from one day to the next.

The Wintu were river people, so it was natural that the Nom'ti'pom band made their home on the Trinity River at the confluence with a major tributary during an era when massive runs of salmon, steelhead, and trout in numbers unimaginable to us today were the norm. They made their hooks from the

jaw of a deer and the riffle pike. Fishing line was made from a thread-like fiber stripped from opposite edges of the grass-like leaf of the "poo-te-re" plant, a member of the wild iris family. And when conditions dictated, they used a long deep-water dip net.

They had the ingenuity to develop highly efficient tools to maximize their take when the fish arrived on their annual spawning runs. One of their most innovative tools for catching large salmon and

² Richard H. Dillon, *Siskiyou Trail*, pg. 373

³ *Siskiyou Trail*, pg. 113

steelhead in riffles and shallower holding water, and one unique to the Wintu, was the spear pole shown above. The business end had two sharpened prongs from the serviceberry shrub about eight inches long and splayed out three or four inches. At the two pointed tips, held in place with a snug slip fit, were two very sharp-tipped “thimbles” of deer bone. They were secured loosely to the main shaft by two dangling strips of rawhide. After harpooning the fish, quickly jerking the spear back would cause the thimble tips to slip off the pointed prongs, leaving the fish dangling helplessly, but totally secured.

Using such technological advantages, the Wintu put away large stores of high-protein foodstuffs, mostly salmon flour from pulverizing cooked salmon meat, for the seasons when the hunting and fishing were poor, and they usually had sufficient surplus for trading with neighboring tribes. Their superior technology eventually allowed them to out-compete their neighbors, and over time and usually nonviolently, expand their territory.

The Fur Trappers

The Wintu thrived for well over a thousand years unfettered by outsiders, until catastrophe struck in the form of the 19th century. It began gradually around 1815 when the first fur trapping parties began traveling up and down the state. They would soon discover, and then expand through regular use, the ancient Indian trail that would later be called the Siskiyou Trail. It led all the way up the backbone of California and well into what was then Washington Territory.

First, there was the London based Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) working out of Fort Vancouver in Washington Territory, followed by their American competitors including Jedidiah Smith and others.

Initially benign and unseen by most indigenous populations, the visitors in the early years generally enjoyed good relations with the locals. But over time conflicts arose ranging from minor infractions initiated from either side, but usually resolved peacefully through diplomacy or negotiation, to major atrocities of mayhem or worse. Trapping ended in the 1840s as California’s beaver populations became decimated⁴, but before it did disaster was innocently visited upon the tribes up and down the Sacramento River valley in the form of malaria.

It was unknowingly introduced by HBC trapper John Work and a few members of his party who were carriers of the disease. Virtually the entire extended Sacramento River valley from above Redding to below Sacramento is a natural flood-plain, so in a typical winter, absent the benefit of today’s levees, it was all underwater. Then, as waters receded in spring, mosquito populations would explode beyond anything we know today. Upon biting the few already infected members of the trapping party, the mosquitos for the first time acquired the deadly Malaria parasitic organism which was subsequently passed on without prejudice to future victims; Indian and trapper alike. The Indians initially contracted the disease in 1832, and when the trappers returned a year later, entire villages were completely wiped out.

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⁴ Decimation of the beaver population throughout the northwest was in fact the express intent of HBC, the hope being that once the beaver were gone (and all profits reaped), the Americans would leave and not come back. The English still held out hope of Britain one day laying claim to the Washington and Oregon territories if the Americans would just lose interest and leave. [Hudson's Bay Company](#), founded in 1670, remains today the oldest continuously operating corporation in the world.

Gold Fever

The impact of the trapping party's on the locals was shortly followed by the massive transformations of Northern California (and of course the entire west coast) brought on by the 1849 Gold Rush. Mining operations fouled the streams, drastically inhibiting the spawning process and cutting off a major food source the Indians depended upon. The miners competed with the Indians for the game in the forest, and with their advanced fire power, it was no contest. This led to widespread starvation among many tribes and was a major contributor to hostile actions directed at the newcomers. This naturally caused reciprocal abuse to be heaped upon the natives, but usually with greatly disproportionate and indiscriminate force, creating a vicious cycle of mayhem. And of course, the gold seekers and increasing numbers of settlers too, would soon commandeer the Indian's Siskiyou Trail as their own for the primary land route for all goods moving north to the gold fields.

In July 1848, Major Pearson Reading discovered gold on a gravel bar of the Trinity River at the mouth of a creek that now bears his name, near present day Douglas City on Highway 299. Then, in March 1851, there was a major gold discovery on Klamath tributaries near today's Yreka. Word of each new discovery brought prospectors from all directions by the thousands.

In April 1852, what may have been a pivotal event for all the local Wintu bands occurred at Hay Fork, about 25 miles southwest of Douglas City near highway 3: the "[Bridge Gulch Massacre](#)". A local rancher, Colonel John Anderson, was murdered, and his herd of cattle stolen. The Trinity County sheriff immediately mustered a posse of 70 citizens, and at dawn the next day they attacked the first Indian camp they encountered, killing all 150 residents except for two toddlers who managed to hide or escape in the melee. The posse had wiped out the Hay Fork band of Wintu, and in fact, they had attacked an innocent group of Indians who were simply going about their early morning routine. Word of the slaughter quickly spread far and wide and certainly terrified the Wintu and other area tribes for many miles. This event coupled with the relentless harassment from miners working the waters surrounding the Nom'ti'pom ancestral encampment made their only option crystal clear. They had to leave; life as they had known it on the remote East Fork of the Trinity River for probably many hundreds of years had forever come to a tragic end. But where and how could they find safety?

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Wi'Ca'we'ha Tau'hin'dauli

At the time of the discovery of gold on the Trinity River, the leader of the Trinity Wintu Nom'ti'pom band was Wi'Ca'we'ha Tau'hin'dauli (1815-1889). That's Wi' for chief for headman, Ca'we'ha for "wise man who intensifies" and Tau'hin'dauli or "ties with the left hand". In fact, all the men of the tribe and some women were left-handed. It's thought that perhaps a few years later, the "Wi" was interpreted by his soon to be new Euro-American friends as "William", so Wi'Ca'we'ha later became known as William or "Bill".

The massacre at Hay Fork, followed by the ever increasing harassment from miners on the river was the tipping point that caused Wi'Ca'we'ha Tau'hin'dauli and his clan to flee their ancestral lands on the upper Trinity. Now estimated to be but a small family group of probably not more than 8 to 12, they escaped upriver over the mountains, where they took a northeasterly path to their destination.

The route their headman chose upriver and over today's Mt. Bradley at 5,560 feet just west of Dunsmuir in 1852 or 53 would lead them to a location on the Upper Sacramento River at the northernmost edge of the historical Wintu range. They called the spot Mem'okis'takki, or "strong water place". The local American settlers called it Soda Springs, and later Upper Soda Springs. Today, the city of Dunsmuir calls it Tauhindauli Park.

Given the bloodshed and mayhem being visited upon the Indians up and down the state at the time, and the entire west coast for that matter, they could not have found a more ideal destination, and with 20-20 hindsight, it was almost too good to be true. There's no way to know if they had just made a well-educated guess or if they somehow had fore-knowledge of a favorable reception. They had the name for the spot, "Mem'okis'takki", and were familiar with the general area since it was within the historic Nom'ti'pom domain. However they found the place, it would soon be clear that their headman We'Ca'wi'ha had led them well to long term safety and security.

In 1852 twin brothers Harry and Samuel Lockhart had established a homestead on the site at Upper Soda Springs, so had a legal claim to the land. They had constructed a simple crude inn consisting of a log cabin and a corral, thought to be the very first civilized construction within the city limits of today's Dunsmuir. The Lockhart business catered to mule trains that made the long trek from Red Bluff up the canyon along the Upper Sac to the mining towns of Shasta and Yreka. In that period, Red Bluff was the terminus of the steamship freight service up the Sacramento River from Sacramento (about 150 river miles), so from that point all goods heading north to the gold fields moved by pack mule then later wagon, as the road was improved. In fact, the Siskiyou Trail passed right by the Lockhart property and was probably why they selected that prime real estate to begin with. It originated as an Indian trail many centuries if not thousands of years before being discovered by the trappers, and then the settlers and miners once the gold rush was under way. This trail provided the shortest practical travel path between early settlements in California stretching from Los Angeles through San Jose and the San Francisco Bay Area up California's Central Valley and all the way up to Fort Vancouver in Washington Territory, the base of operations for the Hudson's Bay Co. Today this same Indian route is Interstate-5.

The Lockharts allowed the Tauhindauli clan to settle on their land, providing protection from predation, and most probably employment. Perhaps it was totally altruistic, but more likely they just wanted cheap labor. History would later show that the brothers were not an especially savory pair with several colorful stories reported surrounding their later activities post-Soda Springs.⁵

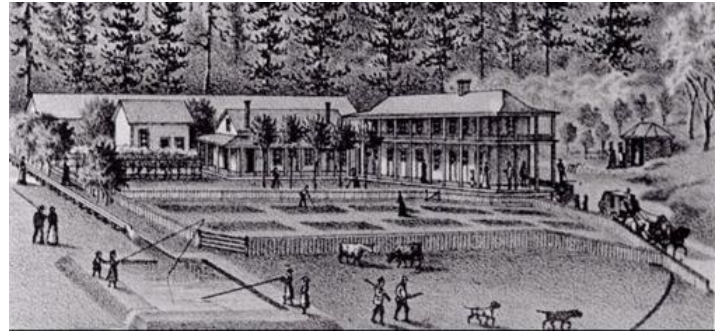
In 1855, Ross and Mary McCloud, who ran a simple inn downriver at the Portuguese Flat mining camp (near today's Pollard Flat) sought to better themselves with an investment they could grow long term, so they purchased the 10 acre Upper Soda Springs site from the Lockhart brothers.

The McClouds continued to provide comfort and shelter to the Tauhindauli clan, including employment as they began major improvements to expand their business which would become very successful well into the 20th century.

⁵ See Joaquin Miller's *Life Amongst the Modoc*. While partly a fictionalized novel, Miller tells of the Lockhart Brother's subsequent exploits after leaving Soda Springs, including Harry's demise during an Indian raid by the Pit River tribe, and the subsequent conversion of his brother Samuel into a fanatic Indian killer. And notably, it was the McCloud band Wintu (Winnemem band), not the Modoc, who Miller lived "amongst" in a state of self-imposed seclusion for a year or so in his late teens. The "Modoc" name had more cachet for marketing purposes due to the recent Modoc Wars that were given massive press coverage prior to publication in 1873, while few at that time had heard of the Wintu.

One of my sources⁶, an expert on the history of Upper Soda Springs, suggests that perhaps the current site of the Dunsmuir City Park or maybe the ball field was the location of the Tauhindauli initial family encampment. At any rate, the Tauhindauli family would find both security and employment there for the next 70 years, with former Headman “Old Bill” worked as a guide and handyman for the resort in the later years.

As the McCloud’s business grew in the 1860s and beyond, it became known as the Upper Soda Springs Resort to differentiate it from the many other resorts, also with soda springs, that were popping up along the river. With the arrival of the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1886, things really took off with the resort catering to hikers, hunters, anglers, and well-to-do Victorian-era travelers from the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond who



Upper Soda Springs Resort, ca. 1870s, and today’s Tauhindauli Park.

sought to “take the waters” of the soda springs and to enjoy a wilderness experience in a beautiful and unspoiled locale. In the upper right of the above illustration is the covered spring house enclosure housing the “soda water” spring. If you know where to look as you drive into Tauhindauli Park today, you will find the spring up a small rise to the left of the road just beyond a short turnout on the left. The location of the stage coach above would be today’s *River Avenue*, which becomes *Stage Coach Road* before intersecting with *Dunsmuir Avenue*, as the main access to the park. Unfortunately, nothing remains of the original resort, with the final remnants of its ruins having been removed in the 1940s.

Ted Towendolly



Ted Towendolly in his 60s.

In 1881, Wi’Ca’we’ha “Bill” Tauhindauli and his Achumawi wife Jennie, would have a son Garfield (The Achumawi are the Pit River tribe). At some point during the 1880s, a name change occurred from Tauhindauli to Towendolly. A careless census taker had difficulty with the native spelling, so anglicized it to a phonetic equivalent, and Towendolly became the family name. Then, in 1901, Garfield and his wife, Rose, now located on Butterfly Avenue in Dunsmuir, would have a son. His name was Theodore Laverne “Ted” Towendolly.

Little is known of Ted Towendolly’s early years, but there’s a lot we can safely surmise. According to Ted’s great-granddaughter, he was proficient in all fishing methods from an early age, including the ancient Wintu spear pole, and, of course fly fishing. And, she stated emphatically “*Yes, he did invent what we call short-line nymphing*”. She also had more first-hand information for me about Ted than I would have expected, given the wide generation gap. I was surprised to learn that she was actually raised as a young child in the Towendolly household in Dunsmuir on Butterfly Avenue. Further, when she was not living with Ted and his wife Julia, she was in the Scarlett Way section of town living with her great-great Aunt Grace, Ted’s sister.

⁶ Angel Gomez is a great-great-grandson of Ross and Mary McCloud, and keeper of the McCloud archives. See his Introduction in *Images of America – Dunsmuir*, Arcadia Publishing, 2010.

And, to add yet another interesting twist, Grace just happened to be married to Arnold Arana, the 1945 inventor of the ubiquitous and still highly effective steelhead Burlap fly, and who also figures prominently in the story to follow.

It's reasonable to consider that Ted likely began experimenting with fly fishing at least in his teens since it's known that he created his Black Bomber in the 1920s, when Ted himself was only in his 20s. One typically does not start tying flies without some level of expertise at fly fishing. Further, Ted had an Uncle John "Johnny" Towendolly, depicted above with the pole spear⁷, and who lived in Dunsmuir his entire life and was an avid lifelong fisherman. It's not a big stretch to assume that his uncle Johnny had a big influence on a young Ted with fishing.



Ted Towendolly's Black Bomber, ca. 1920

Ted Towendolly's first creation was the **Black Bomber**, with its 10 turns of .025-inch lead wire to get it down quickly on the stream bed. Ted would go on to develop his **Black** and **Brown Spent Wing** flies, **Burlap**, and **Peacock**. His Burlap may have inspired, or been inspired by, his brother-in-law Arnold Arana's steelhead Burlap fly, conceived for Klamath River steelhead, one of Arana's passions.

The Brown Bomber, tied the same as its black counterpart and often attributed to Towendolly, was actually created by Arana, I'm told by longtime upper Sac angler Joe Patterson. The prizefighter Joe Lewis was undefeated during the 1940s, and the story goes that in searching for a name for his fly, Arana was inspired by Joe Lewis's nickname given him by the sportswriters: the Brown Bomber.

Ted Towendolly would become the first known fly-fishing guide on the upper Sac, guiding there as early as the 1920s. His daughter, Betty Jane, is reported to have been an accomplished fly tier in her own right helping Ted produce his Bomber and other flies, which he sold from buckets and coffee cans for 10 cents each off the back of his pickup truck around town and beyond.

There's a story that Bill Kiene, founder of the iconic Sacramento fly shop of the same name, tells of the time in the late 1960s when he was working at the Tower of Sports sporting-goods store in Sacramento. Bill was behind the counter, and an older fellow walked in dressed in faded denim bib overalls. He was looking for grizzly hackle capes and introduced himself as Ted Towendolly. As Bill tells it:

"We chatted for a bit and he told me about his fishing style, and his special heavy Bomber flies. After some time he went out to his truck and brought in a 3-pound coffee can filled ³/₄ full with Black Bombers. The can weighed so much I could barely hold it. He wanted me to buy some but I told him I didn't know if I could sell them down here in Sacramento".

The Wintu were early adopters of fly fishing.

Diaries of Dr. Livingston Stone, the noted nineteenth-century fish culturist who established the Baird U.S. Fish Hatchery on the McCloud River, the first salmon-breeding station in the United States, report members of his staff seeing Wintu fishing the upper Sacramento for trout with fly gear in 1873–1874. There's also photographic record of Wintu fly fishing the McCloud or upper Sacramento in the 1880s, indicating that the Wintu were quick to embrace this "modern" method of fishing. Their fly rods were made from bamboo or yew, the material of choice for the period.

⁷ For more on the pole spear, and the Towendolly family in general, see *A Bag of Bones* by Marcelle Masson, 1966, a granddaughter by marriage of Ross and Mary McCloud, founders of the Upper Soda Springs Resort. The book is co-authored by Grant Towendolly, Ted's uncle.

Ted worked for the railroad and Department of Public Works in Dunsmuir, and being good with his hands, he also found work in small-motor repair and as a carpenter and handyman around town. Later in life, Ted would move to Sacramento to work for the Sacramento Department of Public Works. In 1975, Ted Towendolly succumbed to pneumonia in Sacramento at the age of 74.

Ted Towendolly and Short-line Nymphing

Ted's great-granddaughter had told me that Ted did indeed develop what we call short-line nymphing, and this was further confirmed by former Cortland rep. Joe Patterson. Early in my research effort Bill Kiene introduced me to his long-time friend who he's known since his early years in the sporting goods business. I spent time on the phone and face-to-face over lunch with Joe where he described watching Ted's brother-in-law, Arnold Arana, fish on the upper Sac, and it's a fascinating story indeed.

One day in 1948 the two, who had never met, just happened to cross paths above Mossbrae Falls in Dunsmuir. They arrived simultaneously at a split in the river just below an island. Joe had been fishing the river since the age of 12 with bait and hardware on family vacations but was now a 22-year-old rank newcomer to fly fishing. Arnold Arana, on the other hand, was a 38-year-old local who had fly-fished the river regularly since his early teens and was an expert at it.

Arnold graciously allowed Joe first choice at his target water; they then each proceeded to fish their chosen method on opposite sides of the island: dries for Joe, and for Arnold, a method that Joe found quite strange. As Joe would occasionally glance over at his new acquaintance, he saw that he was being out-fished 10 to 1. Joe finally went over to where Arnold was flogging the white water to inquire about what the heck he was doing. And, thus began a friendship that would see the two fishing together five or six times over the coming years, with Joe becoming thoroughly schooled in a nymphing technique that was totally new to him. Sadly, it would be a short friendship, with Arnold Arana's life ending tragically at the age of 49, just 11 years later.

What Arnold Arana demonstrated and taught a young Joe Patterson on that day in 1948 was what we today call short-line nymphing. Not close; not similar; but the exact same technique, absent minor style variations some practice today. Sitting across the lunch table from an 88-year-old Joe Patterson in late September 2014, and with fellow Granite Bay Flycasters member Frank Stolten joining us, I asked Joe to describe again the casting stroke he'd explained to me some days before over the phone. What he described depicted short-line nymphing to the letter. Just to be crystal clear, I stood up and made the casting motion in the air above the table with my arm, and Joe's response was: "That's it — it was not pretty. He smacked the water hard."

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I then asked Joe the pivotal question: “Did you ask Arnold where he learned this technique?” Joe did ask, and Arnold replied: “From my sister’s husband”, who was none other than Ted Towendolly, since Ted was married to Arnold’s sister Julia. And as mentioned earlier, Arnold, in turn, was married to Ted’s sister Grace.

Joe Patterson, a lifelong fly fisher, beginning his career at the California Dept. of Fish and Game would later spend 25 years selling fly lines for Cortland before retiring. Joe was also a founding member of the Sacramento club, California Fly Fishers Unlimited (CFFU), and was a featured narrator in the iconic 2009 film *Rivers of a Lost Coast*⁸.

The Rest of the Story

It was in the early 1940s that Oakland grocery distributor Ted Fay would discover the Upper Sacramento River. He would drive his grocery truck north up the then narrow and winding Highway 99 to Dunsmuir on weekends and vacations (I-5 would not exist until the 1960s) where he encountered Ted Towendolly either in town or on the river. It was at some point during this period, as Ted Towendolly’s daughter, Betty Jane, told her granddaughter years later, that her father taught Fay how to tie his flies and how to fish them.

The meeting of the two Teds was serendipity of the highest order, and the beginning of a lifelong friendship that would prove to be of great mutual benefit. Towendolly had the deadly effective flies that he and brother-in-law Arnold had been fishing on the upper Sac since the 1920s and 1930s, and Fay had developed a passion for the river, if not an obsession. He was determined to master the Upper Sac, and needed his new friend’s flies to be successful, along with some coaching to master the short-line nymphing technique.

In 1948, Ted Fay retired from the grocery business and moved to Dunsmuir permanently. He purchased the Lookout Point Motel and soon developed a reputation among his guests as the go-to expert on the river. On checking in at the front desk, guests would make the typical inquiries we all make today on visiting a destination fly shop: “How’s the fishing? ... where are the fish? ...and, what flies do I need?” Ted, being eager to promote the river, the town of Dunsmuir, and of course, his motel, would reply: “Hang on a minute. I’ll grab my rod and show you.” If you’re a fly fisher and you get this kind of service at a motel check-in, there’s little doubt which motel you’ll return to on your next visit. Ted Fay would prove to be a gifted promoter.



Plaque honoring Ted Fay in Dunsmuir’s city park, just feet from his beloved river.

⁸ The 2009 film *Rivers of a Lost Coast* tells of the tragic decline, beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, of California’s once great salmon and steelhead coastal fisheries, along with the colorful and talented fly anglers of the period. It can be easily found on YouTube. See the trailer [here](#).

From this evolved Ted Fay's free guide service for his motel customers, during which he'd heavily promote what would later become known as the "Ted Fay flies," along with the short-line nymphing technique he had picked up from Ted Towendolly in the early 1940s during his weekends on the river.

Ted began acquiring ever greater amounts of fly-fishing supplies to satisfy requests of his motel customers, so he dedicated one of his motel rooms to this purpose, and the Ted Fay Fly Shop was born. The Lookout Motel was ultimately torn down to make room for I-5, forcing Ted to move the shop to his garage for a while, then later to another motel.

Today, located on Dunsmuir Avenue and under the ownership of Bob Grace, the shop provides customers the same straightforward, no-BS advice provided in the shop since the early 1950s. It's now said to be the second-oldest continuously operating fly shop in California and one of the oldest in the country. And should you ever want to turn the clock back 90 years or so and fish the upper Sac "old school", the Ted Fay Fly Shop still stocks many of the old classic heavily weighted flies, now tied by Bob Grace himself in accordance with the original recipes. On that same October 2013 visit to the river, I netted a 12-inch rainbow in the city park on Towendolly's Brown Spent Wing on my second cast. Those old flies still work!

In the beginning, Ted Fay purchased his flies directly from Towendolly to satisfy demand at his shop, but at some point he began tying his own flies following Towendolly's recipes. Ted Fay would go on to develop derivations and variations of Towendolly's weighted flies, along with his own fresh designs, and would promote them to shop customers along with the short-line technique, which would become known in some quarters as the "Ted Fay method".

In 1973, McCloud-born Joe Kimsey retired from a 20-year career with the U.S. Air Force and returned to Dunsmuir, where he grew up as a teenager. He found work in Ted's shop and having fished the local streams since early childhood; he quickly picked up the short-line nymphing method and began helping Ted out with guiding motel customers and others. Joe would go on to develop a series of his own weighted flies in the Towendolly tradition. While chatting over his tying bench in the shop, Joe was often heard to say, "*Weighted flies were originally created in the 1920s by an Indian fellow named Ted Towendolly*". You can see Joe in action at his tying bench in [this YouTube video](#).



Ted Towendolly's Brown Spent Wing

We can perhaps better discern what the Towendolly/Fay nymphing style looked like from this 1978 Dunsmuir [promotional video](#) that shows Joe Kimsey fishing the upper Sac. He would do a wide-open loop back cast, and then a lob to the target with the rod held up at a 45-degree angle following impact, then maintain the line in a vertical position once the flies came under the rod tip. He'd then finesse the flies along with the current to achieve a natural drift. It seems likely that this is the way Towendolly and Fay fished the technique since Joe learned it from them.

We can gain additional insight into Ted Fay's fishing style, and by extension Towendolly's, by following a description from a regular Ted Fay fishing partner, the late San Jose fly-fishing luminary Marty Seldon from his March 27, 2008, posting on the Kiene Fly Shop website message board:

"Ted was quite short but moved very quickly, fishing aggressively. I remember the last time I fished with him on the McCloud. . . . Ted continually caught and released trout at a faster pace than I could keep up with him just wading. . . . As I recall Ted used a heavy, about 4 ft. long, leader with a heavily weighted fly like a Black Bomber at the point with a 3X tippet and another nymph (or sometimes a dry) on a dropper just over a foot up

from the tip fly. The key to Ted's method was very aggressive wading and very fast fishing. I needed cleats just to follow him. He would cast a short line upstream with only about two feet of fly line out of the guides and then holding the rod high and keeping it all tight, he guided it around the rocks and through the pockets at the same speed as the water. It was one or perhaps two casts, then move on, and he was very successful at his craft."

Ted Fay, while reported to be slow to warm to people, was an exuberant promoter of something he was passionate about, and an eager coach to newbies intent on learning the technique. Without Fay's arrival on the scene at that time in the early 1940s and his exposure to Ted Towendolly, things likely would have turned out differently for anglers on Northern California streams. Without Fay's energetic promotional efforts, combined with help later from side-kick Joe Kimsey in spreading the gospel to probably many hundreds of guiding clients over the years, we may have had to wait for the late 1980s for Czech Nymphing to slowly work its way across the Atlantic, and fly fishing history in northern California would have taken a completely different turn.

In May 1983, Ted Fay passed on at the age of 79, and Joe Kimsey took over the shop. In 1997, due to declining health, Joe would step aside and sell the Ted Fay Fly Shop to San Franciscan Bob Grace. Joe would stay on for another 12 years, tying flies, chatting it up with customers with his colorful style of humor, and dispensing sage advice on where and how to fish the river. My tattered StreamTime river access map, barely held together with multiple layers of tape, has Joe's blue pen markings on it showing me where to fish on my first visit to the shop in October of 2005.

On March 23, 2011, Joe Kimsey passed on at the age of 81, bringing to a close the golden era of highly talented and colorful characters on the Upper Sacramento, but leaving the door open for a new generation to carry the torch forward.

The Next Generation

In 1975, Ron Rabun would learn the nymphing technique from his Davis neighbor and good friend Don Childress, who had been well trained in the method a few years earlier during multiple guiding trips with Ted Fay. Ron, apparently with a strong analytical streak, felt that the method could be refined a bit, so he introduced a few style changes that are now practiced by most of us today.

In 1978, Ron developed his "Bright-Butt In-line Indicator", a 12-15 inch length of fluorescent red/green Amnesia indicator (sighter) between the fly line and leader as a visual aid in strike detection. He would then add an initial downstream roll cast to load the rod and avoid a risky overhead cast with multiple flies and probably split shot.

Ron found through trial and error that raising the rod handle to the horizontal immediately following the lob, then adjusting the angle of attack of the leader into the water to 45 degrees during the drift would increase the grab rate. At the end of the drift, Ron added a trial hook set with a horizontal twitch toward the bank in the hope that a fish just might have its mouth around the fly.



Ron Rabun's Amnesia indicator, 1978

By 1980, two years after conceiving his Amnesia indicator, Ron would begin teaching his modified version of the Towendolly/Fay method through docent slide-show programs and on-the-river clinics to area fly clubs. In 1994 Ron became a professional guide, and two years later joined forces with new friend Bill Carnazzo, exposing him to the nymphing method, including his enhancements, all of which the veteran fly fisher embraced with enthusiasm and quickly mastered. This began a long term guiding partnership that would continue until 2010 when Ron was temporarily sidelined by illness. Bills guiding and short-line clinics continued as he vigorously championed (and wrote about⁹) the nymphing method until his passing in early 2013. At that time Ron jumped back in resuming a regular program of clinics for GBF and other NorCal clubs, and which continues today.

In his article “As the Cro Flies”¹⁰ in the December 1996 *California Fly Fisher*, prolific fly fishing author Chip O’Brien wrote:

“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,¹¹ 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.”

It’s been over 20 years now since Chip made his observation, but through the help of the many contributors¹² to my efforts on these pages we now finally have the full story of the origin of short-line nymphing at the hands of Wintu Native American Ted Towendolly on the banks of the Upper Sacramento, and what a rich and multi-faceted story it is.

And, remember, most of the authentic weighted Ted Towendolly flies that started it all are still available at Dunsmuir’s Ted Fay Fly Shop, along with friendly help from behind the counter on how and where to fish them.

WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT SHORT-LINE NYMPHING?

- See articles on short-line nymphing on the GBF site [here](#). Look for articles flagged with a red “*”.
- Orvis has a good video [here](#).
- Click [here](#) for how Truckee guide Doug Ouellette rigs for short-line nymphing.
- See more short-line leader rigs on the GBF site [here](#).
- George Daniel’s [Dynamic Nymphing](#) is great for the bigger picture including Czech Nymphing and many similar nymphing techniques, American and European.

⁹ See Bill’s *Cal Fly Fisher* article “Short-line Nymphing: Another Perspective” on the GBF articles page [here](#).

¹⁰ In Chip O’Brien’s well researched 1996 *California Fly Fisher* article “As the Cro Flies”, he provides the full back-story on all the Towendolly/Fay/Kimsey Upper Sac flies. This article, with the author’s permission, may be found on the GBF website articles page.

¹¹ Grant Towendolly (1873-1963) was Ted Towendolly’s Uncle. The book “A Bag of Bones” by Marcelle Masson, 1966, provides more information on Grant Towendolly and the Towendolly family in general.

¹² There were no fewer than 15 individuals contributing in ways small and large to my research effort. Most know who they are and my thanks to each and every one for making this article possible.