

William E. "Bill" Schaadt (1922–1995) **Pioneer Fly Fisher for Steelhead, Chinook Salmon, and Striped Bass**

By Jack W. Berryman

William E. "Bill" Schaadt was born in San Francisco in 1922 to a German father and Portuguese mother. There he attended Catholic school. His name, Schaadt, was pronounced "Shad," just like the fish. During his high school years he became an accomplished high diver; after graduation he attended San Francisco Junior College. He was described as "a tall, swarthy, athletic man with large, powerful hands, a large nose, piercing black eyes, and tight curly hair." Besides diving, Schaadt was also a talented artist, excelling at pen-and-ink drawing, painting, and wood carving.

After his father's death in the early 1940s, Schaadt was drawn from the city to the "Redwood Empire" near the Russian River to the north and bought a small lot in Monte Rio. While working at a garage in nearby Guerneville, he built a house for himself and his mother. Bill also began pursuing an art-related career and started painting signs for a living. Before long, his unique flowing style and signature, Shad Signs, appeared on storefronts and businesses in many small towns north and west of Santa Rosa. At this time, too, in 1944 and 1945, Schaadt began to fish for summer steelhead on the Klamath and purchased his flies at Jim Pray's shop in Eureka.

With seasonal work and an immense interest in steelhead fly fishing, Schaadt had the right combination for success. He never married or had children, and once his mother passed away he worked when he had to and fished the remainder of the time. Influenced by Pray and the river's national reputation for big fish, Schaadt fished the Eel River in the mid-1940s. However, he soon realized that closer rivers, such as the Gualala and Garcia—and, more importantly, his local Russian River—were also top winter steelhead rivers. This was also the time that several members of the Golden Gate Angling and Casting Club (GGACC), who were some of the finest fly casters and fishermen in the world, began driving up the coast to fish the rivers practically in Bill's backyard. He befriended Jim Green, Myron Gregory, and Jon Tarantino, among numerous others, and learned much from them over the years.

In 1946, a pivotal year for both steelhead fly fishing and Bill Schaadt, he began a nearly uninterrupted 50-year streak of fishing Northern California's coastal rivers on an almost daily basis. If there were fish to cast to, Schaadt would be there. It was also in 1946 that Jim Green used shooting-heads and monofilament shooting line at the National Casting Tournament in Indianapolis, Myron Gregory used lead-core line for saltwater fly fishing, and Jon Tarantino was coming on the scene as a champion distance caster. In addition, Pete Schwab was experimenting with weighted steelhead flies and torpedo heads for distance casting and writing about it in *Sports Afield*; Harry Hornbrook was having his best years on the Eel, and Lloyd Silvius, a friend of Pray and Schwab, developed his Fall Favorite Optic fly pattern, modeling it after Pray's highly effective Black Optic and Red Optic. It was in this unique environment that Schaadt grew as a fly fisherman and a steelheader.

By the early 1950s, Schaadt had adapted many of these previous developments to his own fishing. He became such an accomplished caster that he could compete with Tarantino, and the two fished regularly with lead-core lines and shooting-heads for saltwater bottom fish as well as steelhead. Schaadt focused most of his fishing attention on steelhead in the Russian and the Gualala, where his two favorite patterns were the Red and Orange Fall Favorites. On the Gualala, he fished with Joe Paul and Alan Curtis, both associated with the GGACC, and they began to outfish him in the Snag Hole and Donkey Hole using a new pattern, soon to be called a Comet. It was an orange fly with a bucktail tail twice the length of the hook, a lead-wire body, and bead-chain eyes. Others started using Comets on the Russian River, and soon thereafter both local Guerneville fly-shop owners, John Ferenz and Grant King, began tying and marketing the fly commercially. As a takeoff on the Comet-style fly, Forestville resident Virgil Sullivan created his Boss pattern, which Grant King named after his wife, Betty, "The Boss." King began marketing this fly as well. Both flies became Schaadt favorites.

Schaadt's fame and celebrity status, like his cohorts', began to develop in the early 1950s. On a day when Claude Krieder, the well-known author of *Steelhead* (1948), proclaimed the Gualala too muddy for fly fishing, Bill landed 33 steelhead, including one weighing almost 20 pounds. He also discovered that the shad in the Russian River would take a small, sparsely dressed, silver-bodied fly with a red head, and he was so successful that Idahoan



Bill Schaadt in 1972 with an Upper Smith River salmon, probably pushing 50 lbs. (Bob Tusken photo)

Ted Trueblood came and fished with Schaadt and featured him in a *Field & Stream* article. On Christmas Eve 1953, Bill caught a 17-pound steelhead in the Gualala, and the fish placed third in the *Field & Stream* western rainbow trout fly-casting division and tied for 20th place (with a fish caught by Harry Hornbrook) for large steelhead entered in the contest during the 1940s and early 1950s. During the 1955–1956 winter steelhead season, Schaadt fished either the Gualala or Russian almost every day from November through April and caught and released nearly 900 steelhead, including a 19-

Gualala on his Shad Roe & *Stream* contest that again in the *Field & Stream* contest that again in the *Field & Stream* 10-ounce steelhead from the Fall when river flows were Flies during clear and low 1950s. By cutting off the not to interfere with the and determine at what developed the Brown Nasty Nymph, and fishing, generally tying them on 3-pound tippet.

"Bill was using a line that I had never seen before....He had taken lead-core trolling line and cut it into 27-foot lengths, each weighing 300 grains. A small loop, to which the monofilament running line could be attached, was tied into one end. The result was a lead-core shooting head that cast like a bullet and got down to the fish."

~ Bob Nauheim, "The Line on the Big Fish," Outdoor Life, 1972.

pound, 10-ounce fish from the fly, which placed fourth in the *Field & Stream* contest with a 16-pound, 8-Russian.

Favorite Optic and Comet patterns strong, but pioneered with his Feeler water conditions during the mid-hackle on the bottom of the fly so as hook, Bill could actually feel the fish depth they were holding. He Nymph, Gold Nymph, Gray Nymph, Schaadt's Nymph for this style of them as small as size 14s and fishing

Chinook salmon fishing with heavy traditional gear, mostly in salt water, was well developed and advertised by the 1940s. In fact, A. J. McClane's *The American Angler* (1954) included chinook records from the annual *Field & Stream* contests. McClane described the "King" as "a plug-chewing, spoon-slammng behemoth," and the prize-winning fish ranged from 61 to 82 pounds. Only 11 of the top 110 salmon were caught in California. Forty-eight were caught on spoons, 41 on plugs, and 21 on bait. Schaadt had heard about the big kings of Northern California's Smith River, but the fishery there was composed entirely of trollers and bait anglers who anchored in Suicide Row, Death Row, and You're Gone Row, at the river's mouth. Schaadt decided he could catch these salmon on flies and became a pioneer in that fishery in the late 1950s, fishing upriver in his 8-foot pram and using lead-core lines. He would tow his small travel trailer to the Smith River in early October and stay there until high water sent him back home in November.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Russian River was at its steelhead peak and Schaadt was its recognized guru. He was seen on a daily basis fishing Watson's Log, Duncan's, and Freezeout from shore or in his old green pram, and he caught hundreds of winter steelhead every year. After the river was dammed and in places increasingly used as a gravel quarry, the steelhead fishing in Schaadt's beloved Russian went into serious decline. Later, in a late 1980s interview with Trey Combs, Schaadt admitted that the chain of events that destroyed the Russian "really hurt my soul!"

In the late 1950s Schaadt met two fellow anglers who became lifelong friends and who were instrumental in spreading his status as a legend throughout North America. Bob Nauheim, a Santa Rosa fireman and freelance writer, was in awe of the man he finally got to meet at the old Gualala Hotel after a day of steelheading. And Russell Chatham, as a young local teenager, watched for Schaadt's old, black 1937 Dodge along the Russian in hopes of seeing his hero. When Chatham finally was introduced several years later, he remembered that Schaadt's "manner was guarded," but when "he offered his immense hand . . . the legend had come to life." Nauheim and Chatham became Schaadt's regular fishing companions, joining a select contingent of local anglers who fished year-round from the Russian north to the Smith and Chetco rivers.



A Chetco Brute. (Courtesy Jim Collinsworth)

By the early 1960s, thanks largely to Chatham, Schaadt began to actively pursue striped bass with a fly in San Francisco Bay and the local rivers, including the Russian. Chatham caught stripers in the bay as early as 1962 and buoyed interest in the fishery even more with his 36-pound, 6-ounce record fly-caught striped bass, caught beside the Richmond–San Rafael Bridge in 1966. Schaadt began to pursue these fish in earnest during the summer and was so enamored of them that he regularly patrolled the lower Russian by bicycle, motorbike, or car looking for their very visible feeding activity. On one such occasion, after spotting a school of stripers, he fished for them all

night, long past legal hours, only to lose his California fishing license for a year and pay a fine. Because he could not imagine having to stop fishing, he discovered that the king salmon in Oregon's Chetco River would also take a fly and once again he was in "on the ground floor," as he liked to say, of a magnificently popular fishery.



Homer Wilson, Bill Schaadt and Bob Nauheim with a Russian River limit (circa mid-1950s). (Courtesy Jim Collinsworth)

Schaadt perfected his chinook salmon fly fishing in the Smith and the Chetco during the 1960s and early 1970s, and Nauheim and Chatham were directly involved. In 1963, in the Smith's Early Hole, Schaadt caught four fish of more than 35 pounds, including a 47-pounder. On other occasions, in the Smith's Bayley Pool, Cable Hole, Lower Park, and Woodruff Pool, Schaadt landed many kings in the 40- and 50-pound range, including a 52-pounder and the fly-caught record fish of 56 pounds, 8 ounces. His 11-hour, 33-minute fight with a 49-pound fish received national notoriety in Chatham's article "Night of the Salmon," published in *True* in 1973. However, it was Nauheim's article, "The Kings Come to the Smith," published in the October 1970 issue of *Outdoor Life*, that brought the Smith and Schaadt instant national acclaim. Bill was pictured with his record fly-caught king, and Nauheim referred to him as "one of the pioneers of the sport on the Smith." The article also highlighted his popular salmon fly, Schaadt's Golden Goose, along with Grant King's Explorer and local fly tier Jack Geib's Special.

Nauheim further popularized Schaadt and his extraordinary talents in other *Outdoor Life* articles, including "Gift of the Gualala" (December 1970), "A Season of Giants" (September 1972), and "The Line on the Big Fish" (October 1972). In the latter article, Nauheim noted that Schaadt was "not only an expert fly fisherman but also an innovator." He said Bill "was using a line that I had never seen before. . . . He had taken lead-core trolling line and cut it into 27-foot lengths, each weighing 300 grains. A small loop, to which the monofilament running line could be attached, was tied into one end. The head that cast like a bullet and

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~ Russell Chatham, "By the Cellblock and the Bay," Sports Illustrated, 1973.

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Schaadt also applied Babine River steelhead, and Costa Rica, and trout in fishing companions included notables: Joe Brooks, Ted Rice, Jim Teeny, Tom among others. Nauheim again contributions in "Chinook

his successful techniques to Alaskan salmon, tarpon in Florida Montana and Oregon. Schaadt's some of the sport's other Trueblood, Bob Wickwire, Ed McGuane, and Polly Rosborough, featured Schaadt and his Fly-Fishing in Theory and

Practice," published in *Fishing World* in 1973. Chatham, who had moved to Montana and was embarking on a highly successful painting career, discussed Schaadt and striper fishing in a 1973 article in *Sports Illustrated* titled "By the Cellblock and the Bay." The following year, the same magazine published Chatham's "The World's Best," the most important article ever written about Schaadt. Therein Chatham told the world that "Bill Schaadt has more physical ability and coordination than any fisherman I have ever known," and that even though Jon Tarantino was considered "the greatest distance fly caster who ever lived, he was the only man clearly the equal of Schaadt." Chatham continued his praise, noting that Schaadt "has caught more big steelhead and salmon than any man who ever lived" and that his "overall sense of understanding, deep love of the natural world, energetic effort and his style are the qualities that set him apart from his contemporaries."

Schaadt exploits and stories also played significant roles in Chatham's *The Angler's Coast* (1976) and *Silent Seasons* (1978); Rosborough had a chapter on him in *Reminiscences from 50 Years of Flyrodding* (1982); Trey Combs devoted a chapter to him in *Steelhead Fly Fishing* (1991). California fly fisher and guide Dan Blanton, who first met Schaadt on the Smith in 1968, referred to his pioneering efforts and included photographs of Schaadt and several of his large salmon in articles titled "King Salmon: California & Oregon Style" and "Shooting Heads" in *American Angler* (1992) and *Saltwater Fly Fishing Magazine* (1993), respectively.

By 1994, Schaadt realized he had lung cancer and found out the medical community could do nothing for him. He took a salmon fishing trip to British Columbia's Sustut River with Chatham and Mel Krieger that August and went to the Smith and the Chetco in October. By early November, Bill was back home, sick, exhausted, and too

weak to live alone. He went to live with Bob and Helena Nauheim in Santa Rosa and told Bob, “I can’t believe it’s all over. I’m having so much fun!”

Chatham came from Montana to be with him at Nauheim’s and at the nearby Kaiser Hospital, where, Chatham remembered, “we held his hand, all of us who were there, and in turn cried and prayed for him.” Bill Schaadt passed away on January 17, 1995, at the age of 73.

More than 240 friends, mostly fly anglers, memorialized Bill on January 29 at the Calvary Chapel in Santa Rosa. The church overflowed, with loudspeakers broadcasting the service and testimonials to mourners on the lawn. It was here, amid the pain and sorrow, that many of the unique Schaadt stories were told once again: the time he stood on a stepladder in the river so he could cast even farther; the morning his car rolled over an embankment, only to have Bill emerge with his fishing equipment, fish all day, and have the car towed out after dark; how, after watching a boatload of gear fishermen fishing on one of his favorite Russian River holes, marked by a rag in a tree, Bill moved the rag in the middle of the night; Bill hiding his car and riding a bicycle to his favorite holes so he would not be followed; Bill tying on a “razor-blade fly” and pulling it through a hole if other anglers would not break off a foul-hooked fish; Bill laying naked in his pram in the Florida Keys to get a suntan when the tarpon were off the bite.

Schaadt was buried beside his mother and father in Holy Cross Cemetery in Colma, California, and Nauheim, who was the executor of Bill’s estate, gave his home to the Kaiser Cancer Center. Also as Bill wished, Nauheim divided \$70,000 in \$5,000 bequests given to Bill’s fishing friends. Both Nauheim and Chatham wrote touching obituaries for *California Fly Fisher*, and John Randolph published one in *Fly Fisherman*. Randolph astutely declared that “if Bill Schaadt lived for anything it was to have his fly in the bucket when the bite was on.”

Nauheim, who passed away in 2005, remembered that “Bill’s energy was limitless. That energy was directed primarily toward finding fish and staying on them. You always joined Bill already on the river. . . . And when you joined him, it was pretty certain he was over fish.”

Chatham called Schaadt “the finest fly caster who ever lived” and remembered that Bill’s “goal was clear and singular: to be there for the bite.” For Chatham, Schaadt was “the hero I valued and worshipped . . . a rare and fragile genius,” who saw fishing and life as “one inseparable entity.” His attitude, too, said Chatham, “could always be counted on to be one of hope. He expected nothing, yet anticipated everything.”

“No lost motion!”—Schaadt’s favorite admonition—was also indicative of his life in fly fishing, and, as Chatham testified, “Bill Schaadt’s life was an arrow straight to the bull’s eye.”

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About the author (2006):

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