

Interview of Bill Carnazzo by Bud Bynack

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Bud's first two questions: As you probably know from reading the magazine, I like to begin with some biographical background—where you're from, education, significant life experiences: in short, "How came ye here?" From what I can find from your Web site and from an article on the Web from the *Sacramento Lawyer*, your family has had a classic American history—Sicilian immigrant commercial fisherman, doctor, lawyer. Could you lay that out and comment on it a little—including Santa Clara, Navy, Viet Nam, USF Law, private practice, Sacramento City attorney's office? What drew you into public service?

As an angler and guide, your specialties are a little bit different: You guide on the west slope of the Sierra — on the lower American, North Yuba, and Rubicon Rivers — as well as on the upper Sacramento and McCloud. And you grew up fishing the salt around Monterey and streams that these days are a bit off the well-worn paths followed by most trout anglers, the Carmel, Little Sur and Big Sur Rivers, Garrapata Creek, and the streams of the Los Padres Wilderness Area. How did those early experiences influence the way you fish now? What do you find special about rivers on the west slope and in the Golden Triangle of the north?

Bill's combined answer to Bud's first two questions:

I believe my lifelong fascination with water and aquatic life is linked to my most fortunate family background, and to a great extent where I grew up. The paths I've taken seem to have always led me back to water—whether it was schooling, military service, "day job" career, or my own family. Those were all intense experiences, some to the extreme; but in my psyche there has always been this nagging, unflinching truth: "I am not *of* this (family excepted, of course), and I'm meant for something else." Or, maybe I just suffered a (barbless) hook in one of my diapers and never got over it.

My parents were one hundred percent Sicilian. My father was born in Carlentini, Sicily and emigrated to this country (Omaha, Nebraska) when he was a child; my mother was born in Omaha shortly after my grandparents emigrated there from Sicily. Sicily, of course, is steeped in the traditions of the sea and its bounty—Sicilians seem to have aquatic genes, and some are reputed to have gills.

After my father finished medical school at Creighton University, he and my mother married and moved to Monterey, then a community dominated by commercial fishing. Almost all of the fishermen were of Italian and Sicilian descent, for most of whom English was only a distant second language. My father was the first and only physician fluent in Italian, which meant he was instantly busy and often beset with

payment in the form of fish. And so I was born into a family with its roots in lovely places where people are connected to the sea.

Sometime later my grandparents all migrated to Monterey. My step-grandfather was a commercial fisherman whose life centered on his boat and the daily gatherings at the “old” wharf where the air was filled with the haughty chatter, laughter, argument, and camaraderie of swarthy men mending their nets. Kids like me hung around these men, sopping up knowledge like sponges.

My grammar school sat on a small hill above Cannery Row, and our home was only a few blocks farther away. After school and on weekends, much of my time was spent fishing from the walking planks beneath the wharf, catching bottom fish of many kinds. Sometimes the fish markets would buy large specimens for a few pennies, or trade for more bait (squid and shrimp, mostly). I think this is where I learned the “feel” of a fish take.

High school activities changed this idyllic scene a bit. But new opportunities also presented themselves, in the form of river fishing. The Big Sur River, about 25 miles south of Monterey, and small streams in between such as the Carmel River, Garrapata Creek, and the Little Sur River held trout, steelhead, and salmon. I believe that my love of small stream fishing was born from rock-hopping these little gems. In those times, the Carmel River watershed’s groundwater had not been over-drafted by the thirsty subdivisions that now pepper the upper Carmel Valley, and it almost always ran to the sea year round. The estuary filled with salmon and very large steelhead, where anglers flocked to take their share—some illegally snagging across the crowded lagoon.

College at Santa Clara University meant little time, except during summers, for fishing. I found myself with a draft notice just before graduation, so I joined the Navy and quickly ended up in Viet Nam for several extended periods. Water is a way of life in Southeast Asia, where the rivers were huge and the ocean teemed with fish. I fished in the Phillipines and in Hawaii during “R & R” periods, learning new techniques from the locals.

Law school in San Francisco followed. There I took respite from the rigors of curriculum by fishing from floodwalls, jetties, and beaches on the bay. After passing the infamous bar exam, I took a job in a Monterey County firm in 1969 doing transactional business work. This left me with plenty of time to fish, although the responsibilities of a young family tempered that. I joined the Salinas Valley Fly Fishers after taking a fishing trip to Idaho with a close friend, and discovered the 20 or so bass ponds on Fort Hunter Liggett to the south, the trout habitat offered by the Nacimiento and San Antonio Rivers, and the upstream reservoirs that moderated their flows. I also prowled the creeks in the Los Padres National Forest and the Ventana Wilderness area, searching out wild trout.

But I wanted more—more fishable places, and more time to do it. So, after 10 years I took a position as a Deputy City Attorney in Sacramento. This wonderful opportunity put me in flyfishers’ Valhalla, and

much closer to other places to the north, with much more time to pursue my passion. I left public service in 2003, increased the amount of guiding that I had been doing part time, and devoted my time to fishing and teaching the sport and fly tying.

Bud: How and when did you start fly fishing? Who helped? Who were the principal influences on your angling career?

Bill: I guess my love of the fly rod began in the late '60's, when a friend showed me his new Fenwick and taught me how to cast with it. I immediately signed up for a Fenwick fly fishing class that was held on a North Coast stream. Mel Krieger was the principal instructor in that three day clinic. Suffice it to say that his influence is with me still, not only in the way I cast and fish, but in the way that I guide, teach classroom and on-stream clinics, teach tying classes, and do programs for fly clubs. His gentle, humble, humorous ways have been a model for me in my efforts to emulate him. If I may, I'd like to name one other person who has influenced my angling career: Dave Whitlock, whose vast reservoir of technical knowledge, combined with a princely personality and artistic talent, has been most influential.

Bud: One thing that sticks out in your list of guiding destinations is the Rubicon River, a place I've frequently thought about fishing, but never have. It's part of a fascinating — and rugged — terrain of what seem to be inviting angling possibilities. Do you have any advice for people who want to explore this area?

Bill: Ah, the Rubicon—all 25 miles of it below Hell Hole Reservoir and above Oxbow Lake, and its upper reaches in and near the Granite Chief Wilderness area. After joining the North Fork of the Middle Fork of the American, the river runs through a short tunnel and enters the main Middle Fork.

This wild little river runs through deep canyons, where accessibility is limited and in some spots literally impossible. If one is willing to hike, sometimes cross country, numerous eager (mostly smallish) trout—Browns and Rainbows—await your flies. In early season (May, water levels permitting) it fishes well with nymphs, with good late afternoon and evening dry fly action. It receives input from fishable little streams such as Eldorado Creek cascading down from the Foresthill Divide, and Long Canyon Creek.

I have guided and fished much of the Middle Fork drainage, up to and above Hell Hole and French Meadows Reservoirs, including lovely little Duncan Creek. For small stream aficionados, there is virtually endless fishing to be had. But it does require some exertion and an adventuresome spirit. For anglers interested in fishing this area, my advice would be to obtain both the USFS Tahoe National Forest map, as well as topographic maps for specific areas. These maps show the trailheads and all of the creeks and small lakes. There is a USFS ranger station in Foresthill, where free photocopies of trail information can be obtained. These packets contain maps, information on trail terrain, lengths, and relative levels of difficulty.

In the “advice” category: rattlesnakes are plentiful in the canyons, especially in the rocks and detritus between the stream and the high water mark. Care must be taken to make hidden snakes aware of your presence; they will warn you with their rattles. Carry a wading staff and bang it on rocks ahead of you to get their attention. Also, drinking water is essential—the canyons get very hot in the afternoon. A filter bottle is best. Finally, don’t go alone. A fall can produce a broken leg, and numerous other disasters are possible.

Bud: You’ve developed a number of fly patterns over the years, perhaps most notably Bill’s Stick Caddis, a cased-caddis imitation. What’s your approach to fly design? What do you look for in an imitation and in the materials used to construct it?

Bill: My fly patterns, including the Stick Caddis, have one thing in common—suggestiveness. I firmly believe in what Mike Mercer has said both in his recent book and in your interview with him in the last issue—go to the source for inspiration and guidance. The source, in our case (for trout, at least), is the macroinvertebrate population in the streams we fish. I collect specimens, embalm them, study them, and then try to come up with a pattern that suggests them in general form, color, size, and activity or habits. Of these factors, I find the last to be the most interesting and challenging. For example, if you are fishing with a fly that is supposed to mimic the cased larval stage of the October Caddis, you need to understand that these insects sometimes get dislodged from the rocks and are swept down current. There also behavioral drift to be considered. Fly design needs to take these things into account. In the case of this larva, the fly should be heavy enough to reach the bottom quickly and stay there. And, its form should mimic the rather large case with its assorted montage of rocks and sticks.

Once I land on the basic design of the fly, I try to think of potential “strike triggers,” again tied to insect behavior or in some cases appearance. Returning to the cased caddis example, when an individual is caught up in the current, it struggles for purchase on a rock or other obstacle by stretching its legs out and grasping. The head and legs are black, but the abdomen within the case is usually a pale yellowish or cream color. As the insect struggles and stretches, a small bit of its light colored body is revealed—voila! A strike trigger! Small insights like this push fly design far beyond the basic parameters of form, shape, and color, in my view.

Materials carefully selected and applied can also do wonders for a fly. My approach to materials is one of “fuzziness,” meaning materials that give the impression of life. There are, of course, many exceptions to this principle, such as midge patterns and other precise imitations. But in general I favor soft edges and shy away from hard lines. Fuzziness suggests movement, and most aquatic insects are constantly in motion—whether it be swimming, crawling, or burrowing. Fuzziness also creates interesting light refraction patterns when the fly is wet, also suggesting life.

One final concept: simplicity. When it comes to fly design, I strive for simplicity both in the tying techniques required for the fly, and in the materials needed. To be sure there are many wonderful patterns

that are complex to tie, and I have tied and used them. But over the years I have found that simple patterns often out-perform their more complex cousins. Maybe it's just that I'm more confident fishing them because I know that they can represent a broad range of "things." After all, isn't the Woolly Bugger the essence of simplicity?

Some of the other patterns that I have designed can be found in the fly archives at the Granite Bay Flycasters' web site: www.gbflycasters.org . If I can offer advice to new tiers and those who want to move to another level in their skills, a good instructor is worth a dozen books or articles. The latter clearly are important, but watching and being helped by a knowledgeable and experienced angler-tyer is invaluable. There are many subtle tricks, tips, and techniques that can be gleaned from a few hours of instruction that may otherwise never be learned, and that can avert hours of frustration at the vise. Personally, even with 35+ years of tying experience, every time I watch someone like Denny Rickards, Andy Burk, or Jack Dennis—or any good tyer for that matter—I learn something new and interesting.

Bud's next two questions: Some people see fly fishing as a refuge from what they do every day, and others see it as part of a continuum with their daily lives. As a founding member of the Granite Bay Flycasters and a fly-fishing and fly-tying instructor at Sierra Community College, you seem to have extended your career in public service into your life as an angler. How do you see the relationship between practicing the law as a public servant and angling?

In a similar vein, have you found that there's a relationship between your skills as a successful lawyer and the skills needed to be a successful guide and author of angling articles?

Bill's answers to Bud's two questions: I believe I fall into the "continuum" part of that equation. I have taught fly fishing and tying for many years, and have tried to develop good teaching skills. The experience of tying in the ISE shows, at the Fly Fishing Show, at NCCFFF Conclaves and other shows has been a big factor in developing teaching skills. Those same skills have become invaluable in guiding—which in most cases is (or should be) a learning experience for the guest. In my legal career, my responsibilities included training inexperienced attorneys to be able to handle both simple and complex transactions. I'm really not sure which career—legal or flyfishing—most informed my teaching skills. Most likely they just evolved over many years as I gained knowledge and confidence. What I do know is that when I teach new fly fishers such as the students at Sierra Community College, I find it satisfying to see the light bulbs turn on when something comes clear. After all, I know how much I enjoy those little epiphanies when they happen to me.

With regard to writing about our sport, I have done articles that I would like to think have contributed something to the body of knowledge. Writing was a huge part of my legal career, where clarity, brevity, and accuracy were paramount. That experience has proven valuable in producing quality fly fishing material. I thought that after retirement I'd have a lot more time to write, but it hasn't quite worked out that way. I seem to find myself on a river or other body of water, or trying to get there.

Bud: What, in my ignorance, have I failed to ask? Is there anything you want to get off your chest?

Bill: There's really nothing that I want to get off my chest, except to say that ethics is a big part of my vision of fly fishing. By that I mean stewardship of the resource through use of proper catch and release technique and barbless hooks, and a willingness to take nothing except a photograph and leave things as you find them, so that future generations of anglers can enjoy this sport.

Bud: Here's the traditional Silly Tree Question: If you were a tree, what kind of a tree would you be?

Bill: If I was a tree, I'd be a Jeffrey Pine. I love their vanilla smell as I hike past them on my way to a nice day of back woods stream fishing. I like to imagine all that such a tree has seen over its long life. But I wouldn't want to be too close to the trail for fear that that flyfisher down there might need to...well, you know.