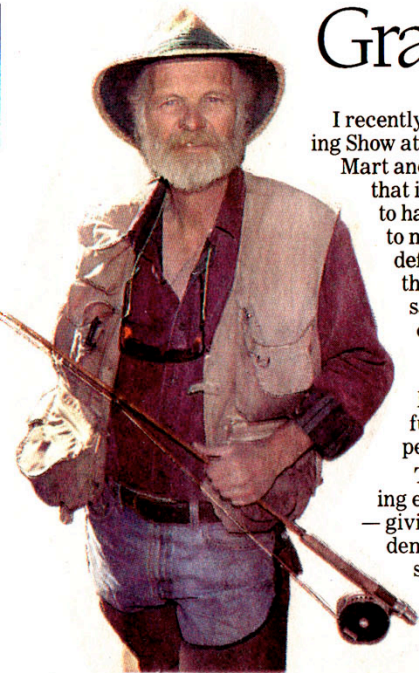


# Gravitating toward individual craftsmen



I recently spent a day at The Fly Fishing Show at the Denver Merchandise Mart and had a passably good time — that is, as good a time as I'm able to have in a large crowd. It seems to me that American culture is defined by its paradoxes, and this would be one of them: thousands of people who love wild country and solitude all crammed together in a large, loud industrial building lit like an operating room. It's fun, but there's a surreal aspect that can't be ignored.

There were the usual fly fishing experts — real and self-styled — giving fly tying and casting demonstrations, lectures and slide shows and signing copies of their books. I spent an hour signing books myself — just enough of a job to keep me from paying ad-

mission at the door, while still leaving me enough time to check out the show.

I hung out with my old friend Ed Engle for a while and quickly lost track of the people who came up to him and said how much they enjoyed the slide show he gave that morning, making me wish I'd seen it. Ed told me once that the hardest thing he had to learn about being a fly fishing personality was how to graciously take a compliment.

Naturally, there was the inevitable repetition in the exhibits. There were lots of fly-shop booths selling pretty much the same stuff, but with just enough variety to make it worthwhile to at least glance through all of them. The same could be said for fly rods, flies, reels, lines, waders, landing nets, fly tying materials, lodges and guide services. There was a lot of each, quality and price varied, all of it was at least serviceable.

I try to look at everything — however briefly — but I tend to gravitate away from the big companies and toward the cottage industries and individual craftsmen.

I stopped to talk to a man who made landing nets and whose name I don't remember. (I thought I got one of his cards, but now I can't find it.) The nets were laminated wood — well made, graceful,

handsome and surprisingly light. The one I especially admired was a medium-sized hand net with the butt of a deer antler nicely worked into the end of the wooden handle. He told me I should have one. I told him I already had three or four nets, all of which hold fish, although they certainly weren't that pretty.

Later I stopped to admire a fine-looking drift boat that turned out to be made

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by the Boulder Boat Works just down the road in north Boulder. It was a standard modified McKenzie design with beautiful hardwood decks, gunnels, thwarts and ribs, but the white hull was made of the same kind of indestructible polymer that's being used on some high-end kayaks. Andy Toohey, the boat builder, told me that the polymer hull was stronger than aluminum, fiberglass or wood, that it slipped off rocks instead of "gagging" on them and that it was virtually maintenance-free.

He said they'd given several boats to guides with no instructions except, "to try and break them," and that so far no one had managed to do that. I didn't ask about price and the brochure doesn't mention it either, so they might be a little steep. Still, they could have something. I've talked to any number of guides who trade in their fiberglass drift boats for

new ones every few years. A boat that would last an entire career could be worth the price.

I also finally met Jeff Wagner, the bamboo fly-rod maker from Ohio. I'd heard some vague good things about him and had read about him in Ed Engle's book "Splitting Cane," but most of his rods sell back East, so I'd never seen one.

In a word, they were gorgeous, beautifully made and with the finest wraps and the most flawless finishes I've seen in a long time. He had several rods laid out on the table, a few of what he calls his Presentation Series — elaborately built, fancy rods that you might think twice about fishing — as well as some more standard models.

I cast an 8-foot, 3-piece, 5-weight that was nicely balanced, quick, powerful and that cast well at all kinds of ranges, from 10 feet all the way out to the end of the casting booth. Jeff said it was built on a Leonard taper (the best rod builders use

proven, traditional tapers) and it was entirely recognizable — the kind of rod you could all but forget about after a few minutes of fishing.

Then Jeff and I talked for a while, as well as you can talk in a jostling mob of people when one of you is supposed to be working. For a rod maker, he seemed surprisingly normal. When we'd finally run out of things to say, I shook his hand, took a brochure and a business card and melted back into the crowd.