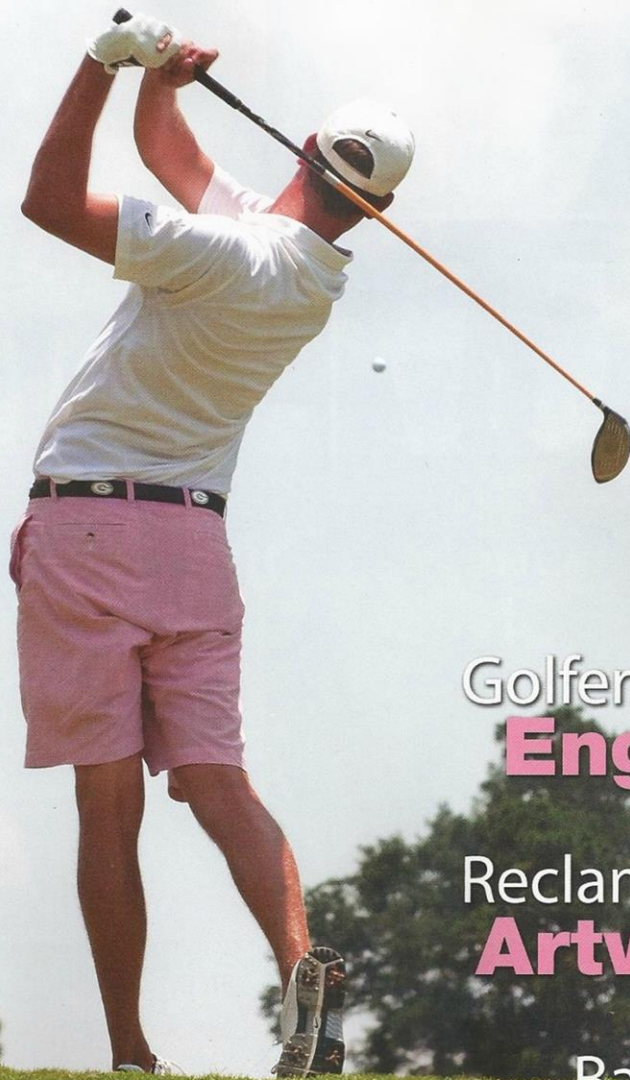


SOUTHWEST GEORGIA
LIVING



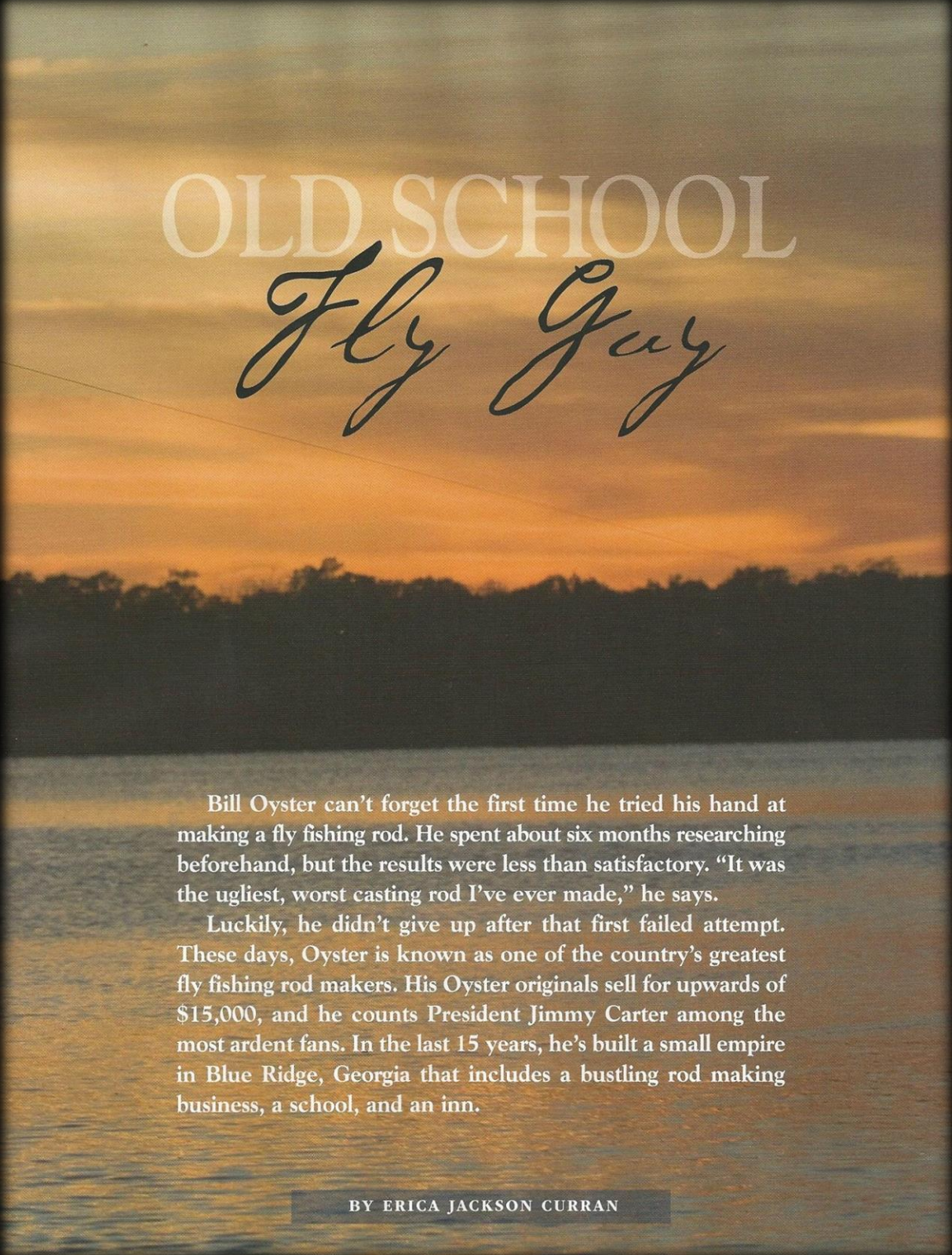
Golfer Harris
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OLD SCHOOL

Fly Guy

Bill Oyster can't forget the first time he tried his hand at making a fly fishing rod. He spent about six months researching beforehand, but the results were less than satisfactory. "It was the ugliest, worst casting rod I've ever made," he says.

Luckily, he didn't give up after that first failed attempt. These days, Oyster is known as one of the country's greatest fly fishing rod makers. His Oyster originals sell for upwards of \$15,000, and he counts President Jimmy Carter among the most ardent fans. In the last 15 years, he's built a small empire in Blue Ridge, Georgia that includes a bustling rod making business, a school, and an inn.

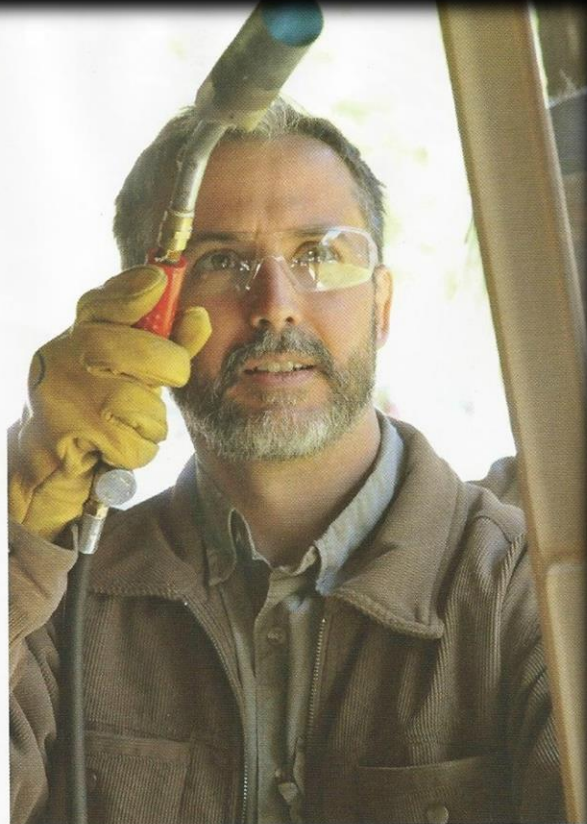
BY ERICA JACKSON CURRAN



Oyster might not have even entered the field had it not been for an accident that derailed a professional cycling career in 1996. Warming up for a race following the Olympic trials and U.S. pro championships, he suffered a bad crash that threw him off of his bike. His injuries forced him to find a new direction.

Back then fly fishing was just a hobby for Oyster, but after the accident it became more of an obsession. "I found myself with all this spare energy, and I just kind of poured it all into fly fishing," he says. He started traveling, serving as a fishing guide, and giving casting lessons. And then he made that first awful and fateful rod.

Finding information on building rods was challenging. At that point, the world wide web was still finding its footing. When he tried to track down people who might be willing to teach him, he discovered "the only people talking didn't know, and the people who didn't want to talk did know," he says. So he taught himself by reading books and learning from his mistakes.

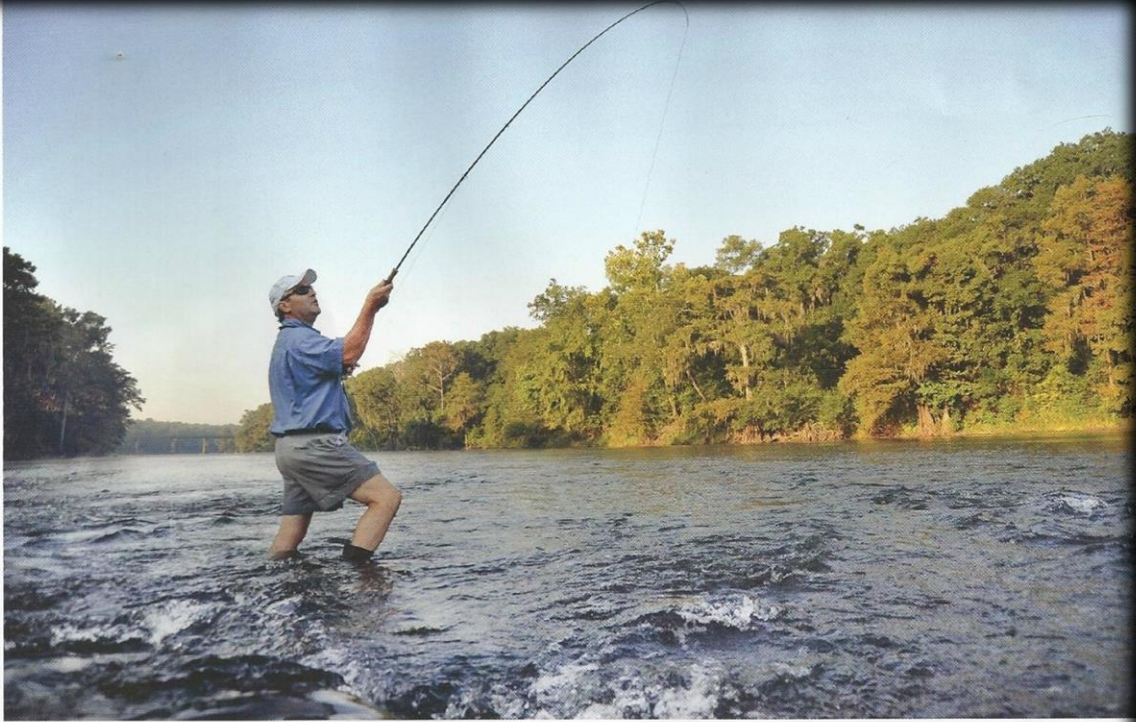


Made from a single culm of Tonkin bamboo, the rods are hand-split, hand-planed, and hand-engraved by Oyster.





"I got to try every technique, make every mistake, and learn the long and hard way, which has worked out pretty well because I teach so many classes now," he says.



"I got to try every technique, make every mistake, and learn the long and hard way, which has worked out pretty well because I teach so many classes now," he says. "When asked about a certain method or a mistake, I've already been there and done that and know how to recover."



The craft is king for Oyster, who views the fly fishing rod as an integral part of American sporting culture.

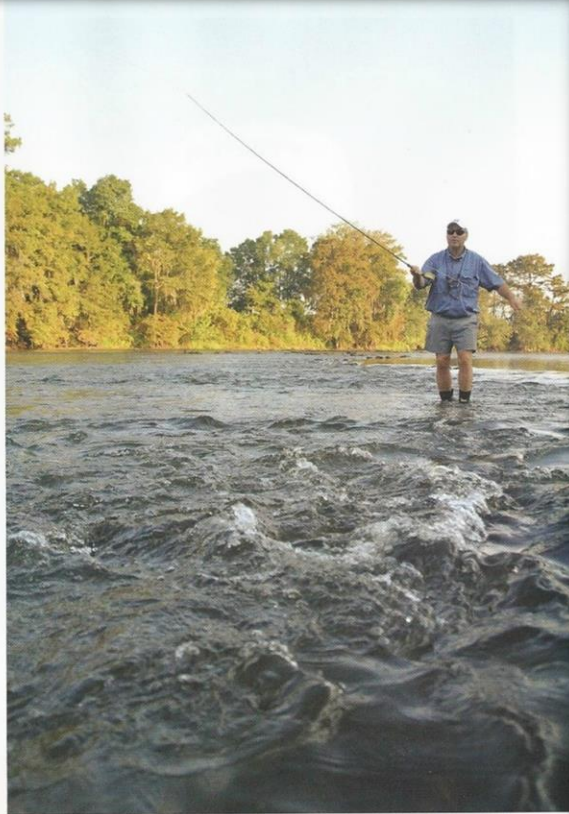


Oyster is generous with his knowledge, as opposed to his predecessors. "When I started to learn, I got very little help or encouragement from anybody," he says. "It was still left over from that secretive kind of mentality. People that knew any high level craft carefully guarded it."

He chose to go the opposite direction. If people wanted to know, what's the harm? "With the internet, as it turns out, there are no secrets anyway."

The craft is king for Oyster, who views the fly fishing rod as an integral part of American sporting culture. "As a fly fisherman from the United States, this is our samurai sword," he says. "At a time when everything is mechanized and plasticized and shipped from overseas, this is still handmade in America. It would be a shame if (American craft) went away or if (handcrafted items) weren't appreciated."

Historians have dated the first fly fishing rod all the way back to the second century, though the sport is often linked to Great Britain. But the hexagonal bamboo fly rod, also known as the split cane rod, was developed and popularized by anglers in the eastern United States in the 1800s. Rod makers were drawn to Tonkin bamboo because of its strength and straightness, splitting each culm—or stem—into small strips which were then planed and glued together.



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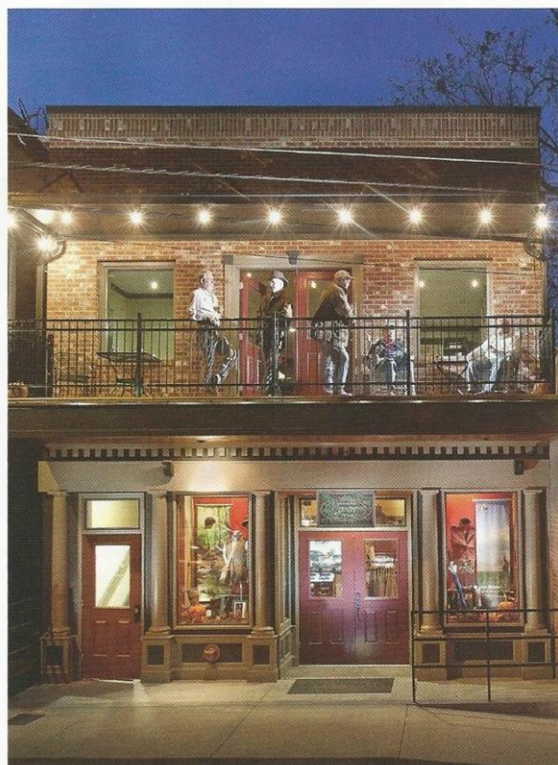


He crafted a custom fly rod for President Carter a number of years ago, Bill Oyster counts former President Jimmy Carter among his ardent fans.

Taking a cue from those traditional methods, each Oyster rod is custom-made for each angler. Made from a single culm of Tonkin bamboo, the rods are hand-split, hand-planed, and hand-engraved by Oyster and his small staff of craftsmen. The rods' reel seats and ferrules—the ring or cap that strengthens the end of the rod—are made from traditional nickel silver, the stripping guides from agate stone. The thread is made from fine silk. The length of the rod, line width, number of sections, cane color, and grip shape can all be customized. The end result? A high-performance rod that blends the very best of art and utility.

“All of our rods are completely custom, so we make it personalized for the individual in every way, from the action of how it casts to all the cosmetic options,” Oyster says. He’s also the only rod maker in the world who engraves all of his own rods. He’s done everything from family crests to corporate logos to a trout in 24 carat gold. One glamorous customer even requested a rod made with diamonds.

Oyster credits his wife Shannen for helping the business find its footing. “I just work here, and Shannen makes sure I don’t have to go get a job at



Oyster has built a small empire in Blue Ridge, Georgia that includes a bustling rod making business, a school, and an inn.



Every Oyster fly rod is personalized and Bill Oyster is the only rod maker in the world who engraves all of his own rods.

Home Depot," he says. "The biggest asset that our business achieved was bringing her in full time, and that's when things really took off for us. She allows me to focus on crafting the rods, and that's a huge benefit for us. She's the missing link in the whole thing."

You can see Oyster in action and even learn from him at his showroom in Blue Ridge. Students and tourists are encouraged to stay at the newly opened Cast and Blast Inn. "They can walk to the restaurants, have a bottle of wine, walk back to their room, and come downstairs and make fly rods all day," he says.

Oyster says his classes, like his selection of rods, are always changing. "It's a constant evolution of hunting for better ways and better rods," he says. "Whenever it becomes set in stone, to me it would become very boring and I'd probably do something else. I'm constantly evolving the technique and actions we use with the rods ... I have to be looking forward to stay entertained."

Classes are \$1,570 per student and include 70 hours of instruction and all materials. The Cast & Blast Inn is \$79 a night per room or \$275 a night for the entire inn. The inn is open to the sporting public when classes are not in session.

For more information about Oyster Fly Rods, visit them online at www.oysterbamboo.com.