

A **FLY ROD** *and a* **MOUNTAIN STREAM**



Bill Oyster's Fly Rod Artistry

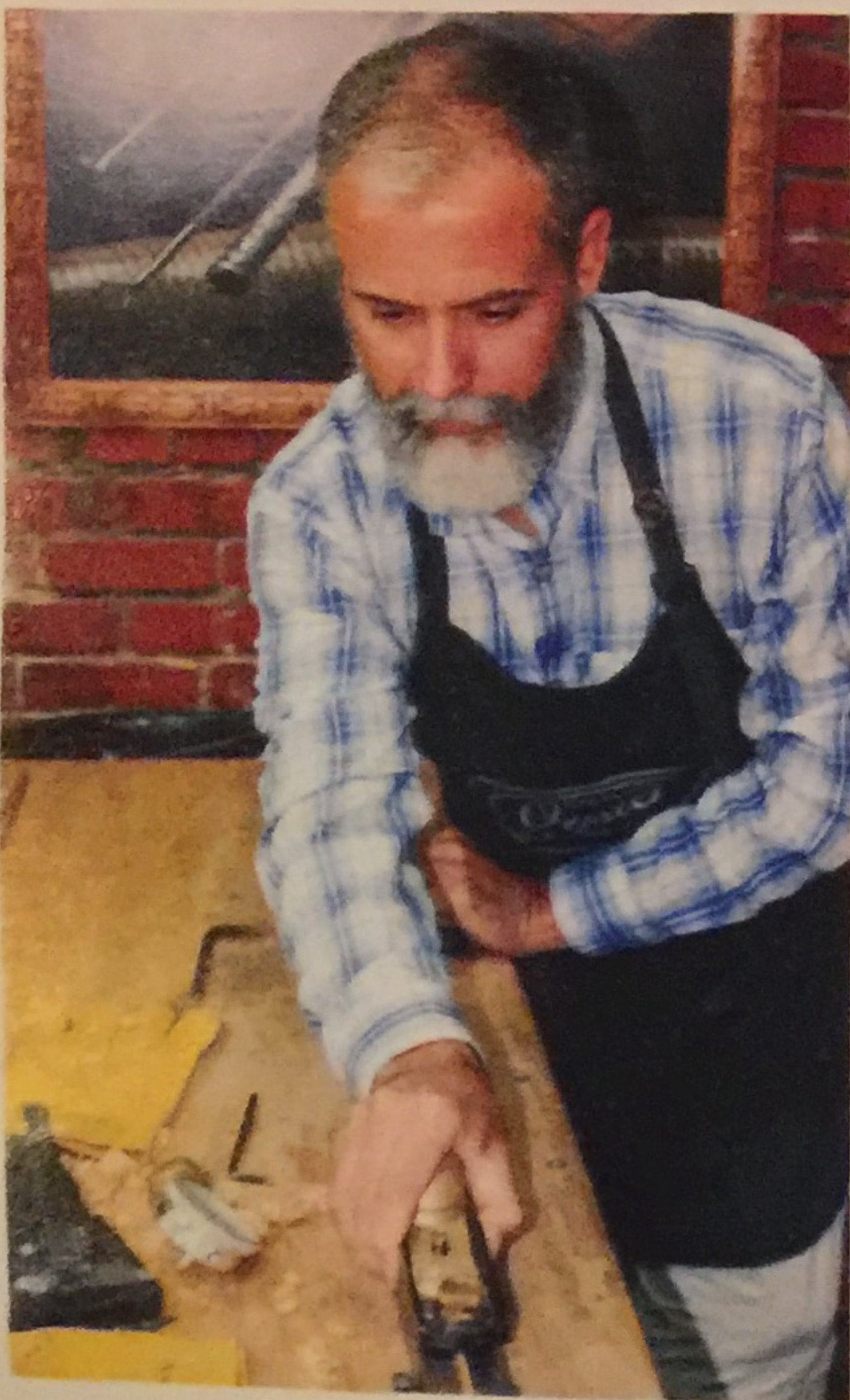
Give me a rod of the split bamboo, a rainy day and a fly or two, a mountain stream where the eddies play and mists hang low o'er the winding way." This is an excerpt from a poem written by Mrs. Eunice B. Lamberton about trout fishing that seems to have been taken to heart in pure artistry by Bill Oyster of Blue Ridge, Georgia.

Art in a multitude of forms is as old as man's imagination and desires to depict in a beautiful way that which he wants to convey to others. Following a bad bike racing accident that ended that career, Bill Oyster has combined and mastered the arts of fine engraving, rod building and classic fly fishing into an extremely lucrative business and the passion of his life.

~ Story and photography by **Bill Vanderford**

"After I had done everything possible with fly fishing as a sport at a young age, building fly rods started as a hobby during my early 20s," states Oyster. "I got some books, started learning, went to art school, used the abundance of knowledge available on Google and taught myself the rest."

Even with his newly acquired knowledge, it wasn't always easy or profitable for the former bicycle racer and avid fly fisherman. Bill Oyster became a part-time fishing guide and fly casting instructor but continued to dream of making traditional split-bamboo fly rods. He knew that this particular type of rod was exclusively woven into the fabric of early American trout angling, but he soon discovered that those with the "know-how" were very tight-lipped with no intention of being helpful. Nevertheless, through lots of trial and error, reading everything he could find about rod building and an inordinate amount of passion and exuberance, Oyster began to find success. In addition, he slowly mastered the intricate art of metal engraving, which nobody else in the fly rod building trade could do, and it instantly made each of his rods stand alone as one-of-a-kind art treasures.



In his Blue Ridge studio, Oyster works at making the rod perfectly straight.

Bill and Riley catching rainbow trout at Bill's favorite spot, Noonwooda Creek.



Six Days with **BILL OYSTER**

Spending six days in the historic village of Blue Ridge, Georgia, learning fly rod building from Bill Oyster would be the equivalent of having art classes with Pablo Picasso. You also come away with a Bill Oyster bamboo rod worth nearly \$2,000 that you made under the his watchful eye, and the whole experience costs less than what the rod is worth. Your finished rod will leave in a bag, inside a tube, with an Oyster label, proudly displaying your own signature under three coats of varnish and ready for fly fishing action.

"As the most prolific teacher of this rod making art alive today," states the Fannin County Chamber of Commerce, "Bill Oyster draws students from as far away as England and Scotland as well as every corner of the US to our quaint little southern mountain town. We feel honored to have him here in Blue Ridge."

During the school, each student works at their own solid maple work bench which is outfitted with the highest quality tools like Lie-Nielsen planes and Bellinger planing forms. The process incorporates the same tools and methods used to create every Oyster bamboo rod, and when the rod is finished, the year-round trout fishing in the Blue Ridge area will afford you the opportunity to put your new rod to good use before leaving.

Most of the classes are filled more than six months in advance, so make contact sooner rather than later. To schedule a class, please call Shannen at 706.374.4239. Visit the website oysterbamboo.com for their latest news and schedules.

With all the mass production and space age materials being utilized in every kind of manufacturing these days, it is still impossible to make quality bamboo fly rods except one-at-a-time.

Each of Oyster's traditional bamboo rods would have to be considered a masterpiece on its own merit, but the engraved artwork that is uniquely different on the butt plates (the base) and ferrules (part which joins sections) of every rod makes them collector's items. Dignitaries like former President Jimmy Carter and many others often wait as long as six months to receive these prize possessions that may take 100 hours to build and can cost from \$2,000 to nearly \$20,000.

Despite all of the exhausting research and hard work that it took to become successful in this practically ancient art, Bill Oyster is always completely open and very helpful about what he has learned. He feels that nothing is wrong with making it easier for people to try their hand at rod making, if that's their passion. "Besides," says Oyster, "with the Internet, there are no secrets anymore."

With all the mass production and space age materials being utilized in every kind of manufacturing these days, it is still impossible to make quality bamboo fly rods except one-at-a-time. Add to that personalized engraving, and Bill Oyster's rods are the only option, plus they are a truly Made in America product. Only the Chinese grown Tonkin bamboo gives it an international flair,

and that's because of its uncanny straightness and strength that is not seen in bamboo from other parts of the world.

Bill Oyster's wife and business partner Shannen says, "The most ceremonial part of the process is choosing and splitting the Tonkin cane. That part is always music to our ears."

From that point on, only one machine is used, a beveler. The rest of the rod building and engraving process is done by hand. All of the engraving and some of the rod building is accomplished with the artistic hands of Bill Oyster, but he has some great help. About five years ago, 19-year-old Riley Gudakunst came down from Michigan to one of Oyster's rod building classes. "He was fast, good and young," recalls Shannen. "So, we kept him!"

Gudakunst has become an integral part of the rod making business and an important member of the Oyster's extended family. He loves the rod building, the Blue Ridge area, the fabulous nearby trout fishing and has recently married. It's doubtful that he will ever leave.

It's an old saying that behind every successful man there is a good woman, and Bill Oyster agrees that without the efforts of his wife Shannen, none of his success would have been possible. "She's the glue that made all of this come together," proclaims



The engraved bamboo rod is a one-of-a-kind.

Oyster. "I'm simply a worker here. Shannen is our biggest asset because what she does allows me and Riley to only concentrate on crafting the rods, and do a little trout fishing as well."

Shannen's duties now include running the retail store, keeping the books and schedules and running the new Cast and Blast Inn on the second floor for visiting fly anglers and rod building students.

Writer's Note: Having been a fishing guide myself for more than 40 years, I sometimes see things from a different perspective than others, especially when the opportunity arose for an afternoon of trout fishing on a famous North Georgia stream with Bill and Riley. I had already been totally mesmerized by the most beautiful and artistic fly rods of my lifetime, but the fishing showed me the rest of this amazing man. He went about his fly fishing with the same intense expertise and artistry as he had with an intricate engraving design, until we stopped to have lunch under the shade of oak trees accompanied by the sound of the babbling brook. Then, his eyes sparkled with his zest for life and the warmth of this wonderful man came flowing out in laughter and engaging conversation. It matched perfectly with what you would expect from such a masterful artist. ▀