

On November 24th 2008 John A. Bradford celebrated his 80th birthday, an American who most readers have never either heard of or read about. What did this man do, and what did he do for flyfishing that »Der Fliegenfischer« would remember his 80th birthday?

But those who have ever read anything by John Gierach, especially "Fishing Bamboo", or the book "Splitting Cane" by Ed Engle would surely recognize the name Bradford. In his book, published in 2002, Engle noted the existence of 16 significant makers of bamboo rods in the USA – among whom, at 80, John Bradford remained active.

### The early years

John Andrew Bradford was born in 1928 at the small village of Baldwin, Michigan. His love for flyfishing must have begun in his cradle. Although originally a banker, his father and John's mother – John was four – took over in 1932 the management of an exclusive flyfisher lodge, the Flint Rainbow Club on the Pere Marquette, one of the most beautiful and well-known trout rivers in Michigan.\*

Already, at 14, in his grandfather's shop and with the help of his uncle Fred, John built his first split bamboo flyrod. Uncle Fred was also a passionate flyfisherman and one of the best fly tyers that John knew, even though those crafts were not yet too widely known.

After his father's death, John, 17, moved to Florida with his mother. There, he at-



John A. Bradford. Photo submitted by Mike Clark.

tended law school at the University of Florida. After his money for studying ran out, he joined the U.S. Air Force and became a pilot. He soon was commissioned a 2nd Lt, and flew in 1951 his first missions from Japan in the Korean War. He stayed in the Air Force until 1980 when he retired as a full Colonel.

### Beginnings of a Rod builder

As a passionate flyfisher, John, already in the years 1946 to 1949 had built a good dozen split bamboo flyrods for friends and relatives, none of which, he recalls, were a "masterpiece." Indeed, no other American rod builder of note remembers any long passage of time becoming proficient. John never was, and to this day, is no full-time rod builder. He notes, however, that he is one of those who is "possessed" by rod building, and blames the enchantment on his father and uncle who launched his career from the beginning on one of the best fly waters in the USA.

Since 1980, following his active service where he ended up as a wing commander of considerable flying experience, he intensified his obsession with rod building, not so much as a way to make a buck, rather in a dedicated pursuit of flyfishing.

Next, he got into flyfishing tackle. Building graphite rods, and restoring split cane rods. He set up shop in Fort Worth Texas where he still lives and works in his shop, concentrating on producing his own line of split bamboo rods.

As far as his own production permitted, he interested himself in the restoration of other well-known rod builders' rods,

using their various blanks and tapers, where possible in "raw" condition, and without varnish. He learned by these experiences the quality and purposes of each taper, and developed his own standards of quality. Today John Bradford doubtlessly belongs to a renown group of world-wide sought-after rod restorers and designers as well as one of the best proponents of function and quality in fine bamboo flyrods.

### His Criteria

Next to optimal tapers in his rods, John Bradford places durability ahead of everything else. There are about 350 Bradford rods in existence, of these only a few are in Finland and in the German-speaking lands, only three, but it is hoped that soon there will be three more.

Only flawless rods ever left his shop and it is John's wish that they will be "fished" and more than decoration mounted on the den wall. John is serious when a customer is not satisfied with a rod, he'll get his full purchase price back. Also, he is the only reknown American rod builder I know that demands no deposit when ordering a rod.

In the last five years health considerations have forced John to cut his rod production down to just 10 rods per year. This is bad news for both old and new friends who now must wait almost four years for an order to be filled.

### The best rods on the water

For more than 30 years now I have accumulated a collection of bamboo rods from various rod makers such as Brunner,

Henseler, Schott, Carpenter, Aroner, Brackett, Moran, Fries and Harms as well as having at least cast with rods of many other well-known makers. But I believe that I can make the observation honestly, those rods marked "J. A. Bradford Co." are the ones to be chosen first when I go fishing.

As I take it I'm not alone with the opinion when I say Bradford rods are of highest quality. Many US flyfishermen would sell nearly any rod from other makers – even Carpenter and Aroner – for the right price, but none – like me – would ever give up a Bradford rod! No wonder rods marked "J.A Bradford Co.," are rarely seen on the secondary market. Until two years ago, the company consisted of John and his cat, Sing Too. Sing Too died two years ago, and now the team is composed of the cats Mali and Chet. That means all John's rods – despite the cat connection – are exclusively made by John alone.

### What's Special

What, then, is so special about a Bradford rod? For me, the most outstanding characteristic is the fact that it is nearly impossible to produce shock waves when casting one of John's rods. And that's even on power casts up to 60 feet. Ed Engle describes the rod's castability as "smooth as silk, with a little bit of oil added for good measure."

My 2-piece Bradford 7 footer for a 4-weight line weighs exactly 88 grams. I know of no other rod that feels so light in the hand including graphite rods of the same length, not even a Connoisseur rod by Bjarne Fries of only 60 grams. You

*We would like to introduce to one of the best, still active, split bamboo rod makers in the world who has reached the highest level of achievement in his art. For decades no amount of advertising hype has been able to show where better developments than his have emerged on the scene.*

*John Bradford*

\* 5 kilometers from John Bradford's birthplace, the club's still there.

A tribute by DR. MICHAEL KNÜMANN.  
Translation by George Wentzel and Kathy Shulkin-Jensen.

Brown trout of almost 2 pounds, 16 inches, from a small club stream in Germany. And John Bradford's Legacy II which caught her on July 22nd 2008. – Photo: Author.



# John Bradford

may fish it all day long without getting tired. The rod shines on shortest casts and on those occasional 20yard reaches once in a while needed as well.

John states, however, that he doesn't intend his rods to make casts across the Columbia River. At the moment he makes rods between 7 and 8 feet in line weights 4 to 6. In these lengths and line weights he assembled a whole lot of experience and he thinks he is better off to know this small world of rod making in every aspect.

His rods are strongly influenced by Jim Payne. He has modified the rods of the late Jim Payne, who some say, was the best rod maker of his time, and (what I believe) brought to perfection. Today John only makes rods called "Legacy." I guess choosing this name for his rods is a hint to Jim Payne, but also the word that his rods are a legacy to future fly fishermen.

His rods have a serial number and behind the name "Legacy" are Roman numerals. My 7'9" Bradford has a "II" and my 7' rod an "I" (no modification). Each time John updates the taper of one of his rods, it receives a higher Roman numeral, i.e., the 7' 6" for a 5 weight is inscribed Legacy III.

His rods are not a bit fancy and of timeless elegance (I hope the pictures do show this). The wraps are desert gold tipped yellow. The spacer is made of Birdseye Maple. The ferrules and the reel seat are blued nickel silver. The rings and the hook keeper are also blued.

He only uses the best materials and products he can get for his rods. He usually makes all of his rods out of "pre-embargo cane", bamboo that is more than 50 years old. Some say it is of better quality than bamboo you find today because the pre-embargo cane was not harvested as early as it is today.

I have fished Bradford rods for some years and none have taken a set at all. I cannot imagine that one of his rods will ever get a set if used properly, although John's rods are sensitive and protect fine tippets. I caught a hard-fighting grayling of almost 2 pounds with my 7'9" Bradford Legacy II for a 5 weight line on a deep nymph and on a 0,10 mm tippet and was confident all the time that the Bradford rod would protect the fine tippet.

### John, these days

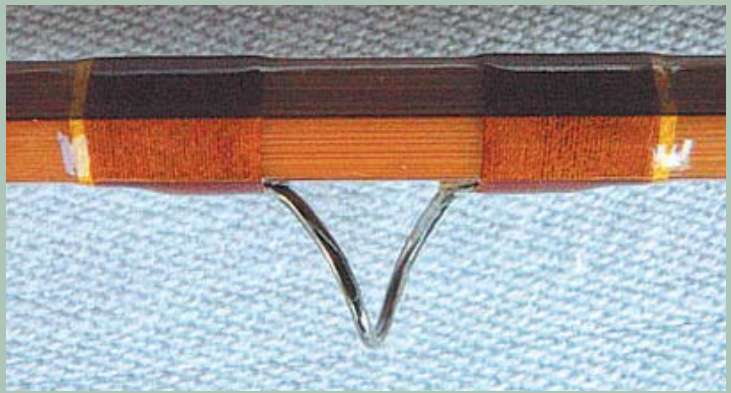
Sorrowfully these days John's health has slipped somewhat. After cataract surgery he still has vision problems even though these problems have had no effect on the quality of his rods which has actually gotten even better.

But John's heart and blood circulation seem to be getting worse. At least once a year, however, he used to travel to Colorado or Montana to meet fellow rod maker Mike Clark or author John Gierach.



From left: A.K. Best, John Gierach, Ed Engle and John Bradford. Kneeling in front: Mike Clark, who submitted this photo.

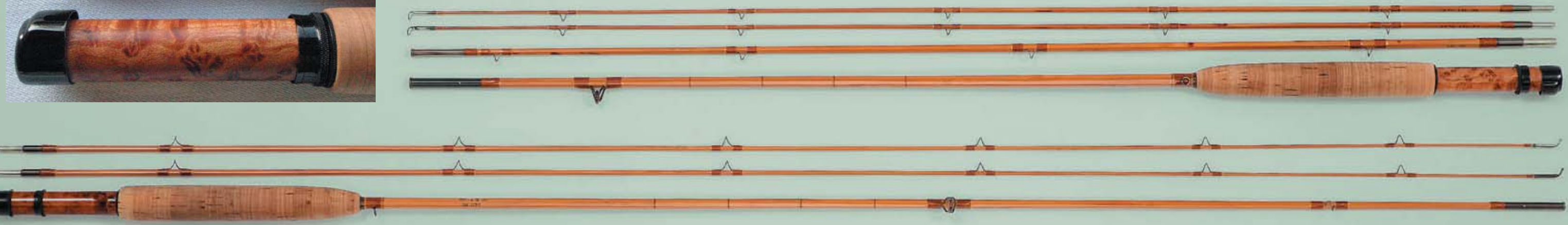
Right: The guide windings by John Bradford are light brown (desert gold) with yellow tipping.  
Lower left: Two of John Bradford's reel seats.  
Lower right: Two of the three Bradford rods found in the German-speaking countries. – Photos: Author.



Both own and fish John's rods. In 2007, however, John had to cancel his Rocky Mountain trip half ways because of his health. As long as his health and his wife permit, he'll still try to produce one rod a month. And despite his age, as always, John remains an extraordinary innovator rod-maker who is not afraid to try new ideas. When friend Mike Clark (South Creek

Ltd.), got a problem regarding rod making he will ask only one person for an answer – John Bradford. Although I have never personally met John Bradford I have gotten to know him and regard him as a good friend. Through many E-mails we have shared our mutual interest in split bamboo flyrods and learned to value our relationship. Therefore

I hope John will have much more time to build his incomparable rods. This means fulfillment to him and joy to us because of his rods. Surely, in the name of countless other friends of "Der Fliegenfischer" too, I wish John Bradford yet many more happy, fulfilled years.



Schneidet man diese grau bedruckte Papierfläche sauber ab, so erhält man die Seitenhöhe des früheren Heffformats.