History of Fly-Fishing

Austin Blain

University of Utah

Fly-fishing has played a significant role in history by providing a way for individuals to provide food for their families and to relieve stress. Rather than using a short rod with near weightless line and a hook covered in live bait, fly fishermen and women use a typically longer more flexible rod, line with built in weight, and an artificial lure. These artificial lure are called flies because at one time they were created to imitate flies that were flying over the water and the fish would rise up and take them when the landed or fell on the surface of the water. Due to these flies weighting almost nothing, special lines were created with weight built into the line to assist in casting. As a result of these heavy lines, a typical conventional fishing rod would not be capable of casting them so longer more flexible lines were created.

 Although we cannot pin point when fly-fishing was invented, we do know when it was first reference in literature. According to Dr. Herd ([www.flyfishinghistory.com](http://www.flyfishinghistory.com), 1993-2005), *Aelian’s Natural History* wrote in 200 A.D. was the first time fly-fishing was referenced. In this literature Aelian wrote about the Macedonian people who observed fish in the Astraeus River rising to eat a fly that is common only to this area. This fly has the color of a wasp but it is roughly the size of a midge. Due to its size it is to delicate for fisherman to use but due to this discovery they had dressed a hook with fur and feathers to resemble a fly to illicit the same response from the fish.

Although *Aelian’s Natural History* was the first time fly-fishing was reference in literature, *The Treatyse of Fysshynge With An Angle* was the first book to be published about fly-fishing. This book was written by an Englishwomen by the name of Dame Juliana Berners (Vliet, 1994) and published by Wynkyn De Worde as a second edition of *The Boke of St. Albens* in 1496 (Dr. Herd, [www.flyfishinghistory.com](http://www.flyfishinghistory.com) 1993-2005). Information such as how to make a rod, line, hook, and a dozen fly patterns was provided in this text. This text is believed to be what set fly-fishing equal to hunting in the eyes of the royalty and nobility.

In both of these works, descriptions of flies are present. In present day people imagine fishing flies to be what are called dry flies that sit on top if the water to imitate bugs that fall on the water or insects that emerge through the water columns. Although these are flies that are used, there are also wet flies, nymphs, midges, and streams. Although the Macedonian’s were prompted to fly fishing because of the flies observed landing on the water, the flies they created were more of a wet fly than a dry fly. Wet fly patterns are generally fished just below the surface and imitate insects that have drowned in the water column. These flies were generally colorful and flashy to attract the attention of the fish the fishermen are chasing. These flies were extremely popular throughout Europe, Britain and American but began losing popularity in the Americas in the late 1800s. According to Vliet (1994), these flashy flies were replaced with more natural flies as a response to the introduction of German brown trout, which are a much more selective fish, to America in 1883.

Dry Flies were one of these more natural flies that the brown trout preferred. These flies are fished on the surface of the water to imitate the flies that either emerged from the river or flies that were outside the water and either landed or fell into the water. “Dry flies make up the largest and most diverse category of fly patterns” (Vliet, 1994, pg. 92). Dry flies come from two main sources: terrestrials and aquatic based. Terrestrial dry flies imitate insect and even small animals that come from land and fall into the water. These insects and animals include grasshoppers, crickets, beetles, ants, cicadas, mice, and many others. Aquatic based flies imitate insects that originate under water as midges, larva, and nymphs. These underwater insects move through the water column towards the surface and once they reach the surface they hatch through their outer shells or husk and than are able to fly off. As a result of this process dry fly imitations consist of patterns that represent flies as they are hatching from their husks as well as the adults that have shed their husk that are sitting on the surface to dry out so they can fly off.

Although dry flies are a significant part of a fishes diet, the underwater insects such as nymphs, midges, and fresh water shrimp make up a much greater portion of their diets. As previously mentioned nymphs and midges are the insects that migrate to the surface to hatch but these insects spend a significant amount of time under water. For instance damsel nymphs that inhabit lakes and ponds can live under water in the nymphal stage for up to four years (Chan, 2013). Midges go through three stages after hatching from their eggs. These stages include Larva and pupa, which are the aquatic stages, than the reach adult hood as a dry fly. The aquatic stages of midges, like nymphs, are fed on more by fish than the adult midges. The last sources of food for fish are aquatic insects that live in the water through out the whole life cycle. These insects include fresh water shrimp, aquatic worms and leeches. There is one other under water food source that is fished like a nymph or midge but not related what so ever and is provided by the fish themselves. This food source is fish eggs, fish are opportunistic and will eat the eggs of fish of other species and even the eggs of their own species.

If these eggs do not get eaten, they than hatch into minnows that become a food source for just about every fish that is bigger than them. Along with minnow, fish will feed on other big food sources such as frogs, leeches, and crawfish. Fly-fishermen had realized this and develop flies, called streamers, to represent them. Although these food sources are not as numerous as the insects that are in and on top of the water, they do provided a large meal for these fish. Because of the size of these meals they become a very productive fly because calorie for calorie it is less work than eating hundreds of small insects.

Although the fly seems to define fly-fishing, it is not the only aspect of the technique to evolve over time. According to Aelian (200 A.D), The rods that the Macedonian’s used were six feet in length with line the same length as the rod. Up until Thomas Barker, Colonel Robert Venables, Isaac Walton, Charles Cotton, and Rickard Franck were prompted to write about fly-fishing after the English Civil War in 1651 information on rods were none existent. In the text of these gentlemen’s writing they had suggested that cane or hazel was used for construction of fly rods. Also in this text Charles Cotton suggested a single-handed rod of eighteen feet but at the time this was unusual and most rods would have been shorter (Dr. Herd, 1993-2005). In the latter Half of the eighteenth century, segmented rods from twelve to seventeen feet long came into existence. At this time rods were made of combinations of materials such as ash, willow, hickory, hazel, and on occasion bamboo. During the early 1900’s a gentleman by the name of Lee Wulff would argue the point of shorter rods and be a leading cause for single-handed rods to evolve to a sub ten-foot length. The short rod became the norm in America with rods being as short as four feet three inches in some cases. In the latter 1940’s the fiberglass rod became into existence with very little acceptance until the early to mid 50’s. The fiberglass rod was soon followed by the creation of the carbon fiber rod in 1976. The bamboo and fiberglass rods can still be found in fishermen’s hands to this day but the much more popular carbon fiber rod rules the water these days.

Along with rods, fly lines and reels have evolved greatly since the beginning of fly-fishing. Fly lines were originally made of braided horsehair and during the seventeenth century was substituted at times for a hair/silk blends or pure silk and generally one to two time the length of the rod (Dr. Herd, 1993-2005). Up until the Industrial revolution fly lines were hand braided but because of the ability to create new machines mas produced tapered lines soon hit the market. During the 1930 a man name A.H.E Wood invented the greased line which revolutionized salmon fishing (Dr.Herd, 1993-2005). In 1949 nylon fly lines with a PVC coating that appeared on the market for ever changing fly line and giving the bases of the fly lines in use today. Right around the year 1750, the multiplier reel came into existence that allowed fishermen to use longer lines and reel them up on a thin spindle in the middle of the reel. This reel left a lot to be desired due to their weak components that would ware quickly if put under any strain. Between the years 1900 to 1950, the Hardy Perfect and the Malloch Sun and Planet reels marked a turning point in reel design with a narrow high walled drum with a variable drag system and were a great improvement from the Multiplier reel. Once World War II had hit the quality of fly reels decreased drastically until into the sixties. During the eighties was the last big revolution in reel design when disc drags and interchangeable spools came into existence.

Fly fishing constantly developed from it inception with the Macedonian people to recent day. All aspects of fly-fishing from flies to tackle have under gone numerous developmental stages. These stages have allowed individual to come in and develop products for the better. Although we have reached what seems to be the pinnacle of fly fishing evolution, there will always be room for development.

References:

A fly fishing History. (1993-2005). Retrieved from

<http://www.flyfishinghistory.com/contents.htm>

Vliet, John Van (1994) The Art of Fly Tying pg. 76-77, 92-93, 104-105

Chan, Brian (2013) Fly Rod & reel: Damsels in Distress Pg. 6-8