

Goodbye, Armand



I can't recall exactly when we first met. It was likely at a meeting of United Fly Tyers, or maybe at a sportsmen's show, some 50 years ago. I was a kid. I may have looked up from my Thompson A vise and seen a short, clean-shaven man with jet-black hair, keenly watching my dubbing technique, my fingers turning tiny ropes of silky underfur from muskrats I had trapped, around a size 12 bronze Mustad nymph hook.

Armand Courchaine was roughly a decade older. We were both spawn of French-Canadian immigrants who had fled rural poverty in the St. Lawrence Valley a century earlier to work the thundering looms in the cavernous cotton mills of Fall River, Massachusetts, on the hills overlooking the Taunton River estuary. I had some Shanty Irish mixed in, I guess, for entertainment value.

Several years after we met, in the early 1970s, Armand became president of United Fly Tyers; I found myself serving as his vice-president. I wasn't yet 20. Most of us came to the pre-meeting tying session with our tools and materials neatly displayed in one of those clear plastic sewing cases from the five-and-dime. Armand came with an old vise, a bobbin, some thread and tinsel and scraps of bucktail in a paper shopping bag.

Armand was a master electrician. At the time he was working on nuclear submarines at the Navy base in New London, Connecticut. He made the southward 75-mile commute daily. On the second Tuesday of each month I'd drive down to his house in a sprawling cookie-cutter subdivision in Somerset and wait for him to arrive from work. He would hastily change his clothes, clear the passenger seat of a large bale of baby diapers so I'd have a place to sit, and off we'd head in the opposite direction, as Armand wolfed a sandwich for dinner, north to downtown Boston, where our UFT meetings were held above an cobblestone street up a narrow staircase in a room over an Italian restaurant. (I know, shades of the *Sopranos*.)

"How do you even know which street to turn on?" I once asked him

jokingly about his subdivision home. “It’s a wonder you don’t get lost!” “Ya know,” he replied, keeping his eyes on the road and giving me that impish grin of his. “Don’t tell anyone but I have gotten lost a few times.”

Armand’s mother and father were both deaf. He was a lone child and the family was poor. When his father was called to work at the mill on Saturday, he would rise early and drive Armand to an area fishing spot—South Watuppa Pond, Segregansett River, Coles River, Rivers, Rocky Run, Palmer River or Forge Pond—dropping him off around 6:30 a.m. and picking him up around 5:30 p.m.



“I have to tell you I was a happy kid,” Armand said. “As long as I had my bologna sandwich and two Oreo cookies I was happy. Life was good.”

One day in May 1955, when Armand was 11, his father dropped him at the dam called the Shad Factory on the Palmer River in Rehoboth. He was packing his eight-and-a-half foot Wright & McGill “Sweetheart” rod strung with an Ashaway Golden HDG line. He also had his trusty can of worms. Armand loved using his fly rod to lob worms into the bottom of the dam and let his baited hook drift through the rocky riffles.

“I caught nine brookies below the dam,” Armand told me. “Then I caught an American eel—I hate eels. I cut my leader.” Then he did

something that would inspire the rest of his life. He tied on a simple shad fly, popular at the time, with a slip of red duck or goose quill for a wing. A shad took it and raced downstream, back toward Mount Hope Bay.

That year young Armand started tying flies for striped bass.

He had watched Portuguese fishermen patrolling the low-lying Slades Ferry Bridge spanning the tidewater between Fall River and Somerset. They used fly rods but weren't really fly rodders. They would look at the bridge attendant's house, then run across the bridge to the other side, jump over the railing to the pilings below. Wielding heavy Orvis bamboo saltwater rods with Pflueger Medalist 1498 reels, they threw real fly lines, but their leaders were 15 feet of 30-pound steel braid.

"I was too scared so just fished off the cat walk," Armand told me. "But I had a clear view of the commercial guys. God, they were good." They perched nine to 14 feet above the water and roll cast their flies into the night. "I watched bass from three to 25 pounds shoot out from darkness to nail the fly in the flood-lit waters." The landing technique was to hold an unyielding, tight line. The idea was to grab the steel leader, hoist up the hooked fish, and then club it. The fishermen would then bring their silvery catches to Drapper's Market on Fourth Street.. They didn't have to clean the fish. They were given a slip of paper with the weight, date, etc. And they would get paid two weeks before Christmas.

"Some of these guys, like my neighbor who delivered Hood's Milk, made more money in two months selling bass than he did selling milk all year long.

"One night I was watching the circus below; it was a high flood moon tide. The guy had a big bass strike, he raised the Orvis bamboo, hit the bottom of the bridge and broke the rod. He hand-lined the fish in, clubbed it, then took the Medalist off and threw the rod in the water. Next night he came back with a nine-and-a-half-foot Shakespeare fiberglass. Money was not a problem with these guys.

Another guy showed up with a big Hardy big reel. I could hear this guy swearing: *What kind of Mickey Mouse reel is this? I tighten the drag and all I hear is a different click! The other guys were busting his balls: You should have listened and gotten a Pflueger!*”

Armand paid close attention to what they were using to lure those stripers. The hook had to be an Eagle Claw 5/0 gold bait-holding style. It was offset so they straightened it with pliers. The body was black wool, large silver tinsel rib, white bucktail tied full, with a red bucktail throat, black thread head with painted white eye and a black pupil.

When Armand met the noted saltwater fly fisher, Harold Gibbs, in 1959, he congratulated Gibbs for designing a real striped bass fly. Gibbs looked at Armand and told him: “Kid, don’t get carried away with this fly-fishing business. All you have to remember is that any fly tied with white bucktail will get you all the bass you want.”

“I was surprised to hear that,” Armand said. “I found him to be a humble human being and a real gentleman.”



In 1962 Armand enlisted in the U. S. Navy. He was stationed in Boston at the Chelsea Naval Shipyard. He read that the legendary Swiss angler and hotelier Charles Ritz was going to be kicking off a promotional tour of America in behalf of the French tackle maker, Pezon et Michel, and that Ritz would, naturally, be staying at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel at the junction of Arlington and Newbury Streets. Unannounced, Armand showed up at the Ritz in his dress whites, asked which way to the presidential suite, and hit the elevator button. The door opened right in the suite. And standing there was the dapper Ritz himself. Armand simply introduced himself as “a fly fisherman, Mr. Ritz, and a big fan of your high-speed, high-line technique.” Minutes later, Ritz and his butler, with an armload of rods, Seaman Courchaine in tow, were marching across the street to the Boston Public Garden, where the diminutive and wiry Charles, then in his 70s, put on a dazzling personal casting exhibition, throwing darts for the kid from Fall River.

I never asked Armand if Ritz, who was known to have a mischievous streak, nailed one of the swans.

JOSEPH W. BROOKS, JR.
2004 PRINCE GEORGE ROAD
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA 23225
PLEASE REPLY TO P. O. BOX 8958

May 30th, 1965

Mr. Armand J. Courchaine
338 Bedford St.,
Fall River,
Mass.

Dear Armand:

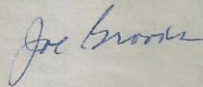
Have your letter and here goes -

Spinmaster make a very good rod for striped bass. It is 9 foot long with slow action, they also have a 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ footer ~~11 $\frac{1}{2}$~~ with slow action, a t ing needed for throwing the slow moving, wind resistant bugs and big streamers and bucktails. Either of these rods will do a good job for you and I have just recently picked these rods and tapers out for them. They will need a GAF or a GAAF line, the latter best in the wind.

You can write Julius Davis, Spinmaster Rod Co., 7701 N. W. 54th St., Miami, 33144, Fla.

I have fished Bermuda a lot and if you go back and wish to fly fish for bonefish see Pete Perinchief, Fishing Information Bureau, on Front St., Hamilton. Pete knows this fishing backwards and will be happy to tell you where to go - tell him I sent you. Whale Bay is very good as are many small bays around the Island, almost anyplace where there is shallow water and sandy bottoms you can find bonefish. They seem very shy there and you need to creep up on them.

Sincerely,



In recent years I'd hear from Armand from time to time, usually with a story from his past and nearly always accompanied by a heartfelt comment about how proud he was to have followed my magazine work over the years and now my book publishing efforts. He was thrilled to learn that I had been hired by the grand-nephews of the late Joe Brooks to research the great angler's life for a documentary video. Brooks was Armand's hero—his Everyman role model. Thus followed a flood of recollections and a copy of a letter Brooks had written Armand in 1965, which he cherished. He always signed his letters to me: Old Friend, Armand. Almost, as if, somehow, I would forget. Once Armand

befriended you, you were a friend for life.

Yesterday, Armand Courchaine died. He was 76. He had contracted Covid-19 sometime in early March, was quarantined at his home in Marlborough, Massachusetts, and then hospitalized in late March. He was put on a ventilator to breathe. Last week he showed signs of rallying. Over the weekend his respiratory condition worsened. The doctors had done all they could.



When I think of Armand, I think of him as a kind and unassuming mentor, always with time to show anyone interested how to tie flies, how to tie knots, how to cast. He loved teaching young people, especially. He loved his old bamboo rods and his beat-up Shakespeare Wonder Rods from the 1960s. Hell, he was still fishing the very same rods I used to watch him pull out of his trunk nearly a half-century ago, on top of the spare tire, rigged and ready to go, in the sudden event of a passing bass pond.

For years Armand organized a day of fly tying each spring at the historic

Wayside Inn, built in 1716, in Sudbury, Massachusetts (yes, *that* Wayside Inn). He'd take up a collection from the volunteer fly tiers and buy trout to stock in a small pond on the property, where anyone was welcome to fish, catch and release, please.

Longfellow's protagonist was a musical magician with a Stradivarius violin. You, Armand, were the pied piper of that little pond, and your magic wand was whatever worn and warped rod you happened to be waving. Thank you for the music.

Goodbye, Armand.

Old Friend,
Tom

From Tales of a Wayside Inn

And when he played, the atmosphere
Was filled with magic, and the ear
Caught echoes of that Harp of Gold,
Whose music had so weird a sound,
The hunted stag forgot to bound,
The leaping rivulet backward rolled,
The birds came down from bush and tree,
The dead came from beneath the sea,
The maiden to the harper's knee!
The music ceased; the applause was loud,
The pleased musician smiled and bowed;
The wood-fire clapped its hands of flame,
The shadows on the wainscot stirred,
And from the harpsichord there came
A ghostly murmur of acclaim,
A sound like that sent down at night
By birds of passage in their flight,
From the remotest distance heard.

~Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1863



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