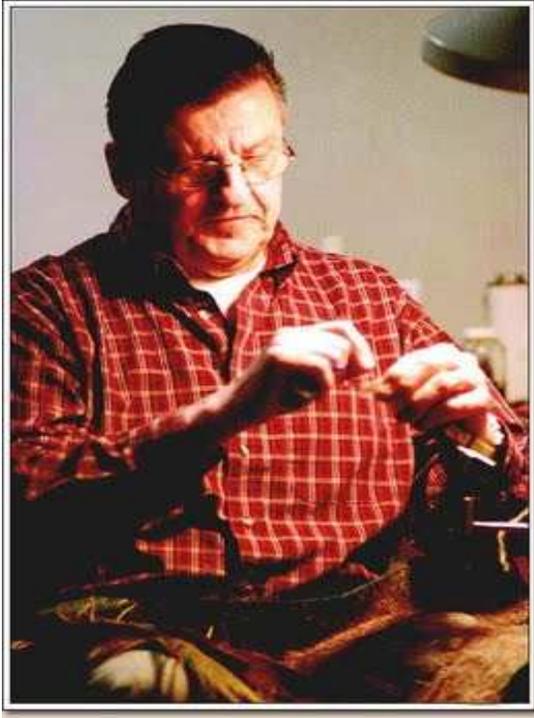


Jerry Regan



Jerry Regan is a Michigan original — as authentic as Mackinac Island Fudge or an Adams tied with muskrat dubbing. A third-generation Au Sable River fly tier, he embraces the history of the region in the flies he ties, and the memories he freely shares about the people and fishery that defined the Grayling area.

But Jerry is more than an endless source of Michigan fly pattern history and amusing anecdotes. He is a true working tier – the kind of guy that isn't intimidated by orders for a hundred dozen Hendricksons. He also is a top-notch guide working both the Au Sable and Manistee rivers.

Having been literally born into the cradle of Michigan fly fishing, his observations are as

true as the model-perfect bend on a Mustad 94840 — and occasionally as pointed as the business end of one.

Jerry grew up at the elbow of his grandfather Fred Carr, a stalwart of the Grayling fish hatchery, and also learned the craft of tying from his uncle Ralph Carr. He was further steeped in the Au Sable style by legends like Earl Madsen, Jay and Ted Stephan, Hans Petersen, Ernie Borchert, Aggie Bugby, Marion Birch and the Wakelys.

But, he points out, his only true “fishing lesson” came from his grandmother, Gwen Carr — a gifted fly fisher in her own right.

“We were fishing for bluegill up at KP Lake,” Jerry reflects. “And, like a kid wants to do, I was throwing casts all over the place. My grandmother walked up to me and said, 'Boy! You put that fly down on the water and leave it there!'”

Such sagacious instruction certainly stuck; but like any youngster, Jerry didn't always recognize the genius that surrounded him — or the value of the more-subtle lessons being taught.

“I was in my 30s before I really understood what I saw,” Jerry says with a shake of his head.

But, he learned a lot simply by absorption. His days as a young tier included going with his grandfather to collect materials — a process that did not involve catalogs, credit cards or stores with aisle upon aisle of pre-packaged goods. Rather, they would make stops at local farms to pick up rooster capes. The odyssey also brought with it a first-class education in the handling and dyeing of fur and feathers.

“Deer hair is the predominant material in Au Sable River flies,” Jerry points out, noting that the use of the material could almost be considered a “style” of the region's flies. “One of the old guys told me I would be a lifetime learnin' how to tie flies and another lifetime learning to collect the materials.

“There was no money,” he continues. “You saw a lot of flies that were painted, because all they had was black and white thread ... and most of them just had black. It was very isolated back in those days.”

One thing that stands out from the period that would shiver the timbers of most modern tiers is that the hackles were often trimmed to size.

“Of course,” Jerry says with a trademark chuckle, “you've got to remember that back then a small fly probably was a 10.”

Following the nod of his elders, Jerry didn't have a fly-tying vise until he was in his late teens. “Earl Madsen didn't use a vise,” Jerry recounts. “He had a pliers-like tool that he used.”

In keeping with that tradition, Jerry eschews most convenience items. He does not use a whip finisher, and rarely even employs hackle pliers. His “bobbin” is a simple thread-holding mechanism of his own design.

“For every tool you've got,” he says, “you'll spend time looking for it. I don't ever set my shears down, and I finish my flies by hand.”

The reference to “shears” rather than scissors comes easily to Regan, who owns and runs a barbershop shop in Swartz Creek near Flint.

“Most of my barbershop customers will tell you I'm a fly tier,” Jerry laughs, pointing to his Regal vise mounted beside his barber's chair. Whenever he is not trimming hair, he is turning out flies by the dozen to fulfill orders to several shops around the state.

Predictably, Jerry does not tie rotary (“There's a lot more to trout flies than going around the hook,” he observes.) He clearly would have been just as comfortable tying in the 1940s as he is today.

His interest in preserving the patterns traditional to his hometown didn't take hold until he returned from a tour in the U.S. Navy in 1963.

“The flies I had grown up with were disappearing,” he explains. “There was a lot of experimenting in the 30s, 40s and 50s, but as the tiers of that era passed away, those patterns could not be found.”

He is convinced that the reason for the lack of notoriety for Michigan flies is that unlike the Catskills and Western Meccas like Montana and Idaho, the Grayling area was not big money country. Early guides relied on one or two wellheeled clients to keep them afloat, and thus the wares of the area never got the widespread acclaim that the eastern and western patterns did.

“The explosion sort of passed right over us,” he shrugs. “There was a big industry in the Catskills, and then the western states — but it never really landed here.”

Most of the tiers and early guides, he relates were simply trying to find gainful employment after the timber industry fizzled out.

Jerry didn't begin tying commercially until the early 1970s, and as soon as his reputation spread, so too did the patterns of his youth. Today, many of the flies pioneered by

Madsen and others are the staple of his repertoire.

“I’m one of those guys that’s pretty particular about what I tie,” Jerry says with a broad grin. “I do what I do, and I don’t stray away from it.”

And, quite frankly, he sees no reason to. The flies are still just as effective as when they were developed — a testament to the careful work that went into them.

“You know, Earl Madsen collected aquatics for Justin and Fanny Leonard,” Jerry emphasizes, alluding to the state’s famous husband-and-wife entomologists. “Imagine those conversations! The things he learned were applied to his flies.”

To make his point, Jerry pulls down a framed collection of Madsen originals. “Look at the egg sack,” he says, fingering the orange-yellow fibers at the back of a large stonefly. “Everyone else tied them around the hook — he tied them off the back, behind the fly.”

Madsen, the area’s original commercial tier, holds a very special place in Jerry’s heart, as evidenced by the reverence in his voice when the name is spoken. That reverence made him reluctant to begin his own guiding career.

“Well, when you looked around and you saw guys like Madsen, or Jay and Ted Stephan on the water — why would you want to get in their way,” he asks. “And you’d see Jimmy Wakely go by on the river ... and he was really something to see.”

And, it wasn’t until those legends cut back or left the water entirely that he allowed his own career to take off. But Jerry doesn’t reserve his admiration for those legends of yesteryear — he feels strongly about the many gifted tiers and anglers he sees today.

“We’re not lacking for any talent in Michigan,” he assures. “You look around and you’ll see some very good tiers around this state.”

As astute on the water as he is at the bench, Jerry notes that all successful anglers share a common trait.

“They pay attention to details,” he says. “And the funny thing is that the details they pay attention to might be different than the ones that I pay attention to, or that you pay attention to ... but they pay attention, and it works for them.”

They spend time on the water, too, something not lost on Regan.

“There is no substitute for spending time on the water,” Jerry states with a definitive tone. “People will tell me they want to catch big fish, or this and that, and I tell ‘em, ‘go up to Grayling for three weeks and fish hard every day. You’re going to have some great fishing ... and you’re also gonna’ have some days that just stink.’”

To make his point, he opens up a photo album and shows me a brown trout of about 8 pounds to wet my appetite for the story to come.

“I was at an awards dinner,” he started. “And of course everyone was having a good time, but I really wanted to be out fishing. I had a feeling that big things were going to happen that night and I couldn’t stand not to be on the water — so I slipped out and went fishing when they started into the award presentations.

“Later that night, one of my friends came by to drop off a plaque that he had picked up

for me at the dinner when they realized I was gone. I felt a little guilty, but couldn't resist showing him the award I'd already brought home!"

He chuckles recalling the moment.

Several more tales and belly laughs followed as we talked deep into the night. The homespun wisdom and wonderful anecdotes just seem to roll out as effortlessly as the countless flies off his vise. And it doesn't take a visitor long to realize just how rare such authenticity is. In a sport too often dominated by self-promoting posers, Jerry cuts through the mix like a cool upstream breeze scattering spinners.

As we parted ways with a handshake and a final laugh, I thought back to a comment Jerry made while discussing trout flies. In a metaphorical sense, the words sum up the man at least as well as they do his flies.

"You know," he explained. "A good trout fly is not all that pretty. They're not colorful like a salmon or a steelheadfly. They're not fancy like that at all. But, a good, well-tied trout fly is really something to see."

Especially when it's a Michigan original.

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