

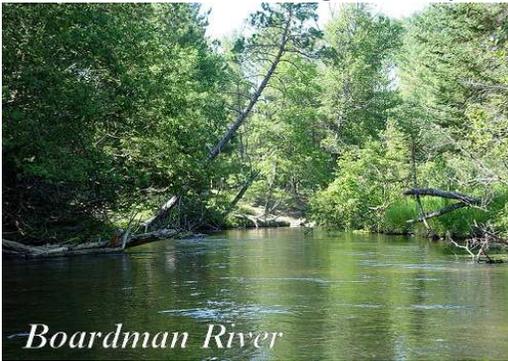
“The Adams:” History Revisited

By: Tom Deschaine

The Adams fly requires no introduction; it is probably the most famous fly in all of history. It's carried in the fly boxes of fishermen in every country where trout are found. It would probably be an understatement to claim that the Adams fly, with all its variations, has collectively caught more trout than any other fly pattern in existence. It can be used in a variety of waters, and, with its brownish-grayish coloration it imitates generally acceptable food items found almost anywhere in trout fishing environments. Most fishermen would agree that if they were allowed to use only one dry fly pattern --- it would be the Adams (or some variation there of).

The story begins just 12 miles south of Traverse City, Michigan, off County Road 611 in the small township of Mayfield. It was here, in 1922, at the Mayfield Pond where Leonard Halladay created the famous Adams fly.

Between 1847 and 1906 the lumbering industry brought merchants and settlers to the woods of northern Michigan. Many small towns centering around the logging industry began to spring up. Most of these, now vanished towns, were founded on the banks of the major rivers like the Au Sable, the Manistee and the Boardman. The small village of Mayfield was located near Swainston Creek, which flowed into the Boardman River over a mile away. Although not a major logging town, Mayfield was still tightly tied to the industry having been the home to three major saw mills and a gristmill.



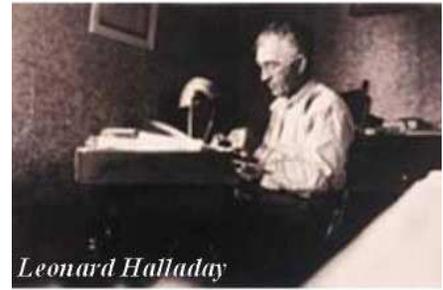
Leonard Halladay (1872-1952) was originally from New York but his family, lured by the lumber industry, migrated to Mayfield when Leonard was just a young boy. As a growing young man he would see the last of the grayling and brook trout whose demise was brought about by over fishing, and habitat destruction from the logging industry. It was around this time when Michigan began introducing the German brown trout to its rivers.

By the age of 17 he had started tying flies and was already acknowledged as an accomplished fly fisherman. He worked as the plant operator for the gristmill that been converted into a hydroelectric plant to produce electricity for the town of Mayfield. Around the turn of the century Leonard and his wife Rilla (Mary) ran the Mayfield Hotel, providing rooms and food for the lumberjacks and tourist in the area.

Along with tying flies Mr. Halladay's many interest were hunting, raising hunting dogs and raising chickens to produce his own hackle. He was a man short of stature and compensated for it by walking fast and taking long strides. He also had the interesting habit of taking a 20 minute nap after lunch, no matter where he was.

As the logging industry waned, the Boardman River was rapidly beginning to attract large numbers of fishermen from the surrounding states. At this time Leonard started a guide and livery service catering to the visiting fishermen.

Mr. Halladay guided and fished with many people, among them was a man by the name of Mr. Charles F. Adams, and Lon B. Adams, his son. Both were fly fishermen, and attorneys from Lorain, Ohio. Later in life, Charles went on to become a judge. The two men summered at Arbutus Lake just north of Mayfield and loved to fish the Boardman River. Both men knew and fished with Leonard Halladay, on a regular basis.



The historically accepted story goes on to say that on a summer's day in 1922 at the impoundment of Swainston Creek known as the Mayfield Pond, Mr. Halladay said: "The first Adams I made I handed to Mr. Adams who was fishing in a small pond in front of my house, to try on the Boardman that evening. When he came back next morning, he wanted to know what I called it. He said it was a 'knock-out' and I said we would call it the Adams, since he had made the first good catch on it."

What was Halladay's motivation for tying that particular design? Most historians say that Mr. Adams, literally, brought him some of the insects that he wanted Halladay to imitate when he designed the fly. Others chronicle that Mr. Adams did not produce any insects, but rather described the insect to Halladay with specific directions as to how the fly was to be designed. If this is true, that would make Mr. Adams the real creator of the fly. Although these different versions cast some doubt as to who first created or designed the fly there is no question that Mr. Leonard Halladay first tied it. To further add to the controversy; Mr. Lon Adams (son of Charles) wrote a note to a friend, years later, claiming, "I'm real proud of the fact that back in 1923 I designed the Adams fly and had it named after me by Leonard Halladay, the original tyer." We will probably never know what his motivation was in writing that note to his friend, but historically there is no support for his claim. Leonard Halladay, himself, did in fact claim that he had designed the fly.

The many arguments, controversies and debates over the design of the original historical pattern are without merit. On several occasions Mr. Halladay, himself, openly discussed the original pattern with others: "Body: of gray wool yarn. Tail: two strands from a golden pheasant neck feather. Hackle: mixed, from neck feathers of Barred Plymouth Rock and Rhode Island Red rooster. Wings: narrow neck feathers of Barred Plymouth Rock rooster, tied 'advanced' forward and in a semi-spent manner."

Adams (Historically Correct Pattern):

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Hook: | Dry Fly Size: #12 or #14 (The manufacture of the hook is not known. Most fly historians agree on the sizes of the hooks.) |
| Thread: | Gray (Most historians agree on this, although some insist that it was black). |
| Tail: | Two strands from a golden pheasant neck feather. |
| Wings: | Narrow neck feather of Barred Plymouth Rock rooster, tied 'advanced' forward and in a semi-spent manner. |
| Body: | Gray Wool Yarn |
| Hackle: | Mixed, from the neck feathers of Barred Plymouth Rock and Rhode Island Red roosters. |



Tied to the original Halladay pattern using gray wool yarn.

It is safe to assume that Halladay tied and sold the fly and also shared it with the customers he guided. The fly gained popularity quite quickly. Although we do not have an exact date or location; within just a couple of years the first modification of the Adams took place. Tiers began replacing the gray wool yarn with muskrat fur. For all practical purposes the color is the same but the floatability increased. The wings, hackle and tail remained unchanged.



Tied with muskrat fur.



Virtually no difference in color.

As the fly continued to grow in popularity its reputation was spreading further and further from its point of origin. Some time in the late 20's or very early 30's the Catskill tiers influenced the next modifications: the wings were pulled back from the 'advanced' position and they went from 'semi-spent' to upright and divided. The body was well trimmed and tapered in the typical Catskill style.



The taking on of the Catskill influence.

The reform of the tail from two golden pheasant tippets to a tail of mixed grizzly and brown hackle fibers is the last major metamorphosis of the Adams. We do not have an exact date or the name of the tier who first altered the tail. We are not even sure from which part of the country the modification started. What we do know is that the original tail began to disappear and be replaced with the new material as early as 1938.



Modern day rendition.

Tiers from years ago observed a strict code of pattern ethics. Modifications to fly patterns were slow to change. The Adams had already been modified, much too fast. A burning desire to retain some semblance of the original pattern caused the tail to survive in some fly shop up until the early 1960's. To my knowledge, no one ties the fly with golden pheasant tippets today, except for nostalgic reasons.

Historically, the Adams was and is important. Not only for its universal ability to catch fish, but also because it arrived on the scene when American fly tying was coming into its own. We were beginning to break away from the classic British patterns. Styles and patterns were being altered, created and adapted for the different types of fishing situations found in this country. American fly fishing authors came into their own, flooding the market with books on casting, fishing techniques and fly patterns.

Leonard Halladay not only created the Adams fly but is attributed with the development of the Female Adams, as well. His vice produced other famous creations of the time including Halladay's Hair Stone, Halladay's Michigan Caddis and the Dr. Kirgin.

History is not always as clear and uncluttered as we would like it to be. In this article I've attempted to provide historically correct information to you on both Leonard Halladay and the creation of the first Adams fly. Although there are few if any, surviving original Adams flies (that can be supported with documentation), I have done my best to try to re-construct what the original fly, and its transitional cousins looked like. I hope you have enjoyed the effort.

See you on the water.....



Tom Deschaine is a retired biology teacher from Michigan with over 25 years experience on the water and at the bench.

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