

Robert Smock, Sr.



Robert Smock, Sr. (1927- 2005)

Life-long Grayling resident, Bob Smock, Sr., started fly-fishing over sixty years ago. A few years ago, while I was video taping Bob for a fly-fishing historical documentary, Bob related how he started fly-fishing and tying flies under the tutelage of the famous Michigan game warden and fishing guide, his friend, Clarence Roberts. Bob said

that around age eleven, he and a friend were drowning worms on the Au Sable River one day, when they saw Clarence net a large, beautiful brown trout on one of his famous flies. Noticing the youngsters admiring his catch, Clarence called Bob over, and after removing the fly from the huge fishes jaw, and cutting the fly from his leader, he handed it to Bob and told him, “son, now go home and tie some like this and then come back and catch some trout.” That kind gesture started Bob Smock, Sr. on a lifetime of fly tying, fly-fishing and guiding. As Bob put it, he ‘then bugged Clarence and a few others in Grayling to teach him how to tie and fish.’ Bob would pass that same courtesy on himself a few thousand times to other upcoming fly fishers through out his own lifetime.

Over his sixty-year fly-tying/fishing career, Bob would come to rub elbows with some of the most famous fly-fishers and fly-tiers of Michigan. He could count people like Fred Bear, whom he worked for at Fred’s famous bow factory, Clarence Roberts, George Mason, one of the founding fathers of Trout Unlimited, Ernie Borchers, and many others, as his personal friends. His little shop, called Bob’s Fly & Hackle, tucked into a section of his garage behind his house in Grayling, ended up being a ‘must stop’ destination for thousands of fly fishers over the years on their trips to the Au Sable, Manistee and the other northern rivers. The walls of his shop are covered with a treasure trove of his personal pictures of some of the most famous and well-known fly fishers in Michigan. It is practically a museum. One of my favorites is a close-up portrait of Fred Bear threading a fly onto his leader, while fishing the Au Sable with Bob. Bob relates, “That if Fred were to be asked for the truth, he would most likely admit that he loved to fly-fish more than he loved to bow hunt.” Bob told of how he and another Bear Archery employee snuck out early one day during the Hendrickson hatch to fish their favorite section of the Holy Waters. While they were on the river, Fred appeared around the bend with his fly rod in hand casting to trout. They asked him ‘what the heck he was doing there?’ Fred answered with a smile, “As far as I know, I still own Bear Archery, what the heck are you two guys doing here?”

Each year Bob tied over 600 dozen flies in that now famous shop, sending them to lucky fly shops and individual customers all over the State of Michigan and the country. Bob is known for having the special knack to be able to tie flies that so closely resembled the

actual insect, that they were rarely shunned by the Au Sable Rivers finicky trout. His flies are treasured by knowing fly fishers. Many of those fishers closely guard and cherish the 'Smock' creations in their fly boxes. Visitors to Bob's shop were always welcome to ask questions and to watch Bob tie flies. He was always quick with friendly conversation, his easy good humor, and his down-home banter. He freely shared his sixty-odd years of fly-fishing and fly-tying knowledge with any visitors. Over the decades, Bob has been responsible for directing many newbie's down the right path when they began their tying careers. During our taping session, which lasted about three hours, Bob showed Todd Fuller and I many of his techniques, and he shared many of his fly patterns and stories with us. Starting around 1999, Bob started putting together a shadow box of the most famous flies of the historically rich North-Central Michigan Rivers. He was famous for tying these flies as their creators had tied them, and for continuing the legacy of those fly originators. Some of the flies featured in that shadow box collection, all of them beautifully tied by Bob, are the Clarence Roberts Mayfly, the Ernie Borchers Special, Earl Madsen's Skunk, and Bob's own Sulphur Dun and Deer fly, among others. On my copy, which holds a special place on the wall of my Hemlock Hills cabin near Fairview, Bob signed his name for me next to his Sulphur Dun. I am very proud to own that wonderful collection of Michigan Fly Tying artwork, because not only is Bob Smock to be credited with helping to perpetuate the rich lore and history of Michigan's fly tying icons, but, he himself is well cemented in this State's fly tying and fly fishing legacy. Bob has been, and always will be, one of the pre-eminent people of this astute heritage.

Bob Smock, Sr. passed away peacefully in his sleep on March 24, 2005. He left behind his wife Barbara, seven children, 21 grandchildren, 16 great-grandchildren and thousands of friends and admirers. The whole Michigan fly-fishing community will miss the good-natured chuckle of the man from the 'Big' little fly-shop in Grayling. Many of us will remember his stories of fishing the river with George Mason, Fred Bear, Sailor Bill, Earl Madsen, and Clarence Roberts. Many more will remember, albeit with a tear in their eye, the man who perhaps started them in fly tying. Bob Smock, Sr. may have left our temporal world, but his legacy will live on in the memories of many of us who have crossed paths with him, either in his famous fly shop, or perchance, while wading the waters of his beloved Au Sable.

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Jerry Kunnath

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