

# back cast



There is an old fly rod leaning in the corner of my office behind a hurriedly-rolled, oversized map of the state. It has rested there in two pieces, disjoined at its tarnished, metal ferrules, for two years.

The rod is 7 ½ feet long, made of fiberglass and is the color of newspaper that has been out in the sun too long. Four of its seven line guides are missing, while the cork handle, from years of handling with sweaty, dirty hands, I'm guessing, resembles the high traffic path of old wooden floors. And, interestingly, instead of being round, this rod is square like the pliable, wooden ribs of a homemade kite.

While I haven't given the rod two thoughts in two years, I picked it up the other day and Googled the name of the rod company, Wright & McGill, which is written in red cursive script just above the cork handle. What I learned without getting too obsessed during the search, was the rod was likely made in the 1950s or 1960s, and cost about what you'd pay for a case of soda pop today.

It's not a collector's piece, not something you'd hang on the wall or put in a glass case, but the sort of rod you might pick up at a garage sale, false cast a time or two between customers rummaging through old plates and chipped coffee mugs, then flinch at the asking price of \$2.

The rod was given to me by a friend who, I assume, thought I'd welcome a piece of angling history that dates back roughly to about the time I was born. I did appreciate the gesture, and left it in my office thinking that one day I'd get back to it and maybe learn a little something. It took two years, but here I am.

While I guessed there was a story behind the rod, I was hoping for a tale of fishing adventure, or at least something a little colorful. Like, maybe, the rod's owner, driving a derelict pickup



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with a camper shell mounted on the back and a bird dog riding shotgun, traveled America's back roads in search of solitude, scenery and fish. He ate what he caught, tied his own flies from materials collected from road kill, liked the company of his dog, but not people, couldn't remember the last time he slept in a real bed, but could name the best trout streams and bluegill ponds between Missoula and Monango.

Or maybe the rod's owner wasn't some vagabond angler from who knows where, but instead a North Dakotan who didn't travel far from home, fished two or three favorite waters, and knew them well. He, too, ate what he caught, but not every night as he hardly ever skipped Thursday nights at the local diner because that's when they served chicken fried steak. None of his friends fished, which was fine with him

because he liked being on the water alone, especially early in the morning when the fish moved into the shallows within casting distance. But, eventually, his eyes and hands didn't work in concert like they once did, making it nearly impossible to tie on a new fly, especially the wee insect imitations he used so often to fool panfish. One day, without any remorse or celebration, he leaned the old rod against a tree and walked away.

The rod's story, unfortunately, is much more prosaic. My friend found it on a campground picnic table with some other rods too rundown to fish. Yesterday's trash, it turns out, that someone was too lazy to throw away.

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