

Valley Angler Made In America? By Bill Thompson

This past weekend there was a young man in the shop looking at the fly rods. I asked if I could help him and in the ensuing conversation he told me that he was surprised to learn that there were still fly rods made in the United States. I explained that despite the onslaught of Asian made rods the finest rods in the world are still manufactured right here in America. Scott, Sage, Orvis, Winston, Loomis and St Croix still continue to make rods in the U. S. A.

It is true that some of these companies do import a few of their low end rods. Orvis, Winston and St. Croix all offer entry level rods made overseas. Loomis is owned by Shimano of Japan, one the world's largest manufacturers of fishing tackle. They also have a pretty good reputation for high quality bicycle parts. Loomis in addition to its collection of fine rods is also one of the world's largest makers of graphite golf club shafts. The Sage Rod Company owns Redington which imports all of its rods. Scott is the only company left with no Asian connection. In fairness there are several small companies that claim to produce their rods in the U.S., however just about all of them use imported parts of some kind.

Redington was perhaps the first successful importer of offshore made fly rods. When Temple Fork Outfitters entered the market the die was cast as far as expectance by U. S. consumers of Asian made rods. Perhaps because of the company's association with Lefty Kreh, one of America's best known fly fishermen, TFO has earned an excellent reputation as a quality made rod at very reasonable prices. TFO rods are made in their own factory in Korea. Because of this they have been able to maintain a higher level of quality control than other companies who manufacture in China.

Today it is fair to say that Asian made rods dominate entry level rod sales. In some cases these companies are also achieving great success in the mid range price level as well. It is hard to argue the superiority of a \$300 U. S. Made rod over that of a \$200 import. The Scott Rod Company no longer bothers to make an entry level rod.

What all this means, I guess, depends somewhat on your politics. Most of us

make a pretense of supporting U. S. Companies, but in the end seal the deal by voting with our pocket book and purchasing the cheaper made goods. Let's face it, if we all brought American there would be no Wal-Mart.

Depending on your point of view this is not necessarily a bad thing. As the young man I was showing rods to last weekend pointed out, "as a family man with young children it is hard to justify buying a higher priced U. S. made rod when a lower priced one from Korea will perform nearly as well if not the same". In all honesty his point was well taken.

The influx of cheaper priced rods is certainly a plus to those just entering into the sport. No longer is it necessary to shell out big bucks to get started. One would think that this would encourage more fishermen to try the sport. And what about quality? This past year we have all read headlines about dangerous products entering the country from China.

On the other hand by buying off shore are we destroying what little is left of American industry and taking jobs from U. S. workers?

A quick trip around my shop tells the story. Once you get past the few American made rods and reels that I stock you will have a hard time finding anything else with a made in America label. I pointed out that Orvis still makes most of their rods in the U. S., but just about every other product they sell, including their reels come from China. Try to find a vest or a pair of waders made in this country. Most fly fishermen are familiar with Simms waders which are made in Montana, USA. However, Simms also sells a wide verity of soft goods, all made in China. Even the venerable Hardy Company of Great Britain has its entire line made in China. There are even bamboo rods now being imported from China. Considering the origin of the raw product used to make them I would guess there is some logic here. It is no wonder that my young customer was amazed to find that there were still a few American made rods.

For some unknown reason most fly lines are still made in the U. S., but you know that this is bound to change at some point. As for flies, the basic of all fly shops, for the most part they are all imported. Large box stores are entirely dependent on imported flies. Even small shops, that still carry some home grown flies, are dependent on the imports.

In some areas of our society brand loyalty has helped keep some American companies in business. Fierce loyalty and pride in being made in America has

done very well for the Harley-Davidson Company. Harley owners would sooner die than ride a “rice burner”. To be sure there are some flag waving, die hard fly fishers who would not be caught dead holding a “chopstick rod”. In the end though, price generally wins out.

It is not likely that much will change in the future. Imports are a fact of life. For now though, the best fly rods in the world are made right here in America. There will always be a few who value quality and craftsmanship whether or not there are enough who fall into this category remains to be seen. It would be a shame to see the end of a great American tradition.

See you on the river.