

Valley Angler
The Indelible Pflueger Medalist
by Bill Thompson

This past winter a customer and friend came in the shop and purchased a new rod. I knew that he was headed for the Bahama's for a short vacation in a few days and guessed that the rod would be used for bone fishing. I asked him if that was the case and he replied that it was. Being the good salesman I asked if he needed a reel to go with the rod. He replied that he thought that he had one that would work. In parting I asked him to bring in some pictures if he was successful.

A few weeks later he returned to the shop with a few snap shots proving that he had indeed been successful. Now if you are not familiar with bone fishing let me tell you that it is not all that easy. Bonefish have a reputation as being very spooky and it takes a perfect cast in order to get a hook up. It is what comes next that usually spells defeat for the angler. Bonefish take off at a fighting speed and are known for their long powerful runs. It is not uncommon for bone fishermen to spend several hundred dollars for a reel with a bullet proof drag system in order to take on the this powerful fish. When I looked carefully at the photos I noticed that the reel my friend had used to catch is bonefish on was an old Pflueger Medalist 1496.

Anybody who has been fly fishing for over thirty years or so probably has owned at least one of these reels. For many years they were probably the most popular reels sold in America. In all honesty I should have not been surprised that a Medalist had been up to the task of handling a bonefish. The early pioneers of flats fishing in Florida didn't have much to choose from when it came to reel selection and the Medalist was the logical selection. Guys like Joe Brooks and Ted Williams were able to catch bones and a lot of other salt water fish back in the forties and fifties with these reels. There have been countless Atlantic Salmon caught on Medalist's not to mention strippers and bluefish right here in New England. Not that long ago a Pflueger Medalist and a Fenwick rod was the finest outfit a fly fisherman could own. My first fly reel was a Pflueger Gem and I still own it and it is still as functional today as the day I received it.

The Medalist first showed up in the Pflueger catalog in 1931. The patent had been applied for in 1928 and was granted two years latter in 1930. The reel came in three different sizes: the 1492, 1494 and 1495. The left hand models were designated the 1592, 1594 and 1596. These early reels featured a bronze spindle, a round line guard and an aluminum latch plate. Six rivets surround the spool latch and the cross pillars are sculpted and riveted in place. These early reels are fairly rare and usually bring around one hundred to two hundred depending on condition. As time went on the reel continued to undergo changes. In 1938 an adjustable drag was added. In 1939 a wide frame series was added to the line. These first of these was the 1495 ½ model. In 1950 the ring line guide was replaced with a rectangular Diamolite one. The drag adjustment, latch plate and handle were now an ivory colored plastic. The sculpted pillars were changed to a

straight one and they were now screwed in place. In 1960 the six rivets were changed to three. In 1963 the ratchet could be flipped over to change the reel from right hand retrieve to left hand. In 1966 the Shakespeare Tackle Company purchased the Pflueger Company.

For a brief time a copy of the Medalist was manufactured for Orvis and called the Madison. Just about every tackle manufacturer made some kind of knock off at one time or another. I doubt that there has ever been a reel so successful and made in such numbers. In the 1980's Shakespear stopped making the reel in the United States and as far as I am concerned the reel went to hell. The new reels were made in Japan, Hong Kong and China. They continue to be manufactured today in China. The good news is that there were so many of these reels made that you can still find them on e Bay at very reasonable prices. Models from the 60's can be had for twenty to thirty-five dollars depending on condition. Those anglers that fish with bamboo and fiberglass still prize these reels and continue to fish with them. The Medalist has a connection to the Mount Washington Valley. Local angling legend Bill Franke manufactures parts for the Pflueger's in his North Conway machine shop. The operation began when Bill first designed and built a replacement foot for the old reels. The one imperfect thing about the almost perfect reel is the huge foot that comes on them. The reel seat on today's rods will not accommodate them; as a result many fishermen either filed down the foot or jammed it into the reel seat. The result was that many fine reel seats were ruined. Bill began turning out a fine aluminum foot to replace the original clunker. Bill named it the One Pfoot.

Due to the immediate success of the One Pfoot Bill started to make other parts for the old classics. Today Bill has a whole array of parts to revive your old reel and make them like new. The replacement foot comes in two sizes to accommodate the regular and half size models. Bill makes a ring style line guard to make your newer reel have the look of the older models. Add a metal latch plate cover and you will have completed the look. A new hardened chrome drag is available as well as a chrome counter balance. Bill says that the hardest part to duplicate was a replacement handle. The new handle has the amber color found on the very earliest models. Bill's attention to detail is amazing. I doubt that one in a hundred would notice that there were two different types of screws used. Bill makes both, the old screw and the new screw. Aficionados of Medalist reels have been sending their reels to Bill to be completely refitted. The practice has become known as "pimping my reel". You can check out Bill's parts on line at www.onepfoot.com. I might add that Bill makes a beautiful rod tube and his simple nail knot tier is priceless.

As I have already mentioned my first fly reel was a Gem and over the years have owned and used several Medalists. Years ago I had purchased from Bill a couple of the One Pfoots and had updated my old reels. They have been setting on a shelf in the shop for about three years. A week or so ago I had received a new line from a company who asked me field test for them. I was hunting around for a reel to spool it up on when I happened to notice an old 1494 on the shelf. I got it down and cleaned it up a bit. I added one of Bill's polished aluminum latch covers to give it some class and strung it up with the new line. An hour or so later on the Saco I hooked up to an honest twenty inch brook trout. It was a real pleasure to hear that old reel sing.

See you on the river.