

Vince Cummings

Forty years of craftsmanship

by Gregory J. Rummo

Illustrations by Edward Kenney

HIS small shop is set in the Hudson Valley at the end of a rock-strewn dirt road. A pair of rusty diesel fuel pumps no longer in use stand as mute centurions outside his front window, silent witnesses to a former occupation. Between them lies the neighborhood stray dog, Sean. The scene is out of another era, but the craftsmanship within these walls also echoes the past. Here, secluded in his workshop at Stony Point in Rockland County, amidst neat piles of cork rings, half-turned hardwood blocks, and unfinished fly rods, Vince Cummings designs and builds custom fiberglass, graphite, and boron rods in a manner steeped in the traditions of bamboo artistry.

Cummings has been designing and building fly rods for over forty years. His roots are in cane rods, fashioning both five- and six-strip models during the earlier years in an array of lengths and line sizes. He is largely self-taught and says that an early paperback published by Herter's plus a lot of determination got him started. Not being able to afford the expensive metal planing forms necessary to form

the individual bamboo segments of a bamboo rod, his first rods were fashioned on his own hand-made maple forms. At first, his rod building was a hobby. "All of a sudden I had a lot of friends," he reminisced. "Then my friends had friends, and it got to the point where I was quite busy making rods. I charged what I thought were very reasonable prices, but after a lot of work I began to realize I was working for only about fifty cents an hour."

Later, with the acquisition of bamboo blanks from Nat Uslan, another Rockland County rod builder, his hobby blossomed into a small business, and before Cummings could turn around, his cane rods were being sold throughout the New York Metropolitan area and as far north as Vermont and Maine. Vince admits that Uslan's generosity played a large part in his success.

"As time progressed I got to know and visit quite often with Nat Uslan. He is the one who makes the five-strip rods. He has equipment that is out of this world. He could really turn out those segments—there was no tomorrow! He was

really turning out some finely made rods with machines. He was the kind of man I thought the world of. I feel I owe him a lot for some of the things I know today. He was the kind of a man who, if asked a question, would have nothing to hide—he would tell you and be helpful to you. He was an outstanding and a brilliant man so I decided I would buy blanks from him. They were so reasonably priced and so well made. I still did special jobs for the fellow that wanted a hand-planed rod, but these production rods were so nice that I started a little business. I still worked for the oil company so my rod building took place evenings and weekends."

Cummings is probably best known in angling circles for his series of fiberglass fly rods whose fine quality is due to waiting for the right grade of glass to come along. His first encounter with fiberglass was years back at a sportsman's show in White Plains. Intrigued by a man at the casting pool with a fiberglass rod, he wanted to learn more about this new material. His desires led him to a small firm in Chinatown that was manufacturing a fly rod made of solid fiberglass.

"I heard about a little plant way down in lower Manhattan in Chinatown. I went down (and fortunately came out in one piece too) to find the place in a loft upstairs and I visited with two gentlemen. They had a fly rod fashioned from six sided solid fiberglass. It wouldn't have made a good buggy whip—you'd have killed the horse. To me it was unbelievable—they were pioneers in those days, and they felt that they couldn't quite get away from that six sided shape. I give them a lot of credit."

Further along in the evolution of fiberglass he recalled the first tubular blanks. "They were rather poor in quality, I could easily feel the unevenness by running the rod between my fingers."

When tubular glass blanks were finally perfected to Cumming's satisfaction, the time was right for a commitment to this new synthetic. Years of searching for the right grade

of glass for the action he desired led him to design his own mandrel specifications for the manufacturer of his fiberglass blanks. Coupled with years of prototype work, these blanks led to the creation of Cummings' classic *Ultimate* and *Superlite* series two fly rods, which combine both power and finesse.

The basic philosophy behind the design of the *Ultimate Series 300* rods is to build a fiberglass fly rod with all the classic bamboo fittings. Cummings first performs two critical hand operations on the blanks themselves prior to even beginning the actual construction. Machined ferrules are then carefully fitted to the rod sections, and he will still use nickel silver if requested. The specie cork grip is made the old fashioned way with the individual cork rings meticulously glued in place, allowed to dry, and shaped on a lathe. The reel seats are fashioned from aluminum fittings, nickel silver hoods, and either teak, rosewood, walnut or zebra wood inserts are turned from the solid hardwood blocks by Vince himself.

The chrome stainless steel guides are elegantly wrapped into a rich brown nylon, with each wrap snugged up tightly against the previous turn.

The finishing touches—six coats of varnish on each wrap, the rod's specifications, and Cummings' tri-color red, white and blue wrap on the butt section—are then applied. The end result is a rich, deep amber colored glass rod, often mistaken for bamboo. It has the power to reach out in a wind yet possesses the sensitivity to softly deliver a sparsely hackled dry fly, or to feel the often delicate take of a trout to a submerged nymph.

Cummings' *Superlite Series 400* rods are made from the same thin walled high strength fiberglass as the *Ultimate* rods, but the reel seats are of skeleton cork and the ferrules are "internal" in design, constructed from the same glass as the blank itself. In addition to reducing the overall weight of the rods, these internal ferrules impart true one-piece action to Cummings' two, three and four piece *Superlites*. He makes another series of lower priced glass rods he has dubbed the *Goldenrod Series*, constructed from

the popular "S" glass which is acclaimed by many to be close to the characteristics of graphite. Despite their trimmed price, he does not sacrifice quality and their golden glow is a pleasure to look upon.

With the introduction of graphite and more recently boron composite blanks to the fly rod manufacturing scene, Vince has responded with a complete line of graphite and graphite/boron fly rods. He feels that there is still some room for improvement in these latest two synthetics. "After all," he commented, "it took fiberglass thirty years to get where it is today."

His graphite fly rods are everything his *Ultimate* fiberglass fly rods are, i.e., fitted with all of the elegant tonkin-like fittings yet possessing the delicate power that can come only from within a graphite blank. The blanks themselves—100 percent graphite inner core with a unidirectional continuous graphite overlay—are his personal preference in the longer fly rod lengths. Cummings feels that there is definitely an edge to having a graphite rod in some instances, and he shared one of his favorite memories with me:

"I had an experience once with graphite. I started fishing with a Muddler and of course they tug, and are tough to cast. I took my 7' graphite out on a windy day on the upper Willowemoc in the Catskills on a section of the river where there was limited casting area. That graphite rod punched holes in the air like nobody's business. A little later the fish started to rise and I tried a variety of flies, but somehow, that Adams fly always seems to work so well. Anyway, I was hoping at that time (I was close to the road where the stream followed the winding roadbed) that nobody would come along and watch me fish because the only way to fish with that wind was to pick up my line, make one false cast and shoot it. Of course there is limited accuracy in doing that and I pretty well decorated the bushes with Adams flies. I caught fish after fish and have never had a time like that but I probably looked terrible the way I was fishing. It was a good

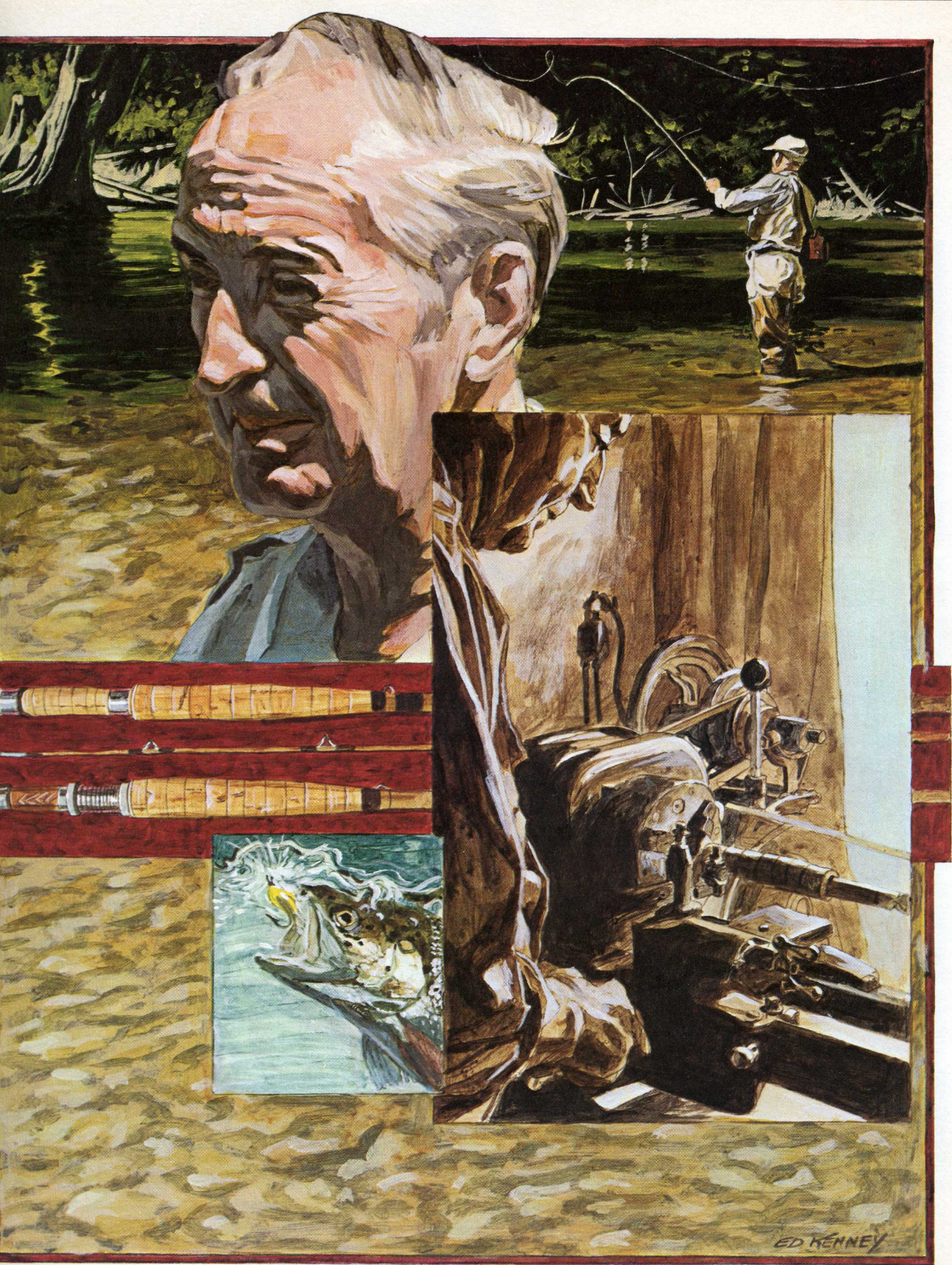
thing that I had about a dozen Adams flies. When I met my buddy, he admitted that he hadn't done a thing. Apparently the wind had gotten to him and he couldn't cast. So I am not knocking graphite; at that particular time it had its place."

Cummings has recently turned to boron/graphite blanks and he sells a complete line of these fly rods. They promise to be a truly remarkable fishing tool. The blanks are made with a 100 percent graphite core with a boron overlay providing a finished rod with increased strength, greater sensitivity, and a remarkable power reserve.

Being a custom rod builder, he constructs more than his standard catalog line of fishing rods. At times he has received very particular design specifications from some discriminating anglers, drawings of customers' hands, and once a special request to make a spinning rod with an unusually extended cork grip to facilitate casting for a crippled fisherman. "I always love a chance to make someone happy," he confided. "That fisherman was so thankful, so excited and to me it was a rewarding experience."

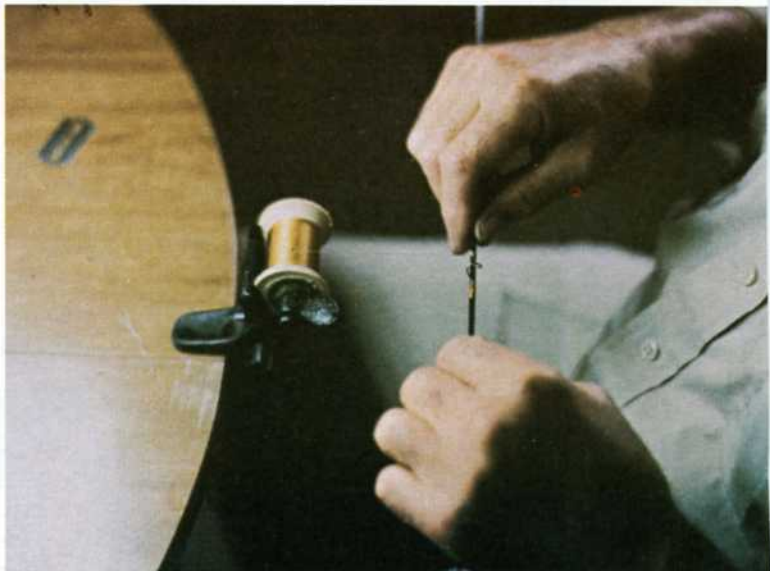
Cummings has had a career of involvement in the fly fishing circuit so diversified that he has obtained an insight into the various areas of rod building few others have achieved. His involvement in fly rod construction has included a job as a plant manager for an upstate New York rod manufacturing company, the owning of his own retail shop and touring some of the finest fly rod manufacturing centers in the United States in order to stay current with the development of new and better techniques of fly rod design and construction. "I love making fly rods," Cummings exclaims, "I don't know why but I just can't get away from it. My love was always rod building and fishing. I was happy doing what I was doing with my two hands—and it is still my love." ☺

Gregory J. Rummo is a chemist with degrees from Iona College and Fordham University. For seven years he has done freelance writing and photography on freshwater fishing and wildlife. He is currently working toward an MBA in marketing.



Photos on right
by Edward Kenney

Photos
below by
author



(Top) The finished fly rods are classic in design and combine both power and finesse.

(Above) Vince Cummings shapes a fly rod handle.

(From top to bottom) Individual cork rings glued to form handle and then shaped on a lathe; Finished handle with aluminum fittings, nickel silver hoods and wood inserts turned from a solid block of zebra wood; Guides are wrapped with nylon thread and varnished.