



June 2012

Driftless Days . . .

It seems that whenever I visit Sam Fox, normally out at his place in the country, I end up either spending money I hadn't expected to spend or finding myself involved in an interesting story. If neither of those happen to occur, good old-fashioned conversation and hospitality make up the difference, so I can't lose regardless of what happens.

A few years ago Sam, his wife Valerie and I took a day-long road trip together to a rod-building seminar in southern Iowa. I don't build rods but Sam does, and he wanted me to meet some of his rod-building friends and see what goes on in the seminars he attends and demonstrates in. Aside from having a very pleasant and unique day, I fondly remember the most interesting discussion of Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner I've ever had the pleasure of participating in. Sam and Val moved to Iowa from Mississippi when they retired and did not live too far from Faulkner's home in Oxford while in Mississippi, and their interpretations of Faulkner's *oeuvre* were fascinating to say the least. I did a bit of talking concerning Hemingway but was a very silent and spellbound listener as concerned Faulkner.

The beautiful hills of Dubuque County rolled companionably by as we chatted and drove along. I noticed that when Sam is deep in thought, he smokes his pipe.

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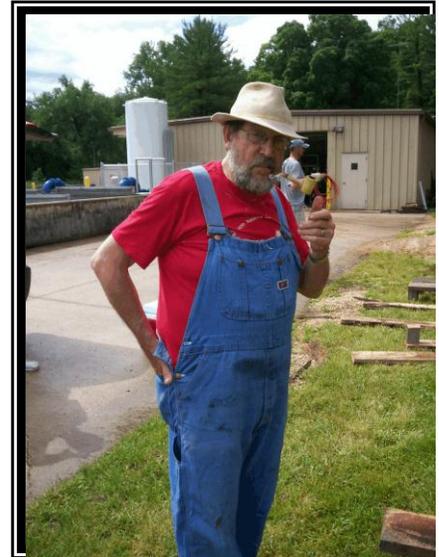
I had a couple of rod tips I wanted Sam to take a look at, and that was the reason I stopped by to see him. Sam has repaired cane and graphite rods for years and always tries to keep me in fishable form, a somewhat hopeless task, particularly with a few of my older weird cane rods and the inevitable problems that occur with them. Sam works with ferrules, guides, tips, loose wrappings, revarnishings and most everything else that needs to be done. He's fairly deep in unusual parts and fittings, many of which he's stripped from old unusable rods for just such occasions as I sometimes present. The shop is very interesting and I sometimes wonder how many hundreds of rods are stacked in it. Recently he had me cast a twelve-foot fiberglass spey rod he'd made up to launch gigantic streamers into the Mississippi River. I'd never cast a spey rod before but he gave me some "figure-eight" pointers and before long I was firing out some respectable casts, all without a backcast, which is one reason some folks fish with spey rods. I

discovered that if I didn't do it right and make a good spey cast, I could pile up seventy feet of line fifteen feet away from me like a pro.

As I've said, I've had some interesting visits with Sam.

For some reason we got talking about reels, mainly because he had just completed a new custom rod for a saltwater fisherman in Mississippi and the subject naturally came up when he showed me the rod. Fly reels take quite a beating in salt water, and a normal fresh water reel can be ruined fishing it in the salt. Sam showed me a reel he'd picked up I'd never seen anything like before, so naturally we had quite a discussion about it. It supposedly was designed to operate in both fresh and salt water.

The reel was a modern reproduction of a classic Edward vom Hofe reel, made by a company called "The Angler's Roost" from Williamsville, New York, and owned by a gentleman named John W. Kuehn. Sam had actually met Mr. Kuehn at a trade show in North Carolina and I think bought the first of his two vom Hofe reproduction models on the spot. According to Sam, John W. Kuehn has an interesting personality and is someone one would not soon forget. "The Angler's Roost" spells the name *vom Hoffe* rather than the traditional *vom Hofe*.



"The Angler's Roost" makes no bones about the fact that its products are made by a company-owned factory in China. That is how Mr. Kuehn has been able to offer both graphite and split-cane rod blanks, various reels, rod-building components and a great deal more through his company and its web site at much lower than normal costs. At least he is very up-front about his operation and has no qualms about what he does, which I suppose is a respectable response to the oft-repeated "made in the USA" quandary. Many tackle companies, including those specializing in fly fishing, market products that are manufactured overseas, but they seldom tell you about it.

Sam hopped aboard the internet and we looked up a couple of original classic vom Hofe reels that were up for auction on eBay. One reel had just reached \$2000.00 and the current bid on another had gone over \$2600.00. Sam said he's watched vom Hofe reel auctions before and they often finally sell for \$4000.00 to \$5000.00. That's a lot of money for a fly rod reel.

Edward vom Hofe's parents immigrated to New York from Germany around 1843, and Edward was born three years later in 1846, which made him a citizen of the United States by birthright. He entered the fishing tackle business in 1867 and eventually designed and manufactured the reels for which he is famous. Supposedly he outfitted most of the better anglers of his generation, and his reels, both fly and bait-casting, became the standard of the industry during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the earlier part of the twentieth.

Edward vom Hofe died in 1920 and a number of companies, in ensuing decades, used some of his design concepts in the manufacturing of fly rod reels. The contemporary Saracione, Peerless,

Bogdan and Bellinger companies all make fly reels that at least to some extent appear and function like the original vom Hofe. Reels made by these four excellent companies generally retail in the area of \$750.00 to \$1100.00, which I'm sure is quite reasonable for reels of such superior quality.

In my case, as part of my ongoing life's story, I haven't really been able to afford that type of reel and perhaps don't need one, particularly as I'm not a steelhead or salt water angler at this juncture. I've looked at them wistfully in catalogues now and then and have friends who own



one or another of these famous and expensive reels, some of which were bought more reasonably as "used" items on the internet. Even so, \$500.00 for a used reel of that type is a bit out of range for me.

I have always hoped that my ship might come in someday, but sometimes I doubt it ever will, much the same as it is for many. My ship is presently *way* out in the ocean, presumably being tossed around in the Grand Banks and, more likely than not, in danger of never making it back to port. I have to make due with the present circumstances, such as they are, and I try not to complain about it too much. It's not all bad by any means. I think I'd call it "normal."

The vom Hofe reproduction models from "The Angler's Roost" retail for around eighty dollars plus shipping. I looked at Sam's reel for quite a while and really couldn't figure out how it could be done for that amount, but obviously it can be. I thought about the reel for a week or so and that about drove me nuts, so I finally decided to order one on a Saturday night. The reel came in the mail the next Thursday, and it's a real beauty. As Sam said, you can't lose for eighty bucks and I don't think I did.

Vom Hofe reels have a wider spool than contemporary reels, and to some extent that's what gives them that "classic" look. They also sported a serpentine handle, another classic trademark in design. "The Angler's Roost" reel has both features. When I first fished with it, I kept bumping my left hand on the reel, along with a few other logistic issues, mainly because I wasn't used to the wider spool and kept looking for the handle someplace where it wasn't. When I change flies, I have a habit of putting the rod butt and reel between my legs, and without getting into great detail (such as banging my testicles a time or two), I'd simply say *that* took some adjustments, too. After a half an hour I had everything worked out and haven't thought about it since.

I've fished the reel a number of times on one of my Leonard split-cane reproductions and love the way it looks and fishes. "The Angler's Roost" offers three reel options, depending on the line weight one wishes to load them with. The middle-sized version is called the "VH2 Vom Hoffe Classic" and is configured for 5-6wt lines, and I've loaded a WF-5wt line on the reel.

I guess the only thing that remains to be seen is how long the reel might last. I'm hopeful that it will be a good long time, but I guess one never knows for sure.

I intend to do my very best to wear it out.

And I'm looking forward to stopping out at Sam's once again soon. Someday we need to go out and fish the Wexford together, which meanders somewhere out beyond his front door. We should probably go launch a few gigantic streamers on the Mississippi River, too.



Be Vigilant!

*“Red” Canoe
Trout Unlimited
Iowa Driftless Chapter*