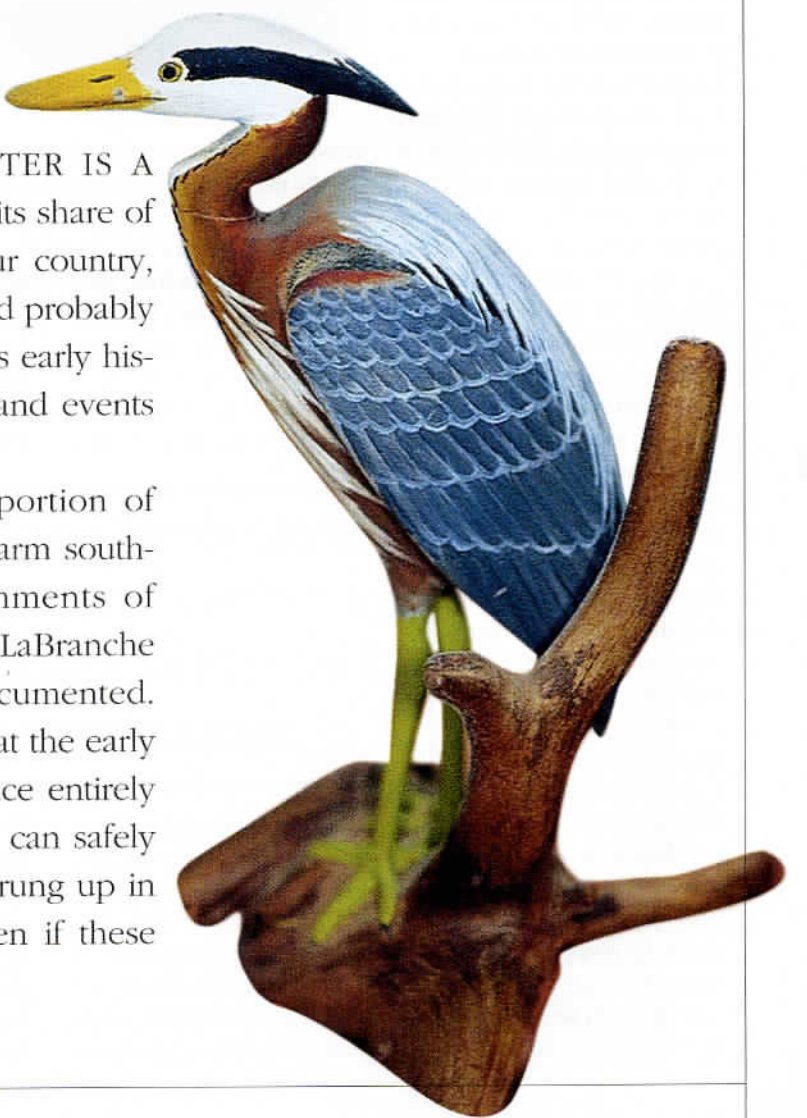
Harold Gibbs, above, is regarded by many as the father of modern striped-bass fishing in the Northeast. He was also considered a world-class woodcarver of miniature bird replicas, opposite.

Harold Gibbs

THE FATHER OF FLY-FISHING FOR STRIPED BASS

BY ED MITCHELL



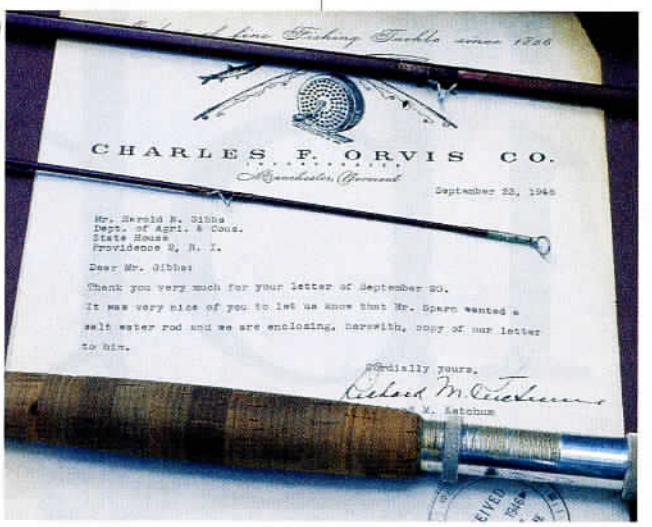
FLY-FISHING IN SALT WATER IS A terrific sport with more than its share of heart-pounding thrills. In our country, its origins go back at least to 1850 and probably beyond, although much of the sport's early history is sketchy. Many names, dates and events are hidden by the passage of time.

Clearly, the most-documented portion of those first days comes to us from warm southern waters where the accomplishments of anglers like A.W. Dimock, George LaBranche and Joe Brooks are fairly well documented. Still, it would be wrong to assume that the early days of saltwater fly-fishing took place entirely in Florida and the Keys. In fact, you can safely bet your Boga grip that our sport sprung up in many places along the Atlantic, even if these other locations are not well known.

NEW ENGLAND ROOTS

In New England the most fascinating figure in the formative years of our sport was a Rhode Island angler by the name of Harold Gibbs. Born in 1886, Gibbs lived the majority of his life in Barrington, Rhode Island. Unlike many children today who grow up glued to the computer screen, Gibbs spent his youth in the great outdoors. Those nascent years instilled in him a deep love of nature, one he would carry with him throughout his life. An avid hunter and angler, some say he was also the best mink trapper in New England. Gibbs would also become a leading authority on birds in his home state, particularly waterfowl, as well as a highly accomplished waterman with extensive knowledge of the marine environment.

Exactly when Gibbs first chucked a feather at striped bass is a bit of a mystery. But bear with me for a moment, and I think I can narrow down the date for you. By the late 1930s Gibbs' reputation as a master outdoorsman had spread far and wide. Based on that reputation, in 1939 the Governor of Rhode Island, William Vanderbilt, picked Gibbs to be his Administrator of Fish and Game, a position Gibbs held until 1946. In his official capacity, Gibbs wrote to the leading outdoor writers of his time about hunting and fishing, including his own saltwater fly-fishing adventures.



Gibbs worked with Orvis to design what many consider to be the first fly rod designed specifically for catching saltwater stripers.

In a 1943 letter to then-well-known angling author Ollie Rodman, Gibbs exclaimed, "This taking striped bass on a fly rod and with streamer flies is really grand sport, and more fishermen should know about it." Moreover, he went on to report that he had caught 300 stripers on the fly that summer — quite an accomplishment for the time, I might add. With that level of effectiveness, one can safely assume that 1943 wasn't Gibbs' first fly season in the salt. More likely he already had, at the very least, a couple of years under his wader belt.

With that established, let's step back for a moment and look at the big picture. At the end of the 19th century, striped bass vanished from the Atlantic coast, and by 1900 they were rare in New England. As a result, it's unlikely that Gibbs would have picked up the long rod to pursue them until they began to reappear around 1935. At that time Gibbs was on the water daily, tending oyster beds; no doubt, he would have seen these striped bass and become interested in catching them. So when we pull it all together, it seems reasonable to say that Gibbs began catching stripers on a fly sometime between 1935 and about 1940.

Obviously, there were no saltwater fly rods on the market in the late '30s, but the evidence suggests that it was through Gibbs' personal efforts in the early '40s that the first one would be created. It's a fascinating story in itself and, strange as it might sound, it has its roots in Gibbs' love of birds. He'd taken up the art of carving wood miniatures of waterfowl.

FIRST SALTWATER FLY ROD

Like everything else he tackled in life, he proved to be gifted at carving — so much so that his miniatures are prized and highly sought-after even today. Gibbs sold these in several quarters, including to the Orvis Company. But rather than ship orders to Vermont, he preferred to deliver them in person. On one of these journeys Gibbs came to know the president of Orvis, who in those years was D.C. Corkran — better known as simply "Duckie." At some point, Gibbs asked Duckie to develop a fly rod specifically for striped bass, since none existed. Corkran turned the idea over to his head rod builder, Wes Jordan, one of the finest cane-rod builders ever to come down the pike.

Wes Jordan crafted a rod for Gibbs, and it would become, as best I can tell, the very first fly rod ever built specifically for the salt. Gibbs nicknamed it his "Original Striper Rod," and I believe it was a three-piece, 9-foot rod designed to throw a GAF line (a 9-weight by today's standards). Gibbs had Orvis build him a second striper rod which, I think, was an 8-foot 6-inch, three-piece rod for an 8-weight line.

> TAKING STRIPED BASS ON A FLY ROD AND WITH STREAMER FLIES IS REALLY GRAND SPORT, AND MORE FISHERMEN SHOULD KNOW ABOUT IT.

By the early '40s Jordan was experimenting with a process to impregnate rods with Bakelite, and it's possible that both of Gibbs' rods were of this type. These two striper rods would lead Orvis in the years ahead to develop a complete line of saltwater bamboo fly rods which were advertised in their mail-order catalogs and later lauded by Joe Brooks in his groundbreaking 1950 book *Saltwater Fly Fishing*.

During the summer of 1946, Gibbs broke his first rod. While that may seem an unfortunate mishap, in retrospect it proved to be a very valuable moment for us. For when sending the rod to Orvis for repair, Gibbs wrote an accompanying letter detailing his striper season:

Working his home waters in Rhode Island, Gibbs logged 300 stripers on fly in 1943, above. He used his position as the head of Rhode Island's Fish and Game Department to promote fly-fishing in salt waters with editors at various magazines around the country, below.

"I believe your records show that this is the first rod you made for the taking of Striped Bass in salt water, and it has had tremendous use. Our season starts the first of April, and the last bass is taken along the last of October, and I plan to fish morning and night whenever possible. I doubt if you realize what a "work-out" these rods get every time we fish — continual casting for two or three hours at a time, and I average five nights a week and quite a lot of mornings."

When Gibbs wrote that letter, he was living in a house that bordered the Palmer River in Barrington, Rhode Island. Less than a mile away was another estuary, the Barrington River. A short distance south of Gibbs' property, the two rivers meet at Tyler Point to form the Warren. These rivers were Gibbs' home waters and his primary striped-bass fishing grounds. The Palmer was literally in his backyard; so close, in fact, that Gibbs was able to walk across his property and fish wherever he felt like it. He was fishing these waters constantly for seven months out of the year, and doing it mostly in low light.

The Palmer, Barrington and Warren Rivers, like tidal estuaries throughout New England, are more often home to school-size striped bass than tackle-busting monsters. Yet, in that same 1946 letter to Orvis, we also discover that Gibbs was tangling with some bigger bass as well:

"Two nights ago, using my second Orvis rod, I landed a Striped Bass that weighed (the following morning) 15 pounds 2 ounces; 34 inches long, 19½ girth. To my knowledge, that is the best fish taken on a fly rod and streamer around here."

Landing a 15-pound bass on a cane rod is an accomplishment; believe me. Years ago I purchased an old, second-hand, saltwater Heddon bamboo fly rod called a Riptide and have used it on striped bass. I love that beautiful wooden rod, but rest assured when I say that cane lacks the casting and fish-fighting performance of modern gear.

The cane rod wasn't the only piece of Gibbs' equipment that seems like a handicap by today's standards. Modern fly lines and monofilament leader material weren't on the scene until sometime after World War II, so Gibbs was likely using an oil-dressed silk fly line and what was referred to as "catgut" leader. Silk fly lines were obviously not intended for salt water, but regardless of where you used them — in fresh or salt — they had their problems. As the line

Gibbs' well-known striper fly (three variations shown above) imitates the silverside — a favorite of hefty stripers, below right.

worked over the tiptop during the cast, the finish quickly wore down, and the lines would absorb water, becoming difficult to cast. And "catgut," which was in reality made from silkworms too, wasn't exactly superstrong and often varied widely in quality and breaking strength.

GIBBS' STRIPER BUCKTAIL

In 1946, not only was saltwater fly gear scarcer than hens' teeth, there weren't any saltwater fly patterns for striped bass. But for a keen observer of marine life such as Gibbs, that was hardly an issue; he simply invented his own. Gibbs realized that the most prevalent bait in his home waters — and one of the stripers' favorite foods — was the Atlantic silverside. So he sat down at his vise and designed a fly to imitate it. And that fly we know today as his famous Gibbs Striper Bucktail.

The silverside, as its name implies, has a mirror-like silver stripe on its flank. Today fly tiers are fortunate to have a wide range of synthetic flash materials with which to mimic that stripe, but reflective materials that would not tarnish in salt water were not available in Gibbs' time. Ever inventive, Gibbs must have realized that, underwater, silversides' stripes would be reflecting the surrounding underwater light; in short, they would often be bluish in color. He tied-in a strip of blue swan feather to imitate that on both sides on the fly.

Gibbs revised this creation with help from his fishing buddy, Al Brewster, a commercial fly tier. Although the name of the fly identifies bucktail as the principle ingredient, originally Gibbs constructed the wing out of white Capra (goat hair). But Capra was not a common material, and the blue swan feather, as you can imagine, proved less than durable.They needed a more practical dressing.

The remedy was to remake both the wing and the blue stripe out of bucktail in the same white-blue-white color scheme. Later, in the '60s, a variation of the fly would be produced, likely at Brewster's urging. The upper white wing was eliminated to produce a blue-over-white-colored fly. This variation was meant to match juvenile menhaden and juvenile alewives, and that classic color combination is still popular with saltwater fly tiers today.

Gibbs' flies rode a fairly good-sized hook — 1/0, 2/0 or 3/0 — but, as with the fly's dressing, Gibbs' choice of hook styles evolved, too. There is reason to suspect that Gibbs initially built the fly on the strongest hook he had on hand: an upturned-eye, black-Atlantic-salmon hook. By the '50s he had gone to a "tinned" short-shank egg hook, which supplied the size and the strength Gibbs required and was non-corrosive as well. Much later still, he was able to convince Mustad to produce a hook with the specific characteristics he wanted for this fly; it was sold for a time as the Mustad 3908 ST Kendal round bend in size 2/0.

By any measure, Harold Gibbs was an extremely gifted individual. He was an artist, a conservationist, a naturalist, and an ardent outdoorsman — a Renaissance man in his own right. His early adventures fly-fishing in salt waters encouraged many other anglers to pick up the long rod and head to the sea. And in so doing, Gibbs help popularized the sport. We owe him and others like him a debt of gratitude; they blazed a trail that we still travel today.

The author wishes to extend his appreciation for the help and hospitality he received from Charlotte and Martin Sornborger of Rhode Island. Charlotte is Harold Gibbs' granddaughter. He'd also like to thank fly tier Al Brewster of Cape Cod for his help.