

PIONEERS



A man among men, Nelson Bryant spoke softly and carried a big stick. His writings in the *New York Times* influenced fly-fishermen throughout New England.

MARK ALAN LOEWEL

Nelson Bryant

THE SOFT, SOULFUL SPIRIT OF MARTHA'S VINEYARD
BY ED MITCHELL



At 4 a.m. on a June morning not long ago, I climbed into my Jeep with a cup of black coffee and headed to Martha's Vineyard. This was no fishing trip, mind you, but a chance to meet someone I have always wanted to know — a person whose writings are favorites of mine and who has fly-fished the island longer perhaps than anyone else.

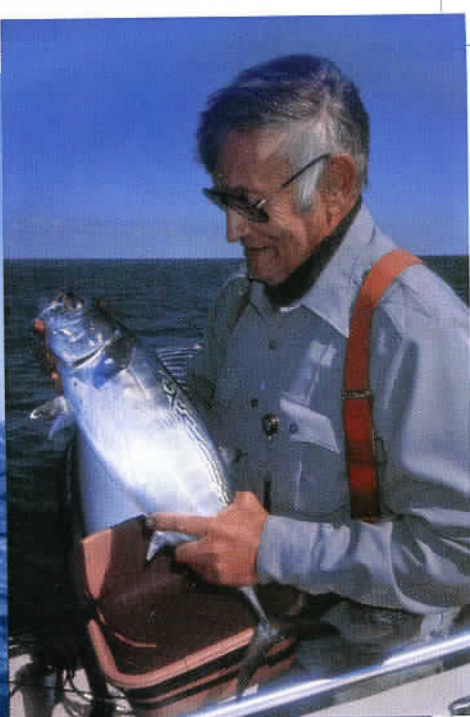
I stood at the Steamship Authority dock in Vineyard Haven later that morning, scanning the busy parking lot in an effort to catch sight of him. During a prior phone conversation, he told me that he had a trim, white beard and would be wearing a green beret with a gold Airborne medallion.

Fair enough, I reasoned to myself, I should be able to spot him. So with those clues guiding my eyes, I watched and waited intently, only to have him suddenly appear out of the crowd. No question about it:

This was the person I had come so far to meet. This was Nelson Bryant.

Our day together, unfortunately, would be a short one. Nelson had warned me that might be the case. For the last year and a half, he has suffered with a medical condition called polymyalgia rheumatic. He tires easily and is frequently in pain. Still, during that afternoon and with the help of an e-mail exchange in the weeks ahead, he shared a great deal about himself, and now I have the opportunity to share it with you.

Having a little fun in 1990
with some false albacore.



KES BRAUNHALL (2)

A TOUGH YET IDYLIC CHILDHOOD

Nelson Bryant was born in the spring of 1923 in Red Bank, New Jersey. When his father took an accounting position in Boston, the family left the Jersey coast for Needham, Massachusetts. But Needham wasn't destined to remain their home. The country was teetering on the edge of a precipice — the infamous Black Tuesday of Oct. 29, 1929, sent the nation's stock markets reeling and ushered in the difficult, dark days of the Great Depression. Shortly after the family's arrival, a great many people, including Nelson's father, lost their jobs.

With his father out of work, the family found itself in dire straits. But as sometimes happens, good things sprang out of adversity. Nelson's maternal grandfather was a retired doctor living on Martha's Vineyard. He was in poor health and needed assistance, so he offered his daughter's family a place to live if they would take care of him. With that kind offer in hand, in 1932 the Bryant family yanked stakes again and moved to the island, the place Nelson still calls home to this day.

One can only imagine how idyllic it must have been for a young boy to spend his childhood on the Vineyard. Surrounded by the island's wild woods and waters, Nelson had an endless and near magical adventure at his doorstep. He slept outdoors whenever possible, trapped muskrats in the pond and took pickerel, smallmouth and trout on a bamboo fly rod his father had given him. With his dad's help,

Nelson caught his first striped bass and bluefish at the opening of Tisbury Great Pond, as well, by heaving heavy jigs into the swift current and then hauling them back on tarred marline.

DAYS OF WAR AND DREAMS

As adulthood approached, Nelson packed his bags and headed off to Dartmouth College. But world events would soon get in the way. The fires of World War II were burning across Europe, and Nelson felt a call to duty. He dropped out of Dartmouth to join the Army, becoming a member of Company D, 508 Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne.

Shortly before D-Day, along with his regiment, Nelson parachuted into Normandy behind enemy lines, where he was wounded by machine-gun fire. After a fairly speedy recovery, he rejoined his outfit, parachuted into Holland and then saw action in the deadliest fighting of the war — the Battle of the Bulge.

While still in Europe, Nelson received a letter from home, one that he remembers to this very day. His father wrote that he had caught schoolie stripers on a fly in Tisbury Great Pond. At the time, fly-fishing in salt water was all but unheard of. Yet the idea of catching stripers on a fly sparked his imagination and eased his war-weary mind. On the spot, Nelson resolved that if he made it back home alive, he would try fly-rod for striped bass.

Upon returning home, Bryant settled back into island life. He married Jean Morgan and started a family. It was a relationship



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that produced four children: Steve, Jeff, Mary and Alison. Nelson also began his quest for a striper on fly. With plenty of angling experience under his belt, he knew how to wield a fly rod, but he felt it wise to seek out advice on rigging for striped bass. Unlike today, however, finding such help wouldn't be easy.

THE SEARCH FOR A FISH

In the immediate days after the war, there were probably only a handful of people in New England who truly knew anything about fly-fishing in salt water. But Nelson had heard about an angler in Barrington, Rhode Island, with a growing reputation as an expert at taking stripers on a fly. His name was Harold Gibbs (see *FFSW's* May/June 2007 issue), and Nelson gave him a call.

What Gibbs told Nelson was simple yet very effective: Use a heavy, 9-foot rod, a 3-foot leader and any fly, so long as it's blue-and-white. It was a strategy that still works today.

Armed with Gibbs' suggestions and a fiberglass fly rod mailed from Herter's, Nelson became one of the very first anglers to ever fly-fish the Vineyard salt. In fact, recreational saltwater fishing in general was very much in its infancy. During those early years, it was rare for Nelson to see another recreational angler of any kind on the island. So he often fished alone, and given his day job as a carpenter, most of his fishing expeditions were done at night.

Tisbury Great Pond was one of Nelson's fly-fishing haunts after the war. Near his home and somewhat sheltered, the pond was an ideal place to wet a fly line. He also fished along the island's North Shore. That was easier said than done, however. Nelson didn't own a car, and the North Shore was a good distance from his West Tisbury home.

But Nelson was young, strong and determined, and he used what transportation he had on hand: a bicycle. With his fly rod stored in his mountain infantry pack, he would take off at sunset, riding to places like Lambert's Cove, a trek of 8 miles roundtrip. The effort would prove worthwhile, however, because it was at Lambert's Cove in the autumn of 1946 that Nelson took his first striper on a fly.

VOICE OF THE OUTDOORS

Nelson eventually resumed his education at Dartmouth and then took a position as managing editor at the *Daily Eagle* in Claremont, New Hampshire, where he pounded on a typewriter for 15 years. Around 1965, however, Nelson opted to return to the Vineyard and took up work as a dock builder.

But fate was waiting in the wings. A couple of years after his arrival, Bryant received a call that would change his life. A friend of his, Howard Swain, told him that the *New York Times* was in need of an outdoor writer. Howard urged Nelson to contact the newspaper, feeling this was a perfect opportunity for Nelson to link his writing skills with his love of the outdoors.

In the fall of 1967, the *New York Times* hired Nelson Bryant. It would prove a fortuitous event both for him and the *Times*, as well as the large readership he would attract. His column, called simply "Outdoors," typically appeared two or even three times a week and sometimes during weekends. On those pages Nelson discussed the things he loved so dearly: fishing, hunting, camping and canoeing. He worked at it full time for 30 years and then part time for nearly another decade. By the time he retired in March of 2005, Bryant's columns numbered in the thousands.

Soldier, writer, fly-fisherman: Nelson Bryant lived an extraordinary life. Today, he still manages to hit the water for an occasional striper.

OUTDOORS/Nelson Bryant

For 2 Thespians, Close-Up With Bass

GAY RUCIO, Mass.
As we got out of my pickup truck among the dunes at Dogfish Head, the sun was setting and a gentle south-west breeze ruffled the waters of Vineyard Sound, stirring the drooping tips of beach grass to meet the slushes in the sand and bringing a staccato of creaking frogs to us.

The frog song was irritating. I had my companions, John Lefebvre and Rip Tern, because it reminded me that the open we were in — one of the East Coast's best sites for shore-fishing for striped bass — had been inaccessible by vehicle for all of June and part of July.

The recent windstorm, in addition to lowering the ranks of amphipods, had cut the beach water march

On Dogfish Bar, an excursion, with a little Shakespeare as the backdrop.

another opportunity for a promenade, this time to the effect that there had been a distinct change in the strippers' feeding habits this year. Their usual pattern was to move out of deep water into the shallows only at dusk and thereafter; this year, I noted, they had often heeded hairfish

about, I take a short breath of the new
water leader of the end of my regular
leader to avoid having the fly cut off
by their sharp teeth, but the monom-
er was unexpected and I was fishing
without wire. My streamer leader
or escaped being cut because the fly
was hooked in the side of the fish's
mouth.

There were no more hits for the remainder of the evening. Tiers, however, caught his first fly-roper sculpin and Labrie caught three or four bass as well as an American shad, all on his dropper fly. What the shad was doing in Vineyard waters is studied now. The nearest shad spawning river was on the mainland about 30 miles away.





Bryant keeps things fairly simple in his fishing and tying. Here, he works on his favorite striper pattern, the Acrobat.

A LIFE WELL LIVED

I read many of those columns and eagerly looked forward to them all. But the ones on fly-fishing the Vineyard especially grabbed my attention. In all-too-brief vignettes, Nelson told readers of his angling adventures in places such as Lobsterville Beach and Dogfish Bar. Those stories, sometimes accompanied with the superb illustrations of Glenn Wolff, supplied me and a great many other fly-rodgers with a tantalizing taste of island life. We read about striped bass on a fly, starry nights and long, sandy strands. Little wonder those stories were the source of many angling dreams.

Today, Bryant fishes with his sons, Jeff and Steve, and with his longtime friend Kib Bramhall, a well-respected island artist. He does so with the knowledge that he taught all three the ways of the long rod. But moreover, Bryant can look back fondly at his years with the *Times*, for they brought him in contact with many fine people. Early on, he fished with "Cap" Colvin of Island Beach, New Jersey, who taught him the virtues of popping bugs for striped bass. With each passing year, he met other notables, as well, including Lefty Kreh, Nick Lyons, Jimmy Carter and actor Rip Torn.

As I left on that June day, I stood on the ferry's upper deck and watched a brisk north wind rake Vineyard Sound. No, it's never easy to leave this island, but at least I felt my trip had been a success. And as West Chop Lighthouse faded into the distance, one thought centered itself in my mind. After coming over from the mainland 75 years ago as a 9-year-old boy, Nelson Bryant is now an integral part of Martha's Vineyard. He belongs there as much as the sand, sea and sky.



FFSW TIPPET

Nelson's Acrobat

During my day with Nelson Bryant, I asked him to name his favorite fly for the Vineyard. A moment later, he placed one in my hand. At first glance, it appeared rather ordinary, a sand-eel fly made with braided tubing. The only difference I saw was that it was tied with tandem hooks, a #2 in the front and a #4 at the back. But Nelson went on to tell me about this particular fly's deadly built-in action.

Aptly called the Acrobat, the fly was developed several years ago by Nelson and his son Jeff during a night of striper fishing. Through trial and error, they discovered that by positioning a short section of foam inside the tail end of the tubing, they could greatly increase the fly's striped bass appeal. Nelson explained that the foam's placement causes the fly to jig during the retrieve. When you pause, the fly rises to the surface, tail first. Strip in line, and the fly dives head down. It's a clever and effective design. — Ed Mitchell

