

## An iconic Lilliput Water fly rod



**By Ed Herbst**

When Sage launched the first '0-weight' fly rod in 1997, the American magazine *Fly Fisherman* coined the term 'Whisper Rods'. However, the first true Whisper Rod, the Leonard Baby Catskill 36L had been described in *Piscator* almost a quarter of a century previously in an article 'Lilliput Water' by Peter Turnbull-Kemp and it can be found on this website.

The six foot Baby Catskill made by the H L Leonard Company of New York weighed one ounce and I corresponded by email ten years ago with Ted Simroe, one of the company directors who had personally built these rods and I asked him for information on this model. I asked him if it was true that, to reduce weight, balsa wood was used in constructing the handle.

Here is his letter:

*Dear Mr. Herbst,*

*The rod you asked about was initially labelled the Leonard 37L. That was changed to the 36L in the mid-seventies when the model numbering was changed for all the Leonard rods. The 6 ft. 1 oz. rod was developed in the early 1950s, and was supposed to have been developed to accommodate a special membership group of the famous Anglers Club of New York. To be a member of this group, which was called the "28-8-18 Club," one had to land an 18 inch trout on a size 28 fly using an 8X tippet. I personally have never been able to confirm this requirement or its relationship to the 37L. However, it has always been a good "story," even if just a rumour! By the way, the rod was designed to be used with a level silk line, size I.*

*There were several issues with getting the weight down to 1 oz. or less, although the idea of a 1 oz. rod was not the starting point. The ferrules on that rod were 7/64ths of an inch, which had to be specially made. The tip tops were actually # 2.5/64ths. The Perfection Company made a special # 3/64ths tip top for Leonard, but it did not have the tubing necessary to fashion anything smaller. Also, the "swelled butt" section, which was a Leonard characteristic, was eliminated. If you have ever seen one of these rods, I am sure you would be amazed at the delicacy of the sections, especially of the tip sections. No one else ever came close to making a cane rod that light. We used a beveller that incorporated 3/4" diameter carbide saws, and I am still amazed when I think what I accomplished with that machine! I can remember that when I planned to cut the tip sections, I would plan on starting early on Saturday AM, when no one was around. I would start with enough cane to make 24 tip sections. Because each of the six strips were so small, some would fracture in just being picked up. Others*

*would break coming out of the saws. I always considered myself lucky if I could end up with 12 complete tips. We would then lose 3 or 4 more when gluing the six strips together, and another 1 or 2 in the assembly process! From all this, we felt good if we could end up with 3 complete rods.*

*As far as the reel seat was concerned, the Leonard Fairy Reel was developed for this rod. It was a raised pillar design, like all the Leonard reels, but the side plates were all hard rubber, with no aluminum castings around the edges. The reel foot was shorter and narrower than normal, and the wood reel seat was only 2 3/4" long, rather than the standard 3 1/2" long. The butt cap and ring were about 1/2 the size of the standard Catskill hardware, and the nickel silver winding and cork checks were also eliminated. The wood used was either white pine, butternut or basswood. Balsa was never used as far as I know. I do remember making one rod with an all cork cut-out reel seat. I eliminated the stripping guide and used a # 1 snake guide instead. We only put one coat of varnish on that rod instead of the normal 2 or 3. The finished rod weighed in at 7/8 oz exactly.*

*As I mentioned earlier, a 1 level silk line was originally used on these rods. When silk gave way to the plastic coated lines, a 3 weight was the smallest available, and most used that line since it was all that was available. Actually, I fished one of these rods using greased 30 pound Dacron squidding line, and it worked better than anything else!*

*I hope this answers your questions, and I hope I haven't bored you with the details.*

*Regards,*

*Ted*

In 2007 I asked Cape Piscatorial Society member and local split cane fly rod builder, Stephen Dugmore, if he could replicate this taper for me but build the rod with a 'Palm Grip', a handle in which the front reel seat is built into the all-cork handle.

You can see the result in the photograph at the start of this article and it cast a Sage 000 line with delicacy and accuracy.

You can contact Stephen via his website [www.freestonerods.co.za](http://www.freestonerods.co.za).

'The Allure of the Split Cane Rod', an article by him describing his start in building split cane fly rods can be found in this section of the CPS website.