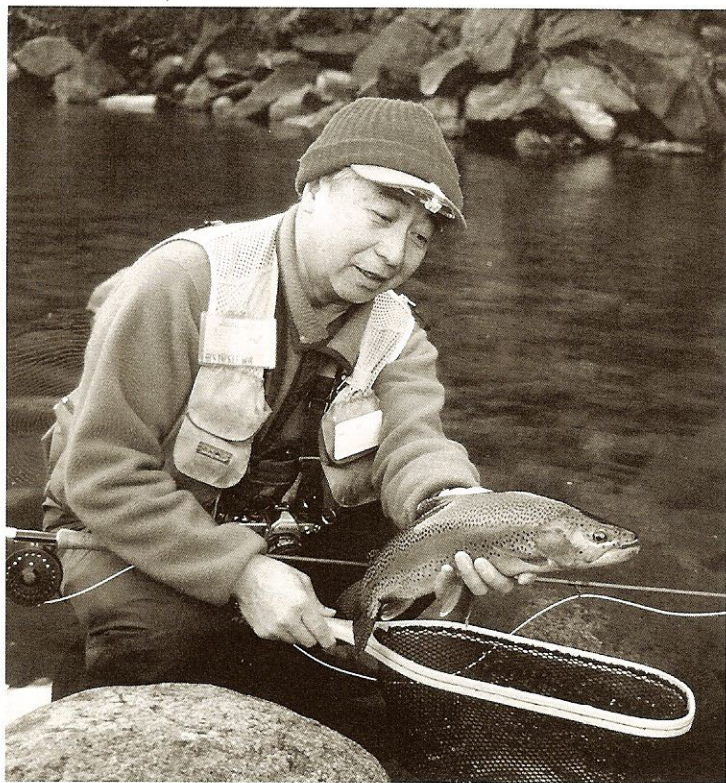


Pioneers & Legends

Michael W. Fong, 1939–2002/By Mike Valla



Not just a fair-weather angler, Mike Fong pursued his passion for fly fishing in all seasons and frequented myriad trout and steelhead waters during frigid conditions. Photo by Christine Fong

Michael Fong shared with fly fishers everywhere fascinating adventures, describing seemingly every nook and cranny of Northern California trout and steelhead waters. He was an explorer whose forays into the Sierra Nevada could be likened to trout fishing travelogues—excursions that were superbly photographed by his wife and fishing companion, Christine. Rivers such as the Williamson and Wood in south-central Oregon or the Green and North Platte in Wyoming were soon on his list. And there were many other waters, too, that did not escape his byline.

His stories provided glimpses into his world of creeks and ponds and rivers in regions of matchless beauty. Oh, how those of us who read his early magazine writings, stories that go back to the late 1960s, wished we could fish Michael Fong's waters! Yet in spite of his reputation as primarily an accomplished trout, steelhead, and salmon angler, the scope of his fly-fishing interests and abilities was beyond vast.

Over time, Mike and Christine began fishing and photographing waters in such faraway places as Alaska, the Bahamas, Canada, Chile, Cuba, Central and South

America, Norway, New Zealand, and other remote locations. Mel Krieger and his Club Pacific, as well as Bob Nauheim and Frank Bertania of Fishing International, enticed the Fongs to fish and photograph various distant destinations for slide show presentations and other travel promotions.

Mike could be found, over the years, in a belly boat on a pristine mountain trout pond near Hat Creek or in the Florida Keys battling tarpon; wading in trousers for bonefish on Honduras' Guanaja flats or fitted with a flannel shirt and warm knit hat, winter trout fishing on an ice-rimmed lake at 5,000 feet; deftly drifting a small midge pupa pattern on a Colorado river, or expertly fishing a pulsating swimming leech along an undercut bank on the Madison River in Yellowstone Park. You might have found him with a smile hefting a fine steelhead on the Trinity River, his hand cupped and almost buried under the fish's fat belly.

Wherever he cast a line, you might discover him fishing with traditional flies or with inventive fur and feather and hair patterns of his own design, like his "fly for all seasons," a unique flying ant pattern he designed and wrote about in the May 1970 issue of *Outdoor Life*.

Californian Dan Blanton, a longtime friend and fly-fishing colleague, said that Fong "was one of the true West Coast fly-fishing greats, a prolific fly-fishing writer/photographer, a pioneer, and one of the most di-



Fong developed what he called his "ant" pattern after frustrating encounters with trout at Milton Lake in the Sierra Nevada (this example was tied by Mike Valla). Though Fong preferred the name ant for this fly, he actually devised it not to mimic a true ant, but to match another Hymenoptera insect. Photo by Mike Valla

verse fly anglers I knew—a true ambassador of our sport.”

More than 40 years have passed since Mike Fong published his first fly-fishing story in *Outdoor Life* (December 1968), which was titled “Stay Dry in Winter.” I well remember the piece. It would be difficult to forget such a story even with the passing of years, since it described an improbable episode that occurred on the Trinity River in winter. Reviewing the narrative helped refresh my memory: I’d last read Fong’s story as a teenager, those many years ago. But I easily remembered the title, even after decades. What young fly fisher would not have been awestruck by the notion of a man, his wife, and their 4-year-old daughter facing single-digit temperatures and a freshly fallen foot-and-a-half of snow while paddling a canoe up a riffle to cast small dry flies to 20-inch browns and steelhead? “The only drawback was the constant cold. But if you are dressed properly, it’s no great problem,” wrote Fong, at the time not even 30 years old.

Such a comment could only have come from a man who deeply enjoyed his sport and who was destined to become a great fly fisher. And there is no doubt he would have uttered the same words years later on other wintry fishing adventures.

“But who is this man?” I must surely have thought many years ago, upon reading that story and others that followed in the leading outdoor magazines of the time—*Outdoor Life*, *Field & Stream*, and *Sports Afield*. He was a fly fisher with an interesting past, his evolving story driven by the desire to share with others the pastime he’d loved since childhood. Many of us knew him only through his words, but we admired him just the same, even those of us living and fishing 3,000 miles across the continent on the East Coast.

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Mike Fong was born at his family’s home in Sacramento on April 26, 1939. He was the youngest of 10 children. His family once lived in Folsom, California, where they operated a laundry service, but then relocated to Sacramento, where they ran both a laundry and a gas station. By the time the children reached their teens, most of them were working. Mike worked in the gas station in those years and eventually enrolled at Sacramento City College, where he studied engineering. After a stint as an engineering student, he switched his major to art and transferred to the California College of Arts and Crafts (now called the California College of the Arts) in Oakland. Mike met Christine at that college in the late 1950s. After they married, the Fongs left California for two years, mov-

ing to Iowa City, where Mike completed his Masters of Fine Arts degree in painting and drawing at the University of Iowa. Mike later admitted, “If the truth were known, my classes were by arrangement, and I spent much more time fishing than at the University.”

The warm-water Iowa years found him on the Iowa and Mississippi rivers, and fly angling for farm-pond bass and panfish. Christine describes those Iowa years before the Fongs, with their daughter, Corrina, relocated back to California in 1964:

In Iowa we fished many farm ponds for bass and panfish. Some of the farm ponds had an abundance of panfish so the owners asked us to catch as many as we could, and we always took some home to eat, although very small in size. He also fished for walleyed pike [walleye], I believe in the Mississippi River. One evening he returned home from pike fishing with a stringer of eight large fish and laid them on the kitchen floor. I mentioned I hoped he was going to clean them because that wasn’t my job. He was so successful at fishing in Iowa that he exchanged fish for pheasant with a friend and also supplied fish to a local bait shop owner. He also fished for giant flathead catfish and carp in the Iowa River. We also fished for trout in Iowa in small streams that were stocked on a regular basis. One of them was called Joy Spring, and I can remember when you fished there, the sound of the water cascading over the rocks from a distance sounded like faraway voices.

In a book he crafted with Christine, titled *Ten Best Western Fly Fishing Destinations* (2003), we learn further details about Mike’s early interest in fishing, as well as other details about his early life. Fong had loved fishing since early childhood; his brother Bob took him fishing in the

Sacramento canal causeway in the 1950s. During that same decade, a brother-in-law took him fishing to Caples Lake in Alpine County, California, where the two caught limits of rainbow trout. It seemed there was no stopping Mike’s fascination with fishing after those early outings: “It is a passion to which I’ve devoted the majority of my time, exceeded only by making enough money to support my family and my family obligations. Throughout most of my life, I’ve placed fishing ahead of just about everything, and it shouldn’t be surprising that most of my closest friends are anglers.”

Although Mike was attached to fishing since just after he entered elementary school, he only learned to fly fish in the late 1950s into the early 1960s, his passion fueled initially by the influences of top-drawer fly tiers and rod builders. Talented fly tier André Puyans (1935–2005) at Creative Sports Enterprises in Pleasant Hill, along with well-known tier Cal Bird (1914–1998), both pioneering anglers and fly dressers themselves, graciously helped strengthen Fong’s interest in fly fishing by teaching him to tie flies. Fong thought of Bird as “an artist with a fly vice and with brush in hand, on canvas.”



Mutton snapper in hand in Cuba, Mike poses for a photo with his guide, Pedro. The Fongs were after bonefish and tarpon on that trip in 2000, but caught other fish species as well. Photo by Christine Fong

Over time Mike and Christine got to know Bird and his family, but once Bird moved to Reno, they saw each other less frequently. The time spent with Bird, early in Fong's fly-fishing career, certainly impacted his development in the sport. Other famous people, too, served as catalysts in Fong's early fly-fishing years, most notably, craftsmen at the famed Winston Rod Company, located at that time in San Francisco.

Winston was headquartered just a few blocks from where Fong was employed as a graphic artist, at a company named Gregory and Falk, where he worked for 27 years. Mike commented in his book that it was a "compassionate" company that treated its employees well—so well that for nearly half the years he was associated with the company, he was able to arrange a four-day work schedule. The long weekends, when combined with annual vacation leave and holiday time, allowed the Fongs to devote a significant amount of time to fishing.

Given the proximity of Winston to his place of employment, Mike was able, on occasion, to wander into the rod shop during lunch breaks. There he met rod builder Doug Merrick. Merrick had been with Winston since 1945 and eventually became its sole owner after the death of famed Winston rod maker, and then partner, Lew Stoner. Merrick, like Cal Bird, played an important role not only in Fong's

growing love for fly fishing, but also in his desire to share the sport with others, especially through his writing.

Over time Fong published stories beyond those he wrote for the major outdoor magazines circulating in the 1960s. He wrote for *Salt Water Sportsman*, the *Garcia Fishing Annual*, and *Angler Magazine*. He also served as editor, for five years, of *Flyfisher* magazine, a Federation of Fly Fishers publication. Once the specialty fishing magazines blossomed, beginning largely in the early 1970s, the fly-fishing world enjoyed even more of Fong's adventures afield. As a longtime contributing editor for *Fly Fisherman*, Mike shared with readers many of his favorite destinations, offering invaluable advice on how to approach those waters and make the best of a planned trip. But beyond the printed page, Mike gave numerous slide show presentations covering fishing destinations, fishing techniques, entomology, fly tying, and photography. The presentations were sometimes arranged through working relationships with ISE (International Sportsmen's Exposition).

Dozens of stories about productive fisheries, beautifully supported by Christine's superb photography, appeared in numerous publications, no doubt making many anglers linger at newsstands and eagerly open their mailboxes. However, the Fongs decided to take the concept of sharing fly-fishing adventures a bit further, and beginning in

1992, they began publishing their own unique newsletter, *The Inside Angler*. The newsletter, published until 2002, was a tastefully illustrated, information-packed vessel complete with photos, detailed maps, and recommendations on accommodations and other services for waters throughout western North America and occasionally abroad. In all, the publication reported on more than 200 great fishing destinations. However, Mike and Christine both recognized that the sport of fly fishing can only continue to be as good as the health of the fisheries and environment surrounding it.

To that end, they were members and staunch supporters of the Federation of Fly Fishers (FFF), California Trout, Trout Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, and the California Sport-fishing Protection Alliance. Moreover, Mike and Christine were members of the Palo Alto Fly Fishers, Peninsula Fly Fishers of Northern California, the Golden Gate Angling and Casting Club, and the Northern California Council of FFF. Mike also became a major sponsor of Fenwick Rods, having been introduced to the company by Mel Krieger.

Over the years, Mike (and Christine, as the two were inseparable in their angling accomplishments) garnered numerous awards for contributions to fly fishing. Mike and Christine received the Ross Allen Merigold Complete Angler Memorial Award. Mike received the FFF Life Member and the Arnold Gingrich Memorial Life Award.

In May 1971, Fong wrote yet another story for *Outdoor Life*. His "Hatch on a Hot Lake" was a welcome tale that I enjoyed reading at the time. The routine I followed back then was to check the magazine racks monthly for any fly-fishing story that might come through in the few outdoor sports magazines of that era. After scanning the issue and spotting Fong's article, I purchased the magazine. East Coast, West Coast, it didn't matter to me: if there was a fly-fishing story in an issue of any magazine, out came the coins.

The story described Lake Davis, a northeastern California impound-

ment at 6,000 feet in the Sierra. The adventurous tale described how Mike, Christine, and fishing companions Nelson Ishiyama and Lou Palmer went after rainbows approaching 20 inches, fishing nymphs and dry flies in flooded sagebrush. Mike was only 31 then, with a lifetime of fishing still ahead of him. I was 17, with a lifetime still ahead to follow Mike Fong's stories. But that wonderful journey ended on June 14, 2002, when Mike Fong died from a brain aneurysm, a day after returning from again fishing Lake Davis. He was 63.

Just like on that Lake Davis outing 30 years prior, on his last trip, Mike and Christine had shared their adventure with friends, this time Ralph and Lisa Cutter, two accomplished fly fishers well known to California anglers. Of his last outing with Mike, Ralph recalls, "Certainly the most poignant memory is one where Lisa and I were on Lake Davis in our boat, and Mike and Christine in theirs. We met on the water midmorning and discussed the 'horrible' conditions: blue sky, warm

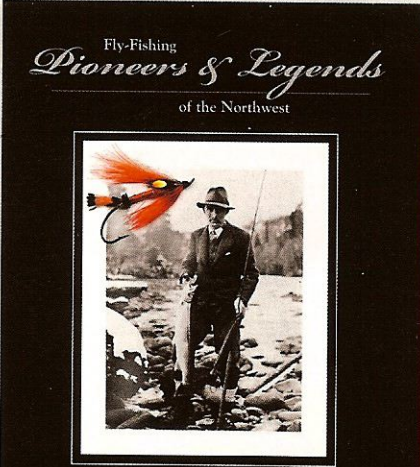
sun, no wind, and an osprey winging over the waters looking for the same trout as us. We laughed at our situation, typically great fishing but lousy catching. Through the entire morning of lousy catching, you could see Mike's grin a mile away."

Remembering that day also, Christine added that later on the fishing improved, and Mike caught several trout on a small, sparsely tied brown damselfly nymph. The couples later met at the dock, and Mike invited Ralph and Lisa to share a meal.

"Being in a hurry to do something terribly important (like getting to the post office before it closed), we took a rain check and agreed to do it next time," Ralph recalls. Mike died the next day, and Ralph laments that such an event "kind of puts life into perspective."

The author would like to thank Christine Fong for her gracious help providing background information for this story.

Mike Valla is an angling historian and freelance writer who lives in Stony Creek, New York.



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