



An engraving showing a view of the Schuylkill River at Philadelphia, ca. 1840


Fishing Tackle from Eastern Pennsylvania: The Rods of George W. Burgess

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In the mid-1850s, Norristown, Pennsylvania, was a growing manufacturing town of approximately 6500 citizens and 100 licensed retailers and dealers. Incorporated as a borough in 1812 and expanded to 2300 acres in 1853, the town commanded a view of the Schuylkill River valley from its elevated site on the banks of the river about sixteen miles northwest of Philadelphia. The borough included two miles of river frontage and was, and remains, the seat of Montgomery County.

Spurred by the presence of the State Road laid out in 1830 that ran through the borough from New Hope, Pennsylvania, to the Maryland border and by its connection to Philadelphia after 1835 with the tracks of the Philadelphia, Germantown, and Norristown Railroad Co.,¹ Norristown would more than double in size by the 1880s. The town would include almost 300 retailers, 10 cotton and woolen factories, two furnaces, six foundries and lumber mills, and one fishing tackle manufacturer. In 1884, whether in spite of or because of its growing industries, Norristown was “remarkably healthy, . . . its water excellent and its neighborhood unsurpassed in the quality and abundance of its marble, iron and limestone.”²

The Schuylkill River already had played an important part in America’s rich angling history. William Penn’s “Greene Countrie Towne” was sandwiched between it and the Delaware River. Along its banks, in 1732, local anglers had founded the “Schuylkill Fishing Company of the Colony (later ‘State’) in Schuylkill,” the oldest existing sporting club in the English-speaking world. Schuylkill was the heavily wooded, western-most area of the city. In 1739, “A Fishing Place in Schuylkill,” from which rock, shad, and other fish could be caught, was advertised for sale. During the 1770s, Philadelphian Edward Pole, one of the country’s leading tackle dealers, became, perhaps, the first in the New World to advertise both multiplying reels and artificial flies. Pole’s tavern, “The Wigwam,” was established on the east bank of the river for the convenience of anglers. However, by 1864, Thaddeus Norris, influential angler, tackle maker, pioneering fish-culturist, and writer, despaired that “the gas-works had destroyed the fishing in the Schulkill [*sic*].”³ The Schuylkill River fishing moved westward, and, stocked by ardent fishermen, including Norris, the river’s western sections were being advertised as “the best black bass waters in the world” by the 1880s.



PHILADELPHIA
WHIP AND CANE MANUFACTORY,
 No. 30 1, South Third Street, nearly opposite Congress Hall.
 The Subscribers have made such improvements in the Manufacture of the above articles, that they flatter themselves that they can sell much lower than any other establishment in the United States, and will warrant their work equal to any Manufactured in the Country.
 All Orders punctually attended to, and forwarded to any part of the Union.
BURGESS, & CO.

An advertisement placed by Burgess in Desilver's Philadelphia Directory and Stranger's Guide for 1831

Sometime between 1853 and 1858, George W. Burgess arrived in Norristown with his wife and established a business manufacturing fishing tackle. His son, Warren S. Burgess, a machinist, moved there in 1856 from Philadelphia, at the age of twenty-eight. We do not know if father and son moved there simultaneously or, perhaps, one arrived first and persuaded the other that Norristown offered new opportunities. Warren's family, which included three children, and his parents would occupy the same households for the rest of the tackle maker's life. The family continued to live together after the tackle maker's death on Nov. 11, 1882. Burgess, his wife, and other family members were buried in the Montgomery Cemetery.

George W. Burgess was born in Boston on August 26, 1805, where he was raised with three brothers and three sisters. As a youth, he served an apprenticeship in New Hampshire to learn the trade of whip and cane making. After rejoining his family, which had moved to New York City, he relocated to Philadelphia, about a decade before the Meeks produced their first reel in Kentucky, and set up a business manufacturing whips and canes. The earliest record of the factory we have found was located in Desilver's 1829 business directory, where its address was given as 254 High St., a couple of blocks from the hardware store of Shipley & Bartram.⁴ We believe that Burgess married Sophia E. Saurman just before or after his arrival in Philadelphia, where their son Warren was born on July 28, 1828.

Burgess was listed as a whip and/or cane maker in Philadelphia directories through 1853, though his name was absent from 1835 until an 1839 edition. He

may have missed hearing the Liberty Bell crack.⁵ He also was not listed in the 1849 or 1850 directories. During his quarter-century tenure in the city, he worked at a minimum of nine different locations while living at no fewer than four different addresses. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that he was self-employed throughout the period. An 1831 advertisement for Burgess, & Co. drew attention to its products' low prices. While Burgess was listed personally in 1839 and 1840 directories, a provocatively prescient ad in each touted an unnamed supplier of "FISHING AND FOWLING TACKLE, Cane Manufactory, and FANCY GOODS" at 26 S Third St. We suspect that Burgess placed the ads. In 1841, George W. Burgess & Co., variety store, was located at 40 S Third. Subsequently, "& CO." did not appear in directories until 1851, when Burgess & Co., cane makers, reappeared.

Burgess always lived within walking distance of his various working addresses, which were clustered in center city near the Delaware River waterfront. Among his business neighbors over the years were William Kirchberg, manufacturer and importer of guns, John Krider, gunmaker and tackle dealer, and at least five other fishing tackle dealers. Krider, at Second and Walnut Streets, and George W. Heyberger, at 50 N. Third St., both of whom described themselves only as "importers" of tackle, advertised walking-stick rods while Burgess was working in the city. We like to think that Burgess may have played a role in their construction.

Although Burgess clearly was able to make a living during his long tenure in Philadelphia, his frequent changes of location and his apparently sporadic attempts to vary his product line suggest that his business often struggled. We can speculate that his move to Norristown represented a chance to enter semi-retirement in a less urbanized, perhaps less expensive, location. Perhaps he was suffering what we now call a mid-life crisis.



FISHING AND FOWLING
TACKLE,
 Cane Manufactory,
 AND
FANCY GOODS,
 No. 26 South Third street, Philadelphia.

A suspicious advertisement in Desilver's 1839 directory. Burgess' "variety store" was located at 40 South Third Street in 1841.

Directory year	Shop address	Home address
1829	254 High St.	-
1830	Locust ab 12th	-
1831	30 ½ S 3rd	-
1833	30 ½ S 3rd	-
1835, 1837, 1838	not listed	not listed
1839	-	Washington (W.P.)
1840	-	Washington (W.P.)
1841	40 S 3rd	Washington (W.P.)
1842	40 S 3rd	Washington (W.P.)
1843	100 Chestnut	SE 6th and Pine
1844	100 Chestnut	151 Wood
1845	rear 4 S 7th	151 Wood
1846	390 High	151 Wood
1848	390 High	151 Wood
1849, 1850	not listed	not listed
1851	140 Sassafras	37 Commerce
1852	49 N 4th	37 Commerce
1853	49 N 4th	37 Commerce
1854 and after	not listed	not listed

The working and home addresses of George W. Burgess in Philadelphia, as listed in city directories.

Street numbers continued to be adjusted until they were officially designated after 1856. It is possible that 26, 30 ½, and 40 South Third Street all were the same location.

Burgess' obituary in the *Norristown Herald and Free Press* stated that "he returned to New York and commenced a business, in 1830 or 1831, which was then entirely new in America, that of making friction matches." According to directory listings, Burgess could have accomplished that feat between 1833 and 1839, between 1848 and 1850, or even between 1853 and 1858. The obituary also mentioned that the U.S. Signal Service adopted "an improved form of match for setting off rockets," invented by Burgess "while a resident of Norristown."

The earliest evidence we have for Burgess' presence in Norristown is unusual. A "First Premium" was awarded to George W. Burgess, Norristown, for his "case of fishing tackle" at the Twenty-Sixth Exhibition of American Manufactures sponsored by the Franklin

Institute in late 1858. The comments of the judges are worthy of repetition: "They are of superior quality, of greater variety and style, to any we have seen. The depositor, *the only manufacturer of the kind in the state* [authors' italics], is a successful competitor with the foreign article. The deposit well merits especial notice." The exhibition catalog diabolically omitted any description of the tackle.

In 1859, advertisements for fishing tackle at both Sower's Book Store and Wills' Book & Variety Store appeared in the Norristown paper. We suspect that the ads resulted from Burgess' ability to convince the retailers to carry his products. Subsequently, Burgess was listed as the sole manufacturer of fishing tackle in borough directories from 1860 through 1882. The only exception was his listing as "fishing rod manufacturer" in the 1867 directory. Between those dates, he served as a member of an emergency company during the late Civil War (though he would have been close to sixty years old).

In Norristown, Burgess continued his habit of changing locations. His occupational addresses included: "e side Green ab Elm" (1860), "Egypt bet Mill and Arch" (1867), "Lafayette n de Kalb" (1870), "de Kalb bel Main" (1874), 319 de Kalb (1876), 208 Green (1880-1882). Presumably, Norristown adopted numbered addresses in 1874. The family lived at the same address as the shop in 1860, then resided at "Arch and Airy" after 1867. An entry in the 1874 directory indicated that the family "boarded" there. The residence was labeled as 428 Arch by 1880.

In spite of his obituary's mention of his inventiveness, we know nothing of Burgess' other inventions. He was granted no patents,⁶ though his son had been granted five by 1882, unrelated to fishing tackle. In fact, we have been unable to determine, with a single exception, what types of tackle he manufactured. Arduous searches through the *Norristown Herald and Free Press* from 1854 through 1882 failed to turn up a single Burgess advertisement. Therefore, we are convinced that Burgess manufactured his products for the trade. His name was absent from every "List of Retailers," published in the same newspaper, that we examined for the period of 1862 to 1872.

Whether or not Warren Burgess worked on the fishing tackle remains an open question. Warren worked at the same address as that of his father in 1870, but by 1874 he had established his own firm at another location. By 1880, he again worked at the same address as his father's, and both he and his son (called George W. Burgess, Jr.) continued working at the Green St. location after the death of George, Sr. Warren eventually would become the superintendent of the borough's electrical plant.



A Burgess advertisement in an 1875 Norristown directory suggests that he was retailing his products.

Where was the “trade” for whom George W. Burgess seems to have made his angling wares? In 1860, Philip Wilson & Co., gun dealers at 432 Chestnut St., Philadelphia, advertised that they were “Sole Agents for G.W. Burgess’s Fishing Rods and Tackle.” It is not known how long this association lasted, but Wilson’s was still selling tackle after the Civil War.

In 1867, Wilson’s was succeeded by a new firm called Westcott & George. J. Louis George had been making tackle at Wilson’s since 1862, and it is likely that Charles S. Westcott, a manufacturer of type, provided financing for buying the Wilson business. Nevertheless, the partnership disappeared within a couple of years, so Burgess must have been stranded without a sole distributor.

There were other potential distributors nearby, including the large sporting-goods houses of John Krider’s “Sportsmen’s Depot,” A. B. Shipley & Son, and, later, Edward K. Tryon Co.⁷ All were known nationally, and all advertised heavily. In fact, Krider and Shipley advertised occasionally in the Norristown paper, at least as early as 1873. Burgess probably had known both of them in Philadelphia. Could he have persuaded these giants to advertise their (his?) products to his fellow townsmen? Burgess advertisements in Norristown directories during the mid-1870s suggest that he was retailing his tackle by then.

However Burgess might have sold his tackle, his business in Norristown may have been a struggle similar to his earlier Philadelphia ventures. After coming to Norristown at about the age of fifty, he worked at a minimum of five locations over a period of twenty-four or more years. His name’s absence from the Norristown Index of Deed Transfers suggests that he rented, rather than owned, the properties where he lived and worked. He left no will when he died at the age of seventy-seven. Nevertheless, he “was well known for his mechanical skill and inventive genius...His wares were noted for their excellence and took premiums at the Franklin Institute and at a State fair held at Harrisburg.”

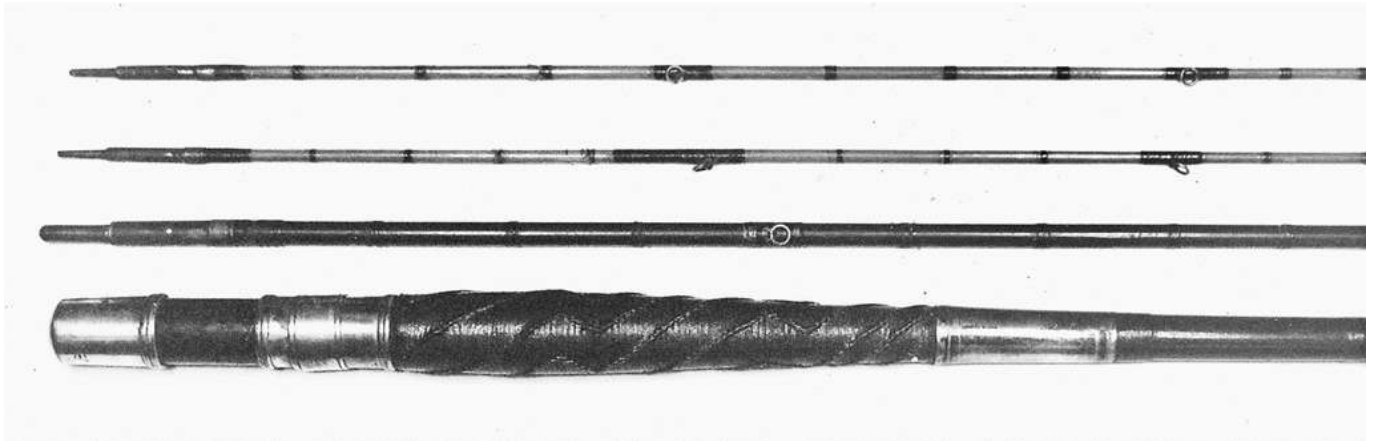


This Norristown building (center) housed Burgess’ penultimate shop. The street-level shops have been modernized, but Burgess may have peered down from the bay window.

The Burgess product that prompted the research for this article is a 3-section, 12-foot fly rod in a fitted walnut case. An extra tip is provided. Equipped with folding-ring guides, brass fittings, and maroon wraps, the rod is heavily varnished and round in cross-section. The male ferrules have capped, tapered dowels, and the female ferrules are shouldered. Though the ferrules apparently were not plated, the butt-cap, reel bands, and grip check are plated with what appears to be silver. The tapered handle is wrapped with twisted linen cord, essentially nine-thread bass line, and a spiral design is woven into the wrapping. The butt-cap is stamped, “Burgess/Maker/Norristown, Pa.” The number “1” is stamped on the long grip check.

We sought advice on the rod from a number of expert rod collectors and historians. The consensus is that it was made during the early or mid-1860s. Burgess was in Norristown during that period, having arrived a few years before the Civil War and having been listed as a rodmaker in the 1867 borough directory. Based primarily on characteristics of handle and grip check, Hoagy Carmichael considers the rod a good example of “Pennsylvania style” construction, which reflects the influence of English rod making styles. A. J. Campbell indicated that the metal band over which the reel-clamping ring slides also reflects English influence. Mr. Campbell pointed out that wrapping the rod handle with cord probably began in the late 1850s and that the style initially had been used for riding crops. Burgess, with his long career manufacturing whips and canes, would have been uniquely qualified to adopt such a technique for rod handles.

There has been some minor disagreement among those who have examined the rod as to its construction, primarily because of the heavy varnish and stain



A 12-foot fly rod made by George Burgess in Norristown

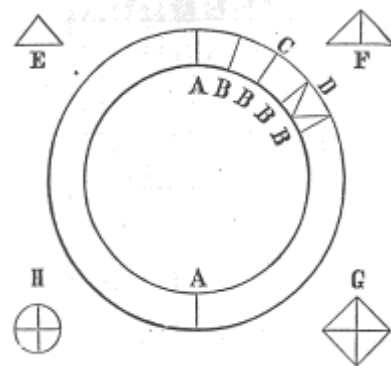
ing, as well as the length of some wraps. The reel seat, whose mortised groove is visible above the butt-cap, is made of walnut. The shaft of the heavily stained butt-section consists of at least two, possibly four, strips of what appears to be ash. The shaft and grip are probably fastened under the grip check. The dark mid-section is constructed of at least two strips, again possibly four, of either hornbeam or heavily stained lancewood. Use of multiple strips to construct non-bamboo shafts is an unusual method. Each of the two amber-colored tips consists of three spliced segments, and each segment is made of four strips of bamboo. The strips may have been glued with the enamel placed internally.

Martin J. Keane informed us that he once owned a rod with a handle and grip check very similar to those on the Burgess rod. The construction was fascinating, in that four dark strips of wood were inlaid within the longitudinal grooves of a light-colored core which was X-shaped in cross-section, and the shafts were round. Such a rod may have been experimental, reflecting “artistic efforts...stronger than [the maker’s] basic mechanical training,” as Mr. Keane has suggested.



The Burgess stamp on the butt-cap of the 12-foot fly rod

This Burgess rod appears to have been constructed partly in accord with advice provided by Thaddeus Norris in *The American Angler’s Book*, one of the most important books on angling of the nineteenth century. Philadelphian Norris, whom Burgess probably knew, recommended that the butt- and mid-sections of a three-section fly rod be made of wood, preferably ash and ironwood [hornbeam], respectively. He went on to provide detailed instructions for making a “quarter-section tip” from four strips of bamboo. The strips are each given a longitudinal right angle by scraping with a right-angled notch in a steel “drawplate.” They are then glued to form a square shaft, which is then rounded by planing and sanding. It would be interesting to learn whether Norris influenced Burgess or vice-versa.



Norris’ diagram explaining the construction of four-strip tip sections. Strips are planed to the cross-section shown in E, then glued and rounded as in F-H.

A second Burgess fly rod was brought in “off the street” at a show in Lancaster County, Pa., and, fortunately, one of our Burgess consultants, by then aware of the name, was able to acquire it. The 3-section rod is 11-foot-5-inches in length and is equipped with



An 11-foot-5-inch Burgess fly rod. Note the long grip check. (Collection of Harold Herr)

folding-ring guides. The male ferrules have tapered dowels; that on the tip-section is capped with brass, but the cap on the mid-section ferrule is missing. The other fittings are German silver, and two brass rims are soldered to the clamping ring, which bears the Burgess stamp. The reel seat, except for the mortised groove, is sheathed, so the clamping ring slides only on metal. The grip is not wrapped. Though some wraps and the splices consist of maroon silk thread, like those on the first rod, some of the guide wraps are a heavier black thread.



The reel seat of the fly rod. The seat is sheathed, and the maker's stamp is on the sliding ring. The cap on the male ferrule of the mid-section has been lost. (Collection of Harold Herr)

The reel seat, which seems to be maple or birch, is joined to an ash butt-shaft beneath the characteristically long grip check. The mid-section, unlike that of the first rod, was planed from a single piece of hornbeam. The tip, like those of the other fly rod, is comprised of three spliced segments of four-strip bamboo. The tip-top guide is wrapped with brass wire. The second rod is somewhat beefier than the first and, though neither rod can be dated with certainty, appears to be a slightly later product.

A third rod already was owned by a collector. It is a 3-section, 8-foot-8-inch casting rod with brass fittings and tapered, uncapped dowels on the male ferrules.

The butt- and mid-sections are made of greenheart, and the tip appears to be lancewood. Though the butt-section has a folding-ring guide, the other sections are equipped with trumpet guides, which are wrapped with relatively heavy, black thread. As the rod has been rewrapped and revarnished, it is not certain how accurate the restoration was.

We learned that another Burgess rod is owned by the State Museum of Pennsylvania in Harrisburg, Pa., to which it had been bequeathed by the late Jack Eschenmann. Although we have the good fortune to have known Jack, an angler and collector *par excellence*, whose company always was a source of great pleasure, his Norristown-made fly rod somehow escaped our notice.

The rod is a 4-section, 13-foot-8-inch-long fly rod with one tip. The butt-section appears to comprise an unstained maple reel seat and a darkly stained, solid maple shaft. Though the guide and ferrule wraps are maroon, the intermediate wraps are black. The female ferrule, like the ferrules on the other sections, is unplated brass. An agate stripper guide may have been an early replacement.

The grip is wound with cord in a manner similar to that on the 12-foot rod described earlier. A piece of red cloth is inlaid within the mortise of the reel seat. A protective sheath below the seat is made of brass with two German-silver bands. The clamping ring also is made of German silver, and the long grip check is unplated brass.

The other three sections have folding-ring guides. While the male ferrule of the second section has an uncapped, tapered dowel, those on the other sections are simpler, consisting merely of capped cylinders. The second section appears to be made of solid lancewood; the third section and tip appear to be solid greenheart.

The finding of two marked rods tipped with bamboo confirms that Burgess was a member of that exclusive fraternity of rodmakers who used that wood before 1870. In fact, there are few American makers known to have built rods of any kind before Burgess began his tackle business in Norristown. We can only hope that additional Burgess products will continue to surface as rapidly as have these rods.



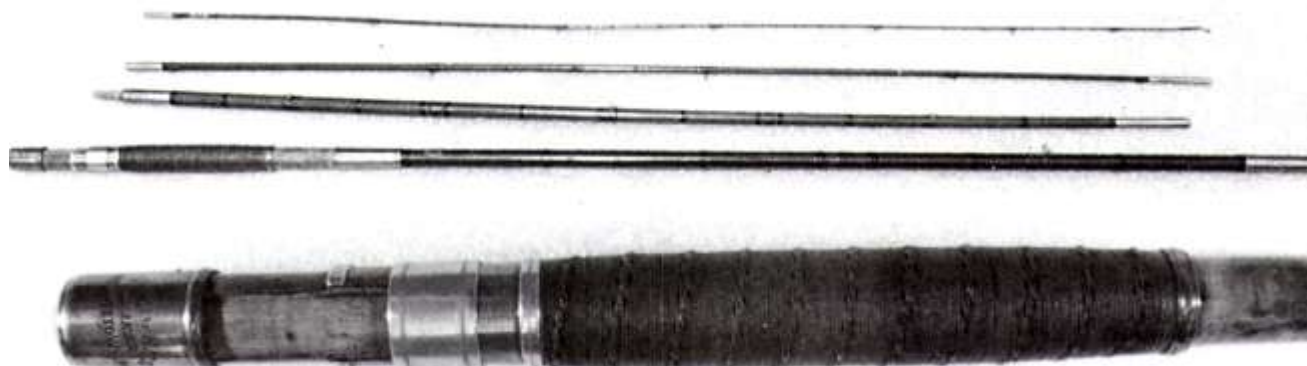
A Burgess casting rod, 8-foot-8-inches in length. Though the butt-section has a folding-ring guide, trumpet guides are wrapped onto the other sections. (Collection of Bill Cooke)



The butt-cap and uncapped male ferrules of the casting rod. The word "Burgess" has been double-struck. (Collection of Bill Cooke)

A fuller description of the products and influence of George W. Burgess will require further research and good luck. Nevertheless, he clearly deserves to join that small fraternity of Pennsylvania makers who are known to have built rods before 1870 and whose work helped to pave the way for the development of the six-

strip, split-bamboo rod. That legendary group already includes Samuel Phillippe, Solon Phillippe, and Norris. We hope that readers will inform us of items in their collections that bear his name or evidence of his craftsmanship.



A four-section, 13-foot-8-inch-long Burgess fly rod. The grip is wrapped with cord, into which a spiral design is woven. The butt-cap functions as the lower portion of the reel seat. (Photos courtesy of the State Museum of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission)

Notes

1. The railroad was served by Matthias Baldwin's "Old Ironsides," one of the first few locomotives built in this country. Although a steamboat had been built at Norristown for use on the Schuylkill, navigation to Philadelphia proved too difficult, and the boat was hauled elsewhere.
2. *History of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania*, ed. by T. W. Bean. Philadelphia: Everts & Peck, 1884, p. 747.
3. Norris, Thaddeus, *The American Angler's Book*. Philadelphia: E. H. Butler & Co., 1864, p. 32.
4. High St. was the most elevated thoroughfare in William Penn's plan for his new city. Over the years, as it became lined with stalls used by local farmers and merchant, contrary to Penn's intentions, it became known as "Market St." The two names were used interchangeably for decades, until the street officially became "Market St." after the city consolidation in 1854. Benjamin Franklin's house at 141 High St. was still standing when Burgess established his first manufactory a block away.
5. On July 8, 1835, while tolled in memory of Chief Justice John Marshall, who had died two days previously.
6. A George Burgess, of New York, received a patent in 1850 for an "Improvement in machines for cutting cap fronts." Though "our" Burgess could have been in New York at the time, we doubt that it was his invention. Other G. W. Burgesses, in New York, Maine, and Boston, earned patents for sewing machine-related inventions, some after the tackle-maker's death.
7. See Putro, Joseph H., "The Sign of the Golden Buffalo: The Edward K. Tryon Company, Philadelphia," *Fishing Collectibles Magazine*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Fall, 1995, pp 11-20.

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