

Walter Durfee Coggeshall

An American living in London in the 20th century

By Graham Turner

The man that could be considered to be America's finest fly fisherman of the 20th century, also the country's tackle makers foremost ambassador, has remained virtually unknown in his country of origin.

His name was Walter Durfee Coggeshall and he was living in London at the beginning of the 20th century. Born around 1850 in Providence, Rhode Island, and married to Josephine Harriet (born Eagan) with a daughter Mary Josephine. In the 1901 census he was registered as a civil engineer living at Upper Phillimore Gardens,



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Kensington, London, having formerly resided at 14, Roxburgh Road, Westgate-on-Sea. He was a keen fisherman and a highly respected member of the 'Fly Fishers' Club' in London and became one of its new trustees on the 15th November 1912 and went on to become its president in 1918.

He fished alongside legendary, revered

authors on the chalk streams of Hampshire, Wiltshire and Kent and was a great influence on their techniques and the tackle they used. These included men such as Frederick M. Halford, author of "Floating Flies and. How to Dress Them", "Dry Fly Fishing in Theory and Practice", "Making a Fishery" and "Dry Fly Entomology". Also G.E.M. Skues, the British author, fly fisherman and lawyer who practiced in the partnership of Powell, Skues and Graham Smith, 34 Essex Street, Strand, London WC2 and in that capacity became Coggeshall's family solicitor. G.E.M. Skues wrote many books and has been described by historians as the finest fly fisherman that ever lived.



Coggeshall's home at Phillimore Gardens, Kensington, London.

He is best remembered for the invention of nymph fishing which created the controversy with the dry fly doctrine developed by Halford. Coggeshall is believed to have been witness to a sharp exchange between Halford and Skues not long after the publication of "Minor Tactics of the Chalk Streams" in 1910.

"Young man," Halford challenged Skues, "one simply cannot fish the Itchen with the method you describe."

"But I've done it," replied Skues.

G.E.M. Skues was highly impressed with Coggeshall's silk lines and mentioned the fact in his later writings with the words, "He gave me one in 1903, the dressing of which, after much hard wear was still almost intact twenty years later."

The ultimate perfection of the oiled and tapered silk line was also attributed by British contemporaries to the American expatriate. His authority on the subject had not gone unnoticed in America.

Abercrombie & Fitch, located at 56 Read Street, Manhattan, put out a catalogue in 1910 that included 'Oil-finished silk lines to the Halford tapers and the oil-finish specifications of Coggeshall.'

Coggeshall was a devotee to the American tackle maker H. L. Leonard and owned two of the maker's rods. In 1902, Skues accepted an invitation to visit and inspect the rods, one of which he later confirmed as being a 10 footer, weighing in the region of 6 1/4 ounces and made in 1901. The weight seems to differ slightly each time it is mentioned in the author's writings. However, what is clear is the fact that after the visit Skues purchased a duplicate of Coggeshall's 10-foot Leonard rod. Evidence to confirm this comes from "Nymph Fishing For Chalk Stream Trout" first published in 1939. The text also gives details of the acquisition of a 9-foot rod which was a present from a client and is believed to be the author's famous WBR (world's best rod). The full text reads as follows:



5 foot 3 1/2inch- 6 ounce trolling rod comprising 9 1/4 inch nickel silver handle and one piece 4 1/2 foot plus whole-cane rod tube inscribed with rod details together with his wading staff 54 inches long incorporating natural hazel shaft fitted with stag-horn fittings to tip and base.

"In 1902, being greatly impressed with the powers and quality of the American light fly rod, particularly the Leonard make, I flung myself actively into the controversy on the subject that raged in the angling press. The part which I took led to my making the acquaintance of the late Walter Durfee Coggeshall — an American long resident in London and my acquisition in 1903 of my first Leonard 10 footer. In 1905 a client presented me with the best fly rod money could buy. To be chosen by myself, and having been immensely struck by the quality of a 9ft Leonard brought over in 1904 for the Crystal Palace Fly Casting Tournament by the young Mr Mills of New York (whose firm built and sold the Leonard rods). I selected a duplicate, which is still, after thirty three years hard wear, the joy of my life."

7 foot - 3 pieces, plus spare tip - 3 7/8 ounce fly rod with cane tip tube, original bag marked owner's details and year 1908.

brought into the salesroom by an elderly gentleman who had inherited the tackle by way of being the surviving relative. Many of the bags / cases in which the tackle was housed carried the name / address of the owner and were dated to the beginning of the 20th



This most celebrated 9-foot Leonard favourite rod, which Skues described as the WBR rod, is the most important fly rod historically and is displayed in the Fly Fishers' Club in London.

On the February, 20, 2020 a quantity of antique fishing tackle was sold at an auction house in Dorchester, England. The auctioneer confirmed that all the tackle had come from one estate and had been been

century. That named person was WD Coggeshall - Upper Phillimore Gardens, Kensington, London. The tackle was purchased by bidding over the telephone. It was therefore a pleasant surprise when it was eventually delivered to find that the lot listed as a Leonard rod and various, also contained 3 additional named early Leonard rods. However, the even greater excitement came when it was discovered that two of

the rods (a 9-foot and a 10-foot) were duplicates of the two most celebrated Leonard rods made famous in the writings of G.E.M. Skues and were in all probability the ones that inspired the great man to order his famous rods from H.L. Leonard in the first place. Furthermore, they would have been used alongside the ones of Skues since the two men fished the English chalk streams together. The provenance alone of Coggeshall's Leonard rods guarantees they will always be considered of historical importance.



In the summer of 1905 G.E.M. Skues wrote an article in the Flyfishers' Journal extolling the virtues of Coggeshall. The legendary author stated he wished to put on record for posterity his belief that no individual of his generation had made a greater mark on the art of fly fishing than his friend Walter Durfee Coggeshall. The lengthy content was one of the most important sources of information on the American expatriate that resided in London. Skues detailed his recollections of two rods he had been invited to inspect 23 years earlier and went on to say that a few years before his death Coggeshall had given him a



10-foot rod which he believed was the rod he had seen in 1902. He returned this rod to Mrs. Coggeshall after her husband's death and she then presented the rod for

display in the Flyfishers' Club. Dr. E.A. Barton wrote an article in the Journal of Autumn 1949 confirming the rod was destroyed by bomb damage during the Second World War. The Skues recollections at the time of writing the article contained nothing to question the validity of the contents. However, in 2020 Coggeshall's collection of tackle, that had been in store for a hundred years suddenly emerged and it contained a rod that would call into question whether

9-foot, 5 3/4 ounces, 3 piece plus 2 spare tips, one of which is shorter to give variation in length of rod, original bag with tag that states re-whipped with silk and revarnished in 1918 In addition a polished alloy rod tube

or not the rod which Skues had given back to Mrs. Coggeshall was in fact the original 10 footer from 1901 or whether it was a duplicate that Coggeshall had purchased at a later date. The newly discovered rod that provided the conflicting evidence was another 10-foot Leonard fly rod that was housed in its original bag, attached to which was a tag with Coggeshall's handwriting that read 'my first modern Leonard rod - re-whipped and re- varnished 1910'. This would confirm it was the original made in 1901 and inspected in 1902 by Skues at the home of Coggeshall. The newly discovered

collection of rods also included a 9 footer from the same early period with a tag that read 're- whipped and re- varnished 1918'. Skues said that when he returned the 10-foot rod to Mrs. Coggeshall she then gave him a 9 footer and this rod, once owned by WD Coggeshall, was purchased by Carl Otto von Keinbusch of New York from C.A.M. Skues, brother of G.E.M. upon the latter's death and is on display in the Flyfishers' Club New York. The excellent book 'G.E.M. Skues : The Way Of A Man With A Trout' by T. Donald Overfield gives the most comprehensive

10-foot, 6 3/4 ounces, 3 piece, plus a spare tip, original bag with tag that states - my first modern rod, Catskill 1887 handle, rewhipped, varnished and agate added 1910; in addition a polished alloy rod tube.

analyses of the Leonard rods owned by G E.M. However, his information with regard to the 10-foot rod given to Skues. by Coggeshall is based on the article from the summer of 1925 thus only reiterates the mistaken belief that it was the 1901 rod and Overfield further compounds the mistake by misquoting what Skues actually said in the article stating, My reason for this view is drawn from Skues' own article in the summer of 1925 issue of the Journal. Here he relates how Coggeshall gave him the 10-footer late in 1910 "but it was so beautiful that I could not bring myself

to the rough usage of the waterside." What Skues actually said in his article was, "In Memory of the controversy Coggeshall very generously gave me the