

The Western Coachman – Notes on Its History and Lineage

By: Tom H. Logan

The historic fly patterns of the British Isles, especially the wets, have held my special interest for quite some time. I enjoy tying them and I fish them in virtually all the warm and cold waters I fish from Florida to the Rockies and Sierras. They're elegant but generally simple in terms of materials used and not at all difficult to tie. Many of these patterns have existed for up to 400 years and there is a very good reason why they're still around and being fished...they imitate the very important emerging life stages of aquatic insects that fish eat throughout the world and they catch a lot of fish!

The pattern most responsible for my interest and study of the historic patterns is the Western Coachman that has existed for just over 70 years and is of new world origin... a youngster in comparison to the 400-year old Partridge and Orange of the north country of England. Wayne Luallen, a friend and fellow fly tyer from Visalia, California introduced me to the Western several years ago as a pattern that had been designed and made famous by Buz Buszek who



owned Buz's Fly Shop also in Visalia. You may recognize Buz as the namesake for the Federation of Fly Fishers' Buz Buszek Memorial Award that is presented annually to individuals that have contributed significantly to the arts of fly tying.

Mr. Buszek designed the Western about 1940 as a pattern for rainbows and browns in the Kings River just northeast of Visalia in the Kings Canyon of the Sierras. The fly had a prominent white hair wing of mule deer hair that was the standard. Many since, and those I tie as you can imagine, are tied with white-tailed deer hair. Buz marketed the fly and got a boost in 1949 when the Pacific Coast Olive Company purchased 2,000 Westerns to use in a promotion. They offered a coupon with purchase of olives that could be sent into the company for a Western Coachman that was provided in a special fly box. He later provided the pattern to the Orvis Company for them to carry in their stock.

Although the white wing is the first thing you notice in the pattern it was the term "Coachman" in the name and the pattern's brown hackle that caused me to research the lineage of the Western Coachman and historic

fly patterns in general. The question that nagged at me when I first started tying the Western was “Why is Coachman brown called Coachman brown and how is Coachman brown different from other colors of brown?” Coachman brown was brown to me, so why call it Coachman brown. Well, the answer turned out simpler than I anticipated, but it took going back to the original Coachman pattern to find the answer.

The first Coachman pattern from which a number of variations, including the Western, eventually evolved was designed probably in the early 1820’s in England, first appearing in British angling literature in 1825. The designer of the pattern was Tom Bosworth who just happened to be the coachman for the British Royal Family of the time. This wet pattern became a mainstay in that part of the world through the remainder of the century, and the brown feather that Tom selected as hackle for his pattern became known as Coachman brown after his profession. It’s as simple as that, but makes perfect sense.



The next variation of the Coachman that surfaced during that century was the Lead-wing Coachman. The wing of the Lead-wing simply replaced the white wing of the original Coachman with grey mallard slips and a gold



tag was added. I can tell you that both are very effective patterns whether for trout or local bream, but you seldom see them fished these days.

The first variation of the Coachman and possibly the most famous pattern to debut in the United States is the Royal Coachman. The pattern was first tied commercially in 1878 by Mr. John Haily who tied for Charles Orvis of the Orvis Company. Although Mr. Haily was the first to tie the pattern commercially, he actually received the original pattern from another unnamed commercial tyer who had tied an early prototype for a friend. He told Mr. Haily “I have just been tying some flies to order for a gentleman. He says he likes the coachman better than any other fly, but he finds it very frail, and he wants me to tie some with red silk in the middle, to make them stronger, and he also wants a little sprig of wood duck for a jib (tail). I send you a fly to see. I think it quite handsome.” Yes, the first Royal Coachman was tied with barred wood duck for tail, rather than with golden pheasant tippet as we know the pattern. Mr. Haily later replaced the wood duck tail with golden pheasant tippet and it apparently was then that the pattern was given the name of Royal Coachman. I think it worthy to note that while the pattern likely was tied wet, it also became a part of the evolving Catskill style of tying dry flies in that part of our country.

The band of silk floss in the middle of the body of the Royal Coachman sets it apart from almost all modern patterns, but it is interesting to find that Mary Orvis Marbury

subsequently described up to 30 patterns that included floss and herl in their bodies in her 1892 book *Favorite Flies and Their Histories*. The Orvis Company later designed a pattern for a fellow in Wagon Wheel Gap, Colorado who requested an order of Royal Coachman tied for him with “all the gilt (floss) possible”. The pattern had a body of red floss with only a neck of herl at the front of the body. It was then marketed as the Gilt Coachman. Mr. J.W. Fricke of San Francisco also designed the California Coachman in the early 1900’s. It was a similar pattern to the Gilt Coachman but the red floss was replaced with yellow. There are other variations on the Coachman of which we all are aware that include the well known Royal Wulff and its variations on grey and white. And this all brings us to the subject of this article, the Western Coachman.



This exploration into how many of the variations on the original Coachman came to be, naturally led to wondering how Buz came to design the Western Coachman. Buz, as you may know, designed a number of original patterns for catching trout in the King’s River and Sierra streams to the east of the Valley, and many of these were marketed widely. The fact is I suspect the pattern just occurred to him and its development began. I also suspect that if anything influenced its design, other than the Coachman

variations in general, the Western could have been a natural progression from his Old Gray Mare that preceded the Western. The Old Grey Mare is another very good pattern, by the way.



I had the fortune during the summer of 2003 to visit with Dr. Gene Mathias about his memories of Buz and his Western. Gene, brother to Olympic medalist Bob Mathias, was a friend and fly-tying peer of Buz and was tying Westerns right along with Buz during those days.

It was Gene’s recollection that Buz may have designed the pattern after the Royal Coachman and his prototype began with using African impala as the white hair wing. However, he couldn’t acquire enough impala for what he needed and changed to white tails of stillborn calves for the wing. Gene apparently helped Buz gather tails locally from the many dairies in the Valley. Buz finally settled on a wing of white deer hair and that is how the pattern remained with one exception. Buz used white mule deer hair from the top of the belly along each side of the body. I suspect that most Westerns are tied today with white-tailed deer hair rather than mule deer.

I enjoy tying the historic fly patterns but I especially enjoy thinking about all the fish the patterns have caught through the decades and centuries as I catch another big bluegill, cutthroat or Sierra golden. So, you can see why tying a Western without knowing how

it came to be was not quite enough for me. The Western Coachman, usually in size 14, is a pattern I'm never without, regardless of where I fish. Yes, I fish the same Western and other historic patterns for everything from bream to bass to trout. Probably my next favorite patterns are the Old Gray Mare and Royal Wulff, and I find the White Wulff a particularly effective pattern when the big *Hexagenias* are emerging from the lakes around Tallahassee.

You might want to give the Western or one of the other historic patterns a try. You might catch fish when others are wondering why the fish aren't biting. I can assure you that anytime I have a fly rod in my hand, I'm going to have a few Westerns in my pocket.