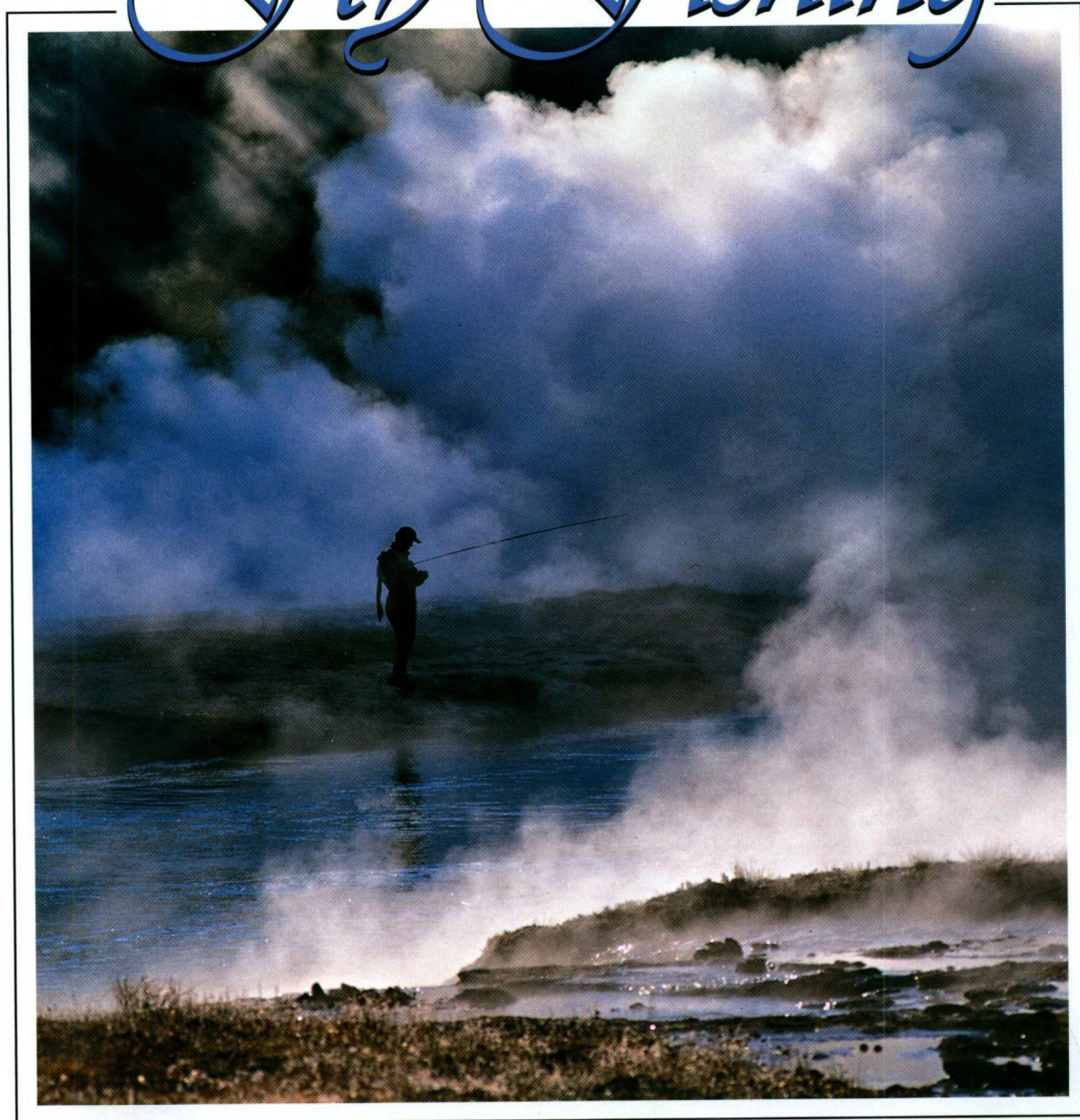


# NORTHWEST

May/June 2007

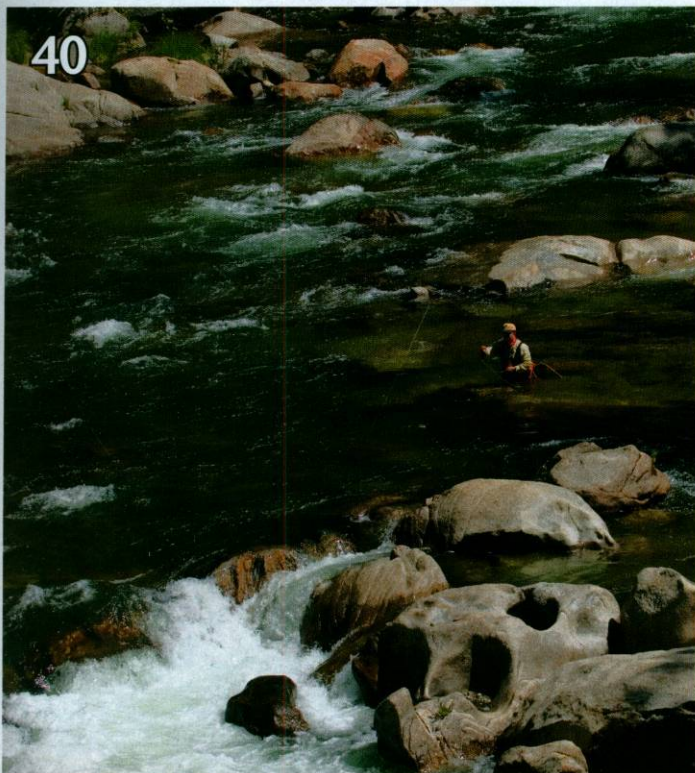
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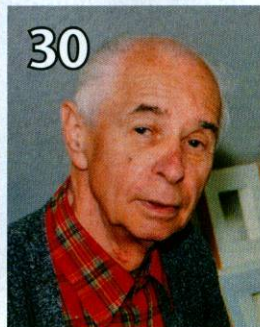
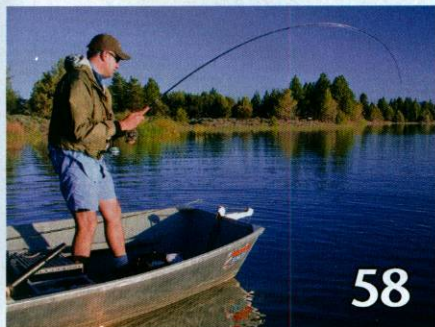
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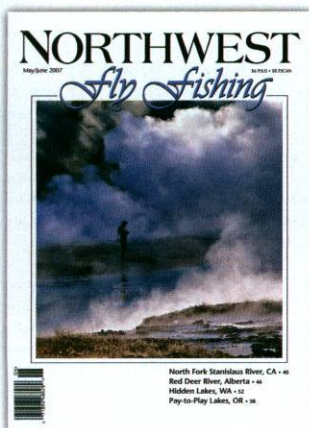
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Cover: *Firehole River, WY*  
Photo by: *John Juracek*



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# Pioneers & Legends

William B. Cushner (1914–1992):  
Collector, Framer, and Exhibitor of Fly-Fishing Memorabilia  
and Pioneer in Popularizing Fishing Flies as Unique Art and  
Their Tiers as Master Craftspeople

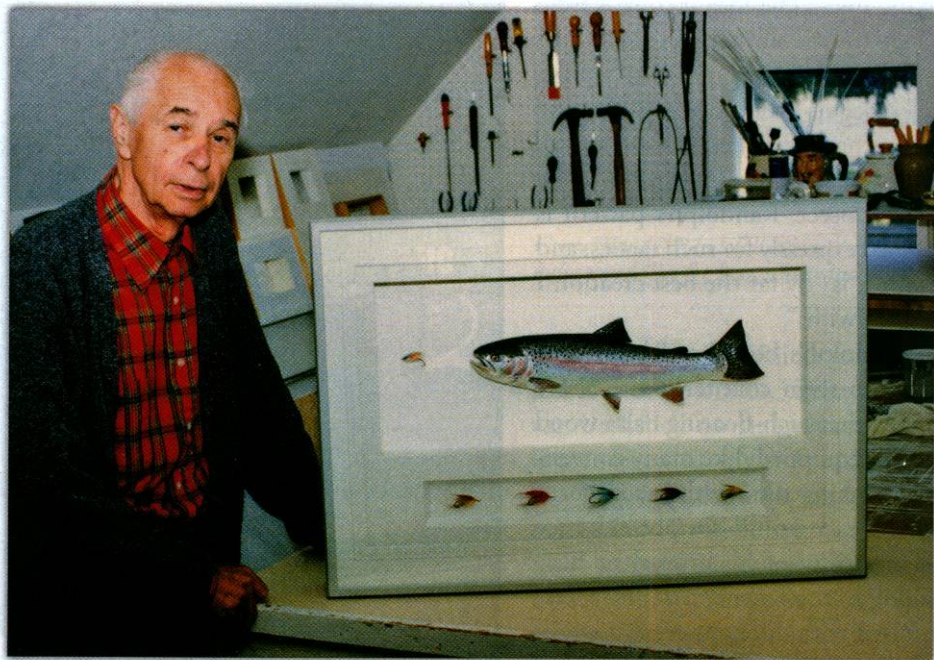
By Jack W. Berryman

William B. Cushner was born in Alberta, Canada, in 1914, the son of immigrants from Russia's Ukraine. He had a brother and two sisters. His father worked in the wheat fields and mines, as well as for the Canadian Pacific Railroad as it was being built across the province. In 1924, the family moved to Brooklyn, New York, to follow the promise of good employment opportunities and a better life for the children. During these formative years Bill spent many happy days wandering through New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, gradually developing an interest in art and artistic expression.

In his late 20s, Bill served in Italy with the U.S. Army during World War II, and shortly after returning home, he started a business making wooden packing crates on the Lower East Side. He married, and he and his wife, Phyllis, had one daughter, Judi. Cushner operated his business for several years, relying on a plentiful supply of cheap wood, his table saw, and the help of his cousin.

In 1949, a potential client asked Cushner if he could make picture frames. After some experimentation and after teaching himself to do miter cuts and bevels with his saws, Bill remembered that "a whole new world opened up for me." He started framing for advertising agencies, art galleries, national magazines, and individual artists and quickly learned that the frame needed to complement and enhance the material, but never detract from it. By the mid-1950s, he was developing a steady business in framing and opened a studio/gallery and workshop in lower Manhattan, where he operated for almost two decades.

In 1961, he framed a show for American artist Burgoyne Diller, an early advocate of a style known as construction and geometric painting. It was art that immediately attracted Bill's attention and was something he



Bill Cushner in his Fly-Fishing Museum workshop in Florence, Oregon, in 1989 with an example of his framing skill and artistic talent. This particular piece includes a 25-inch wood carving of a steelhead by Franz Dutzler of Sisters, Oregon, and a grouping of steelhead flies tied by the late Walt Johnson of Oso, Washington. Photograph courtesy of Bob Bettzig Sr.

believed he could do himself. Accordingly, he devoted two years to self-study, consciously translating everything he saw into geometric shapes as well as studying shadows and light play. By the mid-1960s he was a recognized "geometric constructionist," and his work was acquired by 11 museums, including New York's Whitney and the 20th Century Museum of Modern Art in Israel.

By the mid-1960s, Cushner was framing cover art for several national magazines, including *TIME* and *Life*, and also began to work closely with Herman Kessler, the art director for *Field & Stream*. Kessler's wife, Helen Shaw, one of the nation's top fly tiers and author of *Fly-Tying* (1963), asked Bill if he would frame a fly for her. Never a fisherman or fly tier, Cushner was nonetheless immediately intrigued with the craftsmanship and artistic talent that went into one of her fully dressed Atlantic salmon flies.

Kessler had been involved in the founding of the Federation of Fly Fishers (FFF) in 1965. A member of the Theodore Gordon Flyfishers Club, he had also suggested the idea of a museum for fly fishing to new Orvis president Leigh Perkins, which resulted in the opening of the Mu-

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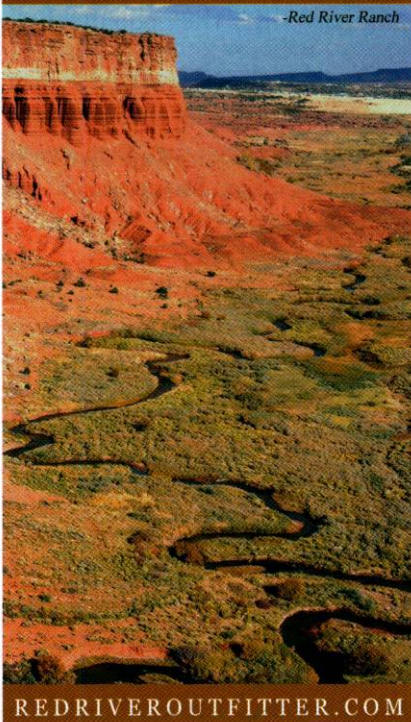
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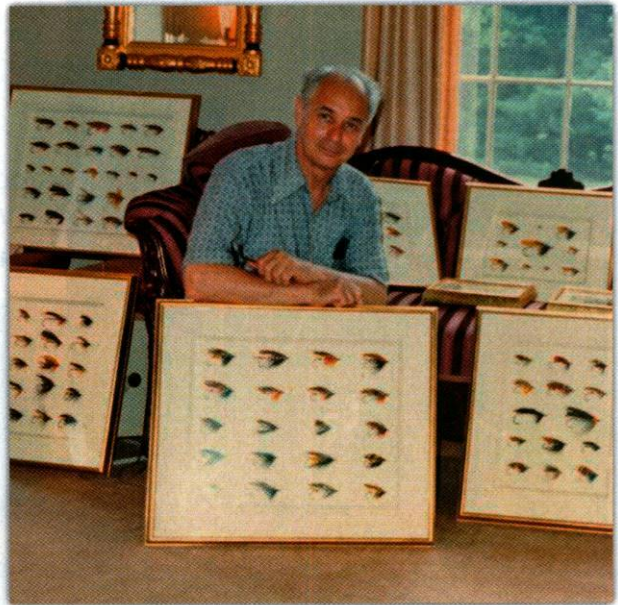
seum of American Fly Fishing in rented space at the Orvis Company in Manchester, Vermont, in 1967. It was this unique timing and the friendship of Kessler and Shaw that moved Cushner's talents toward flies and fly fishing.

After his work for Kessler and Shaw, Cushner was asked to frame the Juliana Berners set of flies tied by Dwight Webster that had appeared in John McDonald's *The Origins of Angling* (1963), for presentation to the Theodore Gordon Fly-fishers. Soon thereafter,

he met a few members of the Anglers Club of New York and also "had the good fortune to meet Charles DeFeo and Ted Niemeyer, fly fishermen and fly-tiers." Cushner remembered clearly that "this is when my interest along these lines began to grow" and he began "to appreciate the art, craft and skill of fly-tyers." At that point, about 1970, he decided to "devote all of my spare time to the collecting and preservation of artifacts relating to the fly."

With guidance from DeFeo and Niemeyer, Cushner began buying flies outright, did framing jobs in trade for desired flies, and accepted numerous donations of flies from tiers and collectors throughout the world. At the same time, he also began collecting paintings, prints, photographs, carvings, and autographed inscriptions, among other fly-angling art, that he stored along with his extensive fly collection in large wooden chests. He wrote dozens of letters a week to fly dressers everywhere, thereby quickly amassing hundreds of flies and new friends.

After visiting Cushner's studio in the early 1970s, Nelson Bryant of the *New York Times* published an article in the *Times* titled "Art of Fly Tying Re-



Bill Cushner with several Atlantic salmon fly plates he framed for the late Joseph Bates Jr. in the 1970s. Photograph courtesy of Jack Smrekar and Angler's Choice Framing

ceives Its Due in Cushner's Imaginative Display." Bryant observed that "the man or woman who ties flies designed to catch fish, have been appreciated by anglers but [remains] unknown to the general public."

Rather than present flies framed and pressed under glass like a photograph or painting, Cushner chose to present a fly as a very visual item that had to be shown with a sense of depth and in three dimensions to be fully appreciated. He attached each fly to an almost invisible Plexiglas rod or peg mounted in inch-deep recessed panels. The panels were shadow boxes with beveled walls and mitered corners that looked seamless, while the flies appeared to be suspended in space. The recessed panels created a frame-within-a-frame effect that brought the eye to focus on the fly. His other signature style was to include a significant painting, print, drawing, photograph, woodcarving, magazine cover, book cover, or other memento with each fly or group of flies.

To commemorate the beginning of the trout-fishing season in April 1975, Cushner opened a three-day exhibition at his studio, which he called Gallery 19, devoted entirely to the art, craft,

and skill of past and present fly tiers. A special guest was Don Haynes, chairman of the Fly Dresser's Guild of England, and more than 1,000 visitors viewed what was believed to be the first such show. Bryant, from the *Times*, was instantly touched by Cushner's work and wrote, "There is to this writer's knowledge no comparable collection-display of the fly dresser's art in the world, and it cries for a permanent home in a museum or gallery."

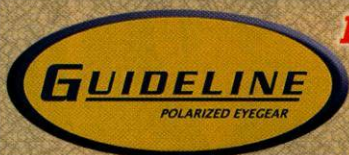
Later that year, Joseph Bates Jr. published an article about Cushner in *Trout* titled "The Premier Preservationist of Angling Artifacts," and the following year, John Merwin published "Pheasant Tails Under Glass," an article in *Fly Fisherman* about Cushner's work. When asked about his style, Cushner admitted, "I've been able to present the work of fly dressers like never before only because I have functioned as a framer for 27 years."

Between November 1975 and January 1976, the National Art Museum of Sport exhibited 200 of Cushner's framed sets in Madison Square Garden, drawing more than 80,000 viewers. The same collection was then displayed in New York's Museum of Natural History during spring of 1976, and the exhibition was extended an additional five weeks because of its popularity with the public. The following year, Philadelphia's Academy of Natural Sciences was host to the exhibition. By that time, Cushner was getting ready to retire and told Merwin that he wanted "to find some individual or organization that can afford to purchase the entire collection...with the stipulation that it all remain together somewhere on public display."

After several years of vacationing at small cottages in the Cape Breton Highlands of Nova Scotia, Cushner and his wife retired there in North Ingonish in 1977. He built a small museum attached to his home near the famous Cabot Trail and began collecting the work of renowned Canadian tiers, both past and present. The following

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year his collection was featured in a story in the *Cape Breton Post* titled "The Cushner Collection: Flies, Feathers, Fin and Pleasure," in which Bill reiterated that he "never intended it to be for myself. It's available to be exhibited anywhere at any time." Indeed, in 1979, he presented a large exhibit at the Toronto Sportsman's Show.

During the winter of 1983-84, Ted Rogowski, an avid fly fisher, Seattle resident, and trustee for the now-named American Museum of Fly Fishing, negotiated a deal with Cushner to sell his collection of more than 200 pieces to the museum. John Merwin, who had been hired as the museum's new executive director that July, drove to Nova Scotia in early 1984 to pick up about 200 pieces, 60 of which were already scheduled for exhibit in the Eddie Bauer stores in Seattle and San Francisco in February and March.



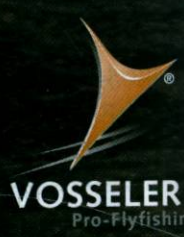
*Bill Cushner preparing the fly spacing and distribution for a framing in his Gallery 19 workshop shortly before his retirement in 1976. Note the "geometric construction" in the background, a style that he also turned into an art form. Photo courtesy of Jack Smrekar and Angler's Choice Framing*

This show was the beginning of the museum's traveling exhibit program, later called "Angler's All." The following year, in 1985, the museum received the entire 200-plus-piece Cushner Collection. Some of the plates were

exhibited at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, and another part of the collection was sent for display at the International Fly Fishing Center in West Yellowstone.

Freed from his massive collection and yearning to be closer to his daughter, son-in-law, and two grandchildren in Oregon, Cushner and his wife moved to Florence, Oregon, in 1986 and renovated their house to include a new museum. Cushner began to collect the flies of the West, especially those tied for anadromous fish. Bill's son-in-law, Jack Smrekar, became the curator and started an apprenticeship to learn Bill's framing skills. Officially opening on May 15, 1988, the collection featured works by some of the region's greatest tiers.

As he had done on the East Coast, Cushner began to collect all sorts of



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fly-fishing art and equipment. Franz Dutzler, from Sisters, Oregon, carved a small wooden trout and a 25-inch wooden steelhead for Bill, who also acquired some of Ralph Wahl's photographs, as well as paintings from Bill Elliot. Ted Leeson wrote an extensive article on "The Art of William Cushner" for *Flyfishing* in late 1988; by the time another article, "Bill Cushner's Fly Fishing Museum," appeared the following year in *American Angler & Fly Tyer*, Cushner had produced more than 200 new framings unique to the Northwest.

A large display of Cushner's work was exhibited at the 25th anniversary celebration of the FFF in Eugene in 1990, but his health was beginning to deteriorate. In a letter to Bob Wethern, former editor of *The Creel*, Cushner remarked, "I'm determined to alter the seriousness of my condition, but I don't know if the body will have the energy that the heart needs." He also noted that "a great deal of energy is spent trying to keep the door to the museum open." Fly-fishing historian and Seattle

resident Al Severeid and his wife visited the museum in September 1991 and recorded their visit on a video, which is now in Wethern's possession. In it, Bill proudly explained every part of the collection, beginning with, "This particular piece..." and concluding by saying that he was "grateful to have all of this great material to work with."

In early 1992, Cushner had a large display at the Seattle Sportsman's Show, but his health was worsening. Walt Johnson was writing an article about Bill and his collection for a Swedish fly-fishing magazine at this time and referred to Cushner as "a kind and gentle man who I soon learned to admire and respect, not only for his artistic ability but also for the great service he was devoting to the preservation and history of fly tying, fly fishing and its memorabilia."

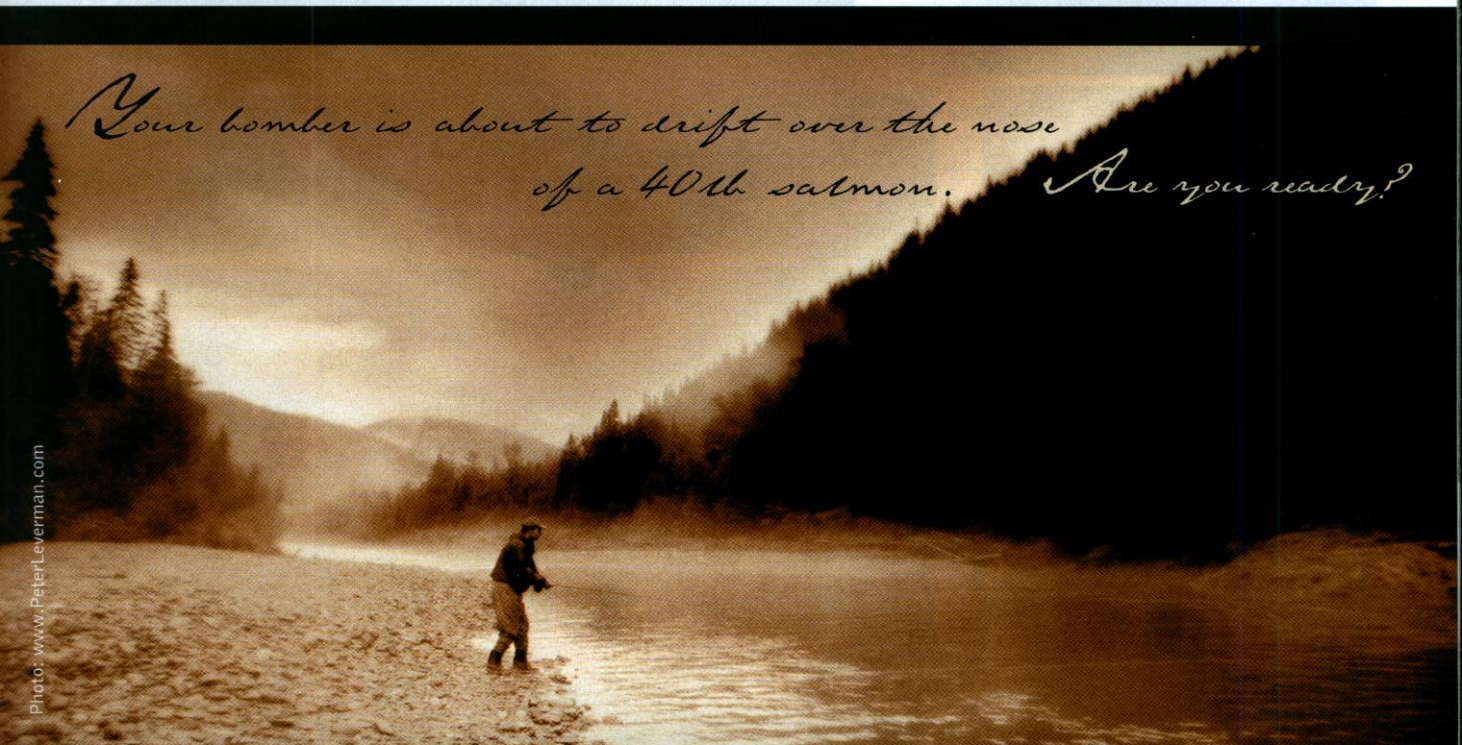
Cushner died on April 13, 1992. Most of the museum's framed materials were sold to John Keith-King to be housed in his Sport Fishing Museum on Granville Island in Vancouver, Brit-

ish Columbia, and Smrekar continued the framing craft in Florence via a company he calls Angler's Choice Framing, [www.anglerschoiceframing.com](http://www.anglerschoiceframing.com).

Cushner's work is still greatly appreciated and prized. An article, "William Cushner's Art and His Legacy," appeared in *Fishing Collectibles* in 1994, and in a 1995 article in *The American Fly Fisher*, Craig Thomas emphasized that Cushner's "interest in the fly-tyer's art was purely aesthetic...his framing work is a remarkable testament to a sport and art form." Similarly, Wethern argued that Cushner "undoubtedly made more anglers appreciative of the artistry of the fly than anyone else—ever! He truly admired them for that aspect alone, and his genuine appreciation was reflected gloriously in the 'shrines' he constructed for them."

---

*Jack W. Berryman is an angling historian and author of Fly-Fishing Pioneers & Legends of the Northwest. He lives in Kirkland, Washington.*



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