

IF FLY FISHING IS A RELIGION, MEET THE POPE

Frederick's Own Great Outdoors Superstar, Lefty Kreh

By Jim Mahaffie

Lefty Kreh tells a story about seeing his 4-year old great grandson. When Lefty's granddaughter reminded the boy that this man was his great grandfather, the boy asked innocently, "What's so great about him?" This gets a great laugh out of Lefty Kreh.

Bernard "Lefty" Kreh is the Michael Jordan of the fishing world. Perhaps no other fisherman has been more honored, published, traveled, quoted, studied or respected. An internationally known master of fly-fishing, he has taught fly-casting and fly-fishing techniques since the 1950s, and he has fished in all fifty states, and in Canada, Iceland, Europe, South America, and the South Pacific. He is the author of 22 books including *Presenting the Fly*, *Fly Fishing in Salt Water*, *Saltwater Fly Patterns*, *Practical Fishing Knots*, *Solving Casting Problems*, and *101 Fly-Fishing Tips*.

Lefty is also a renowned nature photographer and has served on various conservation boards. He has also written for many outdoor magazines, and consulted for companies as diverse as Dupont and LL Bean. Over the past 50 years, he's been a major icon in people's love for the great outdoors.

Though he's traveled all over the planet seeking fishing experiences and writing about it, the Pope lives with Evelyn, his wife and best friend of 58 years, in Hunt Valley, Maryland. Their home is a museum of 40 years of fishing memorabilia and a treasure trove of fishing tackle. In fact, Left was born and raised in Frederick, Maryland.

The Old Days

Raised in the 1930s, Lefty remembers a very different Frederick than today. "Back then there were only about 14,000 people in town, and you could walk 10 minutes out of your house and find places you could hunt and fish." Lefty learned to pole a river boat before he was a teenager and began to do what they called "bush bobbing." His friends and he would hang lines with baited hooks on branches that hung out over the Potomac and Monocacy rivers. "You couldn't bush bob in the daytime because the turtles ate the bait. But catfish roamed the riverbanks at night. They'd grab the bait and take off, and the bush acted like a fishing rod, which is why we called it 'bush bobbing.'"

As a teenager, Lefty went off to World War II, fighting in the Battle of Bulge, and serving in the first American unit that met up with the Russians in the battle for Europe. The Army sent him home to Fort Detrick for training in August of 1945, after which he was going to be sent to the Pacific to fight the Japanese. He remembers walking down the street in his uniform the day Japan surrendered. "Suddenly sirens began going off. Women ran out in the street and kissed me. I guessed it was good news about the war."

He was one of first civilians hired at the Biological Warfare Center in Frederick. They grew lots of the bacteria used by scientists then. "It was shift work and, because I had seniority, I opted to get most of the night shifts so I could hunt and fish in the daytime." He spent night shifts in a biohazard suit, breathing air from a tube on the wall. A 2001 Baltimore Sun article notes that there's a sub-strain of anthrax that bears Lefty's initials. It

was taken from his finger, which one day had swelled up with an accidental skin anthrax infection. Biologists designated it "BVK-1," for Bernard Victor Kreh.

In his years at Ft. Detrick, he became known as a hotshot fisherman, and became the first outdoor editor of the Frederick News Post in 1951. He also wrote stories on fishing, hunting and outdoor life for the Baltimore Sun, where he "retired" in 1992. "I just got busier," says Lefty of his life of lectures, writing and fishing with VIPs over the past decade and more.

The Monocacy Once

"The Monocacy was the greatest smallmouth bass river," recalls Lefty Kreh. "You used to be able to get in a canoe up near the Pennsylvania line, and float and fish all the way down to the aqueduct at the mouth of the river. The Monocacy had long deep pools, sometimes with eight feet of water in them, where the fish were. Not today though, they've taken most of the water out of the river."

Back then Lefty and his fishing buddies would use minnows, seined out of the small spring-fed creeks that ran into the river. "We'd get our minnows the afternoon before, and hide them under a bridge, then pick them up early in the morning and go fishing." Those little streams are gone today, says Lefty, dried up from new building, rampant growth and resident demand for water. "I caught my first smallmouth bass at Tuscarawa Creek, back when you couldn't walk across it, it was so deep. Now there's no water!"

On The Potomac

Though the Potomac is reputed today to be a good smallmouth bass river, it used to be great, says Lefty. "My family had a cottage in Lander between Brunswick and Point of Rocks. We used to stay up there and it was like living in a Boy Scout camp. We'd catch three and four-pound fish all the time, 50 or 60 a day." He says when he went upstream to Brunswick a few weeks ago; he saw very few fish at all. "Now, you're lucky to catch a dozen, and you got to be a good fisherman."

"The problem is these jetboats. They're hurting fishing in the Potomac." Props on boats will always snag on shallows and rocks in the river, keeping boaters out of many areas. But jetboats skim the surface with no prop. So the Potomac is not really a large river any more. "Every inch is accessible to bass fisherman in a jetboat and gets hit over and over. You can put in at Point of Rocks with a jetboat and run all the way to Harper's Ferry," says Lefty. "You can put ten good fisherman on that river and work for a day. They'll hit every spot where bass might be."

Secret Spots

Lefty Kreh gets asked about his favorite spots all the time. He has great memories of fly-fishing the rivers and billabongs of Northern Australia and New Guinea. He loves the Upper Amazon Basin, where he's caught big Peacock Bass up to 19 pounds on a fly rod. "I like dumb fish," admits Lefty, meaning fish from places that don't see a lot of

fishermen. "Some people say they like to outwit smart fish. I just like to outwit 'em. I don't give a damn whether they're smart or not."

He laments that lumbering, mining and roads, like in New Guinea, are now defiling many watersheds that once were pristine. When he made a series of fishing videos and movies there years ago, he recalls seeing entire rivers turned red by miners with high pressure hoses looking for gold and minerals. "You could see ten feet down in the river before. Now they're mudholes."

When Lefty's here in Maryland, he likes to fish the Susquehanna River, just below Harrisburg from the Turnpike on down. "That river is so darn big you can't hit every spot." He says the state limits and restrictions on the river, on number of fish kept and kinds of fishing, have made a tremendous difference in the quality of the fishing. Lefty also says he enjoys trout fishing on the Savage River and on the Potomac above Cumberland.

But the secret around here in Maryland, he says, is farm ponds. That's right. Those little ponds and lakes on private property aren't overfished, and trout, crappie and bass have had a chance to grow big and get complacent. "Many of our Maryland state records for largemouth and smallmouth bass and crappie are from little farm ponds," says Lefty.

Lefty the Innovator

Lefty Kreh has been a consultant to many hunting and fishing tackle companies over the years. He's always to trying to make the experience better for hunters and fishermen, no matter what their experience level.

He says he's never accepted any kind of a problem in his outdoor life. For example, he was the first man to make waders work for fly fishermen. Once upon a time, the bootstraps on hip boots would tangle a fly line as it was cast. Fly fishermen strip lots of line that lies in front of them as they cast. As soon as Lefty started having the problem, he reversed the buckles on waders and put the strap on the inside of the boot. Lefty also helped pioneer new casting techniques and the sinking fly line – busting many myths in the fly-fishing world. His videos, books and articles have taught untold numbers of fishermen.

Lefty also developed a world-famous fly called the Deceiver over 30 years ago. Originally for striped bass in the Chesapeake Bay, it's used all over the world today. Almost any book on fly tying, and especially saltwater fly fishing, will describe the whole new style of fly. It can be tied in just about any color, size or length, representing almost any kind of baitfish. It's very easy to cast and control, too. Lefty is also credited for decades of innovations in reels, rods, line and lures.

What's Next?

"I'm going to be 80 in February," says Lefty Kreh. After writing all those books, magazine and newspaper columns every week, traveling, consulting, giving lectures, teaching and more, he has definitely slowed down a bit. "It was fun, but there were too many irons in the fire."

Today, Lefty still loves fishing for fun. He says his son and he fished together all the time, "til he found girls." But today his son and he still go fishing, often on Maryland Rivers, and he says he has a grandson who got the genes as well. "That boy's crazy about fishing."