PART 7 –
WILLIAM H. “BILL” BURGESS (1886–1967):
Maker of State-O-Maine Fishing Tackle
Minot, Maine

William H. “Bill” Burgess was born on 13 May 1886 in Mexico, Maine. His parents were Otis
William and Emily Farrington Burgess. Bill was the third of four children, with two older sisters
and a younger brother. Otis’ family lived in Rumford, Maine where he worked as the track
manager for the Portland and Rumford Falls Railroad. In Rumford, Bill was educated to the
eighth grade, and worked for the International Paper Company and later the Maine Central
Railroad. Bill was also a member of the town’s National Guard unit, 1911-14, rising to the rank
of Sergeant.

In the spring of 1914, while still living in Rumford, Bill Burgess married Ethel L. Philbrick.
She was 25 years old and he was 28. Bill had been guiding since his late teens in the Rangeley

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Lakes Region, and made flies for himself and his clients. Mrs. Burgess quickly became his helpmate and from the start of their marriage, and through their life together, she assisted “… in making flies and they go tramping and hunting and fishing together.” Sometime after his marriage Burgess developed, in both paste and liquid forms, his “E.L.B. Fly Dope for them Dog Gorn Flies.” Mrs. Burgess (= Ethel L. Burgess = E.L.B.), when out tramping, apparently did not enjoy Maine black flies and mosquitos and in his wife’s discomfort Bill saw a need for the repellent formula his grandfather had given him. With the assistance of Dr. Bowers, a Rumford pharmacist, Burgess developed and sold a commercial fly dope. Bowers’ help must have made a lasting impression on Burgess as the good doctor is acknowledged in Burgess’ fishing tackle catalog. Throughout Burgess’ life, even after he moved to Minot, Maine, E.L.B. fly dope was sold with a “Rumford, Maine” label.

In 1922, Bill’s father retired from the railroad and the families moved to farm in Poland near the Minot town-line. It was at this time that Bill, with the help of Ethel, started to make flies to sell to the general public. Bill and his wife lived on the second floor of the house occupied by his sister and brother-in-law. This house was next to Otis’ home, who farmed during his retirement. In addition to living space, the second floor where Bill and his wife lived also served as the storage and workspace for their growing business.

The Burgesses did not spend all their time working. They owned camps on Beaver Brook in Andover, Silver Lake in Roxbury, and on a track of land they owned on Harris Hill in Poland. Bill enjoyed bird hunting, especially ruffed grouse, and was known for his fine bird dogs, which

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he enjoyed training himself. In the early 1930s, Bill was an officer with the Androscoggin County Fish and Game Association and became a leader in the initial attempts to introduced pheasants into Maine, raising these birds on his own property. These were not the only birds that Bill raised. He was also an expert on Plymouth Rock Chickens, raising these birds for eggs, meat, and feathers. The Burgess family used the eggs and meat themselves, selling the eggs and meat that exceeded their needs. The feathers “bring the biggest returns of all,” being used in Bill’s fishing fly business.

By 1930 the fishing tackle business had grown to the point where Bill hired local women to help make the flies and lures. A newspaper reported that much of the tackle making took place in a 10 X 12 foot room, which provided “ample room for a dozen people to work, each with plenty of elbow room, and still provide storage room for a year’s supply of raw material.” The article further noted that “Most of the work is taken out by women who do the work in their own homes in between their household duties.” These workers were apparently supervised by Laura Chouinard, a neighbor’s 19 year-old step-daughter, who is listed in the 1930 U.S. Census as “fish tackle forewoman.”

A variety of feathers and other natural materials were used to make the flies. As reported by a writer who visited Bill’s shop: “He showed feathers which came from China, from Japan, from England, France, South America and all parts of this country and Canada. There were deer tails and bits of rabbit hair, silk gut from Japan and Spain, hooks from Norway and England.” The flies were tied to “gut,” which is of lower visibility than ordinary fishing line. Bill informed his

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visitor: “The trade calls it cat gut, but it is the silk worm gut, before it is spun into silk. … The worm is killed and the gut pulled out.” Cat gut, the intestines from silkworm caterpillars, had to straightened, dried, and coated to make it waterproof.

Burgess fishing tackle not only included a variety of flies, but he also made fishing spinners and spoons, both those invented by others as well as his own inventions. Bill’s Maine Spinner, for example, was described as “A very successful spinner of the Bailey type.” The illustrations of this spinner show a heavy-duty Rangeley Spinner, essentially the same as the Bailey Spinner. Many of Burgess’ lures were named after Maine lakes (e.g., Bill’s Umbagog, Rangeley Lake Troll, The Richardson, North Twin, Bill’s South-Arm, and Penesseewassee), but others were not (e.g., the J-H-M Special Salmon, Bill’s Salmo-Combo [a.k.a. Bill’s Combo, Bill’s Salmo], Bill’s Tad Pad, Bill’s Rino, and the State-O-Maine).

Bill sold mostly to sporting goods stores located across southern Maine, as well as to general stores scattered throughout this region. To let these retailers know what he had for products, he published a 51-page catalog, the cover of which is reproduced above. The Burgess Catalog is undated but comparing the prices of his lures in this catalog to a circa 1930 published by T. D. Davis Arms Company, Portland, Maine, suggests that the Burgess Catalog dates to the mid-1930s. While Burgess apparently sold most of his tackle directly to retailers, in the 1930s his tackle was advertised by the T. B. Davis Arms Company, a sporting goods distributor located in Portland, Maine (and elsewhere).

The Burgess Catalog is written in a light, humorous style with Bill sometimes referring to his

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tackle as “Junk.” Clearly, Bill Burgess enjoyed life and had a lot of fun manufacturing his State-O-Maine Tackle. As to the content of the Catalog, page one is an introduction (with acknowledgments), the next 11 page are about flies, the 13th page is an informative discussion of silk worm gut leaders followed by 6 pages devoted to Rangeley Spinners, 10 pages about other Burgess spinners, 2 pages about casting spoons, 3 pages on Luck Stowell lures and flies (examples of which the author has not found), 3 pages about Burgess trolling spoons and traces, 2 pages about live bait hooks, 2 pages on Bill’s six ball swivels (his obituary states that he was “the originator” of this swivel), a page about Bill’s fly dope (sold either as a paste or liquid), a page on cooper wire and Bill’s boot-slick (i.e., boot grease for waterproofing), and finally closing with 10 pages about snelled hooks.

Much of Burgess’ fishing tackle came is three grades. For example, his bass flies were available in the following grades: NOCABOUT (each fly was 25 cents), KOMPED (30 cents), and BILL’S BEST (35 cents). Burgess’ silk worm gut leaders also came in three grades which he described: “BILL’S BEST, better known as the No. 99 into which we put all our knowledge and skill, KOMPED BRAND, which is a second choice and the NOCABOUT, which is a darn good Leader for the money and so far as strength goes there is not much difference.” Like the bass flies, there was a 5 cent difference between the grades.

Bill Burgess made a greater variety of flies and lures than any of the other pre-1930 Maine makers. As for quality of his many products, the success of Burgess’ tackle business, according to one newspaper report, was “due in large part, to the plan of manufacture. The goods have not

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been made at a price but regardless of price. Quality comes first. He pays his workers more than most manufactures and sells for a good price.”

In 1943, Bill Burgess went into semi-retirement and conducted his tackle business part-time for only a few more years before fully retiring. On January 15, 1967, at age 80, he died in a Lewiston, Maine hospital after a long illness. Just prior to his death, he and his wife lived in Mechanic Falls, Maine. Bill Burgess is buried in Demeritt Cemetery, West Peru, Maine.

References

Anonymous. 1924. Bill’s “fly” factory at Minot Corner, Lewiston Evening Journal, page 2 (February 16). [Includes a great running-head illustration of “A Few of Bill’s Best Flies.”].

Anonymous. 1967. Well-known Poland sports figure dies at Lewiston, Lewiston Daily Sun, page 2 (January 16). [This obituary was also published the same day on page 2 in the Lewiston Evening Journal. Both obituaries included the photograph of Burgess when an older man; see end of Gallery below.].

Conner, Sam E. 1924. Dry fly fishing is pretty work, but it’s the wet flies that catch the most fish, is the opinion of Bill Burgess, Lewiston Evening Journal, page 1 (February 12). [This interview of W. H. “Bill” Burgess included a photograph as Burgess when a young man; see end of Gallery below.]
Bill Burgess’ flies and some of his other fishing tackle came in three grades. These were labeled as shown above, and his highest to lowest grades were Bill’s Best (left side), Bill’s Komped (middle), and Bill’s Nocabout (lower right). Burgess wrote of his lowest grade: “Although they are low priced, there is nothing cheap about them.”

The above invoice, dated 16 May 1925, shows that Bill Burgess was selling boat motors only three years after moving from Rumford to Minot Corner, Maine. No evidence was found, however, showing that boat motors were a major part of Burgess’ long-term business activities.
One of Bill’s Best was his Morning Glory wet flies, designed “For Fast and Rough Water.” Burgess, when a young guide, made flies for his clients and soon made a wide variety of flies that became the initial foundation for his tackle business. The above card is 6 ¾ X 3 ½ inches.

Above are two examples of Burgess’s low-end flies, the Nocabout Brand. The demand for Burgess flies and lures was so high that in some years he employed up to a dozen women who were trained by Burgess and then worked out of their own homes. The above cards measure 5 ½ X 1 ¼ inches.

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Burgess trolling spoons are similar to Morse’s Lake Auburn Trolling Spoon and were made in a number of models, including Bill’s Salmo-Combo (a.k.a. Bill’s Combo, Bill’s Salmo) as well as the State-O-Maine, shown above. Burgess’s State-O-Maine Trolling Spoon that came in three sizes (top illustration; the largest blade is 4 inches long) and are lightly stamped with the model type on the bottom part of the blade. Blades of Burgess trolling lures must be closely examined for correct identification (bottom illustration).

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In addition to his own spinners, Burgess produced the Cupsuptic and Rangeley spinners invented by Henry O. Stanley. The upper illustration is Burgess’ Cupsuptic Spinner and the lower illustration is one of the great many types of Rangeley Spinners he made. Burgess made his Rangeley Spinners in two grade (i.e., Bill’s Best & Komped Brand), and they were not stamped with Burgess’ name so must be found on cards or boxes to be positively identified. The above box is 5 ¾ X 1 ¾ X 5/8 inches.

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Spinners and other baits found in boxes are always highly collectable. However, finders must be aware that tackle gets moved around and do not assume that the lure in a box is always the original. In the above case, the information on the box label and on the card show is consistent (i.e., both are “Snap” and a “24-1G” [meaning a size 4 blade -1 spinner with a single gold blade; a Burgess 3GG means 3 spinners, each with 2 gold blades]).

The above is an example of the spinner not matching the box. While the “Tandem Hooks” is correct as is the blade size 4 (i.e., No. 24), the box label is showing that the box should contain 3 spinners each with a single silver blade. Instead, the box has one spinner with a single gold blade (i.e., 3S). A single red and blue bead is characteristic (but not diagnostic) of a Burgess Rangeley Spinner.

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Burgess created a number of fishing spinners. Shown above is one example, his Richardson Lake Spinner. The upper picture apparently shows an early version (note that hooks are attached directly to the spinner’s leader) while the lower picture is of a later version of this spinner (note the extra swivels between the lower end of the spinner’s leader and the hooks). The above box measures 6 X 1 ¼ X 5/8 inches.

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Bill’s Salmo-Combo bait (photograph on left) was very similar to the State-O-Maine (page 54), but was flatter and had a welded (versus not welded) loop attaching the blade to the shaft. The Salmo-Combo can be found stamped either “SALMO” or “COMBO,” with the former being more common, and probably more recent. This bait appears under the heading ‘Bill’s “SALMO-Combo” ’ as Bill’s Combo in the ~ 1930 T. B. Davis Catalog, as Bill’s Combo in the Burgess’ Catalog, and as Bill’s Salmo in the 1930 and 1936 Edwards and Walker catalogs (illustration on right above). In my experience, Bill’s Salmo is the more common of the two. Bill’s Salmo was made with either a brass or copper blade, and the copper blades come both with and without the lead coating coat on back side.
Burgess made a great variety of hooks, ranging from single, snelled hooks to “combo hooks” designed to be attached to his spinners. As shown above, Burgess’ Combo Hooks came in various configurations, for easy use on many of his spinners. This illustration is from a T. B. Davis Arms Company Catalog (~1930, page 64).

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Burgess made and sold some “accessories,” including grease for water-proofing boots, bug dope in liquid and paste forms, and swivels to prevent the twisting of fishing lines. Burgess must have been especially proud of his swivels as they are specifically mentioned in his obituary.
State-O-Maine Fishing Tackle was sold through Bill Burgess’ own store in Minot as well by other retailers throughout central and western Maine. The above invoice is addressed to Herbert L. Welch who owned a sporting goods store in Haines Landing, Rangeley Lakes Region of western Maine. Welch was a professional taxidermist, fly tier, and an avid angler. Welch also invented the Welch Rarebit (not rabbit), that Burgess made and sold as part of Bill’s Morning Glory series.
Bill Burgess nets a fish for a “sport” on Maine’s Androscoggin River. In addition to being a guide and tackle maker, Burgess enjoyed fishing and bird hunting. He raised and trained his own bird dogs and was one of the first, if not the first, to raise and introduce pheasants into Maine. The above photograph was published as a full-page illustration in the August 1934 issue of *Outdoor Life*, a national sporting magazine.

Bill Burgess as he appeared in two Lewiston, Maine newspapers. In the photograph on the left, printed in 1924, Burgess is examining one of his fishing flies. The other photograph was published with Burgess’ 1967 obituary (see References above).

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