History of the Buz Buszek Fly Shop
Excellence in the Art of Fly Tying 1947-1997
by Mickey Powell

(Note: Mickey wrote this article and sent it out in a newsletter to customers. Mickey passed away March 3, 2009, and will be missed by all who knew him and have been touched by his kind and generous spirit - David Nelson)

Chapter One: The Beginning

Wayne “Buz” Buszek discovered fishing as a teenager spending his summers at Laguna Beach with his parents. His early experiences were with surf fishing in the Pacific. Spending the other 10 months of the year at his home in the Sierra foothill town of Lindsay, it was inevitable that he would discover high country trout fishing. And fly fishing for large, wild trout became an obsession. He trod and explored the Sierra, lakes and streams, headwaters and heavy waters, every nook and cranny from South to North many times over.

Once he was introduced to fly tying, the stage was set for the birth of Buz’s Fly & Tackle Shop. He tackled fly tying with the same fervor which drove his pursuit of wild trout. By the time he graduated from college, married Virginia Compton and began raising a family, his fly tying skills had become not only well honed but well known. He had many fishing partners as a young man, and his flies became highly prized throughout the Central Valley fly fishing community. With a family of four to feed on a postman’s salary, it became quite difficult to provide his flies to all his fishing buddies and their friends, without charging something to recover the cost of materials. Long before it became his full-time vocation, Buz was selling flies from his home.

Birth of a Business

I don’t know when he sold his first fly. I don’t know when he printed his first catalog. What I do know is that one day in 1947 he and Virginia decided that even if “neither sleet nor snow” could delay the postman’s rounds, fly tying certainly could. He left the Postal Service, hung out his shingle, and the rear bedroom of a rented home in Visalia became Buz’s Fly & Tackle Shop. The first few winters a bank loan was necessary to acquire tackle and accessories to bring sales to a level that would barely provide an adequate income to support his family. And it was a family effort. Virginia tied leaders, daughter Rosalie tied woolly worms and daughter Judy (only 6 years old) helped package the flies. The “store” quickly expanded into the breakfast nook of the kitchen and then the screened back porch. Even though living space in the home was diminishing rapidly, it became necessary to expand the customer base by publishing a small mail-order catalog. The catalog alerted other retailers around the state, and demand for his flies then soared exponentially. Buz began to train others to tie for him in his style. The employees’ flies were sold exclusively at the wholesale level to sporting goods stores, resorts and marinas throughout California. Outside the state were customers such as Rangely Region Sports in Maine and Norm Thompson in Portland, Oregon. Abercrombie & Fitch of San Francisco carried Buz’s flies for many years. At the retail level, Buz always felt honor-bound to tie 100% of the flies sold to individual customers. Amazingly, he held to this principle for at least 16 years. Achieving national recognition as the fly volume increased, so did the need for consistently good quality fly tying materials. Thus, in the early 1950’s began the era for which Virginia is so well known. It became necessary to buy feathers, fur and hair in bulk quantities in order to have sufficient volume for the tying operation. The materials became Virginia’s domain. She was the sole processor (washing, grading, dying, packaging) of the materials. She and Buz soon realized that there were some exceptional quality materials to be found in the bulk acquisitions — quality they had rarely seen before when buying packaged goods from other processors. These exceptional items were stockpiled rather than used in fly tying production. Many of them became exceptional simply through Virginia’s diligent and skillful cleaning. When fly tying materials were added to the biennial catalog, and their quality became known to a few tiers around the country, the word spread like wildfire. Within a decade, fly tying materials were accounting for well over half of Buz’s gross sales. Buz’s Fly &
Tackle Shop was listed in virtually every book on fly tying as one of the best sources in the nation for high quality materials.

Growth and Tragedy
In 1955, Buz & Virginia had built a new home with an oversize, attached garage which became the warehouse for the mail order business. It also housed Buz’s office and his fly tying room. All of the wholesale fly tiers worked in their own homes. The next 10 years provided gratifying yet relentless growth. Catherine Landers was hired to help Virginia gather, pack and ship the mail orders. Buz was compelled to buy his primary source of fly tying materials, an import business named The Feather River Trading Company. Its founder was selling out to pursue other interests, and Buz couldn’t risk losing his best source of good materials. The import business in Rough & Ready, California, became the subject of a feature article by Ted Trueblood in a 1962 edition of Field & Stream Magazine. Thus began another onslaught of growth. Now he was managing two growing businesses, 300 miles apart. Joy should have been rampant, but dealing with the ever increasing demands on his time began to take its toll on Buz. Tragically, he took his own life in May of 1965. The flood of condolences, offers of support and offers to buy some or all of the inventory from all points of the compass allowed Virginia very little time for mourning. Though the grief lasted forever, within weeks she and Catherine were shoulder-deep in returning the business to normalcy. She enlisted the aid of friends and customers who were admirers of Buz and whose fly tying was influenced by his style. These were the men to supplant Buz’s personal fly tying production. Among them were Don Lieb, Darwin Atkin and Clarence Butzbach. By fall, 1965, Virginia realized the effort was far too much for just her and Catherine, so she invited me, Mickey Powell, to join the business as her partner. I knew little about fly fishing and far less about fly tying, but ever since the Field & Stream article of 1962, I had been thoroughly intrigued by the business itself, especially the import operation in Rough & Ready. I jumped at the opportunity. I made it my mission to keep the business operating, and to institutionalize the name Buz Buszek. I hoped that in the process I would be able to raise and educate my four children. Were it not for the help of Buz’s eldest daughter, my wife Rosalie, I would have failed miserably at the latter. For 28 years, she was one of Visalia’s finest and most dedicated kindergarten teachers.

Building Tradition
Virginia and I operated as partners until 1978, when she retired. It was during those years she expended a great deal of effort in founding and supporting the Federation of Fly Fishers, now an international organization of fly fishing clubs and individuals. She provided Buz’s nationwide mailing list to Federation organizers for the very first mailing of invitation to membership of the FFF. She introduced the concept of demonstration fly tying at conclaves. Her acquaintance with fly tying customers throughout the nation made it easy to identify and invite outstanding fly tiers to annual, national conclaves. The Federation now sponsors a highly prized, keenly contested award: The Buz Buszek Memorial Award for Fly Tying. It is given each year to the individual deemed to have contributed the most to the advancement of the art of fly tying. Proudly I can say, two of our former tiers, Darwin Atkin and Wayne Luallen, are among the recipients of this prestigious award. This is the era in the history of Buz’s that we wish to celebrate on September 13, 1997. The next chapter in the story, Mickey Powell’s era, will be detailed in our next edition of this newsletter, sometime in November. At that time we will also have for you a special announcement about the era to come in the history of The Buz Buszek Fly Shop.

Chapter Two: Feathers and Hair
In 1975, ten years after Buz’s death, the mail order part of Buz’s Fly & Tackle Shop was still growing, though it was becoming more and more difficult to provide the very high quality tying materials to which our customers had become accustomed. Various new laws such as the state and federal endangered species acts had come into force. It was ironic that as fly fishers rallied behind catch and release angling as a way to protect trout and salmon, they still demanded feathers and hair from wild animals now protected by these laws. Much of what had been used by fly tiers in the past was simply a by-product of legally taken wildlife, but effective enforcement of the new laws could not allow exceptions. Most of our feathers came from overseas. Some of them were illegal to export from the country of origin, yet quite legal to import and possess in the US. A convoluted federal regulation that grew from the Audubon Law of the 1950’s, allowed applicants to import feather skins of certain pheasants, gray jungle fowl and mandarin duck. But this could be done only under an annual quota administered by the Dept. of the
Interior, and only if the skins were already owned (purchased) by the applicant. This meant we had to buy, and then pay to store skins we wanted to import, before we knew whether we would be allowed to import them! Sometimes they had to be stored for years. This regulation was a factor in the demise of one of our competitors. They were probably the nation’s largest supplier of fly tying materials. Their mail order catalog was the size of a phone book. When the endangered species law resulted in a ban on the importation of gray jungle fowl, they were stuck owning several thousand of them overseas, with no legal means to import them, and no foreign market of any consequence.

Other regulations were hampering us as well. To protect the US poultry industry from the importation of avian diseases, all feathers on skin had to be sterilized in a solution of formalin for 4 hours. This had an extremely deleterious effect on the feathers. We abhorred this job — not only for what it did to the feathers, but for what it did to our skin and lungs in the process. New poultry processing plant regulations made it virtually impossible to gather the neck skins and long saddles from US birds raised for meat. Circumstances were perfect for the expensive development of strains of birds for their feathers alone. This is the void into which stepped Henry Hoffman and the Metz family. For many years, others like Harry Darby and Ted Hebert had been breeding special strains of birds for their feathers, but primarily for their own use rather than for sale in volume to other fly tiers.

Flies
Clarence Butzbach was one of those who stepped forward immediately after Buz’s death to supply Virginia with flies tied in the style and quality of Buz himself. He did this (as did most others who tied for us) as an independent contractor — not as an employee of Buz’s. His fly production was invaluable during the next 13 years. In 1979 he left his job as a medical lab technician to become a full-time farmer and part-time, in-house employee of Buz’s. He worked his grapes and walnuts in the mornings and weekends while spending two to four weekday afternoons at Buz’s as a sales clerk and coordinator of all the other fly tiers. This schedule seriously cut into his fly tying time, so an additional responsibility became to identify and train new tiers for Buz’s. I am proud to say that even to this day we have been able to stick to Buz’s philosophy of providing the retail consumer with flies tied only by other fly fishers. Individuals who not only were skillful tiers but who also fully understood the function of the fly. Some of the tiers who provided this high level of workmanship were Don Lieb, Dennis Black, Darwin Atkin, David Chapple, Bob Brown, Ira Lindgren, Wayne Luallen, Steve Fernandez, Bill Askea, Greg Asbury, Lance Wilkins, Jeff Land, Doug McKinsey, Eric Otzinger, Bud Heintz, Bruce Hughes, Dan Robbins, Mike Nanamura, Larry Goates and Bill Corum. Currently, Don Lieb, Doug McKinsey, Bob Scheidt, Kenny Stout, Chase Hartman, Tad Wheeler, and of course Clarence Butzbach are still cranking them out for Buz’s. Many of these tiers have been both willing and able to suppress their own style in order to emulate that of Buz.

In the meantime, the wholesale fly business was slipping away due to the impact of imported flies. Fly factories were established in third world countries such as Kenya and Sri Lanka, and more were coming. Many retailers saw this as a Godsend. Finally they could obtain unlimited volume with virtually no effort, and at extremely low prices. At retail, because of the quality of our flies, we had no difficulty competing. But at the wholesale level, most of our customers were looking only at the buy and sell prices, not customer satisfaction and repeat business. Some exceptions were a few long standing customers whom Buz had developed personally, such as the Arcarius Ranch on the Owens River and Walter Gnose Mercantile on the Big Hole River in Montana. At least enough wholesale orders remained to carry the last of the group of ladies whom Buz had trained for this business to her retirement. In 1984, Maudie Cox retired at age 75 after tying flies for Buz’s for 36 years. One month later, Rebecca Land took Maudie’s place, and she tied for Buz’s until fall of 1992.

Growing the Business
By 1975, Virginia was devoting less time to Buz’s. She was approaching retirement, had health problems, deserved a rest and needed time to heal. Natalie Robinson was hired and trained to package materials and fill mail orders. Catherine took over Virginia’s job of dying and processing materials with Mick’s help. Both of them had learned at Virginia’s side. Lance Wilkins, followed by Jeff Land, then Doug McKinsey were hired to help Mick with the increasing walk-in traffic. The world had become smaller and customers were not just mailing their orders. Now they were bringing them in person, from all over the nation. Increased demand and decreased supply of high
quality fly tying materials was bringing the art of “high grading” to previously unknown levels. In 1978, Virginia retired and Mick teamed up with Bob Loney, owner of the Visalia Printing Center, and together, they embarked on an aggressive advertising campaign. The catalog was enlarged to 8” by 11” from 5” by 8” and color was added. It was hoped that tackle and other replenishable items would become the focus of Buz’s customers. It certainly wasn’t prudent to rely on a diminishing supply of fly tying materials to provide growth in business.

By 1980, Buz’s had 3 full-time and 2 half-time employees working inside the tiny warehouse/garage on Tulare Avenue. Mick and secretary/bookkeeper, Debi McInnes Braswell, shared a 9’ by 11’ office with two desks and two large file cabinets. Fortunately Mick spent much of his day at the Visalia Printing Center laying out new copy and illustrations for the next catalog. But Doug, Clarence and Catherine could hardly get by each other as they maneuvered in the narrow aisles of the garage to fill mail orders and package materials. The sales area up front was only about 200 square feet. A building downtown became available at a rent that a small business might be able to afford. It offered more than twice the floor space of the garage. Even a simple thing like a rear entrance meant a lot more convenience and saved time in handling incoming and outgoing shipments. The office could include a light table for catalog work; there was a ready-made, 3-station room for fly tying and feather packaging, plus more room up front for demonstration tying and classes. And finally, Buz’s could have an area dedicated to walk-in sales that really did look like a sales room instead of a warehouse. Thus Buz’s opened at 219 N. Encina Street on Groundhog Day, 1981. Even though a lot of bulk tying materials were left at the garage, which was to continue serving as a warehouse, Mick vowed that he would never again move a fly shop.

The Catalog and Near Disaster
Within months of the move, Buz’s biggest and most expensive catalog to date was mailed to more than 20,000 addresses. It was the 1981 catalog, relabeled 1982 because it was being mailed so late in the year. The remodeling and the move to Encina had delayed production. The catalog nearly broke Buz’s. The mailing coincided with a major recession throughout the nation, coming on the heels of the overheated economy of the late 1970’s. There was virtually no response to the mailing. It was an unthinkable development. Always in the past, regardless of the time of the year, a catalog mailing had resulted in a tremendous spike in business. Buz’s had to downsize to survive. Doug went on to the Royal Coachman. Clarence went back to being an independent fly tier. Catherine, who was well past retirement age, cut back to half-days. Debi went to work at the Post Office. The local economy was better off than that of the nation, and local rivers were in great shape due to an extremely high water year. Our focus became the “local” trade (Modesto to Van Nuys). Wholesale fly tying materials sales were suspended in order to conserve the best quality for retail customers. For the next catalog, there was little time, no money, and even less heart. The 1982 catalog was to be the last from a business virtually founded on mail order catalogs. Times had changed. Now instead of only dozens of fly shops throughout the nation, there were hundreds. Now instead of less than one dozen national mail order fly shops, there were several dozen. Many of them were mailing 2 or 3 catalogs each year, inundating the consumer and causing them to discard them soon after receipt or ordering. The “disposable” catalog had come to vogue, where the old 5” by 8” Buz’s catalog used to be kept in a desk drawer for 2 years or more. For the indefinite future, Buz’s was to be a walk-up retail store still shipping orders to loyal customers from around the country, who were willing to order without benefit of a catalog description.

Larry Comes to Work
Sales gradually increased while costs were contained and large volumes of fly tying materials left from the wholesale era were converted to cash, then to tackle. Buz’s granddaughter, Stacey Powell, became our secretary and bookkeeper. Fortunately, Clarence spent some of his fly tying time in the store so that Mick could get some relief occasionally, or help a customer with their casting across the street on the library lawn. One of our most enthusiastic customers was a young man named Larry Goates who would rather fly fish than play golf, a sport at which he had become quite accomplished. In 1987 he convinced me that Buz’s couldn’t get along without him. He had tasted the business side of fly fishing, having worked a short while at Herb Bauer’s Sporting Goods, and had pretty much decided that a shop like Buz’s was what he wanted for a career. Stacey wanted to move on to pursue an accounting degree at Sacramento State, and Larry’s willingness to sacrifice income for opportunity made it possible for he and I to find some middle ground. It was one of the best decisions I ever made. In the last 10 years
he and I have worked together to promote and provide as many classes for casters, fly tiers, and rod builders as possible. This has resulted in the growth necessary to allow Buz’s to flourish in an ever-shrinking market place. True, Visalia and Tulare County have grown, but in what was our “local” area just 15 years ago, more fly shops and fly departments have opened than could ever be countered by population growth. Fortunately, we still enjoy the loyalty of thousands of “local” customers who live between 25 and 100 miles from here.

The Movie
Another stroke of good fortune came along in the winter and spring of 1993. It was the movie, “A River Runs Through It.” The movie affected us in the same way it did the entire industry — more than 40% growth within just a few short months. Larry really had to scramble that spring because Mickey was out a couple of months due to lung cancer surgery. Fortunately, even though he was still not an employee, Clarence was available to take up the slack every afternoon and give Larry the breathing room he needed to get it all done. After Mickey returned, Buz’s was holding a casting class about every other Sunday, right up to Halloween. In 1993, Buz’s sales finally made it back to the level of the late 1970’s, and have continued to grow since then. Nevertheless, since then, right up to the present, and except for fly tying, Mickey and Larry have operated Buz’s virtually on their own. One exception was Catherine Landers, who in 1987 cut back to packaging materials just one day per week because she had stopped driving and had to rely on the bus to get to work. The other was Alicia Nelson who worked from June 1996 through February 1997 to get Buz’s mailing list and inventory entered into the computer. This was a task that neither Mick nor Larry had been able to keep up with after 1994.

Tie and Lie
The Kaweah Flyfishers have been an integral part of the growth of The Buz Buszek Fly Shop. By the mid-1970’s Tulare County fly tiers were meeting on a once per month basis to tie flies and talk fly fishing: “Tie & Lie,” the sessions were called. Inevitably, some of those attending these sessions wondered if this group might be able to play a part in restoring or enhancing local fisheries. An exploratory meeting was set for March 1976 at an ice cream parlor in Visalia. Members of the group invited other fly fishers to attend in an effort to learn how much local interest might truly exist and whether or not it should coalesce into a new club or be directed to Fresno and the Fly Fishermen for Conservation, a club which Buz Buszek had helped to charter. With a couple dozen or so present, it was hands down to form a new club. Ken McNeill slapped his money on the table to become Charter Member No. 1, followed closely by Tex Bryant, Clarence Butzbach, Eugene Mathias, Dan Perazzo, Butch Olson, Lance & Chris Wilkins, Hal Johnston, Wayne & Donna Luallen and Dan Robbins.

One area of concern for the charter members was the rapid demise of the Little Kern River Golden Trout. The Golden Trout Wilderness had been proposed and was before Congress. Hearings were about to begin. The members managed to scrape together the funds to send a local DFG biologist, Dan Christenson, to Washington DC so that senators and representatives could hear firsthand what a treasure there was to protect. The Wilderness was approved and signed into law by President Carter. The fledgling club had experienced its first major success in just a matter of months. The club then went on to help acquire funding and manpower for the decade-long job of restoring pure strain Little Kern Golden Trout to much of their original watershed. Hard working club member and DFG Biologist, Stan Stephens, shouldered the lion’s share of the task. In its early years the Kaweah Flyfishers focused on education and was very active in providing instruction, classes and clinics in all aspects of fly fishing. These activities coupled with the golden trout effort and other restorative work on the Tule and Kaweah Rivers led to the awarding of the McKenzie Cup to the Kaweah Flyfishers by the Federation of Fly Fishers. This occurred in 1983, just the seventh year of operation for the club. The award is emblematic of the most outstanding club in the Federation, an international organization of several hundred fly fishing clubs.

Festival of Fly Fishing
Starting in 1985, Mickey and Buz’s Fly & Tackle Shop worked very closely with the club to produce the Festival of Fly Fishing, a weekend exposition of fly fishing held every fall at the Holiday Inn. Each year they brought fly fishing equipment manufacturers to the show as well as many well-known personalities to provide seminars and instruction in all aspects of fly fishing. Most of the West’s best fly tiers were on hand each fall to demonstrate their art and to provide hands-on instruction to all comers. Some years there were 4 or 5 winners of the Buz Buszek
Memorial Award for Fly Tying at the Festival. In more recent years, the club has not grown at the same pace as the sport, and the Festival has been scaled down to a one-day show. It’s still very effective and enlightening, while at the same time much more manageable for a group of volunteers with lots of other responsibilities in their lives. Altogether, the existence of the Kaweah Flyfishers has been beneficial to and a most important aspect of the history of the Buz Buszek Fly Shop.

Looking Ahead
In 1995, Mickey and Larry were still trying to catch their breath after the amazing growth of 1993. It was decided that Mickey would retire after squiring the business through its 50th year in 1997. Larry was most anxious to take on the additional responsibility, and participated in all major decisions thereafter.

One such decision was whether or not to relocate the business. The Encina Street location had served Buz’s well, but an unusual opportunity to relocate was unexpectedly on the table. If we were to move to the Sports West building a few blocks away, there would be a great expense in time and money to remodel our portion of the old, abandoned building. There would also be the risk of a prolonged business interruption. Nevertheless, the decision to move was taken. At this time that Mickey decided to change the name of the business to one that more clearly identified the founder: The Buz Buszek Fly Shop.

The new location had about the same floor space, but more of it could be devoted to retail display and to classroom activities. The key factor in the decision was the chance to be exposed to thousands more outdoors enthusiasts as they visited Sports West and the Bow Hut. These two businesses were located in the same building, and they catered to skiers, backpackers, mountain climbers and archers. Most of the remodeling was accomplished in November 1995, and the first weekend of December was targeted for the move. Mick was about to violate his vow of 1981.

The move came off well, thanks to the tremendous efforts of several friends, relatives and customers. Though perhaps not appropriate to name them all in what is supposed to be a “brief” history, I am nevertheless going to take this opportunity to express my sincerest thanks to them once again. They were Rosalie, Garth, Wayne, Ethan and Seth Powell, Kirk Bergman, Clarence Butzbach, Lloyd Kuhn, Frank Linik, Jeff Nelson, Vince Peterson, Bob Riley, Bob Scheidt, Stan Stephens and Kenny Stout.

Golden Anniversary
The following two years (Buz’s 49th and 50th) have provided the growth to validate the move. We were able to celebrate the company’s golden anniversary last fall by having an expo of fly tying, fly casting and fly rod crafting. We hosted as demonstration fly tiers most of the individuals still living who had tied for Buz’s over the past 33 years. John Christlieb, the artisan who created the special 50th anniversary commemorative fly rod for Buz’s, was on hand to demonstrate his skills. Again, the Kaweah Flyfishers provided a big boost to Buz’s by providing the extra manpower necessary to set-up the furnishings, the fly casting pond, and then to man the pond, and Buz’s door prize drawing throughout the day. That evening, the club hosted its annual banquet and auction at the Sports West Center.

A New Beginning
The Sports West Outdoor Sports Center now also includes an outstanding bicycle store and archery target lanes. The Center is a unique mix of businesses not likely to be found elsewhere in the nation. The two-story brick building is special. It is very old and has been home to a wide variety of businesses. Each tenant works to retain the building’s character as they go about upgrading their own domain. The Buz Buszek Fly Shop should enjoy a long, long run at 400 N. Johnson Street.

If you haven’t realized it by now, this not-so-brief telling of the second chapter in the history of The Buz Buszek Fly Shop is in a way, Mickey’s “swan song.” Originally, I had intended it to be published late last year and to announce my retirement as well as Larry’s impending purchase of the business. Well, on January 1, all of that happened. Sort of. Yes, Larry is the new owner and boss, but I still work there.