

Rambling Along the Silk Road

The fly on which I caught my first trout was surely a simple, wingless wet fly - a gray hackle peacock perhaps. My father often chose simple wet flies for our early outings. They're the perfect choice for beginners. Fish will take them dead drifted, swung and stripped.

As a kid, I never thought about how flies were tied even though fly tying material was always strewn about my father's fly tying room. He tied coho and trout flies for local sporting goods shops. But his desk, with the wooden spools of thread and floss amidst the feathers and hair, was off limits. Much later, I came to understand his tying reflected the post-WWII consensus that modern materials were better. So the threads and flosses I had seen were nylon and rayon.

In my late twenties, I discovered the scientific side of fly fishing and the idea of imitation. I began devouring fly fishing books and that immediately led me to fly tying. Although Preston Jennings lists a silk color for his patterns in *A Book of Trout Flies*, it really didn't register with me that he used real silk instead of nylon thread or rayon floss.¹ Or more importantly, there might be a good reason to use real silk. Only after I read Sylvester Nemes did the idea enter my mind that silk might actually have advantages over nylon or other modern materials.²

Silk thread had already become somewhat arcane. None of my friends used it and we seemed to catch plenty of fish. Much, much later, I came to appreciate the beauty of silk. As I tried to tie pretty flies for Atlantic salmon and steelhead, I found myself gravitating toward and gaining an appreciation of beautiful materials, silks among them. About that time, silk threads and flosses became harder to find and more expensive. The irony of truly discovering silks as they became quite expensive wasn't lost on me.

But as one of my friends used to say, "Even a blind pig finds an acorn once in a while." A recent, rekindled interest in bamboo rods had led me to consider refinishing some older bamboo rods. I hadn't built a rod in decades so I began by reading web sites, books and anything else on refinishing bamboo rods. Looking for threads and silks with which to wrap a rod on the Golden Witch website, I stumbled upon a whole set of fine silk threads which were more than suitable for fly tying. While discussing thread colors with Russ, it suddenly dawned on me that I didn't have to use Pearsalls at all; I could use the finer rod building silks to tie flies.

This is not really an astounding insight, others have had it, but it was incredibly freeing for me. Golden Witch carries two thread brands which were obviously suitable for fly tying - Kimono and Tire (pronounced tea-ray). Kimono brand is a two ply filament silk in size #100 and available in 80 colors. Tire #50 is a three ply filament, twisted silk available in 171 colors. Size #100 Kimono silk thread is about 50% thinner than size #50 Tire.

To my eye, Tire is somewhat larger than Pearsalls Gossamer, perhaps more like Naples, while Kimono is finer than Gossamer. Kimono is very difficult to split but both threads are strong and tie great dubbing loops. Many years ago, I had started tying to imitate local bugs with their particular color variations. The range of colors of these silks meant there was virtually no limit to the thread/dubbing combinations one can create to match local conditions. Two questions immediately sprang to mind: how will these silks perform tying flies and from where did these silks originate.

After acquiring several spools of both Tire and Kimono, I decided to tie some simple soft hackles: Purple & Starling, Partridge & Orange and a Hare's Ear. Using #50 Tire in Purple Plum #130, I started the thread mid shank and wound forward tying in a starling hackle out over the eye. I then wound down the shank to a point over the hook point and back forming a smooth body. The twisted Tire silk gives the impression of segmentation. I next wound on some peacock herl leaving plenty of room to wind the hackle back.

¹ Jennings, Preston. 1970. *A Book of Trout Flies*, Crown Publishers, New York.

² Nemes, Sylvester. 1975. *The Soft-Hackled Fly: A Trout Fisherman's Guide*, The Chatham Press, Old Greenwich.

Winding the hackle back with slightly loose spacing, I then wound the thread through the hackle to secure it and whipped a head. I used exactly the same process with #100 Kimono in Emperor #329.



The #50 Tire (OTL above) give the hint of segmentation while the #100 (OTR above) produces a very delicate little fly. Both threads were strong and easy with which to tie. Although the Tire is twice the size of Kimono, the tying strategy let me keep the head small although still noticeably larger. In my judgment, the Tire was slightly easier to wrap because the twisted silk nested neatly against itself while wrapping. It's easy to understand why it's gaining a following among rod builders. It should make some stellar midges.

I have found a Purple & Starling to be deadly for BWO hatches on several of my local waters. The breadth of colors available now means I can tune that fly for other hatches as well. Want to try a soft hackle for the little February Red Stones? Maybe try Kimono #321 Tokyo Rose or perhaps Kimono #312 Prickly Pear both of which have a little more brown tone to them.

I followed up the Purple & Starling with a Partridge & Orange and a Hare's Ear. Not surprisingly, the variation in the orange and yellow tones available means you can achieve virtually any result you want. With the Hare's Ear, I wanted to see how the silk took to dubbing. I've found a Hare's Ear tied with yellow thread and a yellow head to be more effective in my waters – probably because of the abundance of

golden and little yellow stones. Both sizes made effective and strong dubbing loops although the finer Kimono created less thread build-up.



Above, #50 Tire Orange Poppy #067 (OTL) and #100 Kimono Orenji #317 (OTR). Again, the stronger segmentation is just barely visible with the Tire. And below in the Hare's Ear, #50 Tire Canary #145 (OTR) and #100 Kimono Rising Sun #303 (OTL). You can see the Kimono makes a significantly smaller

head OTL. Both made strong dubbing loops and held wax well.



Below is a Grouse & Olive tied using Kimono Mori #359. You can see the head darkened considerably after applying lacquer.



At this point, I wanted to try winged wets to see if the larger Tire diameter would be an issue. I chose a Professor variant using Tire #145 Canary (OTL below) and Kimono #303 Rising Sun (OTR below). The larger diameter of the #50 Tire requires that one be far more careful with the number and placement of the thread wraps. I found myself using old school thread techniques to manage bulk which some of the very fine synthetic threads have made obsolete. For example, many materials require four to six tight wraps to be bound to the shank. However, if one begins the next application of materials by unwinding say four thread wraps while maintaining tension, the next material can be secured without creating undue bulk. Using Kimono, the head was significantly easier to control with the #100 silk. My lesson for winged wets is that I should probably use Kimono just because it's easier to manage and keep the head small.

However, just as silk offers beautiful depth and transparency on rod wraps, it makes beautiful heads on flies. For kicks, I tied some simple wets meant for duty as trailers behind waked or skated steelhead flies. Farther below is a Purple Peril variant tied with #100 Kimono in Emperor #329. And still farther down, are a couple of steelhead soft hackles. The heads generally darkened and became quite translucent.







Not only do these silks tie well, they are not particularly expensive. A spool of #50 Tire holds 100m and costs about \$6. A spool of #100 Kimono costs the same \$6 and holds 220 yards. In contrast, a 50-yard spool of Pearsalls, if you can get it, sells for \$11-20 or more. That is one-half to one-quarter as much silk for two to four times the price!?! Comparing typical spools, a spool of Kimono costs 2.7¢/yd compared to Pearsalls at 22¢ - 48¢/yd or more. A serious tier could also purchase Kimono in a 1,090 yard bulk spool for less than \$18 - that's 1.7¢/yd!

There is one drawback to using these silks. The Tire and Kimono spools are much larger than common thread spools. A typical spool of Ultra Thread is 30.5mm long (L) with an outside diameter (D) of about 25.34mm. In contrast, Tire spools are 39.22mm L with a 27.16 mm D. Kimono spools are 38.84mm L with a 31mm D. This may not seem like a big deal but it means that Tire and Kimono spools are 48% and 91% larger by volume respectively than standard fly tying spools. They take up significantly more space and they are harder to fit into bobbins. In fact, the Kimono spools were so large I needed to buy some new bobbins for them to comfortably fit in the bobbin my hand. Fortunately, the very well made Stonfo Maxi bobbin is perfect.

The origin of these silks is a little bit of a story in itself. Tire and Kimono silk threads are recent imports. Both brands are made in Japan. They are exclusively distributed in the US by Superior Threads. They are available from some retailers like Golden Witch as well as directly from Superior Threads. But how did they get here?

After spending a decade teaching English in Japan, Bob and Heather Purcell moved to Hawaii for four years and then on to St. George, Utah. Heather discovered quilting and worked part-time at a quilt shop. They began working on quilts and founded a business in 1998 focused on quilting and sewing. She realized some of the best quilting products were made in Japan.

They found they couldn't get threads made by any American maker to the specifications they needed. In quite a feat of entrepreneurship, Bob made a trip to Japan to cold call several Japanese firms. He eventually struck a deal with the top thread brand in Japan, Fujix, Ltd.. They agreed to both sell their silk thread here (Tire) as well as manufacture an exclusive thread design (Kimono) for the Purcells.

Fujix is a now 100-year old company and remains in the heart of sericulture and silk weaving business in Kyoto. The silks are so delicate that Fujix still uses specialized wooden machines to wind the skeins. Dyeing takes place in a facility specialized for the handling of ultra-fine silk. The Kimono brand colors and names were all designed by the Purcells and manufactured to their specifications.

In another irony, although Bob didn't have fly fishing in mind as they designed the silks, his father was an avid fly fisherman and his grandfather was a tyer. When we spoke, Bob obviously enjoyed hearing how their threads could be used for fly fishing instead of quilting. According to Bob, his Dad would have appreciated the use of his silk in his flies. And although they're designed for quilting, the quality and the array of colors solve a wide variety of fly tying and rod building problems.

Its funny how things work out. When I started fly fishing, I cast simple wet flies. My favorite rod soon became an old bamboo. Sixty years on down the road in a full circle, I am fishing bamboo again and tying little wet flies for trout. I went poking around for rod building thread and found some beautiful silk with which to tie those little wet flies – made by a quilter whose Dad was a fly fisherman. I suppose when you go on a bit of a ramble, you just never know where you're going to end up.