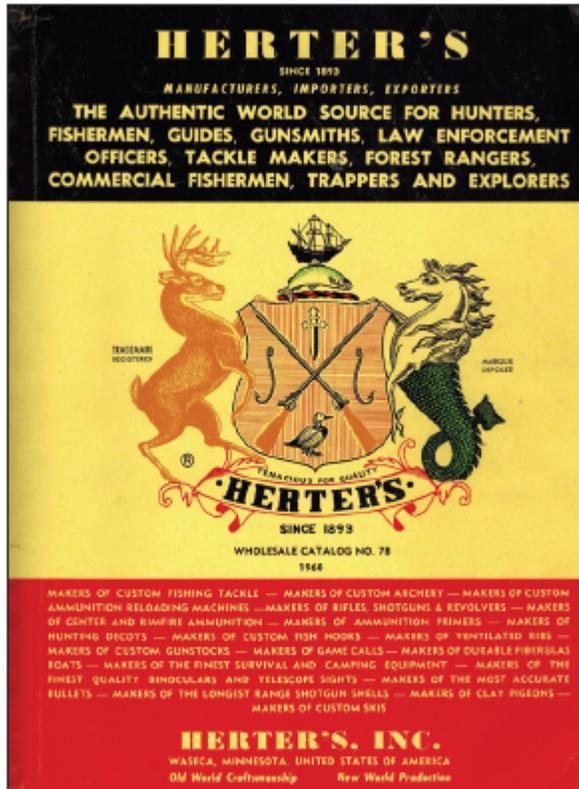


# HERTER'S, INC.

John Byron

Before Cabela's ... before Bass Pro Shops and World Wide Sportsman ... even before Wal\*Mart ... there was Herter's.



In the '40s all the way through to 1981 when the company went bust, Herter's huge catalog is where you went for fly tying material, fishing tackle, hunting gear, custom gunstocks, duck decoys, and just about everything else an outdoorsman might dream of wanting.

Polar bear for streamers? Got it, cheap. English dry fly hooks. Imported jungle cock hackle capes. It was a fly fisherman's dream and a walk through one of the six retail stores that later opened usually yielded a full basket and sticker shock at the checkout.

Herter's pioneered the use of fiberglass in boats, proving their durability by pushing them off the factory's third-story roof onto the parking lot. Brought fluorescent colors to chenille and feathers. Sold kits for bamboo flyrods and jigs to plane the bamboo into tapered hex strips to glue and wrap. If it was something you did in the fields or woods or on a river or a lake, Herter's had the stuff you needed.

George Leonard Herter, the company's founder and owner, was also an author, writing 15 books on outdoor topics and a range of other themes usually described as "oddball." He traveled widely, was a worldly man, a family man, but also a recluse and—again that word—an oddball. I won't repeat the histories documented [here](#) and [here](#) and easily googled from other sources. Let me instead tell you of the George Herter I knew as a young lad growing up in Waseca, Minnesota, where Herter's was located.



*George Leonard Herter, Clear Lake, Waseca MO 1928*

Waseca. Just another small farm town in Southern Minnesota, *Fertile Land* in the dialect of the Dakota Sioux. My great-grandfather and his brother broke sod in the 1850s just south of where the town would be, driven by the Potato Famine from their home in Parish Kildeely, County Limerick. Byrons still work the same land. But I was a city mouse, living in town a couple blocks from Clear Lake and its bass, crappies, bluegill, carp, sheepshead, and northern pike.

When I was eleven, I fished a cane pole and worms from the dock behind a fancy house a new family had just moved into. The wife was Belgian and the father—George—a friend of my folks from before the war. My mother had some French from college and the wife spoke little English, so Berthe Herter and my mom became best buddies and I got to meet George. Tying TIMES 9



*George Leonard Herter in the 1950s*

He fished the lake too, wading with a fly rod behind the house and catching *beaucoup* crappies every night. I'd watch from the bank and one night he asked if I'd like to try it. George quickly taught me the rudiments of casting with Berthe's fly rod, her hip boots fit me perfectly, and I became a fly fisherman. Two droppers, three flies. Usually a bee pattern, a black gnat, and what I came to call the Crappie Special: yellow tail, yellow chenille body, red hackle tied wet. George and I often had doubles and even the occasional triple. Gut 'em, scale 'em, coat 'em in corn meal and fry in hot grease. Love crappies.

These were George's flies I started with, but he asked if I'd be interested in learning to tie and I became an eager student, sitting at George's tying bench in the house as he looked over my shoulder and coached me. No bobbins—we waxed just the length of thread needed for each fly. No whip finishes but tons of half hitches. I wasn't very good at first, the hackles would unwind

on the Crappie Specials, and thus was invented the Crappie Special Streamer (which worked even better). My folks bought me a tying kit and a fly-rod outfit at the tiny Herter's retail store in a corner of the factory downtown and I was in business.

I did yard work for George, my first paying job, bucking brush and cleaning up his overgrown property. One day I came over and found the one-car garage stacked to the ceiling with burlap bundles about eight feet long, Chinese symbols on the side. "What's this" I asked George. "Tonkin bamboo" he replied. "I think the Chinese communists are going to take over and I want to get the biggest stock I can out of the country before it's impossible to buy anymore." Another time he had me on the aluminum roof of the garage in the hot sun using carbon tetrachloride to remove some tar. Damned near passed out and probably would have cashed it in had George not found me woozy from the fumes.

George Herter was my friend, my mentor, and often a daily companion as I was growing up. If my dad weren't such a great guy, I'd cheerfully have adopted George as my father.

I got to know his oldest son Jack too, then not yet in school, now a clinical physiologist still trying to figure out his dad. And Berthe, a gentle woman of breeding and grace. She died in August at 91 and is buried beside George at Fort Snelling Military Cemetery in St. Paul.

The Waseca County Historical Society recently hosted a Herter Exhibit: "George Leonard Herter, The Man and The Myth." That's a good title. Though successful as a businessman and wealthy, George was a troubled human being. He'd had a tough war, an artillery officer in Europe who saw battle and was awarded a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart. Now we call it PTSD. He had it and it affected his life ever after.

My friends at the Historical Society alluded to rumors of George having "a dark side" and I don't think I give up confidences to say without details that son Jack confirms this. But I saw George Herter as brilliant, a polymath of wide interests and deep passions. He was always reclusive and private, but gentle with me and kind. I'm of two minds on some of his writing: is he serious or just putting us on? Best 10 Tying TIMES guess: tongue in cheek and laughing quietly all the time. He was an incredible man, deeply complex, and the father of modern marketing for outdoor sports.

And my friend. I miss him.

I still tie flies and chase fish, tarpon and bonefish when I can afford the trip and reds regularly in the Banana River behind the house. My stepson Jared and grandson Jon have taken it up. They tie flies too and so, as George Herter did for me and I hope you do in your circle, I'm able to pass on down the line the skills and folklore we fly tyers and fly fisherman share. Tight lines.

*The Author:*

*John Byron retired as a captain (and former chief petty officer) from the US Navy after 37 years of continuous active duty. He commanded the submarine USS GUDGEON (SS-567) and Naval Operations Test Unit, the Navy operation at Cape Canaveral responsible for testing TRIDENT missiles. He lives in Cocoa Beach FL with his wife Melissa.*

**Acknowledgement:**

January 2017: Fly Tying Group of the International Federation of Fly Fishers, Volume 1, Edition 15