



## Casting Masters Then and Now

# Bill & J.W. (Jay) GAMMEL

by Sekhar Bahadur, London, England

Jay and Bill Gammel, father and son, wrote the seminal fly casting work, *The Essentials of Fly Casting* (the 'Five Essentials' or the 'Essentials'-see Appendix) in 1990. Their work is regarded as among the most influential on fly casting and its instruction. Jay taught sociology at Lee College in Baytown, Texas. He passed away in 1997 after a long illness. Bill is an MCI and Casting Board of Governors (CBOG) Emeritus who worked on several committees, including leading the committee which designed and introduced the Two Handed Casting Instructor program.



## Bill and J.W. (Jay) Gammel *continued ...*

Bill twice won the IFFF's Colliander Cup for casting excellence. He teaches biology at Lee College in Baytown, from which he received one of his degrees.

In 2014 the International Federation of Fly Fishers CBOG established the Jay Gammel Award for Fly Casting Instruction which recognizes lasting contributions to the teaching of fly casting instruction through written publications, instructional course materials, or electronic media.

Master Casting Instructor Sekhar Bahadur interviewed Bill Gammel.

**SB:** *Bill could you tell us a bit about your father?*

**BG:** Dad was an athlete in high school and college. He went to college to play baseball for Southern Methodist University and walked on the football team. Most American football players at major college programs are recruited by the coaching staff and offered scholarships to attend. (Walk-ons, the few unrecruited members of the student body who try out for and are actually selected to play for the teams, are generally considered highly motivated overachievers who have overcome long odds against them.)

Dad hurt his shoulder playing football and effectively ruined his baseball career. He and his wife moved back to Baytown and he finished college at the University of Houston where he also earned his Master's degree. Right out of college he turned to golf and was very close to a scratch golfer. After my brother Cliff was born, Dad took up bow fishing, because it could be done at night after mom and Cliff were in bed. This led to a brief conventional tackle fishing period and then on to fly fishing.

## **Appendix**

### **Bill and Jay Gammel's Five Essentials of Fly Casting:**

- 1. There must be a Pause between each stroke, which varies in duration with the amount of line outside the rod tip.**
- 2. Slack line should be kept to an absolute minimum.**
- 3. In order to form the most efficient, least air resistant loops, and to direct the energy of the cast to a specific target, the caster must move the rod tip in a Straight Line.**
- 4. The size of the casting Arc must vary with the length of line past the rod tip.**
- 5. Power must be applied in the proper amount at the proper place in the stroke.**

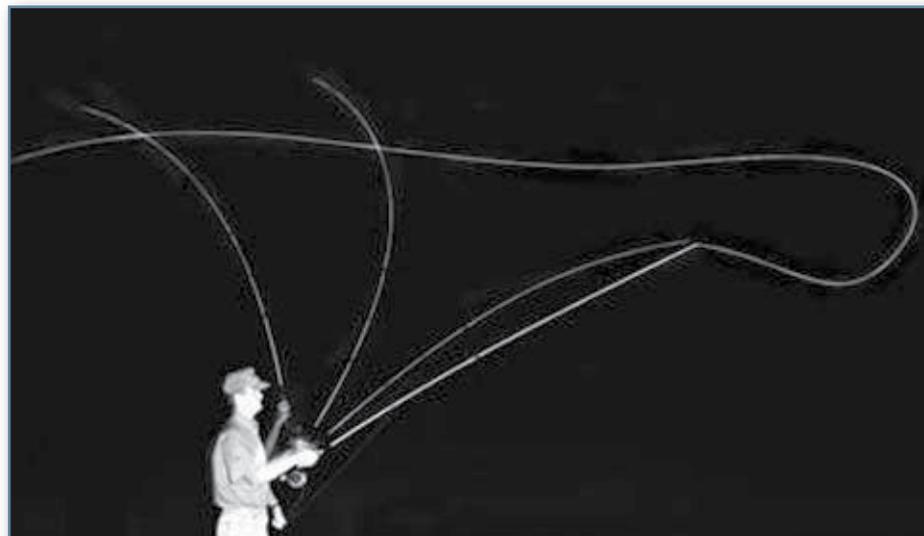
## Bill and J.W. (Jay) Gammel *continued ...*

It was Dad's ability to watch the great ballplayers and break down what they were doing that helped him learn fly casting. He was constantly reading. An FFF member's wife was the local librarian, and perhaps because of that the Baytown library has an extensive fly fishing and casting section. Dad read them all twice.

What he loved most was spending time with his family. He was a great dad, waiting for us to get out of school with the boat ready. We hunted and fished together a great deal. Family vacations were a group decision. He decided that we were going back to the Madison River and Yellowstone Park for the 18th year and he let my mom decide when she wanted to go. Her options were late June or early July. Today, my mom spends late June and early July with my family on the Madison River.

### **SB:** *How did he get started in fly casting?*

**BG:** His fishing began with a bow in his hand. After mistakenly shooting an 8-pound largemouth bass, he began fishing with conventional tackle. His brother-in-law heard he was fishing a lot, so he introduced Dad to fly fishing. In true Dad form, he quickly became obsessed with fly casting and was casting in the yard every moment he was not fishing. My uncle lived in Dalhart, Texas which is just a few hours from Red River, New Mexico and southern Colorado. Dad fished his way north from there to Glacier Park in Montana, settling on the Madison River as his favorite spot. When it was not summer, he spent a lot of time fly fishing the Galveston Bay complex. He was one of, if not the first, to fly fish the upper Texas Coast.



**SB:** *My condolences on his passing. I know he courageously battled illness for several years. Could you tell us the story of his last cast please?*

**BG:** Dad had a rare form of cancer that ruined the efficiency of his lungs. He went to M.D. Anderson Cancer Center and basically checked in as a guinea pig. There was no cure for what he had and the average was two years to live. Dad turned his two years into a little more than nine. One of the things that kept him alive was a steroid called Prednisone. You are not supposed to take this stuff for more than six weeks. Dad took huge doses for nine years. This sapped the calcium from his bones and made them very brittle. In the summer of 1996, we believe he broke his back in five spots. This was the source of a great deal of pain, especially while fly casting.

## Bill and J.W. (Jay) Gammel *continued ...*

In the fall of 1996, he was sent home from the hospital and told to get his will in order if it was not already updated. He asked to go out and cast. He asked for a chair, so I jumped up and got the lawn chair from the garage and he walked out the front door using a walker and wearing a full body plastic brace.

I placed the chair in his spot and he sat down. Instinctively, he stripped off the whole line and began to cast. As the line lengthened he began to haul. At the first haul he grimaced in pain and let the cast fall. He rested a minute and said, 'I can't do anymore of that.' He cast a few pick-up-and- lay-down casts and then shot one with no haul. It draped over the neighbor's fence. He stripped in and did it again. The fence was around 95 feet away and he threw the line over the fence. He handed me the rod and struggled to his feet. As he turned to his walker he asked me to reel the line in for him because he was done.



The next day he entered the hospital for the last time and died on January 5, 1997, two days after his 60th birthday.

### **SB:** *How did the Essentials come about?*

**BG:** Judy Lehmborg was the Vice President of Learning for the FFF and they had a booklet series going and needed a casting pamphlet for beginners. She approached us in 1988 when I was 18. It took us about two years to write 24 pages. We developed the Essentials for

the booklet. My Dad and I had several years previously started a deep and through study of fly casting and had worked some of this out, but not in the form it actually took in the booklet. We traveled with our video camera to FFF events and worked very hard to separate substance from style in order to figure out what good casts fundamentally had in common. I was very good at mimicking casters like Lefty Kreh, Joan and Lee Wulff, Jim Green, Mel Krieger, Chris Korich and Steve Rajeff, and we had hours of videotape of many of them, especially Chris and Steve, casting and teaching.

### **SB:** *What technology was available to you?*

**BG:** Just a home video camera, and a VCR with a remote - thank God, we had just gotten a TV with a remote too!

### **SB:** *How did the Essentials become a cornerstone of our casting program?*

**BG:** I don't know exactly. This may sound boastful but I don't mean it to be. Jim Green [a founding CBOG Member, Fenwick rod designer, and World Casting Champion at age 17] told me at a Conclave in Livingston, Montana that we had written in 24 pages what everyone else had tried to write in 300. If that was the sentiment in the room then they probably believed that it was as good a summary as anyone would write. The casting program never truly adopted it as far as I know.



## Bill and J.W. (Jay) Gammel *continued ...*

It really just became part of the fabric of casting instruction of the IFFF because over time so many people began to speak of the Essentials.

**SB:** *What led to your generous decision to donate the rights to the IFFF?*

**BG:** Dad and I never felt as though the Essentials were ours. We just happened to be the ones that collected them into one spot and weeded out all of the things that were stylistic and not essential. We never thought about it being generous. In hindsight, it could not have worked better for me. I was an 18 year old kid from Texas who was a very good caster. However, no one knew me and there was no reason they should read what I had to say. The FFF had a promotional vehicle that was not otherwise available to me. So I have benefited greatly, if you want to be well known among a couple of hundred people who care.

**SB:** *Starting with what isn't essential, what did you decide fell into the style category?*

**BG:** Some of them include: Grip, Stance, Casting Arm position, Use of Wrist, Drift, and Hauling.

**SB:** *The full text of the Essentials mentions stroke length as a practical substitute to use with students in place of the Arc width Essential. Could one argue stroke length itself is also essential to cast beyond certain distances or above a certain speed?*

**BG:** Technically yes, but it depends on how strong the caster is. I would say it was a matter of style to choose to use a longer stroke on

a longer or faster cast, and would be hesitant to say it was essential. With that said, most casters do widen the arc by lengthening the stroke.

**SB:** *The original Essentials start with Pause and Slack and then go onto Straight Line Path of the rod tip, Arc and Power. Why did you choose this order?*

**BG:** Frankly there was no real reason behind the original order. We didn't really know at the time how the Essentials fit together. It wasn't until I started teaching using the Essentials and trying to apply them to every situation that I came to understand how they work together.

**SB:** *In your 2002 video, 'Teaching Yourself to Fly Cast - Learning the Essentials', why did you change the order of the Essentials?*

**BG:** I taught the Essentials to thousands of students over more than a dozen years before shooting the DVD. I came to understand that the Straight Line Path of the rod tip is the overall Essential and it is presented first in the video, followed by Arc, Timing (Pause), Power and Slack. The first Essential is that the caster should avoid tracking errors in the horizontal plane (assuming the rod is vertical). The next four Essentials work together to make the rod tip path straight in the rod, or vertical plane as well. Dad and I talked a lot about the Essentials being linked and how 'you can't mess one up without messing up the other' (Straight Line Path was always 'the other').

In other words a Straight Line Path with no up and down movement is a result of the other four Essentials, and a Straight Line Path with no right or left movement is an essential direct action by the caster.



## Bill and J.W. (Jay) Gammel *continued ...*

**SB:** *The 180-Degree Rule is not mentioned in the original Essentials, but is covered in depth in your video. Would you make it part of the Straight Line Path Essential if you were writing today?*

*[The 180-Degree Rule suggests that the rod tip path during the casting stroke should be an extension in the opposite direction of the fly line's position when the casting stroke begins.]*

**BG:** Yes, the 180-Degree Rule is really good teaching terminology and I use it often. I would use it in the description of the Straight Line Path Essential if I were rewriting it.

**SB:** *In your article 'Making Adjustments on the Fly...' in the Summer 2010 Loop, you made changes to what determines the appropriate Arc width and Pause length, which Dr. Gordy Hill called 'an epiphany' in his online MCI study group. Can you please give us some background?*

**BG:** I generalized by saying that instead of just depending on line length, Arc and Pause, depend on the bend in the rod and the time it takes the line to straighten, respectively. This covers line length and also other factors such as speed, the effect of wind on the rod, and different equipment or anything else requiring an adjustment in arc and/or pause length. Rod bend and the time the line takes to straighten are really the fundamental points.

**SB:** *Although it is mentioned in the full text of the Essentials as part of Power, should Stop be the 6th Essential?*

**BG:** There is no doubt that the caster needs to stop or slow down - you can accelerate all day and never form a loop. We started with a longer list of Essentials and whittled it down to six.

Stop was actually the sixth Essential but my Dad and I decided it was just power applied in the opposite direction to the cast in order to form a loop and it therefore should be part of Power.

**SB:** *You made reference earlier to a change you would make if you were writing today. Given how your thinking has advanced over more than a quarter of a century, would you consider producing an updated version of the Essentials?*

**BG:** Yes I see them differently than they were originally written but I don't have any plans to rewrite them. That little booklet has taught a lot of people how to cast. Many have tried to pick it apart and have not had much success. I don't think I could improve it without Dad.

**SB:** *Turning to you now, if we may: I understand you found creative ways to use your fishing skills in your studies!*

**BG:** I developed a fishing method that would be useful as a lake management tool. I have a degree in Wildlife and Fisheries Management from Texas A & M University. My specialization was warm water ecology. At A & M that means you study largemouth bass management. The standardized method of collecting fish is with an electro fishing boat. It is expensive and you can't get a heavy boat into many private lakes in Texas. So when I got to the Southwest Texas State's Master's Program and found out my major professor was a semi-pro bass fisherman, I did what anybody would do. I proposed developing a standardized fishing method that would result in statistically sound data without the electro fishing rig. It worked great for the largemouth bass with basically a 1:1 ratio between conventional fishing and electro fishing data. I found bluegill on the other hand for some reason did not require as much real fishing data!

## Bill and J.W. (Jay) Gammel *continued ...*

Needless to say I turned an 18-month master's program into just shy of three years. I wanted to be thorough.

I learned a lot; most notably, don't ever push off a metal fence post while the electro fishing rig is on. It won't end well.

**SB:** *How did you become the Federation's first Certified Casting Instructor?*

**BG:** In 1992 at Conclave, Mel Krieger started to demonstrate the new instructor assessment tasks to a fairly large group and then he called me up and asked me to do them. I guess I must have done OK because he made me the first CI on the spot!

**SB:** *I understand you folks had some epic cast-offs at Annual Conclaves. What were some of your favorite memories?*

**BG:** Yes we have had some great casting contests. Usually at about midnight at the Holiday Inn in Mountain Home, Arkansas. The Southern Council conclave was the site of many great casting sessions.

At the IFFF event in Idaho Falls, Bruce Richards, Tom White, Rick Hartman, Paul Arden and I stood on the lawn of the hotel and cast. This turned into one of the most epic cast-offs I have ever seen. We cast distance, under tables, through windows, and capped it off with Rick and me putting a fly on the roof of a four story hotel that was only 50-60 feet in front of us (that's straight up). It was one awesome display by all of them and probably a good deal of luck on my part. Paul threw a cast through a second story balcony door and across a lady's room and she was standing on the porch making smart mouth



comments at us. Then Rick wins by putting the fly through the door, across the room, and into the sink. We were there laughing, joking and making all kinds of noise, all with 100 feet of line out and not six people stopped to watch. We could not even draw a crowd at the Conclave.

This was different years ago when Dad and I would travel to West Yellowstone to the FFF Conclave. Twenty-five years ago Steve Rajeff, Dad and I stepped out the door of a West Yellowstone Conclave so Steve could show us the new Loomis IMX fly rods, and the three of us had a crowd of close to 100 people standing there watching Steve Rajeff, a kid, and an old man throw 100+ foot casts for an hour. There was no instruction, just casting.

## Bill and J.W. (Jay) Gammel *continued ...*

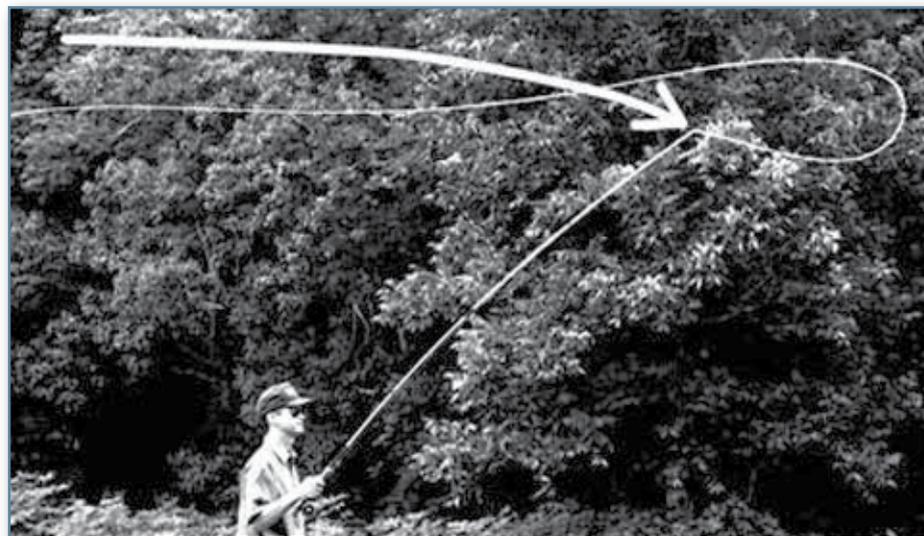
Twenty years later Tim Rajeff, Katherine Hart and I were casting at the conclave in Livingston, Montana. We were 100 to 105 feet from a fence and we were trying to throw a fly through the gap between the fence and the building it was adjacent to. This gap was about three inches wide. We cast and cast and every time we thought someone had gotten it through we would run up to the post to look. Two grown men running around making fools of themselves while repeatedly casting 105 feet and no one stopped to watch. I finally won this world championship of casting when Tim made the mistake of answering his phone. While his back was turned I threw a cast high into the wind and let the wind blow the loop into the building. The line fell along the side of the building and perfectly straight about five feet past the post in that little gap. Tim could not believe it and Katherine and I never told him.

**SB:** *What advice do you have for casting instructors?*

**BG:**

- Never quit seeking the cutting edge of learning.
- Never be scared to blow up someone's stroke and start over. Even yours. I would start over at the basics and rebuild my stroke from scratch every spring.
- Listen to the quiet ones. The ones running their mouths are probably not nearly as good as you.

**SB:** *Have you ever had a casting student you just couldn't help? What would you recommend an instructor in that situation do?*



**BG:** Well, I probably helped them a bit, but yes, I have had students that I was never able to help reach their goal. It was always with the student who wanted to reach a distance goal. I have never had a student that I could not teach to fish at a reasonable fishing distance.

**SB:** *Do you have much time to fish, teach, speak or demo casting at shows?*

**BG:** I am fishing more now that my kids are older. We have been taking a trip to Montana every summer. We fish Arkansas a couple of times a year. My kids play baseball and that kills a lot of spring fishing. I would do more of all of it if given the opportunity. However, when I stopped traveling to stay home with the kids, my teaching also fell off. I still don't want to travel a lot, but would do more than I have.

## Bill and J.W. (Jay) Gammel *continued ...*



**SB:** Are there any noteworthy casters in the next generation of Gammels?

**BG:** No, they won't practice. They are OK with being good enough. If they would cast as much as they play baseball they would be great.

**SB:** Do you do much two-handed casting?

**BG:** No. I am very proud to have been a part of the Two-Handed Casting Program, but it is not my thing. I have used two handed rods in helping wounded warriors with arm weakness. This was great to help them to overhead cast. They were able to cast all day on a guided fishing trip.

**SB:** Are you working on any casting or fishing related publications that we should look out for?

**BG:** My new book 'A Sportsman's Pursuit' is a collection of short stories that end in a Christian message. It is basically a book of lessons learned in the outdoors from a lifetime of hunting and fishing. I am also working on a YouTube page aimed at reaching the young digital media crowd. My college students don't have DVD players. If I want to teach that generation about fishing, casting, or Christ, it is going to have to be online.



About **Sekhar Bahadur Sekhar** is an MCI and a casting coach for the British Fly Casting Club. He and his wife have two grown daughters.

They divide their time between London and Greenwich, Connecticut.

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