



THE SHOP TIME FORGOT

For three decades, Phil Evans of Rod & Reel Repair has been part of the heart of Northern Virginia's angling community.



By Dr. Peter Brookes
Photos by Lynda Richardson/DWR

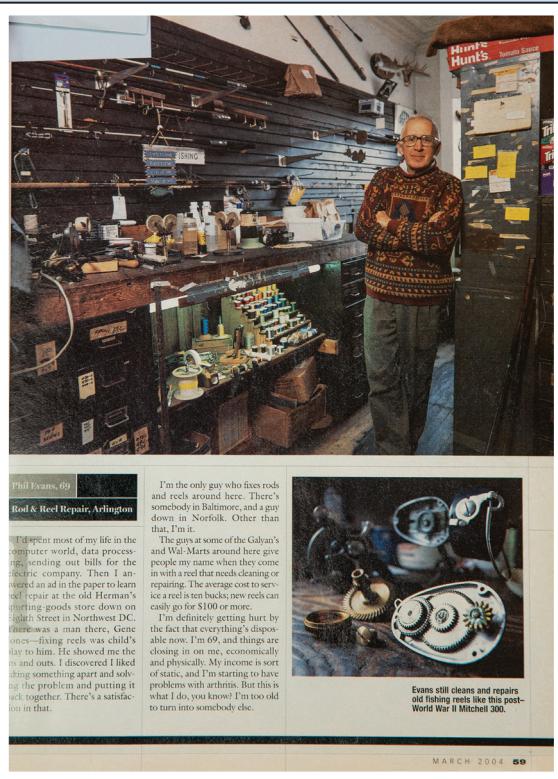
It's not easy to interview an icon. By icon, I mean someone who's a mainstay of a community and has already had articles written about him in the popular, cosmopolitan *Washingtonian* magazine and in the venerable, outdoorsy *Field & Stream*. And that is what describes Phil Evans.

Phil has owned and operated Rod & Reel Repair in Arlington since 1993—and would, due to his service to the fishing community, be considered by many to be Northern Virginia's "go-to" guy for fishing gear repair.

I met Phil on a bright winter Saturday morning before opening hours at his understated, one-room shop on Langston (previously Lee) Boulevard for a quick chat, amongst the unclaimed rods and reels for sale and those waiting for repair.

While a fishing show plays on a TV in the background, Phil tells me he isn't a native Virginian, but instead was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania, in 1934. It turns out that as the work got scarce in the Pennsylvania coal mines Phil's family picked up and left Scranton when his father and mother found

Left: Rod & Reel Repair's original sign still hangs over the shop in Arlington. Above: Phil Evans works on a reel in his shop, unchanged after more than three decades in business.



Phil Evans, 69
Rod & Reel Repair, Arlington

"I spent most of my life in the computer world, data processing, sending out bills for the electric company. Then I answered an ad in the paper for a job at the old Herman's Sporting Goods store down on Eighth Street in Northwest D.C. There was a man there, George—one-fifth century—George, who showed me the ropes and ours. I discovered I liked doing something apart and solving the problem and putting it back together. There's a satisfaction in that."

I'm the only guy who fixes rods and reels around here. There's somebody in Baltimore, and a guy down in Norfolk. Other than that, I'm the only one.

These days some of the Galan's and Wal-Mart's around here give people my name when they come in with a reel that needs cleaning or repairing. They want me to service a reel for them because new reels can easily go for \$100 or more.

I'm definitely getting hurt by the fact that everything's disposable. I mean, things are changing in me, economically and physically. My income is sort of static, and I'm starting to have problems with arthritis. But this is what I do, you know? I'm too old to turn into somebody else.



Evans still cleans and repairs old fishing reels like this post-World War II Mitchell 300.

MARCH 2004 59



Left: Phil Evans was featured in the *Washingtonian* magazine in 2004 when he was 69 years old. Right: Phil Evans, wearing the same sweater, strikes the same pose for *Virginia Wildlife* magazine 18 years later.

government work at the Pentagon during World War II.

Phil never finished high school and took a job as an office boy at the *Washington Evening Star* newspaper. He eventually went back to school, got his GED, and studied computer programming and data processing in community college.

After working in that field for a while, Phil started to learn rod and reel repair at a local Herman's Sporting Goods in Washington, D.C. He eventually opened Rod & Reel Repair in the '80s with stops in Washington, D.C., and Mt. Rainier, Maryland. He finally settled into his Arlington location in 1993. He lives above the store and commutes down the stairs each day. But after nearly 40 years in business—and at nearly 88 years young—he wants a well-deserved break from "scrubbing fishing reels." So, as Phil puts it, he's selling out.

Phil has been fishing since he was 12 years old. He smiles when he

recalls his many boyhood memories in Arlington, telling me how he and his pals would grab their bikes and head to local fishing holes to chase whatever fish would grab their hooks. You can see a twinkle in Phil's eyes when he tells me that the fishing of his youth in Northern Virginia was "wonderful," hitting places like Roaches Run and Gravelly Point with his buddies for perch, catfish, and carp and D.C.'s tidal basin for carp and black crappie.

Interestingly, Phil says that the largemouth bass fishing is much better today than it was back in his younger days; he also remembers that there were phenomenal herring and striped bass runs in the Potomac, but that the super popular shad runs of today were pretty sparse.

The youthful anglers kept just about everything they caught—and ate those that were deemed safe. Phil says that even back then there were public health advisories on which fish were okay to consume. He tells me that in those days

the Potomac River was really a "polluted mess." Interestingly today, the Potomac's waters are considered clean enough by some that there is a movement to re-open the river to public swimming. Phil quickly credits President Lyndon Johnson and his 1966 Clean Waters Restoration Act for the tremendous progress in the amelioration of the Potomac's water quality—and the subsequent improvement in the fishery.

Though a conventional gear angler at heart, as an adult he also enjoyed fishing for brook trout in Shenandoah National Park with buddies, catching them on the fly. Or as Phil laughingly puts it: "Chasing four-inch fish while getting lost in the woods."

He is heartened by the fact that Virginia has such a wonderful variety of fish and fishing today, commenting how newcomers to the area have added a new vibrancy to the Northern Virginia fishing scene.

Though he may be ready to end his

nine-to-five routine of many years at the shop, he still has some fishing to do. On his bucket list is fishing for tarpon in Florida, no doubt influenced by the book, *Lords of the Fly: Madness, Obsession, and the Hunt for the World-Record Tarpon*, which he pulls off a shelf and passes on to me to read—and then instructs me to pass on to another angler when I'm done.

I asked him why he hadn't retired earlier? He responded: "Habit," adding, "I worked long, but not that hard."

I then asked him how the "big box" sporting goods stores—the bane of many smaller fishing shops—affected his business? He looked at me quizzically, saying that since he does repair, he doesn't see the big box stores as competition and, in fact, receives many referrals from them. With a sense of pride, Phil says that's he one of the few—and maybe the only—shop around the area that does repairs of rods and reels, giving his place a unique niche in the local fishing business scene.

Asked what he would have liked to have done if he hadn't opened this shop, Phil says he has no regrets but would've



Phil Evans tracks all of his sales and repairs with good old-fashioned pen and paper.



A customer describes the repair he needs to a fishing rod as Phil Evans listens.



Phil Evans shares a laugh with one of his many customers.



Replacing a fishing rod guide requires careful removal with a razor blade.

maybe liked to have been a doctor to help fix up people just like he fixes up rods and reels.

I can see that.

In retirement, he plans to move from his apartment above the shop, get a room near a library, and read a lot of books, sharing with me a list of works handwritten on the back of a piece of scrap cardboard. The weighty list includes the likes of Bertrand Russell, a British mathematician, essayist, and philosopher.

In closing our conversation, I asked Phil what his favorite local place to fish was, thinking he probably has a few of them, coming to the area in 1943. (I, of course, was scheming to get some good “intel” for my own local fishing outings.) As I breathlessly got ready to take down the “lat and long” of the locations of his favorite spots on my notepad, I sensed a pause in the cadence of the conversation. I looked up at Phil, who had a mischievous smile on his face.

He said: “I’m really sorry, Pete, but I can’t tell you.” As anglers often do, Phil clearly didn’t want to “hotspot” any local fishing holes or give away any cherished secrets to this budding outdoor writer and avid angler. I let out a heavy sigh, and smiled back, disappointed with his sudden case of “lock-jaw”—that condition every angler dreads when the fish just don’t seem willing to open their mouths to take the hook.

Oh well.

But, in truth, his totally understandable reticence on this matter makes me more fully appreciate why Phil and his long-serving Arlington rod and reel repair shop are considered pillars of Northern Virginia’s vibrant fishing community. ☀

Dr. Peter Brookes is a D.C. foreign policy nerd by day and an award-winning Virginia outdoor writer by night.



Phil Evans has kept a list of books he's planning to read in retirement.



Hoping to sell his business before he retires, Phil will continue to “work long, but not that hard,” as he likes to say.



NOT MANY PLACES LIKE THIS

The reviews of Phil Evans' Rod & Reel Repair that appear online speak to the shop's unique charm and Phil's finesse.

- ◆ I have been passing this shop on my way to someplace else for 30+ years now. I was always curious but always thought to myself "some other day when I have more time." Well, today was that day. I brought in three vintage surf rods that I have been meaning to repair myself for at least 10 years. The proprietor is a soft-spoken, elderly gentleman with striking blue eyes who was re-varnishing some rods when I walked in. He looked my rods over, made note of what needed repairs, and wrote out a quote on a legal pad in pencil, and then totaled it up in his head. The prices, like the shop itself, seem like something from the 1960s. I agreed to the price, and told him I thought it was very reasonable. He asked for my name and I said Dave. He gave me an old fashioned tear-off ticket like you used to see at the dry cleaners. His name is Phil. Cash only. The rods will be done a week from Friday, but frankly I'm in no hurry. Rod and Reel Repair is an Arlington treasure that will be gone far too soon.
- ◆ Talking to Phil took me back in time to my childhood. It was like talking to my Grandad or one of his friends in one of their shops in small town America in the '70s. He is incredibly knowledgeable, talented and fair. His shop is a time capsule. Any person who fishes enough is bound to have a bad day every now and again and Phil can help you out. If you do have one of those days, go see Phil. Talk to him a bit. Stay awhile. I can't say enough good things about him. We're lucky to have him in this area.
- ◆ I am not sure how to describe this experience. I started out at DC Anglers, they are strictly fly fishing. I needed repairs on reels, one installed and spooled. I was referred to Rod & Reel Repair about two blocks away. I walked into a place time forgot. Phil Evans, the proprietor, was amazing. Man knows what he is talking about; he had parts to fix my reels from the '70s! One just needed some adjustments. I had a new freshwater reel I wanted spooled, he said he had a pole he would trade me for one of my old saltwater poles. Told him no immediately, sentimental value, it was my Dad's. He said, "He would tell you to get rid of it!" Told him he didn't know my Dad; he parted with nothing. Like Phil, he fixed and repaired rods and reels, but out of his garage. After all was said and done, he told me \$15.00. Wanted to pay him for freshwater pole and he said no, it was a piece of junk! Gave him \$20.00 and left very happy. He told me stories about fishing spots he had been to and how he enjoyed bluegill pan fried. He thanked me for stopping in and I was glad I did. Not too many places left like this and made me remember good times I had fishing with my Dad.