

# Fly Tyer



WINTER 2011

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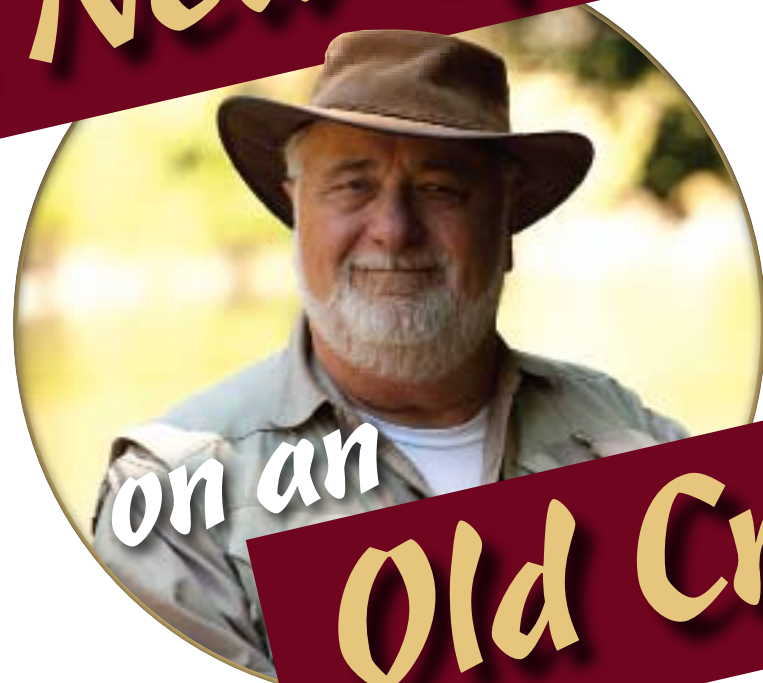
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# A New Spin



on an

# Old Craft

Norm Norlander created the Nor-Vise System and founded a family business.

*Anglers have tied flies for centuries, typically using their hands to wrap thread and materials onto the hook. Norm Norlander reinvented the concept of how to tie a fly, and in the process created a revolutionary vise and bobbin.*  
by Mark Halperin

**N**orm Norlander is a big man: six-two, heavysset, but with a light step. I pick out his white beard as soon as he enters the coffee shop where I've come to learn how he came up with the spinning vise and retractable bobbin that make up the core of the Nor-Vise System. Norm has already retired once: he was a senior research engineer for Weyerhaeuser. These days, however, he puts in 60 to 70 hours a week at his new job.

Doing what? His business card identifies him as "vise" president of Nor-Vise Corporation.

"I combined my avocation with my vocation," he says, although it's hard to know how he separates one from the other.

His talk has the same note of confidence as his big-man's walk, and he adds humor as well as a touch of his business card's playful self-mockery. The story of the Nor-Vise System has many components. First came the vise.

### Creation of the Nor-Vise

It's fair to say that Norlander created the ultimate vise for rotary fly tying. The jaws on the Nor-Vise are short and simple. They're also positioned perfectly horizontal to coincide with the axis of rotation: line the hook shank with the top of the jaws, clamp the hook, and give the jaws a whirl. The hook rotates with no wobble, and the shank is in line with the axis of rotation.

Norlander received the patent for his unique vise on October 1, 1985, two years after he applied for it. The first prototypes, he says, were made in 1979. Even today, the Nor-Vise stands out from other rotary vises.

Horizontal jaws aren't the only distinguishing feature of the Nor-Vise. The jaws spin smoothly in good part because of a pair of heavy brass hubs that act like small flywheels. The jaws extend from one hub, and a short knurled knob for spinning the jaws and hook extend from the center of the other hub. An axle that rests on ball bearings joins the two hubs, and this shaft passes through a T-shaped post to hold everything above the tying bench. A quick look shows you how straightforward the arrangement is. Quoting Einstein, Norlander says, "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not any simpler."

It's clear that the Nor-Vise is built to turn a hook easily and fast. The hubs add mass, and the ball bearings allow the axle and jaws to rotate freely.

The vertical thread post is another distinguishing feature of the Nor-Vise System. At first sight, it seems like no more

than a variant of a bobbin rest, and it does provide a place to park the bobbin when winding material onto the hook. But—and this is important—it supports the thread at the same height as the hook. This allows for spinning dubbing on the thread or reinforcing herl with thread.

How did Norlander come up with these ideas?

"I'm an engineer, and one of things I did pretty well was thinking 'outside the box.' Like a lot of inventors, it seems as though you're better at it when you don't know too much."

But there had to be a starting point—an interest in fly tying.

### Birth of a Fly-tying Inventor

When he was about 12 years old—living in California's San Fernando Valley, he tells me—he received a fly-tying kit for Christmas.

mom's sewing kit, and started putting this stuff around the hook. In those days, I think a lot of us were self-taught."

Southern California is not an area we associate with trout streams, and Norlander wanted to get out of there in the worst way.

"Being an engineer in the early sixties was the ticket. I had accepted a job at Boeing. I still had six months of school, but back then, they were doing that sort of thing. I figured that was about as far north as I could get. That was the time I really discovered fly-fishing: sea-run cutthroat and the Snoqualmie River. I went home and did my very best to counterfeit a Bucktail Coachman. We caught a few fish."

A few years later, he went to work for Weyerhaeuser as a developmental engineer. Meanwhile, the experience with that Coachman was quietly percolating in his brain.



The Nor-Vise and retractable bobbin are well built and simple to use. They are the ultimate tools for rotary fly tying.

"I had this kit, which included a Thompson Model B vise with squared-off jaws, like I have on my vise. The idea was you could grasp the bend of the hook rather than the point. But I was absolutely clueless as to what to do; I had all these feathers, like remnants from pillow stuffings, and a cake of beeswax like a hockey puck. I had no idea what that was used for. You got a pair of scissors out of your

"One day, out of the clear blue, I decided to sit down and make a fly-tying vise. I started with a blank piece of paper and thought about it quite a bit. You know, it's really better to turn the hook rather than wrap stuff around the hook. That was the basic concept. I still think it's better. And if you could mount the hook so that the shank was on the axis of rotation, and if you could easily spin the hook, that would



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## FIRST WRAPS

also be better. The first couple of vises I made had big brass flywheels on them. Over time I overhauled the design."

The pleasure Norlander takes in making things played a part as well. Later, he related a story about building a one-man pram. He liked the result so much, he built a second one, a bit bigger so his grandson can eventually row for him. More significant, he "built a spinning wheel for my wife. That led to the concept of spinning dubbing without thread." (You can watch Norm do that and a whole lot more using the Nor-Vise in a battery of excellent fly-tying videos on the Internet. Just go to [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) and type "Norm Norlander" in the search field. Be sure to check out the video titled "Extended Body Mayfly Dun" to learn how to make an extended body without using thread. It's amazing!—editor)

### Building a Better Bobbin

Necessity, that famous mother of invention, also played a significant role in the development of the Nor-Vise System. For

a bobbin with one hand. And that, I guess, led to my need for a spring-loaded retractable bobbin. The first prototypes were made between 1985 and 1987, and the bobbin patent was issued December 31, 1991."

Good fortune also played a role in the development of the Nor-Vise. In Norlander's case, he had access to a Weyerhaeuser machine shop.

"You could do actual hands-on stuff. That's not normally allowed, but on my lunch hour I'd go back there and help the machinists. They'd befriend me and over the years I started making a few more vises. It got to the point where people wanted to give me money for the darned things. One thing led to another, and next thing you know, I made a profit. It was definitely out of control at this point."

### Business, Friendship, and Family

The initial vises were made of stainless steel, but over time that was replaced with other materials. For 15 years, the hubs



Here we see Norm Norlander using his unique vise, bobbin post, and spring-loaded bobbin.

example, moving the thread back and forth from the thread post to the hook requires rewinding the thread back onto the spool. You might have to do this several times while tying a fly. What if you had a bobbin that would wind the thread onto the spool for you?

"See that scar?" Norlander asks. "My right thumb doesn't work. I can't wind up

were aluminum.

"Aluminum was cheaper. Darrel Martin was the one who really pushed me into the brass hubs. He liked them just because of the appearance, and then I kept them on because they're heavier and work better."

Seeing the potential for his new product, Norm took samples to a fly-fishing show.

"I think the first show that I ever did

was Federation of Fly Fishers Conclave at West Yellowstone, Montana, in 1984. I had half a dozen vises. I decided I was going to put serial numbers on them, and I engraved numbers on the first hundred. I've got number 000 myself: stainless steel with a walnut case. Number 001 was sold at auction. A guy named Lefty Kreh got 002, and Charlie Brooks got number four.

"These guys were pretty good, and it encouraged me. Charlie Brooks, in particular, was taken with the thing, and he was teaching a fly-tying class. 'I have to have six more,' he'd say. I couldn't keep up. Hell, it took a couple of nights to make one of the darned things. Unfortunately, Charlie died right after that."

Norlander's modesty kicks in. He's not much at working on a lathe, he explains.

"I imagine over the years I've busted up more tools than any machinist you've ever known. Now I have parts made for me. I do the finishing work on them—a little machining and all of the assembly."

He was equally fortunate on the business end of things. A vice president at Weyerhaeuser helped him draft the business plan he still uses. "Don't try to compete on the basis of price or volume," he advised. "Just make the best vise you can, and it will take care of itself."

And the Nor-Vise has taken care of itself—and taken Norm all over the world. He's been from Kamchatka to New Zealand's Taupo Lake, with a stop along the way at the Itchen River, "where Izaak Walton fished," the self-professed history buff adds. There may be a few places in the world where he hasn't wet a line, but he's paring down the list.

The Nor-Vise Corporation remains a family operation, and will continue that way after its president steps down, he says. Speaking of his grandson, Norm smiles: "Someday, I hope, if I live long enough, he'll have the business. It's a heritage thing. I don't think I've done too many earthshaking things in my life, but here's a little something. I'm kind of proud of that."

Mark Halperin is a regular contributor to our magazine. He lives in Oregon.

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