

Book Report: "A Modern Dry-fly Code" by Vince Marinaro

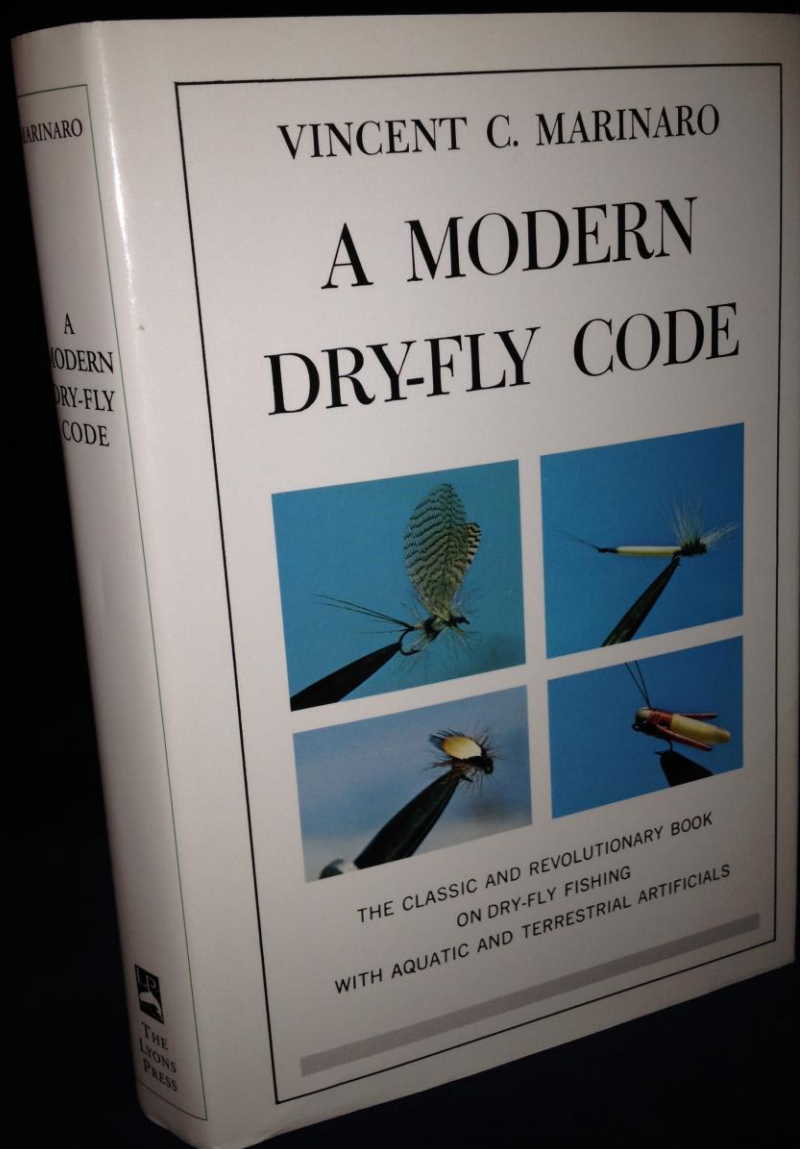
*Buddy Randolph/ August 6, 2015*

In the past I collected quite a few old fly-fishing books, especially those that were reputedly ground-breaking to the sport. My reading rate always lagged my collecting but recently I decided to try to catch up, beginning with "A Modern Dry-fly Code" by Vincent C. Marinaro (1950; copyright renewed 1970; reprinted 1997 by The Lyons Press, New York).

Vince Marinaro (1911-1986) was born in Pennsylvania and spent most of his life there. His career as a corporate tax specialist apparently left him with plenty of resources to pursue fly fishing on his local streams, mostly the Letort and also Yellow

Breeches, Cedar Run and Big Springs. (Incidentally, I assume the word "code" in the book title is similar to "tax code," meaning a set of rules.) He enjoyed the use of a cabin on the bank of the Letort and for a long time kept detailed accounts of water temperatures, insect hatches and fish activity. This scientific approach to fishing was apparently novel at the time and fueled his interest in replacing fly-fishing traditions, mostly from British chalk streams, with more rational approaches to American streams.

Most of this book focuses on fishing for trout in what we would now call spring creeks, and I believe Vince had never heard about any American spring creeks outside of his home area. He lays a foundation of how trout view the world and specifically how flies, both natural and artificial, are observed by rising trout in flowing water. He uses this



information to build a case for using realistic wings on dry flies, dismissing the importance of bodies on duns and emphasizing the importance of bodies on spinners.

Next come chapters on three key hatches: Hendricksons, Sulphurs and Green Drakes. He presents detailed descriptions of hatches and spinner falls, noting that evening spinners are often more productive to fish than hatches because they are more compressed in time, and that fish respond accordingly. Reading his accounts of catching (and sometimes failing to catch) trout measured in pounds during these events is engaging. Like most, my trout fishing is typically freestone, where hatches are more loosely organized and fish are more opportunistic. Marinaro's stories make me want to find a way to fish such spring creeks as the Letort, although I suspect it would be more of an opportunity to come to grips with my own deficiencies as a fisherman.

Perhaps his most ground-breaking material concerns terrestrials, which were apparently mostly ignored or treated with disdain by his contemporaries. Japanese Beetles had only recently appeared in America. Vince confidently predicts that we would soon eradicate this invasive species (some forgivable post-world-war arrogance at work, I think) but strongly advises that we fish their imitations until then. He also writes extensively about grasshoppers. Vince was concerned that, unlike beetles, hoppers twitch and kick on the water and that animation of a hopper pattern with a fly rod seemed to spook more fish than it enticed. He offers two novel solutions: use a tight leader and the action of "ripply" current when available, and use a hard-landing "plop" very close to feeding fish when the water is smooth. All of the many writers since who have advised "plopping" hoppers can probably trace that idea back to Vince.

The descriptions of fly patterns are invaluable as examples of his analytical concepts and are also interesting from a modern fly-tyer's perspective. Vince found ingenious ways to use natural materials and worked on new patterns until he developed designs that landed properly, floated well and caught fish, even if that meant, for example, sawing off quills and plugging the ends with tiny corks. But what he would have given for a sheet of foam! His description of someone else's Japanese Beetle pattern is almost painful: they took half of a coffee bean, enlarged the center groove and lashed it to a hook. My earliest book on using foam to tie flies is from 1994, eight years after Vince passed away, and I only hope he had a chance to get an inkling of things to come.

I thoroughly enjoyed "A Modern Dry-fly Code" and wondered how Vince might have viewed fly-fishing from our local perspective. His penchant for analysis would resonate in Huntsville and he even includes a story about bass fishing in the Susquehanna River. His personality seems to come through most strongly when he speaks about the use of the term "Cicadellidae" (related to "cicada") for tiny leaf-hoppers he calls "jassids."

*“Though this name [Cicadellidae] has a liquid and lilting sound, it is an effeminate and maudlin thing that I cannot stomach no matter how much the revision is justified. So contrary to the wishes of the entomologists I shall continue to use the former name [jassid], a compact and more vigorous term befitting the nomenclature of things connected with outdoor activity – things like rod, reel, and trout.”*

So Vince Marinaro might struggle in our politically-correct world, but I think he would have been an excellent fishing partner.