

Lefty

LEFTY KREH HAS BEEN ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL AND BELOVED FIGURES IN FLY-FISHING

It had been a few weeks since I'd arranged to take a casting lesson from fly-fishing sensei "Lefty" Kreh. I rang the doorbell at his modest split-level home in Cockeysville, Maryland.

"Who the hell are you?" he shouted from a second-story window. "Just kidding," he chortled before ducking his head back inside.

Kreh reappeared at the front door, holding a bundle of fly rods. At 5 feet 7, he was shorter than I remembered from fly-fishing shows, but his piercing, light blue eyes and contagious, gap-toothed smile gave him a cheery, approachable appearance. "Hey, my ball is hanging low," he said with a chuckle. "Can you go check my mail?"

He'd rigged a rope-and-ball contraption on his mailbox to let him know when the mail was delivered. Many more jury-rigged contraptions were around his home and in his truck, including a bobber on the truck's radio antenna to help him find the vehicle in a crowded parking lot. He also had a padded shelf on the driver's-side door. "I'm always trying to fix stuff," Kreh said as we drove.

We arrived at a park, and he started putting together rods. Looking at my brightly colored running shoes, he said, "I sure as hell hope you didn't buy two pairs of those, Gary." He made a snickering sound, something he always does when he's delivering one of his infamous one-liners or not-safe-for-print jokes.

An author, columnist, innovator and teacher, Lefty Kreh is one of the most influential figures in fly-fishing. He reinvented the way fly anglers cast, created some of the most successful modern fresh- and saltwater fly patterns, collaborated in the design of numerous pieces

of gear and taught tens of thousands of individuals how to improve their casting. Known for his welcoming and charismatic personality, Kreh is a beloved figure among fly anglers everywhere. And yes, I was a little intimidated the first time I met him.

Kreh handed me a rod and said, "Go ahead and cast." I muscled the line back and forth before launching about 30 feet of it across the pond. "Well, the good news is you're going to be a hell of a lot better when you leave here," he said. "Have you ever looked at your backcast?"

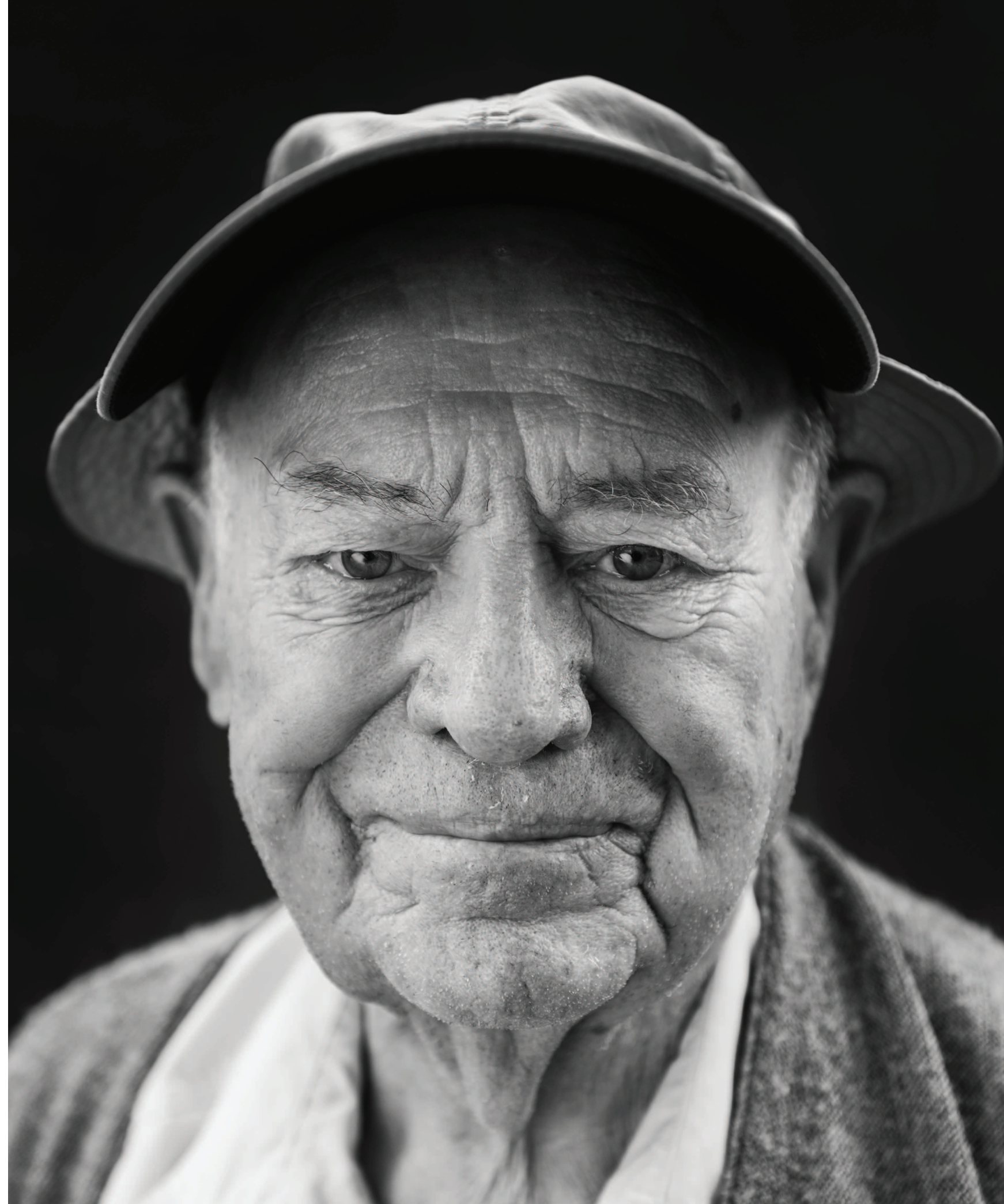
I had not.

"Good," he said, "because it's ugly as hell."

Kreh then showed me a style of fly casting he'd taught to thousands of people since he perfected it in 1957. Instead of the standard approach of stiffly whipping the fly rod between the 10 o'clock and 2 o'clock positions, Kreh moves his body, reaching far back with his arm on each cast. "You gotta pivot your body," he said. "Don't use your arms. Keep your elbow on a shelf. Don't bend your wrist." He demonstrated, effortlessly launching the fly line about 60 feet across the pond. A few minutes later he stood beside me with one hand on my shoulder and the other tightly wrapped around my casting wrist. Instantly he added 20 feet to my cast. "I told you you'd be better," he said. "Come on, let's eat."

Early Catches

Bernard "Lefty" Victor Kreh was born Feb. 26, 1925, in Frederick, Maryland. His father, "Whitey" Kreh, a bricklayer by trade, was killed in 1932 in a freak basketball accident. Six-year-old Bernard was the oldest of four





Kreh with a mess of bluegills taken in 1950 from Israel Creek in Frederick, Maryland.

children and became the de facto man of the house. His mother, Helen, had no income, so the family ended up on welfare.

"It was different back then," Kreh says. "We never got a nickel. They paid our rent, delivered coal to our house and distributed food to us. I'll never forget walking down North Bentz Street with sacks of food labeled 'relief.' People looked at you funny, and not in a good way. We were so poor we couldn't afford to buy a mosquito underpants."

As an adolescent, Kreh fell into a rut of delinquency. He says joining the Boy Scouts at age 12 changed his life. "I was getting into fistfights and running with the wrong crowd," he recalls. "Nothing horrible, but petty vandalism and stuff like that. I couldn't afford the Boy Scouts because there were uniforms and activities to pay for. But we worked something out where I'd wash dishes at meetings and campouts, and they'd let me be a Scout. It gave me a firm basis in morals and discipline."

Kreh worked his way through high school because his mother told him that if he wanted to go, he had to buy his own school clothes and food. He supported himself and the family by hunting, trapping and fishing.

"When I was a kid, a local store was offering 10 cents a pound for dressed catfish," Kreh says. "Well, the Monocacy River was filled with them. There were mussels in the river that made great bait. We'd hook them up and toss them in. It was like rolling a wine bottle through a jail cell. The catfish went nuts. I also hunted foxes and trapped muskrats for pelt money."

As a kid, Kreh excelled at sports. His friends called him Lefty because he dribbled a basketball with his left hand. The nickname stuck. Years later, Kreh tore his left bicep, which forced him to do things with his right hand, arm and shoulder, including casting.

Kreh graduated from high school in 1942. Less than a week later, he received draft orders from the Army. Installed in the 69th Infantry Division, he fought at the Battle of the Bulge and was among the men who met advancing Russians at the Elbe River. "War was horrific," he says. "You eventually just got used to seeing dead bodies — humans and animals — just strewn everywhere. The destruction was unbelievable. I had one fella walking next to me get shot in the chest. The impact took his head clean off."

Kreh also remembers the U.S. Air Force dropping canned pancakes and hot maple syrup for the troops. "I rammed those pancakes into my mouth as fast as I could chew them," he says.

Kreh returned to the States in 1945, believing he'd be shipped off to Japan, but the Japanese surrendered. "I remember walking through Frederick one day when horns started honking, and people were hugging and cheering," he says. "Right then I knew the war had ended."

He found a civilian position at Fort Detrick, Mary-

This big tarpon was fooled by a fly thrown by Kreh in the pioneering days of saltwater fly-fishing.

land, where the military was brewing super-germs for biological warfare. "I was the 14th person hired for the program, and they paid me 79 cents an hour," Kreh says. "We grew 1,800 gallons of anthrax each week and then concentrated it into a thick mud for the scientists. It was shift work, so I could keep on fishing and hunting in my off hours."

One morning, Kreh woke up feeling ill and realized he'd been exposed. "My arm turned all black, and I was sick as hell and in the hospital for weeks," Kreh says. "I eventually beat it, though, and they developed a stronger strain from the cultures in my blood." He jokes there is a strain of anthrax named after him. "They call it BVK-1, after my initials."

Kreh often says the best catch he ever made was his wife. They met when he was early in his career at Fort Detrick. He was going to see a movie with a couple of buddies at Frederick's Tivoli Theatre (known today as the Weinberg Center). When the men met the usher, Kreh couldn't get in because he had been given a child's ticket. "I stormed up to the window," he says, "but when I got there, I saw a beautiful blonde with a great figure. I forgot about that ticket pretty quick. After the show I walked her home, and then we talked for an hour or more."

Her name was Evelyn Mask. "Six months later, we were engaged, and a year later we were married," Kreh says, then winks. "And nine months after that, our daughter, Vicky, was born. Back then you didn't get any nookie if you weren't married, so we got to work getting married pretty quick."

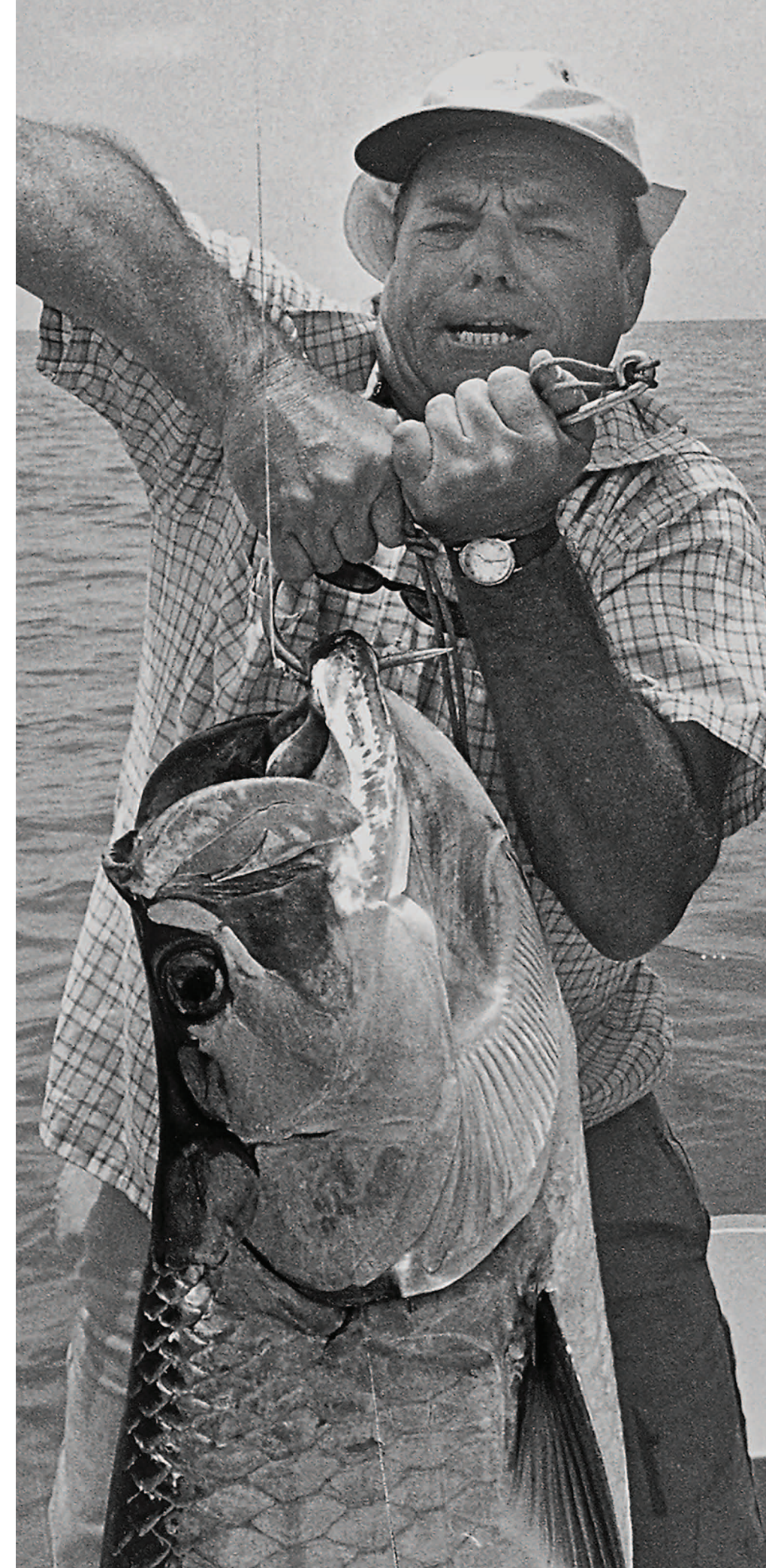
Their son, Larry, came three years later. "Evelyn," Kreh says, "was the best thing that ever happened to me."

A Natural

By the late 1940s, Kreh had a reputation for being one of the best bass fishermen in Maryland. A local writer and angler named Joe Brooks, who would become Kreh's mentor, noticed and called him for a fishing date. "I took him just downstream of Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, for smallmouth bass, and he starts stringing up this bamboo fly rod," Kreh says. Brooks, who went on to become quite a figure in the sport, caught a smallmouth on every other cast. "I saw that and thought to myself, Good God, I've got to have me some of this."

The next day Kreh drove to Baltimore and bought his first fly-rod outfit from Tochtermann's Fishing Tackle. "They sold me a 9-weight South Bend fiberglass rod with a Pflueger Medalist reel and a Cortland GAF fly line," he says. "I was hooked right from the get-go."

Kreh is recalling that day while we're sitting in a diner, ordering lunch. He pauses when the waitress appears. "I'll have a hamburger steak and French fries, both well-done," he tells her. "I don't want to see no blood coming out of that hamburger steak, hon. Burn it." He turns to me and says, "I don't eat nothing with four col-



ors. I like plain food with no seasoning. Well-done and nothing fancy. I take a jar of peanut butter and a few cans of corned beef with me on fishing trips because you never know what sort of crazy stuff they’ll have to eat.”

Sometimes, Kreh says, fly-fishing fans recognize him in places like that diner. But it doesn’t happen often. “I kind of like my anonymity in the regular world,” he says. “Plus, I don’t think it’s ever worth making a big deal of yourself. In fact, I have a difficult time getting along with people that do.”

Kreh is a man of the people, someone who never forgets his roots. “For someone who’s caught nearly 130 species of fish on a fly rod, and who is probably one of the best fly casters on the planet, Lefty remains one of the most humble, sincere people I’ve ever met,” says Ed Jaworowski, a writer, photographer and renowned caster. “He never shows off his own skills at the expense of showing up someone else. His integrity is probably the biggest gift he’s given to the sport of fly-fishing.”

In the 1950s, Kreh began fishing with Henry Decker, managing editor of *The Frederick News-Post*, who asked Kreh to write an outdoors column. Readers loved it, even if Kreh didn’t at first. “This will surprise a lot of folks, but I hated English in high school,” Kreh says. “I told Decker that and let him know I didn’t have a college degree.”

Decker said he’d help with the writing. By the mid-’50s, Kreh was writing several columns a week for magazines and newspapers around the country. One thing that set him apart was his photography. He figured out that if he could write the article and include the photography, he could make more money. “They used to have us write the story, and then they’d have to hire an illustrator for the artwork,” he says. “That’s the way it worked back then. I’d bring my cameras along and take all the photographs for the story. It meant I got paid more and was more desirable to magazine and newspaper editors.”

And Kreh didn’t stop there. “I even had a boat painted two colors — red one side and yellow on the other,” he says. “When someone caught a fish, I’d get in the water and take a picture from one side of the boat and then move to the other and have them put on these slip-on rain slickers. Then I’d take another picture. That way I could sell two different photos with two separate articles. The guy who painted the boat thought I was nuts.”

Thanks to his budding fan base, Kreh began to give fly-casting clinics at fishing clubs around the country. “They paid my airfare and



If those reels could talk, Kreh's basement would be a chatter.

motel to come give a demonstration, and inevitably a couple of guys would ask me to go fishing with them,” Kreh says. “I’d take my camera along with me and then write a magazine or newspaper column about it. I did that all around the country and up into Canada, and eventually the world.”

He racked up a catch count on the fly rod on every continent except Antarctica. “Ain’t nothing to catch on Antarctica but penguins,” Kreh says.

Common Touch

Kreh has often said that not only his fishing skills, but also his ability to function on about five hours of sleep contributed to his success. He was able to work full time at Fort Detrick while giving fishing demos, traveling to places such as New Guinea (where he caught the hard-fighting Niugini bass) and writing, all without feeling tired. “I discovered at one point that I could take a quick power nap in the middle of the day and get right back to it,” Kreh says.

His friend Tom Brokaw, the former NBC Nightly News anchor, says Kreh will fall asleep in the bottom of the boat for 20-minute spells. “He’s only out for 20 minutes or so, but when Lefty breaks for a nap, everyone stops what they’re doing,” Brokaw says. “It’s just a part of fishing with him and is one of the many quirks that make Lefty, Lefty.”

We finish lunch and return to his house. Kreh is a little frustrated because he has been having computer problems. Having once worked at an Apple Store, I looked at his computer and fixed the problem. “You ain’t doing this for nothing,” Kreh says. “I’ll give you a casting lesson every now and again, and you can help me with the computer.” Two days later I received a typed thank-you note on Kreh’s signature stationery. That was about seven years ago, and we’ve been friends since.

Kreh loves to mentor and teach, and he is generous with his time. At fly-fishing shows he talks with every person he meets as if he has known the guy forever. He receives hundreds of emails a day, and he’ll always take a phone call from a fan. He loves his fans. “If you walk up to him at a show he’ll stop for a picture and talk with you for a few minutes,” says Capt. Sarah Gardner, a North Carolina fly-fishing guide and Kreh protégé. “It doesn’t matter who you are; he never turns anyone away. Lefty has time for everyone, almost so much as to be a liability to himself.”



Kreh says his wife, Evelyn, was the best thing that ever happened to him. Three old friends share a moment: (from left) Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard, Kreh and former NBC Nightly News anchor Tom Brokaw.



Former *Baltimore Sun* outdoors writer Candy Thomson says Kreh’s broad appeal stems from the fact that he is, at his core, a “meat-and-potatoes fisherman,” happier fishing for Potomac River smallmouth with poppers than rubbing elbows with the rich and famous. “His public knows he’s genuine and love him for it,” says Thomson, now the public information officer for the Maryland Natural Resources Police. “And he loves them back.”

He can also spot a fake. “If you’ve got a genuine interest in learning, Lefty will work with you,” says longtime friend and fly-tying innovator Bob Popovics. “But if you’re just trying to get to know him for the sake of your own ego, he’ll spot it within seconds and move on.”

Popovics says Kreh supported him at a time when fly-fishing purists were rejecting his innovative epoxy flies, including his famous Surf Candy pattern. “People were saying that they were lures, not flies,” Popovics recalls. “Lefty stood up for what I’d created and vouched for how well the Surf Candy could catch fish. That meant a lot to me.”

“It’s difficult to speak about Lefty and not sound as if you’re just completely gushing,” he adds. “There will never be another Lefty; he’s completely irreplaceable.”

Kreh says that showing off and doing casting tricks — something he did a lot of in the ’40s and ’50s — never did much for him. He preferred teaching. “I can teach anyone to

fly-cast that I ain’t married to,” Kreh says with a grunt. “A good instructor never displays his knowledge; he shares it with others. I’ll never forget when I worked with the golfer Jack Nicklaus. He learned so quickly, already having an idea about strokes and body movement. By the end of that lesson he was grinning like a Halloween pumpkin.”

Brokaw says that one particular teaching moment is among his favorite stories about Kreh. “I remember a trip with Lefty in the northern Bahamas,” Brokaw says. “The guides were showboating and trying to impress Lefty with their casting. I look over at him and say, ‘Looks pretty good; he’s strong,’ to which Lefty responds, ‘He’s strong, but dumb.’ The guide turns around and asks Lefty what he said.” Brokaw recalls Kreh saying, “ ‘You heard me. I said you’re strong, but you’re dumb.’ Lefty instructs the guide to turn his backcast a few degrees. The guide did what Lefty said and instantly added another 30 feet to his cast.” Kreh also fished with Fidel Castro, in 1959, at the annual Hemingway International Billfish Tournament. “I fished with Castro for one day and aboard Hemingway’s *Pilar* for two days,” Kreh says. “I didn’t talk to Castro much because I didn’t speak Spanish, and I only spoke briefly to Hemingway. I spent most of my time with Hemingway’s mate, Gregorio Fuentes, learning how to rig baits and catch marlin. Fuentes was Hemingway’s inspiration for the old man in

The Old Man and the Sea. Most folks think I am crazy when they find out I didn’t take more time to get to know Hemingway, but we did eventually talk for a while. I remember asking him what makes good writing.” Kreh says Hemingway looked at him and said, “It can’t be edited.”

Kreh adds, “As a writer, that stuck with me for a long time.”

Kreh isn’t impressed with status or social standing. “Titles don’t mean nothing to me,” Kreh says. “It’s the fishing and company that matters.” He has also fished with four U.S. presidents, sausage magnate Jimmy Dean, angling legends Flip Pallot and Stu Apte, Major League Baseball shortstop Humberto “Chico” Fernandez, actor Michael Keaton and Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard.

“Meeting people while fishing landed me some of my best friends,” he says. “I don’t know if I told you this, but I’m Tom Brokaw’s grandson’s honorary godfather.”

Brokaw considers Kreh part of his family. “My daughter and Lefty hit it off immediately,” Brokaw says. “I love him; my wife loves him. ... He’s just a part of us.”

Another angling buddy who sticks out in Kreh’s memory is baseball star Ted Williams. “He thought he was hot shit when I first met him — he was a rude and ornery guy,” Kreh recalls. “Tougher than an automobile tire. He invited me to go fishing, and I met him in



Lefty's Deceiver proved to be an effective pattern on a number of species, including striped bass. A beloved figure, Kreh reflected on his life this fall at his home in Cockeysville, Maryland.

fished a red-and-white pattern and came back flabbergasted by how many fish they caught. When I asked him what I should name it, Lefty said, 'Well, it swims deep, looks like a minnow and your last name is Clouser. Clouser Deep Minnow is what you should call it.' The rest is history."

Clouser says he can't imagine there will ever be another Lefty in the sport. "He's given so much to all of us," he says. "I wish I could figure out a way to keep him around forever."

Kreh's tackle room, in his basement, has walls covered with hundreds of spinning and fly reels. There are boxes of fly tackle and a multitude of other fishing gear. "Have you ever heard of a Tibor reel?" Kreh asks, picking a shiny brass reel off the wall. "Me and my friend Ted Juracsik worked on this together. It's a great saltwater fly reel."

Kreh takes a fly rod down from the ceiling rack. "See these ferrules, how the rod goes together? This is an old Fenwick rod," he says. "I worked on it with a friend of mine."

Kreh continues around the room, being careful not to take full credit for anything in it. From Bob Hewes' first flats boat to flies to fishing knots and fly rods, there isn't much in the way of gear or techniques that Kreh hasn't helped design or improve. "I'm an insufferable tinkerer," he says. "I'm always trying to make things work better. Even my living room lamp's pull cord is rigged with a rubber hose so the static from walking across the room doesn't shock me."

Challenging Times

When it comes to writing, Kreh is proud of the work he's done, including during the years he worked for *Florida Sportsman*. "I was really proud of the magazine; there was nothing like it at the time," he says. "Then I was at the *St. Petersburg Times*. In 1972, *The Baltimore Sun* called me and wanted me to be their outdoor editor. I was pretty happy at the time, and I loved Florida, so I made damned sure I wasn't making a mistake going back up to Maryland. I interviewed with them and essentially dictated my own terms. They accepted without so much as hiccupping."

While Kreh was with the *Sun* his book, magazine and television work accelerated. Today he has about 30 books under his belt. Many are considered the bibles of their respective subjects. He retired from the *Sun* in 1992. "I loved my time there, but when I left it was a huge weight off my shoulders," Kreh says. "Then I focused on fishing, traveling, giving demos and product development full time."



Islamorada, Florida, one day. He showed off his cast, which had a ton of wasted movement, so I picked up the rod and cast it the same distance but with hardly any effort. From that moment Ted's attitude changed, and we became best friends."

Innovator

Kreh came to know so many famous fishing enthusiasts because of an opportunity that he jumped on in 1964. Pioneering fly fisherman Brooks had asked him to take a job running the Metropolitan Miami Fishing Tournament, one of the largest tournaments in the world at the time. "Running that tournament was like being the mayor of fishing in all of South Florida," Kreh says. "My kids were 12 and 14 at the time, and it was a big deal for them and Evelyn to pick up and move with me. Accepting that job and moving to Florida was one of the best decisions Ev and I ever made."

At the time, South Florida was an incubator for many of the saltwater fly-fishing techniques and light-tackle developments that are commonplace today. "There were only 12 guides in the Keys back then, and we were learning new stuff all the time," Kreh recalls. "Many of the saltwater knots and flies we use today came out of South Florida in the late '60s and early '70s. Flies, reels, rods, you name it. If it's used in

saltwater fishing today there's a good chance it came out of South Florida back then."

One of the flies Kreh used in Florida was a pattern he crafted to catch striped bass in Chesapeake Bay. "There were these crab-processing plants in Crisfield, Maryland, and back in the '50s they'd dump the leftovers in the water at night," he says. "Well, I'm here to tell you it drove the stripers nuts. But they wouldn't take a fly. Plus, the flies we were using got fouled up all the time."

Kreh came up with a new fly that not only didn't tangle, but also caught stripers. Lefty's Deceiver turned out to be wildly effective for striped bass and is still imitated and used for a variety of species today. In 1991 the U.S. Postal Service honored the fly with a stamp. "The Deceiver is a great fly, but what I remember most is Lefty's Popping Bug patterns," says Bob Clouser, a fly-tying master and close friend of Kreh's. "That Lefty's Bug was great on smallmouth on the Susquehanna. Kreh's early fly-tying contributions were just as important as that Deceiver."

Clouser, of course, invented the most successful saltwater fly-fishing pattern of all time: the Clouser Deep Minnow. "I gave a few to Lefty to use, and he looked at me and said, 'Are they finished?' " he recalls. "Lefty was perplexed by how simple they were. He

In Kreh's living room a signed picture of President George H.W. Bush fishing hangs just below a large tarpon mount. There's also a picture of Evelyn. That's the one closest to Kreh's heart. "She was my best friend," he says of his wife, who suffered a stroke in 2009 and died in 2011. "I never knew anyone who had a marriage as good as ours."

Her death devastated him. "I spent a lot of time lying around feeling sorry for myself," Kreh says. "For about three months after she died I didn't do much of anything. Eventually I snapped out of it and got back to what I loved doing."

He buried himself in his work, maintaining a travel schedule at age 86 that would wear out people half his age. "I'd be in Dallas, Texas, one day, Canada two days later and giving casting demos in New Jersey a day or two after that," Kreh says.

In early 2017, at age 92, Kreh suffered a series of ministrokes and had surgery to

unblock his carotid artery. "The doctors discovered my heart is only pumping 35 percent of what it should and told me to take it easy and travel less," he says. "I ain't much on that, but I never imagined being around so long in the first place."

By late summer 2017, doctors had told him to stay at home and further limit his activities. "Well, I can't travel or do instructing, so I've got to find a way to be happy here at home," he says. "I've got some projects to do on the computer, and I'll be happy keeping busy right here."

In late October, Kreh semiofficially announced his retirement via e-mail to the fly-fishing community. He wrote: "The schedule I lived for decades is no longer valid, and I will spend most of my time at home. As we get older, we learn to adjust to what we can and cannot do. I have a number of interesting computer projects and will be busier than a Syrian bricklayer."

In November, hospice care was brought into Kreh's home. His daughter, Victoria, says he's comfortable and happy in the house. "He gets tired easy and is on oxygen but manages to spend some time on the computer, like he loves to do," she says. "And he's had lots of visitors. I'm passing messages to him from e-mails, and he loves getting them. Dad's his happiest when he reads something about a person he helped be a better caster or catch a new species of fish."

Kreh's friendships have touched many people. "Meeting Lefty is one of the best things that ever happened to me in my life," Brokaw says. "He's a true living legend. There will be a hole that can never be filled when he is gone."

For me, in my insignificant little part of Lefty's world, I can never repay him for his generosity in helping me become a better writer, a more accomplished angler and, most important, a better person.