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HELEN SHAW

1910-2007

City: Madison, Sheboygan

County: Dane, Sheboygan

Known as “The First Lady of Fly Tying,” Helen Shaw was an expert in creating fly fishing ties.

Helen Shaw was born on March 2, 1910, in Madison, Wisconsin, and her family moved to Sheboygan when she was a child. As a young girl, she went on fishing trips with her father and learned how to tie flies – artificial bait made by tying materials to a hook using thread. During high school, she began working at Art Kade Flycraft, a fishing tackle store, where she tied flies. After graduating from Sheboygan High School in 1928, she worked full-time at the store and eventually became business partners with the owner, Arthur Kade.

Shaw’s ties were so popular that she gave demonstrations on how to make them at local events around Sheboygan and at the 1939-1941 International Outdoor Shows in Chicago. She joined the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps during World War II, rose to the rank of 2nd Lieutenant and served with distinction. After the war, Shaw returned to Sheboygan and her fly-tying. It was around this time that she was honored by the Sportsmen’s Club of America as one of the world’s greatest fly-tiers.

In 1953, she married Hermann Kessler, art director of *Field and Stream* magazine. They moved to New York City, where she was the first woman to receive a recognition luncheon from the all-men Anglers’ Club of New York. She was also one of the first women to write about fly-tying. She and Kessler collaborated on two books, including the groundbreaking *Fly-Tying: Materials, Tools, and Techniques*. Published in 1963, the book was a guide to tying flies with text from Shaw and photographs from Kessler. It was unique because the photos were taken from Shaw’s perspective, which made it easier for readers to see and understand the steps of the tying process. They also collaborated on the 1989 book *Flies for Fish and Fisherman: The Wet Flies*.

In 1993, the couple was writing a third book when Kessler passed away. The book was never completed, and after his death, Shaw stopped tying flies. She continued to be recognized by the fishing community. In 2002, she won the Buszek Memorial Fly Tying Award from the Federation of Fly Fishers (now Fly Fishers International) in recognition of her fly-tying skills. Shaw was also inducted into the Fly Fishing Hall of Fame in 2004.

Shaw died at age 97 on December 20, 2007, in Red Rock, New York.

To learn more, visit womeninwisconsin.org/profile/helen-shaw