

HANDICRAFTS SERIES No. 7

# How to tie trout flies

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McGILL UNIVERSITY  
ADULT EDUCATION SERVICE

HANDICRAFTS DIVISION  
MACDONALD COLLEGE, P.Q.

Macdonald College Handicraft Pamphlets

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## The Principal Product of a Handicrafts Program should be Better People

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*Better people* because of the greater knowledge of their own latent talents for creative work.

*Better families* because mother and daughter, father and son and whole families can plan and work together on individual or joint handicraft projects.

*Better homes* because homes can be tremendously enriched by the innumerable articles that can be designed, knitted, woven, carved, thonged, moulded by the members of that home.

*Better communities* because an active handicrafts program encourages a community handicrafts centre where people can work together, use equipment in common, exchange ideas, hold exhibitions and become better acquainted.

Ample opportunities are also afforded for supplementing incomes through the sale of high quality handicraft products.

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*"Every rise in the quality of the work that men do is followed swiftly and inevitably by a rise in the quality of the men who do it."*

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# HOW TO TIE TROUT FLIES

by

STEPHEN GREENLEES

(*Courtesy of Field & Stream*)

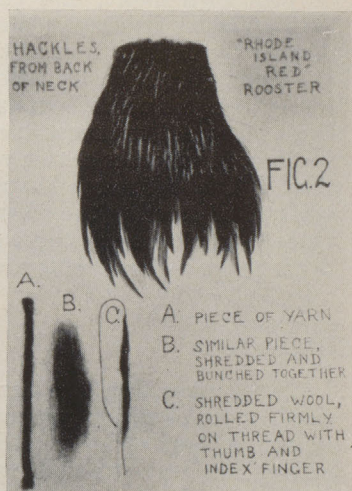
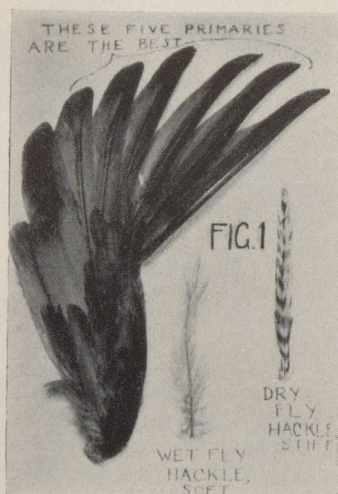
There is a particular satisfaction in taking fish on flies of your own make, and certainly the technique of an accomplished fisherman should include the ability to dress a fly in imitation of the food upon which the fish are feeding at any given time. You don't need double-jointed fingers or the patience of a setting hen. Nor is there any need to invest in expensive equipment in order to find out whether or not you can enjoy tying your own flies. The following instructions outline a standard method of dressing the ordinary type of dry and wet fly. Once learned, the principles can easily be adapted to tying other types of flies, using a variety of different materials.

## *Materials*

To tie your first fly, here are the materials you will need, most of which you can probably find around the house: A pair of small, pointed scissors; two ordinary sewing needles; two clothes-pins (the kind with a metal spring); a little waterproof varnish; an eyed hook not so small as to hinder your first attempt (size 6 or 8); and a monkey wrench, which will serve well enough in place of a fly-tying vise to start with.

For the body of the fly: A couple of feet of fine silk sewing thread; a few inches of crewel wool (the thick yarn of which heavy sweaters are made); and for the ribs of the fly, two or three inches of tinsel, which can be bought by the spool or taken from Christmas tree decorations, or from the fancy cord used for wrapping Christmas parcels.

For the wings, hackle and tail: A pair of duck wings (failing these, hen wings will do as a makeshift); and the hackle feathers from the nape of the neck of a hen, if you are tying a wet fly, or the stiff hackles from a rooster's neck if the fly is to be dry. Figure 1 shows a duck wing, indicating the proper feathers for the wings of the fly. You will need another wing from the opposite side of the bird. Figure 1 also shows the wet and dry types of hackle feathers. In figure 2 you will see the stiff, dry-fly, rooster hackles.



### Tying

Now for the tying. Shred a piece of crewel wool into fibres with your fingers and roll it firmly around a few inches of silk thread, as in figure 2. Taking a pair of opposite feathers, one from each wing of the bird, separate out four bits with a needle and cut them off, as shown in figure 3. (Whenever the whisks, or individual strands of feather, split away from each other, they can easily be

THE TWO FEATHERS ARE FROM OPPOSITE  
WINGS OF A DUCK

PAIR A

PAIR B

PAIR A

PAIR B

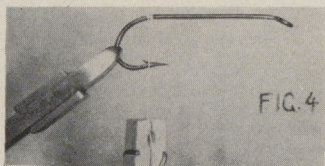
FIG. 3

HACKLE  
WITH THE  
DOWN STILL  
ON THE  
BUTT

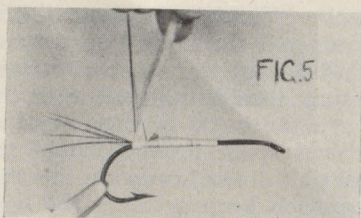
BUTT  
STRIPPED,  
READY FOR  
TYING

smoothed together again with your fingers, since each whisk has little teeth along its edges which mesh into the teeth of the next whisk. This is the way to blend feathers of different colors, as in making the wings of the Parmacheenee Belle. To straighten out a bedraggled feather, simply hold it over the steam from a kettle spout.) Strip the down off the butt of a hackle feather with your fingers, as in figure 3.

Put a little varnish in a fold of paper or thin leather, squeeze it together and draw about a foot and a half of silk thread through it. Now rub most of the varnish off the thread by drawing it between the folds of a piece of cloth. This will leave the thread just sticky enough to work with. If you get varnish on your fingers, an eggcupful of kerosine (coal-oil) will remove it after a moment's wiping with a rag. Bend the end of the thread onto the shank of the hook, as in figure 4, and wind it around the shank for a quarter of an inch. Whenever you remove your fingers from the thread, always clip a clothes-pin on it and let it hang down to maintain tension on the thread and keep it in place.



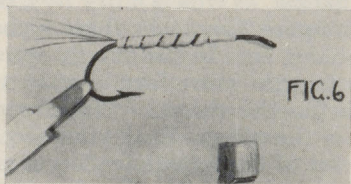
Keeping figure 5 in mind, take a few whisks of feather for the tail, lay them along the shank with your left thumb and forefinger, and take two turns of the thread around them to hold them on. Do the same with the ribbing tinsel, placing it just ahead of the tail feathers. (For clearer illustration, instead of tinsel, figure 6 shows black quill ribbing, made by slicing with a razor blade a paper-thin strip of quill off the surface of the quill of a wing feather.) Then perform the same operation with the wool which you have already rolled onto a piece of thread, placing it just ahead of the ribbing. Now wind



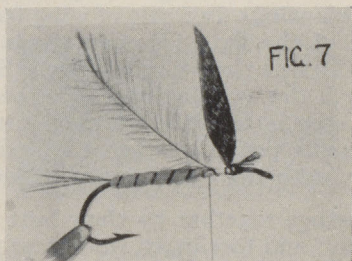
the tying thread two-thirds of the way up the shank. Clip the other clothes-pin onto the free end of the wool, wind it around the shank and tie it down with two turns of the tying thread. Wind on the ribbing next, tying it down also, and then wind the tying thread farther up the shank to serve as a base for the wings, as in figure 6. This completes the body, and you are ready for the wings.

Now take the four bits of feather from the duck wings as shown in figure 3. Place the two bits from the left wing feather evenly one on top of the other. Do the same with the two bits from the right wing feather. This gives you your double wings, two sets of wing feathers, one set for each side of the fly. (Double wings are far more effective and durable than single wings.) Supposing that you are tying a dry (or floating) fly rather than a wet fly, the next step is to place the two sets against each other in the same position which they will have in the completed fly, with the concave curves facing out.

Pinch the wings together by their butt ends, between your left thumb and forefinger, and press them down on top of the shank of the hook, laying them on the thread which you have wound around the shank. Holding the



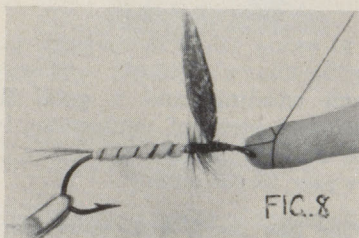
paired whisks there firmly, with your left thumb on the side nearest you, pull the thread up between the ball of your thumb and the side of the shank against which the thumb is pressing, then bring the thread over the top of the shank above the butts of the wings and down the other side between your forefinger and the far side of the shank, and pull down firmly on the thread. During this whole operation keep pressing the wing butts very firmly on the shank with your finger and thumb. Bring the thread around under the shank and take another turn around it in the same way, and then yet one more turn. Now you can remove your thumb and finger from the wings. Take two or three more turns of the thread around the shank in front of the wings, but slanting the top of each turn backward behind the wings so you can then draw the thread forward and thus make the wings sit upright as in figure 7. (A length of black thread has been attached to the white here simply for clearer illustration.) Snip off the protruding butts of the wings which show in figure 7, to make room for the head.



Take a hackle feather with the butt stripped as in figure 3 (stiff hackle, as this is a dry fly), place it against the shank as in figure 7 and take three turns of the thread around it to hold it on. In the dry fly the concave curve of the hackle feather must face toward the eye of the hook. Now bring the thread forward so that it hangs down in front of the wings. Snap your second clothes-pin onto the top end of the hackle feather shown in figure 7 and wind it around the shank, going forward toward



the wings. Four turns of the hackle behind the wings and two or three turns between the wings and the eye of the hook will be about right. Snip off the protruding ends of the hackle feather and anchor as in figure 8, sliding the hitch off your finger onto the shank. Snip off the thread and apply a drop of varnish to the hitches with a needle, to cement them in place, and the job is done.



### *Tying Wet Flies*

When tying the wet fly the procedure differs in the following respects: Use a soft hackle feather so that it will absorb water; place the hackle on the shank so that its concave curve faces away from the eye of the hook instead of toward it; wind the hackle on before you set on the wings, then set the wings on in front of the hackle; place the wings together with the concave curves facing inward instead of outward; and omit the extra turns of thread used to make the wings sit upright. The finished wet fly is shown in figure 9.

A complete kit for the man who intends to tie more than the occasional fly would include the following additional items of equipment: A supply of silk thread and wool of different colors; silk floss in various colors, this being more commonly used for fly bodies than crewel wool and also used for ribbing; a stock of feathers, which can be bought inexpensively from a dealer in fly-tying supplies (and, incidentally, *white feathers can be dyed in the same way as cloth*); rabbit or squirrel underfur for fly bodies, which is rolled on a

thread in the same way as wool (*white rabbit fur can be dyed any color*); a pair of hackle pliers to take the place of a clothes-pin in holding the end of the hackle



and wool when winding; and a good fly-tying vise. This last-mentioned piece of equipment is well worth, in convenience and efficiency, the extra few dollars it will cost. (See page 16, for prices.)

When practice has made you more expert, you can save time by rolling the body-wool onto the main tying thread, instead of using an extra piece of thread as shown in figure 2. And you may find that drawing a thread through a lump of beeswax (obtainable at a druggist's) will make it stiff enough without resorting to varnish at all, although the stickiness of the varnish helps a great deal in keeping the thread in place in spite of the possibility of getting the varnish on your fingers.

In Canada wet flies are more commonly used than dry flies, the wet fly usually being a satisfactory tempter for speckled trout, which do a great deal of their feeding on or near the bottom. However, in mid-summer when the water is warm and trout are eating very little they often rise to the surface about sunset to feed on floating flies such as gray drakes, and this is the time when a dry fly angler using the right fly will take trout while the wet fly fisherman comes home empty-handed. Dry flies should be dipped in dry fly oil to make them more water-resistant. Your back-casts will flick the water off the oil-coated feathers. A satisfactory dry fly oil can be made by dissolving a lump of angler's line-grease the size of a raspberry in an eggcupful of carbon tetrachloride, which may be obtained inexpensively at a druggist's.

### *Formulae for Tying Flies*

Here is a short list of popular and effective flies and the materials needed for tying them. They may be tied either wet or dry:

*PARMACHEENEE BELLE.* *Tail*—scarlet and white whisks of wing feathers, two whisks of each color.

*Body*—yellow wool or silk floss, with silver tinsel rib.

*Wings*—wing feathers of white goose or duck, some of them dyed scarlet. Blend a streak of scarlet into the centre of each wing.

*Hackle*—scarlet and white. Wind two hackles on simultaneously, one of each color.

*MONTREAL.* *Tail*—whisks of scarlet hackle.

*Body*—claret-colored wool or silk floss, with gold tinsel ribs.

*Wings*—turkey tail, dark and mottled. One feather will do, as you get two opposite curves, one on each side of the quill.

*Hackle*—dark claret color.

*PROFESSOR.* *Tail*—whisks of scarlet hackle.

*Body*—yellow wool or silk floss, with gold tinsel ribs.

*Wings*—mottled gray feathers from the breast of the mallard duck.

*Hackle*—light brown.

*ROYAL COACHMAN.* *Tail*—whisks of golden pheasant tippet.

*Body*—peacock herl, with a wide band of scarlet floss or silk thread around the middle. (The herls are the glossy, dark-green, fuzzy tail-feathers.)

*Wings*—wing feathers of white goose or duck.

*Hackle*—reddish brown.

*BROWN DRAKE.* (Also called March Brown.) *Tail*—whisks of mahogany-colored hackle.

*Body*—Brown fur (or wool), with ribs of light-brownish-yellow floss or silk thread.

*Wings*—wing feathers of partridge, dark brown and mottled.

*Hackle*—mahogany, and barred Plymouth Rock. Wind two hackles on simultaneously, one of each color.

*SILVER DOCTOR.* *Tail*—whisks of Golden Pheasant tippet.

*Body*—silver tinsel, sometimes with a narrow band of red silk just before the tail.

*Wings*—blended streaks of red and yellow, and mottled gray from the breast of the mallard duck. A streak of green is also sometimes blended in.

*Hackle*—light blue. Barred Plymouth Rock may be used instead.

*PALMERS AND BI-VISIBLES.* These are variations of the dry fly type. The Palmer floats the best, is the "driest," of all the types of dry flies, since the body is surrounded by stiff hackle throughout its entire length. Very often the Palmers are tied without wings. Using the Montreal pattern as an example of a Palmer-tied fly, first tie the body and tail as previously described but without the ribs. Then tie on the hackle feather, this time at the base of the tail instead of near the eye of the hook. And tie the tip end of the hackle feather, instead of its base end, onto the shank of the hook. The concave side of the hackle feather should face towards the eyed end of the hook as in an ordinary dry fly. Now wind the tying thread up the body, letting it hang down near the eye of the hook. Then—and hackle pliers will come in handy here—wind the hackle around and around the body, working up towards the eye of the hook. Just before you reach the eye, tie down the hackle with the

tying thread, snip off the protruding base end of the hackle feather, and you have a Montreal Palmer.

You can easily add wings to the Palmer if you prefer, tying them on in the usual way, if you allow enough room for them between the hackle-wound body and the eye of the hook. In this case you should add another hackle, wound on in front of and behind the wings, as in the conventional dry fly pattern. A Palmer-tied fly is often one of the regular fly patterns with a hackle feather taking the place of the ribs, although in many cases the wings and the hackle which goes with them are omitted altogether.

The Bi-visible is a dry fly in which the wings are left out and a white hackle of the stiff, dry-fly variety substituted instead. Dress the fly as usual, omitting the wings but tying on whatever color of hackle is supposed to go with the wings. Tie this hackle on a bit farther back from the eye of the hook than it would ordinarily be, and then, in front of it, wind on a white hackle between it and the eye of the hook. Many anglers favor the Bi-visible type because it is easier for the fish to see on the surface of the water. Palmers can be tied bi-visible by adding a white hackle just back of the eye of the hook.

*STREAMER FLIES.* These large flies, dressed on long-shanked hooks, are fished deep, jerked along by the action of a "whippy" rod-tip to imitate the action of a minnow. Although some patterns of streamer flies have hackles, and many have tails, numerous patterns of these flies omit both. The streamer, which in these flies takes the place of wings, consists sometimes of a pair of long soft hackle feathers, but more often of hairs from an inch to an inch and a half long. Polar bear hair bleached white (since the natural hair has a yellowish tinge) is favored for this purpose because it is stiff enough to stay straight and yet supple enough for the water to impart movement to it, and can be dyed any color. Goat hair, however, can be quite successfully used, and also bucktail hairs (the white hairs from the underside of the tail of a deer.)

If a hackle forms part of the pattern of the streamer fly you are tying—meaning not a hackle feather used as a wing but wound on as in the case of an ordinary wet fly—wind it on near the eye of the hook before adding the hair streamer. The hackle should be of the wet variety, a soft hackle. When you have tied it on, wind enough turns of the silk thread on the shank between the hackle and the eye of the hook to act as a foundation upon which to lay the base of the hairs when tying them on. You will need between a hundred and two hundred hairs for the streamer, depending on the thickness of the hairs, although of course it is not necessary to count their number when estimating the size of the bunch to be used. Now tie on the bunch of hairs to the foundation of silk which you have wound on the shank, keeping them in place while you work by pinching the bunch together between the thumb and first two fingers of your left hand near the base of the hairs. Get all the hair on top of the shank, that is, on the side farthest away from the barb of the hook, so that the body of the fly will not be hidden from beneath by the hair—except in those patterns, particularly those which call for bucktail, in which the hair is tied all around the shaft.

As you tie the base of the hairs to the shank of the hook add a drop of varnish with your needle to keep the hairs from pulling out when seized by a fish's teeth, and wind tightly. Keep winding the thread around the base of the hairs until you have formed a symmetrical head, which should be coated with head lacquer of whatever color the pattern calls for and will give the head a glossy finish. In those cases in which the pattern requires that a hackle be wound on before the streamer is tied, the hackle imitates the action of a minnow's fins when the fly is jerked through the water. Or, if the hackle is red, it may represent the opening and closing of the minnow's gills. At the same time it is perfectly true that many streamers, like numerous flies of all types, do not resemble anything this side of Never-Never Land, but results are what count, and if the fish go for an impossible-looking fly then obviously that's the thing to offer them. The following are three popular patterns of streamers:

**MICKEY FINN.** No tail, no hackle. The head is coated with red lacquer.

*Body*—silver tinsel.

*Streamer*—an approximately equal number of red hairs and yellow hairs, the yellow lying on the shank and the red on top of the yellow.

**RED AND WHITE.** The head is coated with black lacquer.

*Tail*—five whisks of wing feather, red, blended together.

*Body*—silver tinsel.

*Streamer*—white hair.

*Hackle*—red.

**RED SOLDIER.** No hackle. The head is coated with black lacquer.

*Tail*—five whisks of wing feather, red, blended together.

*Body*—red crewel wool, with silver wire ribs.

*Streamer*—white hair.

### **NOTES and SUGGESTIONS.**

Fish are said to be color blind, but if this is the case they certainly have very definite reactions to different colors in flies, whether they recognize them as separate hues or not. A hackle intended to imitate the red of a minnow's gills may not be recognized as a distinct color by a trout, but he can distinguish the difference between it and a hackle of another color, and prove his incredulity by refusing to take the fly which has the wrong hackle. When a trout is really on the feed he is quite likely to snap up the most bizarre creations. The list of time-tested fly patterns includes flies which imitate actual fish foods and flies which will tempt hungry trout when the angler does not happen to have in his fly box an imitation of the food on which the trout are feeding.

When choosing your hooks for fly tying bear in mind that the off-set type, in which the barbed end is bent to

one side, should be avoided for use with dry flies. They tend to make the fly turn over on its side when floating, although with wet flies this drawback does not arise. Snelled hooks for wet flies—eyeless hooks which are sold with a short length of gut leader already whipped on—are still popular with many anglers who buy their flies, since the loop on the gut can easily be slipped onto the loop of the main leader which is attached to the angler's line. But eyed hooks, without gut attached, are steadily gaining favor. With a snelled hook the gut is very prone to break off at the end of the shank, and if it is necessary to change to a lighter or heavier main leader the size of the gut on the snelled hook cannot, of course, be changed.

Moreover, flies last longer than gut does, and a fly tied on an eyed hook can be used again and again on different leaders. If you want to use more than one fly on your leader at the same time, it is easy enough to tie a short length of gut to an eyed hook so that it can be attached to one of the loops farther up on the type of main leader which is furnished with extra loops. In the case of dry flies, the delicate casting of the fly so that it will drop onto the surface gently pretty well eliminates the desire to cast with more than one fly on the leader. Tapered dry fly leaders are often made with no loops whatever.

Hooks made for flies have the eye bent somewhat inwards, towards the barb of the hook. This is done so that when the leader is tied on it will extend out in the same direction as the shaft of the hook and not tend to upset the fly on the water or turn it at an undesirable angle. If at any time you should find it impossible to obtain hooks with bent eyes, you can bend in the eye of an ordinary small-sized bait-fishing hook so that it will serve your purpose. Do this carefully, as the shaft is liable to break if handled incautiously. The bait-fishing type of hook, however, while it will do for wet flies in an emergency, is too heavy for dry flies.

While it is true that most fish are taken on the old approved patterns, you should bear in mind that if you are temporarily unable to obtain the exact materials



which a pattern calls for, you can often take fish with a fly which differs in some details from the standard pattern. If you have not got the particular type of body material called for, for instance, use whatever you have that comes nearest to it. The fly may still prove quite successful. And there is no reason why you should not try patterns of your own invention. These experiments are interesting and they sometimes yield unexpectedly satisfying results.

For your first attempts it is not necessary to tie flies of any particular patterns. Practice on easy combinations of feathers, bodies and ribs, then go on to the more involved patterns. When you bring the first fish to net taken on one of your own flies, the time you have spent in learning the craft of fly tying will be amply repaid.

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*PAMPHLETS SOON TO BE PUBLISHED*

An Introduction to Pottery — (Equipment, Coil Method and Throwing.)—by Members of the Canadian Guild of Potters.

Clay Modelling—by Mrs. Dora Wechsler.

Finger Weaving—I—(A technique which requires no equipment whatever for making purses, shopping bags, tea cosies, hobo-bags, belts, etc. No seams are made in weaving.)—by Ivan H. Crowell.

Linoleum Block Printing—(This craft seems to reach a peak of activity before the Christmas season.)—by Margaret Austin.

Cutting and polishing small stones—by D. Leachman.

## MACDONALD COLLEGE HANDICRAFTS STORE

Through the Macdonald College Handicrafts Store, a co-operating organization of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild, various supplies and tools described in this pamphlet may be purchased in kit form or separately.

Everyone will understand the difficulties of obtaining adequate supplies of best quality materials. Substitutions may sometimes be necessary.

If a money order or cheque accompanies your order any balance due you will, of course, be returned. Otherwise kits must be sent C.O.D. postage extra.

### PRICE LIST

(Prices are subject to revision).

Fish fly tying kit for beginners (Equipment or materials may be purchased separately).

#### *Equipment*

|                      |        |              |
|----------------------|--------|--------------|
| 1 fly vice.....      | \$2.50 |              |
| 1 hackle pliers..... | .50    |              |
|                      |        | ————— \$3.00 |

#### *Materials*—ample for several flies:

|  |        |              |
|--|--------|--------------|
| Lacquers, 1 vial each black and clear.....                                       | \$ .20 |              |
| Tinsel, 2 yards silver 5 s F.....  | .15    |              |
| Chenille, 1 yard each red, orange, yellow and black<br>or a very dark color..... | .30    |              |
| Thread, 1 spool "wartime silk".....  | .08    |              |
| Wool dubbin, available shade.....  | .12    |              |
| Crewel wool, assorted colors and lengths, about<br>2 yards total.....            | .10    |              |
| Hackles, 1 doz. Badger.....  | .15    |              |
| 1 doz. each red, blue, furrness, brown....                                       | .40    |              |
| Quills, 1 each red, yellow black.....  | .15    |              |
| Peacock herl, one.....   | .15    |              |
| Hair for streamers, 1 piece each red, white, golden<br>brown.....                | .45    |              |
|  |        | ————— \$2.25 |

Complete kit for beginners, equipment and material..... \$5.00

(The supplier of these kits reserves the right to make essential adjustments and substitutions).

(Fishing Hooks cannot be obtained until after the war.)

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## THE PURPOSE OF THIS SERIES OF PAMPHLETS

About 90% of our boys and girls will earn their livelihood, after they leave school, by the skilful use of their hands. Because they have had little experience with which to guide them in selecting work suitable to their talents, many of them take the first job that they can get. Under such conditions this job is usually a short one. By a trial and error method, often covering a period of years, they find positions which they hold for life. In many cases the work is not really suited to their natural abilities.

Handicrafts offers one means of meeting this great problem. The opportunity to learn a range of crafts provides a means of discovering natural talent. This talent may be in woodwork, metalwork, leatherwork, weaving, pottery, or in design. A person who has talent in a certain craft or phase of a craft will find greatest pleasure and productiveness in a position where that talent can be used to advantage. The nation needs all the natural talents available for its Industries, Arts and Sciences. Hence all will profit when talent finds its useful outlet. Handicrafts in the schools, churches, homes, scout rooms, etc., will give to young people an opportunity to find the sort of work in which they will produce best and be happiest. This pamphlet is one of the arrows pointing the way.

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