1985 - Bill Blackstone
by Dennis Bitton

Bill Blackstone was the 16th recipient of the prestigious Buz Buszek Memorial Fly Tying Award. According to his friends in The Fly Fishers' Club of Orange County, he's spent hundreds and thousands of hours promoting fly tying. He's demonstrated his talent at innumerable trade shows, shared and passed on his talent at club and council activities as well as numerous Boy Scout events. Like the other Buszek winners, Bill is a man with exceptional talent who's willing to pass it on.

"It's king of like a pinnacle of achievement," says Bill of the award. "It's the highest peak you can climb and the best thing that can ever happen to a fly tyer in the Federation - to be recognized by your peers with this award."

Born in 1933 in Illinois, William Joseph Blackstone moved to Ventura, California in his youth. At age 14 he was fishing in the Ventura River, the Santa Clara and the Sespe, mostly with a fly, for trout and steelhead. At about the same time, he was learning to tie flies. Bill says his first instructor was Howard Shaffer of Shaffer's Sporting Goods store in Ventura, California. His second instructor was Roy Donnelly, a fly tyer of considerable talent and reputation in southern California during the 40's and 50's.

Interestingly, Bill started tying flies as a Boy Scout project. It was one step of many which eventually helped him earn the important Eagle rank. Now, he's helping other young men win the same award.

Bill is best know as a fly tyer for the incredible realism he puts into his flies. He takes delight in lugging a pitted rock to trade shows and setting it up on the table in front of his vise. After he's tied a few black and brown stonefly nymphs, he carefully arranges them so that the bend and the point of the hook are concealed in one of the rock's slight depressions. For someone casually walking by, a quick glance reveals real insects crawling (they seem to) on a rock in front of this very studious tyer, concentrating at his vise. And then there's the dragonflies and the mayflies. Much skill, unique materials and quite a bit of time go into each creation. Most observers agree that the finished product is worth the effort.

I watched Bill tie a couple of years ago at a trade show in San Francisco. Being the nosy reporter type, I asked him openly why so much emphasis on totally realistic flies when it was obvious that most recipients of such flies would never fish them. Bill explained that he'd been tying for a long time, and that this "realism mood" had come over him a few years ago and he enjoyed it. He was tying super realistic flies because it made him feel good and he enjoyed the challenge. He quickly added that he recognized that what he was doing wasn't appropriate for everyone, or that it wasn't necessary for catching fish. However, friends say they've fished some of his stoneflies and mayflies, and they do catch fish.

It should be noted that Bill has the talent to do a lot more. During his college days, he actually helped support himself with his fly tying skills. And while he hasn't tied commercially for many years, he's constantly donating money raised from his flies to whatever the "cause of the moment" happens to be. One thing he does to raise big bucks is to prepare and frame metamorphosis plates. He ties flies at the various stages of development to graphically show the entire process. It's quite a piece of work.

Bill has been active in FFF, Cal Trout and The Fly Fishers' Club of Orange County for many years. He served as president of the latter group.

In his private life, Bill was president of a large air conditioning company called Cal-Air before he retired. His wife has watched his antics for many years, carefully choosing when to participate and when to let Bill go off on his own.

Bill does enjoy fly fishing. Like other FFF members, and all Buszek winners, Bill Blackstone
enjoys the sport of fly fishing and likes to share his fly fishing skills with others.

In that regard, a close friend, Dave Mosely, says of Bill, "he has that special quality that enables him to demonstrate fly tying skills while simultaneously entertaining and instructing those watching. Those who have never seen him tie should come to the International Conclave. Bill will be there."