

A Legacy of Excellence

Tom Morgan contributed to
the shape of fly fishing today

By Jerry Kustich

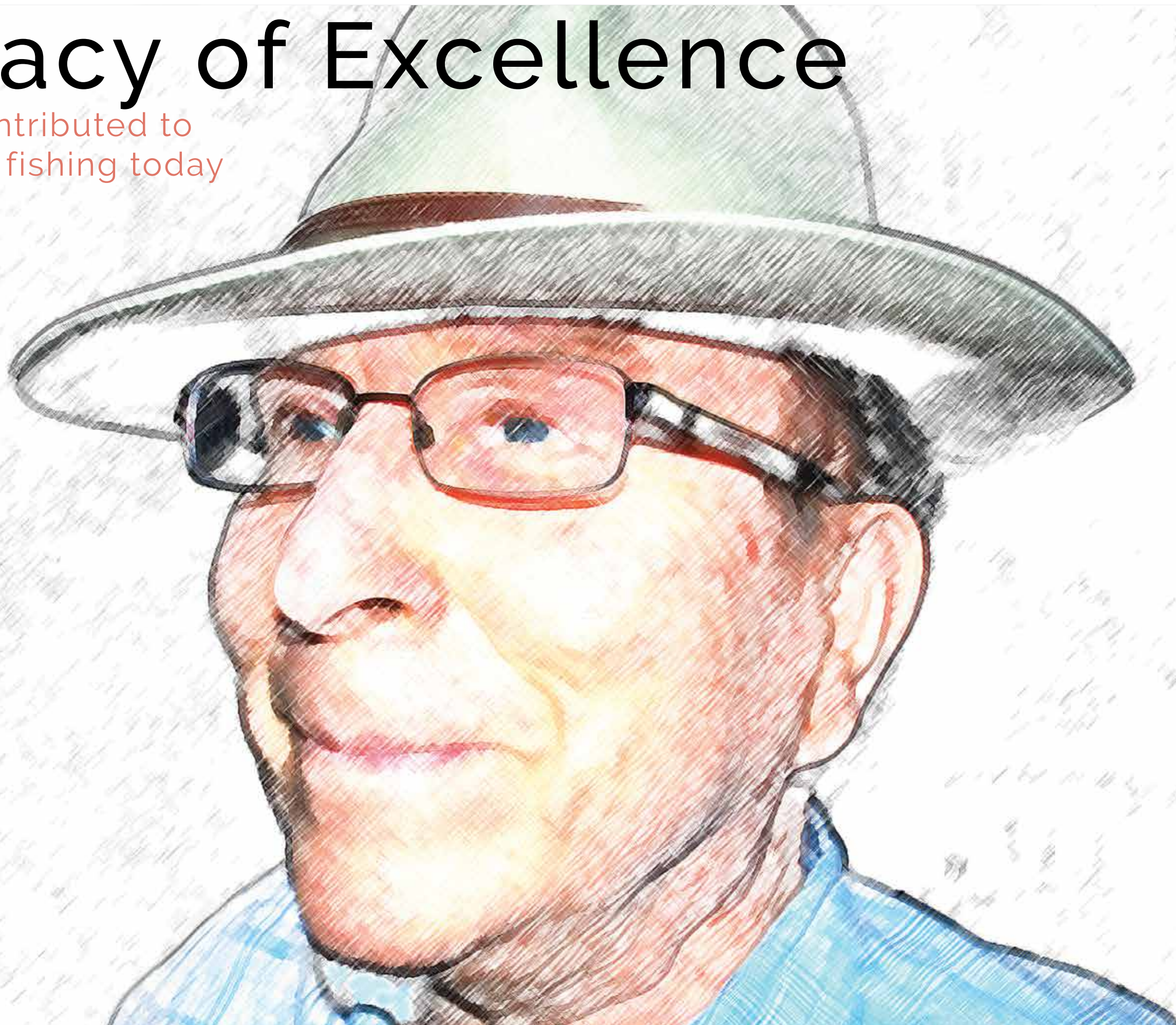


Illustration produced from photo by Gerri Carlson



In a day gone by, Tom Morgan often tested his rods on water near his Montana home.

Before fly fishing became the mainstream attraction that it is today, it was once a somewhat folksy pastime practiced by a diverse gathering of outdoor enthusiasts. Seeking the pleasure of solitude in secluded peace filled niches while skillfully stalking the most mystical of quarry, these devotees found poetry in the presentation of an artfully tied fly and meaning in the music of a gently flowing river. Despite the solitary nature that characterized fly fishing back then, there were many visionary pioneers whose expertise in one discipline or the other would selflessly provide the foundation for the modernization of the sport. From the explorers to the fly tiers to the rod builders, remembering our historical roots is perhaps the only way to honor those who have contributed significantly to what fly-fishing is today. In the realm of fly rods, Tom Morgan was one of the men who led the way.

In 1949 when Morgan was a child, his family built the El Western Motel along the banks of Bear Creek in Ennis, Montana. From a very early age, fly fishing began to define Morgan's

life as he grew up fishing Bear Creek, Odell Creek, the Madison River and many of the other waters that flowed throughout southwestern Montana. By the time Morgan was a teenager, he became a highly touted guide on the Madison and other local waters. In 1961, he bought a fly shop in Ennis from his brother. As a result of spending much time in the mountains exploring the natural wonders of the area, Morgan developed a keen sense of contemplative insight about life and an acute intellectual curiosity about how life works. Consequently, during his fly shop years he often studied the structure of fly rods and wondered why they could not be improved in a way that allowed them to blend art and form into a more harmonious function.

With the aid of silent partner Sid Eliason, Morgan's creative urge led him to purchase R. L. Winston Rod Company from Doug Merrick in 1973. Established in 1929, Winston was long revered as a premier leader of crafting world-class bamboo rods. By the early '60s under Merrick, the company also added phenolic resin fiberglass rods to its offerings. While spending five years refining his skills in San Francisco where Winston was located, Morgan hired guide and fishery biologist Glenn Brackett in late 1974. During that time they both worked closely with former Winston employee Gary Howells to update the entire bamboo process.

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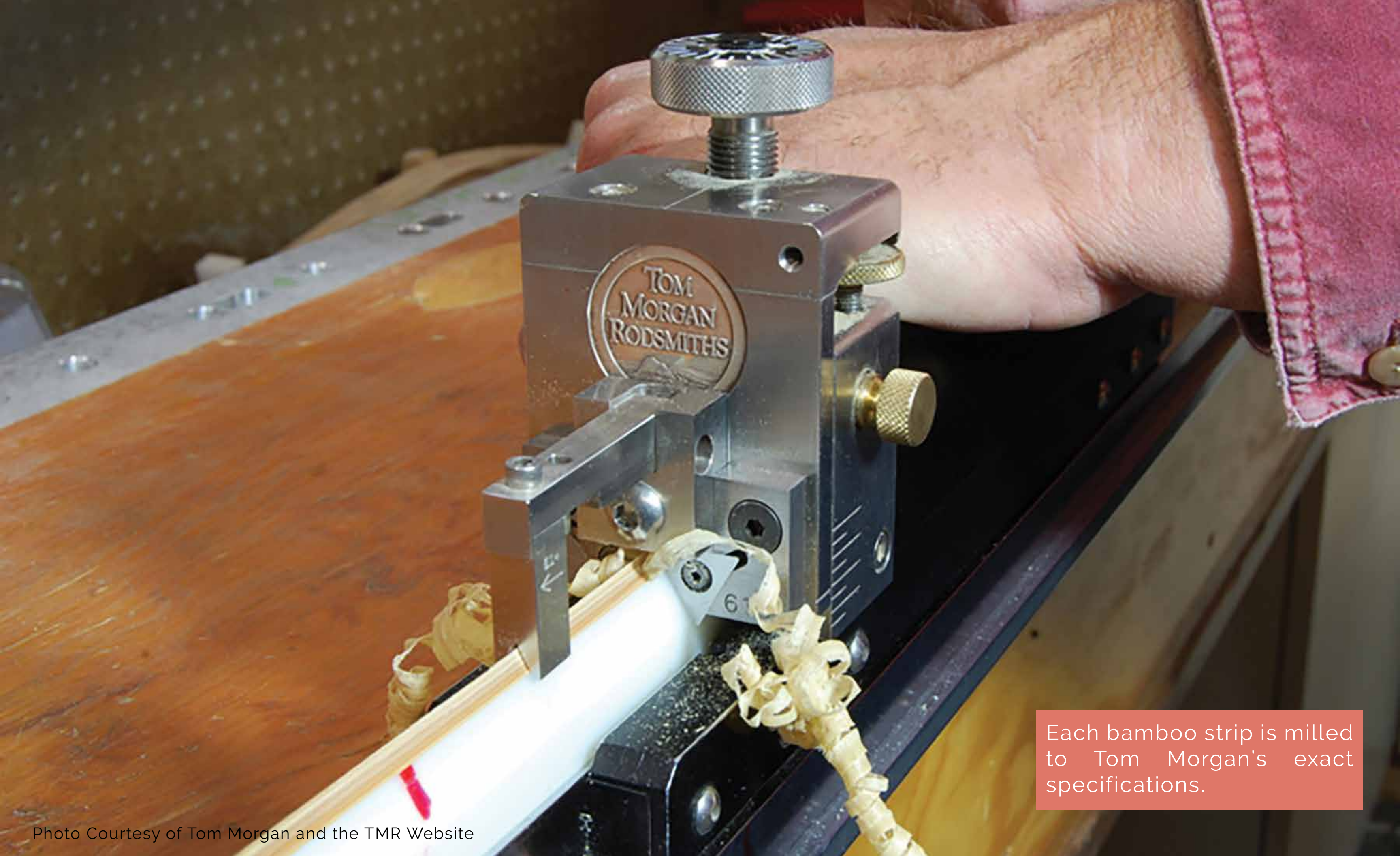
With Howells' help in 1976, Morgan moved the shop to Twin Bridges, Montana. Sharing the same passion for fly fishing, they also shared the same vision for creating fly rods that were true reflections of their commitment to both the sport and the craft. Brackett eventually gravitated to bamboo operations and later became a minority owner in the '80s. As Morgan gradually relinquished his bamboo duties, he embarked upon a journey that would establish the basis for how modern fly rods would be judged well into the future.

At first Morgan continued Winston's line of fiberglass rods, while utilizing a working relationship with blank provider J. K. Fischer. Along with Brackett's input, Morgan added the "Stalker" series of small fiberglass rods in the late '70s that are still highly sought after today. But not only concerned with rod performance, Morgan was also a stickler for cosmetic perfection, thus every aspect of rod construction was scrutinized and enhanced as he strived to produce the best rods ever made. When Brackett and Morgan hired me in 1984 I can attest to the stringent "not in my rod" standard they both demanded, a policy reflecting their belief that the fly rod was a hallowed instrument connecting an angler's soul to the sublime world of trout. When Morgan and Brackett were not building rods, they were out fishing with them.

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Tom Morgan Rodsmiths' graphite rod is the ultimate of a quality product.



Each bamboo strip is milled to Tom Morgan's exact specifications.



The Tom Morgan Rodsmiths logo on the brass ring in the reel seat means the product is the best-of-the-best in workmanship.

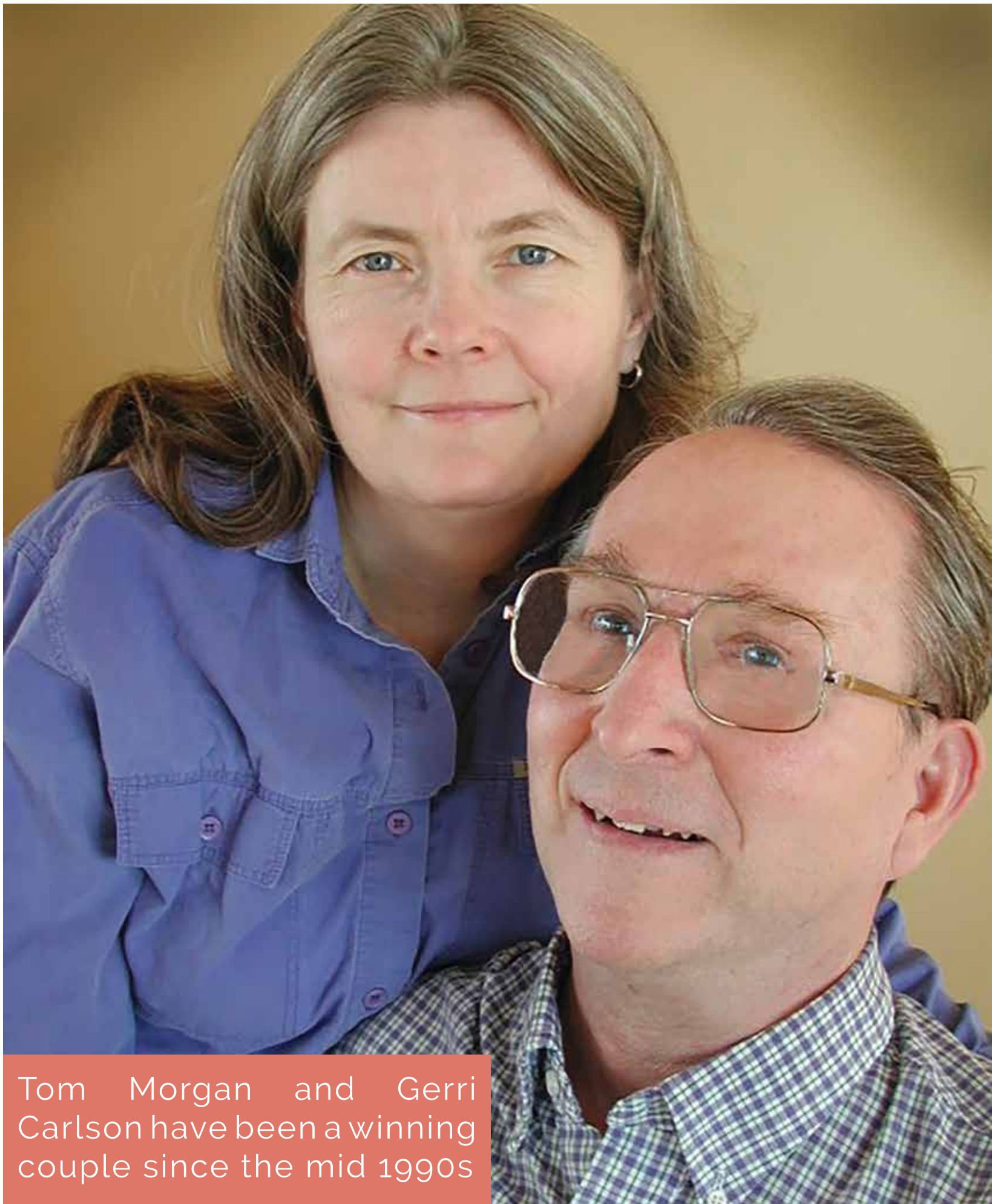
Upon the advent of the graphite era in the late '70s, fiberglass gradually faded in favor of a material that potentially held much more promise for building lighter rods with smaller diameters. From the onset Morgan was totally dedicated to graphite rod design. His dedication resulted in a number of rod mandrels around which many rod blanks and prototypes were cast. During those years Winston cultivated a working relationship with Gary Loomis who would manufacture blanks. Utilizing the cutting-edge IM6 material for its blanks, by the late '80s Winston was producing one of the finest series of graphite rods. Using the spigot ferrule design for smooth transition of energy throughout its entire length, this rod was created for the astute angler. Cosmetically flawless, the IM6 series green rod cast a fly perfectly as well. Because the line weight of each rod was designed to exactly match the corresponding double taper line designation, the rods were a dream to fish. It was all about excellence.

After selling Winston in 1991, Brackett decided to stay on as Morgan planned to start a new high-end custom rod business after his non-compete clause ran out. Unfortunately, Morgan's life took a drastic turn in 1993 when he was diagnosed with a pernicious form of relapsing remitting multiple sclerosis (MS) that evolved into a chronic progressive type of MS, but that setback did not deter Morgan. However, after marrying

very talented ex-schoolteacher Gerri Carlson in 1995, the MS flared up while they were just getting Tom Morgan Rodsmiths off the ground. The recurrence of the disease left Morgan using a wheelchair and very much impaired. During that difficult period, I was honored that Morgan asked me to help train Carlson to build rods utilizing the exacting skills he and Brackett had imparted upon me a decade earlier. In the process, I was touched by the dignity with which Morgan dealt with his challenging fate.

Twenty years later, Tom Morgan Rodsmiths continues on. Although physically incapacitated these days, Morgan remains upbeat about life while continuing to exude an undying love for fly fishing. In addition to tending for Morgan's welfare, Carlson's crafting skills ensures that each year they produce about 70 of the most elegant and smooth casting graphite rods imaginable. The company also makes about 15 exquisite bamboo rods yearly and has added a line of innovative new-age fiberglass rods as well. Always creating, Morgan told me they have recently added two more bamboo rods and a series of newly designed four-piece graphites to their offerings. Although Morgan has not been able to cast many of the rods he has designed, in his mind he knows exactly how they feel. While Carlson now does most of the rod making, her attention to detail still reflects Morgan's high standard of quality.

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Tom Morgan and Gerri Carlson have been a winning couple since the mid 1990s



Superb workmanship is the trademark of a Tom Morgan bamboo rod.

Morgan's will to overcome inconceivable hardships while continuing to creatively express his life-long devotion to fly fishing is an inspiration to all of us who love trout and their environs. After recently casting my vintage IM6 rods, I personally attest that his creations will always live on as true manifestations of his commitment to excellence.

The IFFF Board of Directors recently recognized Morgan by awarding him the Lee Wulff Award to acknowledge his "business for outstanding innovation in the fly-fishing industry through its products." He earned the award through hard work and dedication. The IFFF is proud to thank Morgan for all he has done for the sport we all love. 🐟

Jerry Kustich worked 21 years for Winston Rods until he and Glenn Brackett founded Sweetgrass Rods in 2006, a company dedicated to building fine bamboo rods. Kustich has written several articles and four books including "Great Lakes Steelhead" with his brother, Rick. His other works are reflective stories about life and fly fishing. His latest book is "Around the Next Bend." Contact Kustich at BooBoy724@gmail.com.



A close look at the stripping guide on a Morgan bamboo rod gives a sense of the quality of the rod.