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## Rodmaker Profile:

# Tom Morgan: From Flatfish to Flyfishing Icon

interview by Bob Maulucci

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To live a flyfisher's life is one of the truest joys that one can attain. To produce finely crafted rods is a labor of love. To assist others in attaining their goals is a selfless task. To find a soul mate is a sustaining gift. This is Tom Morgan's life.

There are many people that I have come across in my short time as a rodmaker and writer, but few encounters leave a lasting impression on you like a talk with Tom Morgan. His undaunted spirit rings out through the receiver, and his words encourage you backed by years of experience and experimenting.

I have had many correspondences with Tom over the last two years, and each leaves me knowing more than I knew before. The following interview was done in series of e-mail correspondances between Tom and me. Despite the countless hours it must have taken him to dictate the following, you can see by the eloquence of his text that Tom does not take on a job unless he can give it his best.

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### **What were your earliest experiences with fly fishing and rod building?**

I grew up on a motel at Ennis, Montana, the home of the famous Madison River, and the not so famous O'Dell Creek and Spring Creek. My first experiences with fly fishing were with some of the customers that came to the motel. It was more of a fishing resort than it was just a motel.

In the beginning I was a spin fisherman and as a kid I fished mostly in Bear Creek that ran right through the motel grounds. It was a small stream and was safe to fish. Usually, I would use an F7 frog colored flatfish. Bear Creek had only brown trout in it and was very brushy. I would feed the flatfish down into a brush pile and the big browns just couldn't



*Tom sights down a blank to check for straightness. (photo courtesy of Tom Morgan and Gerri Carlson).*

resist it.

My next jump was to fish O'Dell Creek with live grasshoppers and the spinning rod. O'Dell also had only brown trout. I learned quickly that the trout were very wary, particularly if you showed yourself so I would crawl up to the pools and toss out the hoppers. The big browns were a sucker for a juicy hopper bobbing down the stream. There were some small ponds in O'Dell and when I would toss out the hoppers I could see them coming by the wake they made. It was very exciting fishing since many of the takes were very explosive.

As I got older I started fishing the Madison with customers from the motel. I would watch where they fished and also explored the river myself. This was how I learned where the fish were and how to catch them.

There were two motel customers that kept telling me that I should learn to fly fish because it was more fun and could be even more productive than lure or bait fishing. Tom Coxon and Howard Sykes became my fly fishing mentors. Tom lived in Florida

at the time but had been a stockbroker in New York City and grew up fishing in the Catskills. Howard lived in New Jersey but had fished all over the world. Both of them were accomplished fly fishermen. They both used Leonard and Payne rods so I could see what those rods did for them. They got me started and for several years would let me go along with them and helped me learn the nuances of fly fishing.

There couldn't have been a better place to practice my fly fishing skills than O'Dell Creek. It has all kinds of water from very quiet pools to fast riffles. There were lots of big browns up to 22" with an occasional bigger one. At that time you could fish anywhere you wanted without even asking permission. In addition to O'Dell I fished Spring Creek after I learned to drive. It was generally quiet water with very selective fish and taught me the art of gentle presentation.

I built my first flyrod when I was living in Clarkston, Washington. It was a fiberglass rod built on a Phillipson blank. It was the only flyrod that I ever built before buying Winston.

I guided for fourteen seasons prior to buying Winston. This gave me a great deal of fishing experience under all kinds of conditions. I have always said that I always learned more watching anglers fish than I learned fishing myself. I also learned what made a great flyrod by trying many of the best rods of the day. Before I bought Winston I owned three Winston bamboo rods.

### **How do you see fishing and rodbuilding as being connected?**

In my opinion, in order to be a great rod designer you must have a large range of fishing experience. It also helps to guide fishermen and to watch them fish and use a variety of rods. I think that presently most trout rods and steelhead/salmon rods are designed by tournament casters and are much too stiff. Many of today's rods are demonstrated at fishing shows and the ones that cast the farthest are the ones being made. Fortunately, most bamboo rodmakers have not fallen into this trap and are still making rods that bend and flex appropriately for fishing situations. However, even some bamboo makers are leaning towards rods that are too stiff for good trout fishing. When I hear that a bamboo trout rod will cast all of the line I am very suspicious of its fishing action/stiffness.

### **How did your ownership of Winston come about?**

I was running the El Western Motel in Ennis in 1973. We had decided to sell the motel so I was looking for something to do. A good friend of mine, Al Wilson was staying at the motel. He had been in the Army Air Corps with Doug Merrick, the owner of Winston, during World War II. Al said that Doug wanted to sell Winston. I had always had a passion for flyrods so thought this would be a great opportunity for me.

I immediately called Doug to see if he wanted to sell Winston. He said that he did and I told him that I was interested in buying it. I made arrangements to fly to San Francisco to meet with him. On the way down I stopped in Salt Lake City to meet with my fishing friend, Sid Eliason, to see if he was interested in either loaning me money to help buy Winston or to become a partner. Sid said he would love being a partner with me.

I met with Doug and looked over the business. I must admit that I had stars in my eyes. Doug was like a God to me. I wanted Winston badly and told Doug that I would come back to Montana and make him an offer. He had five other people interested in



*The Tom Morgan Rodsmith's Hand Mill has become one of the most innovative tools used by modern bamboo rodmakers.(photo courtesy of Tom Morgan and Gerri Carlson).*

the business so I offered him \$10,000 more than he was asking to make sure I got Winston. Doug accepted my offer, and Sid and I were the proud owners of Winston.

### **Should one avoid making their passion into their income?**

By all means you should follow your passion in your life for earning your income. However, this is not the case for most people. If your greatest passion is fly fishing and rodmaking I don't see how you can make a substantial living doing it. You can make a reasonable living and have a good life. Most amateur rodmakers are best off just making a few rods for friends or limited sales while maintaining a real job for income. Rodmaking for most could provide a small supplemental income for their passion.

### **Does business take the joy out of building and fishing?**

It didn't for me. I can't imagine doing anything more fun than running a great rod company. One of my greatest joys was to want a rod for a specific fishing situation and be able to make it for myself. That's how many of the designs came about. I grew up with a strong aesthetic sense developed by my mother and that helped guide me to keep improving the quality of the products that I made.

### **How did your design ideas and glass/graphite rods change the rods produced by Winston?**

As mentioned before I grew up fishing a big variety of waters. This experience helped me develop a strong sense of rod types. Also using a variety of customer's rods let me see what others were doing and what worked best fishing conditions. When I first went to Winston there were only bamboo and fiberglass rods being produced.

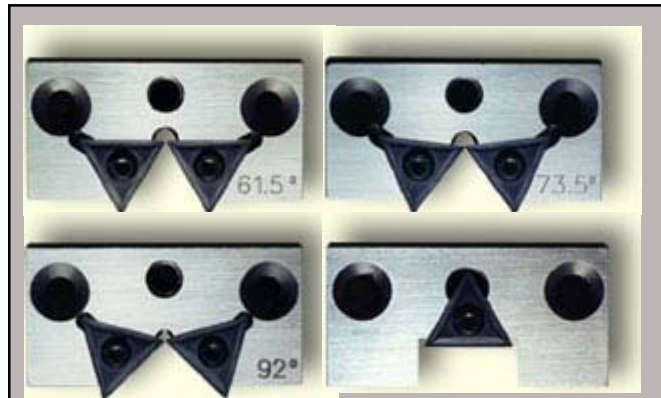
The first thing I did was to design the Stalker fiberglass rods that were true #3 & #4 rods. There were very few light rods being made in the 1970s. Even in those days all of the fiberglass rods that I could find were much too stiff for the line designation they carried. The Stalker became an immediate hit and is still popular to this day. They never seem to come up on used tackle sales.

Soon after I bought Winston, Fenwick brought out the graphite rods. They began to revolutionize not only the rod industry but fly fishing itself. It was not long before they completely took over the fly rod business and forced fiberglass off the market. In my opinion, this did a great disservice to some of the fiberglass rods that were, and still are, great fishing rods. I also think that for many beginners' graphite rods are easier to learn to cast with because their

stiffness/speed fits their casting stroke.

By the time Fenwick brought out graphite rods fiberglass had mostly replaced bamboo rods. Most of the bamboo rodmaking companies had closed their doors. The ease of making shafts from composite materials was much cheaper than making them from bamboo.

In the beginning the graphite materials were heavy and, along with the manufacturing techniques, made rods more like the traditional parabolic designs with stiffer tips and softer butts. These rods would cast a lot of line but lacked the delicacy that I preferred. We made the best designs that we could and they were good fishing rods but needed more sophisticated materials and manufacturing processes.



*The innovative cutting heads on Tom's Hand mill allow the maker to choose from 4,5,6, and 8 sided rods. The flat cutting insert (bottom right) allows laminates, ala E.C. Powell Co., to be glued to a flattened pith surface, making for easier hollow building and a variety of experimental possibilities. Tom also offers a fluting cutter insert to do Winston style hollow fluting. (photo courtesy Tom Morgan Rodsmiths).*

The second and subsequent material improvements have greatly increased the versatility of designs. Another big improvement was the increased manufacturing technology and mandrel design that allows great variety in the type of rod blanks available.

### **How do you weigh technological progress against tradition and the aesthetic beauty of cane rods?**

I am going to make a statement that will probably anger many bamboo rodmakers. In my opinion, graphite is the best rod making material to come along so far. Now, that is not to say that most graphite

rods being made today are great rods. Far from it. There are more terrible rods being made today, in my opinion, than have ever been made at any other time.

However, graphite does offer the opportunity to make great rods. They are very lightweight, have great strength, won't take a set, have great design flexibility, have great casting range, and can be aesthetically pleasing if properly executed. I am very proud of the graphite rods that we are currently making and think that they are great fishing rods. They have supple tips, good flexibility, bend appropriately for trout fishing distances, and are beautiful.

This is not to say that bamboo rods are not also great fishing rods because many of them are. Bamboo is a great material and can be crafted into a beautiful rod that has an intrinsic value unequaled by any other material. Bamboo also has the benefit of being the traditional rod material that our fly fishing sport was built upon. This gives it a tradition that won't ever be displaced.

However, just because a rod is bamboo doesn't make it a great fishing rod. I have always been very critical of any rod and whether they be bamboo, fiberglass, or graphite. Regardless of the material they must do the job well. In my opinion, bamboo is the most difficult material to design rods with. The weight of the material affects the rod action more than fiberglass or graphite. Therefore, it's critical that the tapers be worked out carefully and tested to insure that the rod performs well.

One of the great appeals for bamboo rodmakers is their ability to experiment with different tapers to develop a rod action that they prefer. With either graphite or fiberglass this design capability is not available to most amateur rod designers. Making bamboo rods can also represent an opportunity to develop not only tapers but also the other aesthetic design details of a rod.

### **What is running a production shop like?**

The thinking in a production shop is to group processes together so that you have efficiency of scale and you save on setup to do an individual step. For example, we would work batches of bamboo through the processes of selection, sorting, matching, node work, gang cutting, and inspection. We would have a substantial amount of bamboo ready to final cut and glue. Then we would final cut and inspect enough bamboo in a morning to glue it in the afternoon to insure that the bamboo had a fresh cut glue surface.

We glued primarily in the winter and would do it once a week. Over the years that I owned Winston I estimate that we glued about 5000 sections.

When I was making ferrules I would setup the process to make several hundred at a time. This included cutting off the solid bar stock, setting up the turret lathe to drill and ream holes, rough turning, and precision turning of the males. Then the females were honed to a standard size. After the females were honed I would then outside hone the males and match a set of two males and one female. By doing this in large batches you get accustomed to the "feel" and are able to do the fitting quickly and very consistently giving a very high quality ferrule.

When working production in batches it allows you to learn to do processes consistently and, overall, more quickly. Our goal was always to keep improving the quality of our rods and workmanship. In my opinion, by working product through on a consistent basis in a flowing pattern you are able to examine your procedures to develop ones that gradually keep improving your product.

### **What would small-scale builders benefit from knowing about how the pro shops are done?**

For most individuals that are building only a few rods a year it doesn't really matter since most of them are doing it for their personal enjoyment and the amount of time it takes to complete a rod is not important.

For those trying to make a modest number of rods per year for sale they could benefit both in reducing the time spent and improving their quality by working the processes in bigger groups. For example, batching the bamboo work to have a stockpile of mostly completed splines could save time. Most are using either a set of planing forms or a Hand Mill and the setup time for a taper is not substantial but if they would make several sections at one time and build up a reserve of glued up sections it would increase their efficiency. Then if somewhere down the road a customer wants a rod and they have the sections glued it would be a simple matter to finish a rod. I also think that if you are able to clean up and ferrule several of the same rods at a time you get more consistent and better results.

### **How was the move to Twin Bridges orchestrated?**

When I was first looking at Winston to purchase

it I intended to move the company to Montana. There were a lot of benefits to Winston in the bay area such as the Golden Gate Angling and Casting Club, tradition of being in San Francisco, infrastructure of support businesses, and a big labor pool. Even with these benefits I thought that a rod company should be in a great fishing area.

From Winston's beginning they produced a broad range of rod types from surf rods, boat rods, plug rods, to fly rods. When I bought the business most of the rods being sold were fly rods. Having been a spin fishermen for a number of years I could see that the spinning rods did not have great action. In addition, I didn't know anything about any other rods except fly rods. I also realized that most anglers wouldn't pay a premium price for spinning or boat rods even though the manufacturing costs were the same or higher than for a fly rod. Therefore, soon after buying Winston I dropped everything but making flyrods.

Even though I liked San Francisco as a city I didn't want to live there. My heart was in Montana. Doug Merrick had agreed to work for me for 2 ½ years to teach me the business. I decided that after he was through I would move Winston to Montana. By that time Glenn Brackett was working for me, and the two of us, at separate times, looked at different towns in Montana to move to. I had a very good knowledge of southwestern Montana that helped me look for an area.

The area around Twin Bridges, Sheridan, and Dillon appealed to me because of the good fishing and general lack of fishermen. I looked at different properties and found an inexpensive piece in Twin Bridges with a building located on it. The decision was made to buy the property and move Winston.

In the beginning, it was a difficult move since we gave up a tackle shop that provided a lot of income to help support the rodmaking. There were only three employees, Al Wilson, Chris Warner and Glenn Brackett, along with myself. Al worked part time at home. Chris, Glenn, and myself moved to Montana. In the beginning our rods were still wrapped in California with the finishing work done in Montana.

### **What about the craftsmen at Winston?**

When the move was made to Montana Winston was a very small company. Doug Merrick had already retired. We had the rod wrappers in the Bay

area and they stayed there while we sent rods back and forth. Glenn also did much of the wrapping. Al Wilson worked at his shop at home as he had been doing and we continued to sent work back and forth. We had one part time worker, Doug Wilson, who didn't move with us. Glenn Brackett, Chris Warner, and myself moved to Montana.

### **What did each of the Winston craftsmen contribute to the modern bamboo rod?**

In the beginning Doug and I worked on the bamboo rods together. The next year Glenn came to work for me so both of us had an opportunity to work under Doug. However, during the time that we were in San Francisco we had another mentor, Gary Howells. I feel that Gary did more to help us develop our quality bamboo making skills than anyone else did. He came over every Saturday morning and we talked extensively about bamboo rodmaking.

When I bought Winston there were not established exact specifications for each rod. This was a big disappointment for me. In the beginning I did almost all of the taper pattern adjustments to develop our rod actions. I would work out the tapers, Al Talbot would cut the taper patterns, and then Glenn and myself would glue up the sections, make the rods, and cast them. Al would then redo any taper pattern that I wanted changed. After considerable effort I had the most popular rod tapers well defined.

After the first year I took over running the milling machine to cut bamboo. I feel that I have a good mechanical aptitude and was very interested in machinery. Lew Stoner made the original milling machine. It is a very simple but elegant design that is the best that I have seen. It had oil bearings and a setting mechanism that wasn't as accurate as I wanted. Al Talbot made a new slide mechanism with a positive dial for setting the depth adjustment that worked extremely well. This machine was used for a number of years until we started to have trouble with the oil bearings. Then I rebuilt the milling machine adding a new ball bearing spindle while retaining the adjusting mechanism that Talbot built.

When I bought Winston we used a glue machine that had been built by Lew. It had two counter rotating wheels with the thread on each wheel and wrapped two threads on the rod blank while you pulled it through. It may have worked well for big boat rods, but in my opinion, it was a disaster for fly rod tips. I designed and had built by a machine shop a new glu-

ing machine based on a modified Crompton style. I always have felt that the crookedest joint from it was better than the best one from the other machine. This glue machine made all the difference in the quality of our sections. A great many come off the machine with no torque and extremely straight.



*Tom Morgan Rodsmith's Bill Blackburn planes away on the Morgan Hand Mill. (photo courtesy Tom Morgan and Gerri Carlson).*

After we moved to Montana and established our routine each of us did, for the most part, specialized tasks. In the beginning, I did most of the pole sorting and matching. Both Glenn and myself would do the sanding of the nodes. Glenn and I would do the cutting with me operating the milling machine and Glenn pushing strips into it. Glenn and I would both check the strips for the quality of the cuts and final blemish inspection. Then when gluing, Glenn would spread the glue and I would run them through the binding machine. We would both work on straightening and hanging them.

Glenn did almost all of the section cleaning, rod ferruling, corking, wrapping, and wrap coating. He essentially took over the assembling of the finished

bamboo rods. Glenn also did all of the repair work on bamboo rods. Glenn has assembled hundreds of bamboo rods and, in my opinion, is one of the great rodmakers today. He has been able to have a wealth of experience that just isn't available to most rodmakers today.

After the rods were ready for final finishing I would do that by spraying the varnish on in a special spray booth. The spray booth was set up with an exhaust fan, special dust free filters, and I would wear dust free clothing when spraying. I have always felt that spraying was the best way to apply the finish coat. By proper application I could vary the varnish finish by the application rate putting on a lighter, thinner coat on the tips and a heavier one on the butts. Spraying is also very fast. I could varnish the final coats on ten two tip rods in about three hours total including setup and cleanup. The finish coats came out virtually perfect with almost no dust blemishes and these were easily polished out. I think that the finish varnish on our rods added greatly to the overall quality.

During the time that I owned Winston Jerry Kustish and Jeff Walker started working for us. Jeff took over the bamboo jobs that I did and is Glenn's primary helper in the bamboo work. Jerry works part time in the bamboo area. They have all contributed to Winston's bamboo reputation. From my observations, Winston built the best bamboo rods they ever had under my watch and Glenn, Jeff, and Jerry are continuing this fine tradition and are adding their own improvements along the way.

For most of the time that I owned Winston we casted every bamboo rod with both tips that went out of the shop. This not only gave us an opportunity to know what every rod that we sent out felt like but it gave us a tremendous amount of casting experience with different bamboo rods. From my observations, the most difficult task for rodmakers is being able to cast a rod and determine its characteristics and how to change it for the better. This seems to only come with great experience.

### **How/why did you form Tom Morgan Rodsmiths?**

There were really two reasons. First, I needed to continue to make money from some source and I thought that making rods would be an ideal way since I would have limited production and it wouldn't take all of my time. Second, even though the graphite

rods at Winston had excellent action and were well executed I knew that by limiting the production and doing the work myself better rods could be built.

**What were your goals, products, and startup experience like?**

The goal of Tom Morgan Rodsmiths was to build the best fishing rod that was possible based on my experience and to encompass the appointments to make it the most beautiful that I could imagine. I also wanted the level of workmanship to be highest possible. I believe that this has been done. Anglers who have fished these rods constantly rave about their action and how beautiful they are. It has been very satisfying and rewarding to receive their accolades.

In the beginning I only was going to make a limited number of graphite rods in the lengths that I have always liked best along with reels that would complement the rods. The Hand Mill was not planned and only came about accidentally. However, the addition of the Hand Mill has been very rewarding and interesting for both Gerri and myself. One of the best parts of our business is the associations that we have made with our customers.

I did not intend to make bamboo rods because I didn't want to make a milling machine to cut the strips. After the invention of the Hand Mill they could be easily made. Therefore, Gerri and I decided to add a limited number of rods to our graphite offering. I have always enjoyed making bamboo rods so it a natural addition.

My fishing experience and length of time in the fly rod business allowed me to understand the product that I wanted to make. My associations with individuals in the fly rod business provided me with the ability to get them to help develop the products that I wanted. I realize that for most people it would be much more difficult, if not impossible, to do this because of the limited production. As with most business startups the initial time and costs were greater than I anticipated.

**Tell me about your partnership with Gerri.**

Gerri and I fell in Love in 1993. We just celebrated our 8th anniversary and it's been a fabulous time. She is interested in life and we share many of the same interests.

At that time she was just beginning a stock brokerage business. She worked it for about 1½ years and was doing well but I convinced her that if we

made rods we could make a satisfactory income working together and still have considerable time off so she quit selling stocks and bonds.



*Gerri Carlson and Tom Morgan; Together they manufacture Tom's incomparable rods. (photo courtesy Tom Morgan and Gerri Carlson)*

When Gerri and I first started, my Multiple Sclerosis was getting quite severe but we always thought that it would stop before I got too disabled. I was able to cast the first prototype rods and develop the action that I wanted. Gerri and I both worked on the appointments on the rods, bags, and cases and she had many great ideas that we have incorporated. Now that I am totally disabled Gerri does everything except the rod blank and guide alignment. I still have a keen eye and between the two of us we get them "dead" straight. Fortunately for us, Gerri has the keen eye, the technical ability, and the desire to do what I consider to be the finest work in the industry. The workmanship on our rods is just incomparable.

Gerri will do much of the finish work on the bamboo along with the graphite. I do the design work and have assembled a group of casters that know what type of action I want to test the rods. Working on bamboo is a new experience for her but she is looking forward to the challenge.

**What brought about the Morgan Hand mill?**

In the early 1980s my friend, Per Brandin, was visiting in Twin Bridges and we were talking about how he made his rods using a planing form and hand plane. That night I thought about how it could be done easier using a plane with carbide inserts running down a track with an adjustable bed for adjusting the taper.

The next morning over breakfast I sketched out my ideas on a napkin and explained it to Per. At the time he kind of dismissed it but I learned later that he thought I was crazy but didn't say it.

During the late 1980s I ordered some ground steel with the idea of making a prototype Hand Mill but that was as far as I got. In late 1984 my friend from British Columbia, Bob Clay, said that he wanted to start making bamboo rods using the traditional planing form and plane. I told him that I thought I had a better design for planing strips and if he were interested I would help him make one. Bob said he was and ended up coming to Montana where I helped him make the first base/bed assembly for a Hand Mill in my shop.

In the meantime, I talked with a machinist friend of mine, Tom Wandishin, about my ideas for a plane. Tom was very familiar with bamboo rodmaking since he had worked for me at Winston for 1½ years making bamboo rods. He is also a master machinist and a great designer. Between the two of us a plane design was developed and Tom made the first one.

Bob and I went to Tom's shop with the base and some bamboo. Bob fastened the bamboo to the bed and took the first few cuts. The bamboo cut easily and we were all laughing about how great it was. When Bob got through cutting the strip down substantially Tom took it off and measured it. The edges were sharp and the strip was the exact same width from end to end. It was perfect! The first Hand Mill was a success!

### **What was the response in the early days of its development, and what was the debut at Corbett Lake like?**

Gerri and I went to Corbett Lake with Per Brandin and Bob Clay to demonstrate my first prototype model of the Hand Mill. Per had prepared some strips for cutting and he and Bob demonstrated the Hand Mill while I watched. Everyone there was very excited about it and most could see what a substantial improvement it was in cutting strips.

Bob had been using his Hand Mill for some time

and had experienced faster and easier cutting soaking the strips. The strips that were cut for the demonstration had been soaked. I was not in total agreement that only wet strips should be used for the demonstration and this proved to be true. Some rodmakers thought that the bamboo had to be soaked for it to cut well and this wasn't the case. Also, we only had time to cut butt strips and there was some concern that it wasn't capable of cutting the smaller tip strips. This concern was also unfounded. However, the overall response was excellent and I ended up selling some Hand Mills as a result of the demonstration.

### **Who else helps with the R&D?**

Bob Clay worked out a lot of the early difficulties with getting the Hand Mill procedures worked out. At my shop, Per Brandin made three separate trips to Montana during my original stages of working out a production model. I felt that several changes needed to be made in order for it to be a practical tool for rodmakers. Each time we had difficulty making it work perfectly and Per went home saying it wouldn't work out. Each time I kept pursuing a solution to that particular problem until it was resolved. I was handicapped because I couldn't physically use the Hand Mill and had to rely on someone else to help.

Per was absolutely instrumental in helping me get the Hand Mill perfected as it now is. Since he understood bamboo rodmaking very well and is thoughtful about the necessary processes I would have had great difficulty working through the development without him. He suggested the name Hand Mill which has proven to be a perfect name for it. I also must give Bob Clay a lot of credit for making the first model work well and being an inspiration for me to continue to pursue working out the details on the final model.

Also, as with most products, the end users have also contributed a lot of good ideas to the development of the Hand Mill. I have also continued to work out different solutions to problems that have arisen from the reports of owners.

### **Why is it a useful tool?**

Reports back from my customers have answered this in several ways. One of the biggest benefits is that the carbide insert holder always keeps the correct angle when you are cutting strips. This has elimi-

nated one of the difficulties with hand planing. A number of customers have remarked about how much easier it is to just start cutting strips without learning to sharpen planes or too continually have to keep planes sharp.

The learning curve for cutting strips has been substantially reduced since you can put a strip on the Hand Mill and, providing the node work has been properly done, you can get a perfect strip the first time. The development of the swelled butt kit makes it easy to cut strips for this type of rod without special forms, only an inexpensive accessory.

Another big benefit is that it easily allows both 5- and 4-strip rods to be planed simply by changing a cutter head. Prior to this the planing forms were difficult to find and expensive for these rods.

Now that I have developed a hollow fluting cutter it is easy to hollow flute rods. Also by using a flat cutter laminating a different core material to the inside of a strip is easily accomplish to make rods similar to those of EC Powell.

#### **What is in its future?**

As I see it I will continue to manufacture the Hand Mill and to refine any aspect of it that requires improvement. The feedback from customers is essential for this process. However, it appears that its function is excellent and the satisfaction of my customers is very high.

#### **How do you answer people who say, "Anybody could build a rod if they had one of those?"**

As anyone who has built bamboo rods knows cutting perfect strips is only a small part of rodmaking. I do believe that the Hand Mill makes the strip cutting easier and more efficient but overall it doesn't make rodmaking easy. From what customers have told me though that they had given up because they felt they could never master planing strips with the traditional method and now they could. One of my primary goals was to make it easier so more people could enjoy the wonderful pastime of making rods.

#### **How do you answer people who question the price of the Hand Mill?**

When I first began developing the Hand Mill my goal was to be able to sell it for less money. However, as I worked to develop different aspects of it including the plane I could see that it was very important to provide high quality parts that worked well

and would continue to so. there are a substantial number of parts that have to be made with limited production and considerable handwork that are expensive to make. Also, as with any production process, there are mistakes made where substantial numbers of pieces have to be rejected. All this contributes to the manufacturing costs.

In addition, as new designs are developed there is always a substantial development and pre-manufacturing cost associated with each part that has to be amortized into the final production.

The bottom line is that it's not a product that provides great profit to our operation although it does contribute a reasonable amount.

#### **What kinds of rods do machine milling, hand planing, and the Morgan Hand Mill produce?**

I'm not clear about this question.

#### **Is one inherently better than the others are?**

Yes and no. This gets down to the experience and craftsmanship of the individual builder. I think that it is easier with the Hand Mill or with a milling machine to produce strips that are very consistent to one another with very good cuts. It is also possible to produce with regular hand planing strips that are very consistent to each other and have perfect edges. There are thousands of rods that prove this. I believe that it is just easier with a machine that is set up to do it automatically. The quality of any rod always comes down to the dedication and craftsmanship of the individual builder.

#### **What does one need to know if they want to experiment with hollow or fluted designs?**

The wall thickness is important for strength and the rods should not be hollow under the ferrules but other than that there is nothing difficult about making the rods providing you have the appropriate tools. It takes some time to make rods that are hollow and to cast them for comparison to determine the best action.

#### **How do you go about designing bamboo rods?**

In all of my rod designing I have started with rods close to actions that I like. With bamboo rods you can easily make a rod to determine its measurements so that you have a reference unless it has been hollow cut in some manner. I then decide from my

experience from casting and fishing how the rod could be improved. For example, is the rod overall too stiff or too soft? Is the tip too soft to cast the line properly or is it so stiff that the rod won't cast a small loop easily? Does it cast smoothly or does it feel like it has a hinge or delivers the line unevenly?

After I have picked a rod design that basically suits me then I would make several tips and butts that were interchangeable and cast each combination to determine which one I liked best. If I were lucky one of the combinations would be perfect. Otherwise, I would make another set of tips and/or butts to zero in on the perfect combination. This is the method that we are using to develop our current rod tapers. I don't know any other way to determine the perfect rod. I understand that some rodmakers have used the computer programs to help determine original tapers but I have never pursued that route.

### **What are the ideal parameters for cane rod?**

For me, I like what would be called a progressive action. I have been primarily interested in bamboo trout rods and not steelhead/salmon rods that have different requirements. The primary goal has been to make rods that feel very "smooth" when you cast them. Another important attribute would be for the tip to have the appropriate strength to handle the line it was designed for. Overall, the rod must have a perfect balance between the power in the tip and butt. When casting other rods the biggest single criticism that I would have would be that the rod was not well balance between the tip and butt.

### **Could you give me an example of a taper that shows the type of rod you like?**

The EC Powell rods taken as a whole are the smoothest and best casting rods that I have seen. The Winston rods that I helped develop with their progressive action are some of my favorites. Some of the Payne rods are also wonderful casting rods with the smoothness and balance that I enjoy. I, personally, have not enjoyed using the parabolic tapers even though they are very popular.

### **How is the development of the Tom Morgan Rodsmith's bamboo rod line coming?**

We made five tips and five butts for a 7' #4-weight that were interchangeable. They have been casted and one butt and two tips were excellent. We are now making two more tips to try and get the

perfect combination. We have three interchangeable tips and butts for a 7' #3- eight and two interchangeable tips and butts for a 7 1/2' #4-weight. These should be ready to cast by the end of September or early October of 2001. Hopefully, we will be there or within one more round of prototype blanks for these three rod models. At this time I am planning to make a 7 1/2' #5-weight that should be ready next spring.

We have completed the binding machine, the heat treating oven, and have the coating quite well worked out. The reel seat designs are going to be based on our traditional Rodsmiths designs along with the rod bags and tubes.



*Despite his battle with Multiple Sclerosis, Tom is able to maintain his busy work schedule. His prismatic glasses allow him to see well from a lying position, and his computer dictation software assists him in e-mail correspondance and other computer tasks. The answers seen in this interview were composed by Tom in this manner. (photo coutesy Tom Morgan and Gerri Carlson)*

**How have your personal/health struggles affected your craft? (I don't mean to be intrusive, but I find it amazing how you are accomplishing so much.)**

Some years ago I read a book by M. Scott Peck that dealt with people in a nursing home. One of the patience was a woman with Multiple Sclerosis and she was totally paralyzed and just lying in the bed. At the time I couldn't imagine anyone being able to live under those conditions. Well, now I am in that exact situation but, amazingly, I believe strongly that I still have a great life!

There are several reasons why. First, and by far, the most important is my wife, Gerri. She has an

attitude that anything is possible and she just won't give up. With her help I am able to get out of bed, spend only a reasonable amount of time in my wheelchair, get fed, showered, and taken well care of. This is in addition to her doing almost all of the rodmaking. It is also a two way street in that I am very supportive and encouraging of her interests. I realize that it's important that she has as complete of life outside of rodmaking and caretaking that she can.

We have a shuttle bus that we have converted into a camper and not only do we use it for local travel but we take trips with it. This past summer we took a trip to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to celebrate Gerri's father's 80th birthday and were gone 19 days, 16 of which we camped in the bus. We just returned from a trip to the West Coast where we were gone 23 days and we camped 21 of those in the bus. I lay down in my wheelchair and have a pair of prism glasses that allow me to look forward with great clarity. I also use these glasses when I'm watching TV.

I seem to be able to maintain a positive attitude despite physical restraints. This may seem strange but I don't think of myself as being disabled. Other than the MS I am healthy and feel good almost all of the time. Often I don't have much energy to sit up so I lay down in my wheelchair and continue with whatever I am doing at the time. Being involved in inventing, developing, and selling the Hand Mill has provided a lot of mental stimulation. The same has been true for our rods. The friends that Gerri and I have made doing both have added tremendously to our lives.

One item that has been tremendously important is my DragonDictate computer program for running the computer. This entire response was easily written using the software. With the use of the computer I am able to write letters, do spreadsheets, use Quicken for doing the business and personal books, write emails, surf the Internet, and allow me to connect to the world. I can use it entirely hands free by lying in bed and looking at the screen with my prism glasses.

The two employees that we have, Cyndie Freirer and Bill Blackburn, are very supportive of me and are able to work well with my disability. They re patient with me and are able to work well on their own. Either of them is willing to stay with me while working so that Gerri can get away. We have a good network of friends and family that gives us support so that Gerri can get time away to pursue her interests. ⊖

**Bob Maulucci** is the editor of Power Fibers. He happily planes out hex and quadrate rods on his Tom Morgan Rodsmith's Hand Mill.