14 | MONTANA OUTDOOR HALL OF FAME mtoutdoorhallo!ame.org

his is how a young scientist’s challenge led
to one of the most disruptive regiments in
!sh management history.
The disruptor was E. Richard “Dick” Vincent,
an inquisitive kid who grew up in Norris and
Garrison, poking around the Madison and Clark Fork rivers in the 1950s.
Dick earned degrees in !sh and wildlife man-agement at Montana State University and hooked on immediately with Montana Fish & Game in 1966 to become the Madison River’s biologist. Job one was to develop a nascent technology, electro!shing, to count and measure the trout inhabiting the fabled river.
The system was an instant triumph. Biologists could estimate the number, size, and age class of trout in a big river for the !rst time.
So what happens when science gets to bat? With new data, in 1968, the Montana Power Company agreed to increase "ows from two dams to help bolster trout populations in the Norris and Varney sections of the Madison. The bene!cial "ows helped at Norris, resulting in more and larger trout, but not at Varney. The discrepancy became Vincent’s “aha’ moment. Out-of-the-way Norris harbored wild, river-borne trout while busy Varney received about 10,000 “catchable” hatchery trout yearly. That was 1969, the peak of FWP’s trout-stock-ing program. Four more years of Dick’s study showed the unthinkable—Madison River wild trout thrived in reaches without stocked trout and virtually disappeared in stocked stretches. In 1974, state o#cials had the science in hand.

The wild trout in the now unstocked Varney section ballooned more than 200 percent. Determined to support the science, Montana stunned anglers and professional !shing managers nationwide. It would not merely
stop stocking trout in the Madison but in all Montana streams and rivers that could naturally support wild trout.
Dick’s work revolutionized trout management in Montana. Today, wild, naturally reproducing trout thrive in the Madison, Big Hole, Beaverhead, Upper Missouri, Big Horn, Yellowstone, Blackfoot, Flathead, and more.
State hatcheries, meanwhile, focus on stocking lakes and reservoirs to the delight of anglers. The beauty of Dick’s research is in his cer-
tainty that wild trout management depends on habitat, access, and instream-"ow protection laws. “If you want to catch big wild !sh,” he told Montana Outdoors magazine in 2004, “then you need to !ght for water and habitat, and that is what has happened. I don’t know of a state where people have fought as hard for their rivers as they have here in Montana.”
Dick amassed more than 20 awards for his work on wild trout and whirling disease research, including The National Trout Unlimited Conser-vation Award, Madison River Foundation Award, Governor Award of Excellence for his whirling disease work, Lee Wulff Sculpture Award, and a unique Western Division of American Fisheries Society award for whirling disease research. Dick and his wife, Twyla, live near Toston, where they raise dachshunds. ✮

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