

Valley Angler

Jim Dorso

By Bill Thompson

This past week the world lost one of those guys that makes living in this world just a little bit better for all of us. He was James Dorso of Gardiner, Maine and he was my cousin. Chances are good that you probably never heard of the man unless you happen to be from the Gardiner area or you happen to be a duck hunter from Maine. Jim's legacy however goes far beyond these limited boundaries.

Jim was a member in good standing of what Tom Brokaw calls, "The Greatest Generation". He was a decorated Navy veteran of World War Two who served his country in the South Pacific. He met his wife, Gloria at Old Orchid Beach, Maine early in the war when his ship was docked in Portland. The result was another one of those great love stories, not unlike my own mother and father, and probably yours too if you happen to be a baby boomer. They celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary last March.

In 1953 Jim began what was to become the defining event of his life. He took it upon himself to install 40 wood duck boxes in a wet land area near his home. Jim was an avid hunter and a talented taxidermist. At the time, that Jim put up his boxes, the wood duck was in serious decline. Not content to just throw up just a few boxes, Jim began to maintain them and keep extensive field notes on his success. The first 40 boxes were just the beginning and over the coming years he added thousands more. In a rare moment of bureaucratic genius the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife realized that Jim knew more about wood ducks than anyone in the state of Maine and hired him to develop a wood duck restoration project.

Jim realized that just putting up wood duck boxes would not solve the problem. He saw the big picture and began to lobby the Department to help in preserving the wet lands vital for the wood ducks survival. In doing so Jim became not only the wood duck's best friend, but the beaver's as well. At the time the beaver was considered a pest by the Department and it was common practice to blow up beaver dams and quickly dispatch errant beavers. Jim began a one man army in the defense of the beaver. He pleaded with land owners to preserve those wet lands created by beaver dams and pointed out to them the value to wildlife that would result in leaving them in place. When there seemed to be no other way Jim trapped and relocated the beavers to new locations. One of the Game Wardens who spoke at Jim's funeral said that Jim believed that there was no such thing as a, "nuisance beaver". Jim changed the policy of the Department to his way of thinking and today both the wood duck and the beaver thrive in the state of Maine.

Jim's work did not go unnoticed and he received numerous awards for his efforts. He was recognized by the St. Regis Paper Company, at the North American Wildlife Conference, in 1979, he received a "Certificate of Recognition" and a plaque from The Wildlife Society, an international association of professional wildlife managers and

researchers. In 1981 he was the recipient of the Maine Conservation Award given by the Maine Natural Resources Council. In 1982 he was given Down East Magazine's Environmental Award. In addition to being a member of the Maine Department of Fish and game he was commissioned a U.S. Deputy Game Warden.

Last year Jim was presented with perhaps his greatest reward. The State of Maine honored him by naming a state wetland after him. Generations to come will be able to remember Jim's work by visiting James A. Dorso Wildlife Management Area at Ruffingham Meadow.

On the day of the funeral the weather reflected the somber mood of those who had gathered to remember Jim. As I drove home down the rain swept Maine Turnpike I passed two deer grazing by the side of the highway. I slowed down a bit and was rewarded by being passed and nearly drowned in the bow wake of a 18 wheeler. The sighting of the deer got me to thinking about Jim and how much he loved the outdoors. The thing about Jim was that he was not content to set idly by and watch a part of nature disappear.

The amazing thing about Jim was that he was just an ordinary guy. He didn't have a college degree in biology or wildlife management and yet he took the time to learn every thing that he could about the wood duck. Unlike most of us he took it upon himself to make a difference. He didn't wait for a government study or a grant from some conservation organization he just started building wood duck boxes and putting them up in swamps.

It is unlikely that many of us will ever have the passion that Jim had in his lifetime, but we all have the power to make a difference. I would invite anyone who hunts, fishes or just loves the outdoors to join some kind of organization that promotes conservation. If you are a hunter you might consider Ducks Unlimited. This national organization not only promotes hunting it actively seeks out endangered wet lands and purchases them preserving them for hunters and nature lovers alike. If you are a fisherman why not consider joining Trout Unlimited. We have an active chapter right here in the Valley. Even if you never attend a meeting you will have the satisfaction of knowing that your dues are helping out in some small way.

Jim once told me how crazy it was that he would work all year doing every thing in his power to help preserve the wood duck and then go out and hunt them in the fall. There was nothing crazy about it; the fact is it hunters and fishermen, like you and me, who have done more for the preservation of wildlife than any other group or organization. If we do not continue in our efforts we will all be the poorer for the loss.

See you on the river.