

Thought you all would like to know about this. I'll pass on more details as I know them. I will add that he was born April 18, 1912 in Onaway, MI the son of a lumberjack. By the time he was 18 he was a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse. He married Dot (Dorothy) in 1938. He was 94, the father of 6 children and several (not sure of number) grandchildren.

While a wonderful tribute some of the information is wrong. Homer was an early president of Detroit Audubon Society but was not one of its founders--the founders were a group of 3-4 women, as I recall. They were at Camp Mahn-Go-Tahsee for 60+ years not 50. I remember when they celebrated their 60th summer at camp a few years ago.

I did spend a day with him and Dot before they went to Oregon getting them to tell stories and recount memories of Detroit and Michigan Audubon Societies (Sometimes they would disagree over whether a particular event was a MAS or DAS event) while I recorded them on 2 audio cassette tapes. Those tapes reside at The Detroit Audubon office.

Jim Bull

Nature Says Goodbye to a Champion

The Long, Purposeful Life of Homer Roberts

By MICHAEL DONNELLY

After a long, well-lived life, Homer "Gus" Roberts passed away in his sleep April 30th, 2006 at the age of 94. The proud son of a lumberjack (the term for loggers back in 1912), Homer was a teacher, starting in a one room schoolhouse at age 18. As an Industrial Arts teacher in suburban Detroit in the early 1950s, he was part of a group that started Outdoor School. As he once told me, these teachers decided to provide something for the "gifted" kids who were bored with the usual curriculum. It started out as a thing for the "gifted" students, but Outdoor School quickly became a valued educational effort open to all students in his District--and, now versions of Outdoor School exist in most states.

These lucky students were just a few of the youth that benefited from Homer's lifelong role as a Naturalist. For over 50 years, Homer and his wife Dot were instrumental in the life of YMCA Camp Mahn-go-tah-see at Loon Lake, in the northeast part of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. Homer was the Nature Director and Dot was in charge of Crafts. As Chief Mahn-go, Homer would preside over camp ceremonies imbuing all with the Mind, Body, Spirit values of the camp--"fair play, self esteem, teamwork and the value of every living thing" was the defining credo.

The Wonders of Nature

As Nature Director, Homer took thousands of young, urban boys out for their first ever "nature walks." I'll never forget my first one. Homer, known as Gus to campers, pointed out a small, chewed-up stump in the wetlands along Loon and Mud lakes. Gus asked us, "Does anyone here know how this happened?" Of course, we knew of beavers, though we had never seen one. Homer found out that most of us had no idea what a beaver looked like. One camper surmised that they were the size of dinosaurs. So, Homer the Artist, carved out a beaver family for display in the Nature Center; a building he built with the help of campers.

The Artist Homer Roberts also created a number of other dioramas for the center--eagles, turtles, Native encampments, etc. His creativity was also on display in the many bird books he illustrated. It was his life as an Ornithologist and Nature Photographer that led him to co-found and serve as president of the Detroit Audubon Society. He brought yearly groups of Audubon bird counters to Mahn-go-tah-see. The handmade charts of species sighted date back to the 1940s.

Steward of Creation

It was in the 1940s that Homer became concerned about the fate of the Kirtland's warbler (or Jack Pine warbler). Warbler numbers had dropped off as more and more of their nesting habitat was lost--to farming, roads, and, ironically, to the maturing forest--as the warblers only nest on the ground under jack pine trees that are from five to fifteen feet in height. As jack pine trees release their seeds only during fire and Smokey had successfully denied forests the necessary fires, Kirtland's warblers were fast approaching extinction, after thriving in the turn of the 20th Century fire-scarred remains of Michigan's great white pine forests.

Homer and a number of other conservationists started working with the Forest Service on Kirtland's warbler habitat plans. The tiny migratory songbirds which only were nesting in a 20-mile radius of Loon Lake by 1950, have rebounded and are now, as their former range returns, even nesting in a couple places in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Another successful bird recovery project Homer was instrumental in is the American Bald eagle. Upon gaining a ban on DDT which was interfering with eagle and other raptors' reproduction, ornithologists worked hard on habitat protection. By the 1970s, eagles had returned to the area, nesting along the nearby Wild and Scenic Au Sable River. For years, Homer volunteered to be the Naturalist at an overlook where people could observe the eagles' nest over the river. Now, eagles make daily fishing runs over Loon Lake.

And loons themselves have returned to their namesake lake. Due to the camp's mile plus of undisturbed shoreline and the efforts of lakefront homeowners to keep the lake loon-friendly, including an artificial nesting island provided to prevent predation from canines and floats warning folks to keep away from

the nest area in a quiet cove; loons have successfully nested at Loon Lake for the last eighteen years. Even the beavers have made a couple recent returns to the lake. (Loons are still quite threatened as there are less than 400 breeding pairs in Michigan.)

Upon retiring in 1964, Homer and Dot purchased Harvest Hill, their beloved home adjacent to the camp. They raised the three youngest of their six children there and Homer soon was back teaching, as a volunteer at the Hale, MI schools. Homer still was the Naturalist at the camp, though by the 1980s, kid camps were in decline and the camp passed over to the Lutherans who now run it as the Loon Lake Lutheran Retreat Center (LLLRC). Homer adapted and gave his talks and walks to the families now utilizing the camp/retreat center. Two years ago, Homer and Dot moved to a retirement center in Eugene, OR to be near their children and grandchildren.

A Dynamic Duo

Gus and Dot were one of those great teams. Some couples just have it. For all the outdoor work Homer accomplished; there was Dot weaving baskets of natural materials she'd pick up on the many Nature Walks (and tirelessly teaching others how to do it). And, there was Dot encouraging Homer's music (he'd played banjo and other instruments since childhood); his nature photography (he built his own darkroom at Harvest Hill); and his work with Audubon. Dot was also his main collaborator on the books and nature films he produced. When hiking, Dot would forego binoculars; preferring to "see things the way the Indians did."

Upon hearing of Homer's passing, my life-long friend and former Mahn-go-tah-see camper/counselor Tim Burton wrote, "A sad day indeed for all creatures. His nature walks were always entrancing, but Dot's way with words indicated she's no slouch, either! If Gus connected to your head, Dot connected to your heart."

And, what a way with words! In the tribute the Roberts family sent out, one reads this passage;

"Homer will be remembered by all of us for the way he lived his life, the things he taught us, and most importantly, the things he taught us to see. From the grandeur of the forests to the beauty of each creature that makes up the natural world and the need to protect the environment, he opened our hearts as well as our eyes. We will continue to hear his voice in the songs of the birds and the whisper of the wind in the trees."

Nature has lost a champion - a teacher, ornithologist, photographer, illustrator, musician, Purple Heart veteran, husband, father, grandfather and great grandfather. But that loss is mitigated by the many he touched who are still here, still working to protect the habitat of "all God's creatures" as Homer "Gus" Roberts taught us and showed us how.

NOTE: An effort is underway to purchase some of the Loon Lake wetlands from the LLLRC and set them aside permanently as a preserve--the Dot and Gus Roberts Nature Preserve has a nice ring to it; don't you think?

MICHAEL DONNELLY recognizes Homer Roberts' teaching him about Nature as the major reason he has spent his life as a dedicated conservationist. Homer (and Dot) Roberts' contributions to his life and those of so many others are beyond measure.