

JOURNAL SENTINEL FILES

Former Milwaukee Sentinel writer Don L. Johnson, who lives in Menomonie, is one of Wisconsin's best-known conservationists.

Outdoors writer always hits the mark

Johnson plays key role in conservation

By JAY REED
Journal Sentinel outdoor writer

It takes one to know one. Right? It takes a legend to know a legend.

Which is why, among a pack basket of other reasons, Don L. Johnson is chairman of the high-powered Journal Sentinel Sports Show Hall of Fame Selection Committee.

The former Milwaukee Sentinel outdoor writer, who retired in 1984, is one of Wisconsin's best-known conservationists.

His career blazed a superhighway through a decades-long tangled web of

Don L. Johnson,
outdoor writer:

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political and scientific underbrush toward the lofty pinnacle atop which the state's conservation community now sits.

Johnson, who lives in Menomonie, is a full-time freelance writer these days. His work shows up in a half-dozen or more publications throughout the state and the Midwest.

A native of Milwaukee and a graduate of West Allis Hale High School and the

University of Wisconsin, Johnson's accomplishments are as wide and clear as his many-splendored horizons.

His fingerprints can be found on both federal and state conservation regulations. Some are part of the basic policy that governs the management of Wisconsin's fish and game. Some can be found within the very structure of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

His dealings with the "heavy stuff" of conservation are legend. But Johnson also helped generations of Sentinel readers smell the flowers and see the woods and appreciate the sky and the stars on chilly winter nights.

In a world of uncertainty, turmoil and fear, he'd take a walk on a morning or evening with his dog and return with a notebook of scribbling.

He'd transform those notes into stories and, by reading them, you could join

him, step for step, on those walks. You could see, from his words, the colors of a male wood duck or smell the smells of a marsh or hear the music of the wind or the splash of some little stream.

In June 1984, Johnson wrote a final story for his newspaper. It was a farewell, of sorts. He noted, among other things, that his job "offered an opportunity to convey my own wonder of nature and, hopefully, to instill appreciation of it in others."

That he accomplished that, and more, is as clear today as mink tracks beside a backwater bay.

He said, in that story, that he intended to "spend more time puttering, weeding in the garden, picking on the guitar, scratching the dog's ears."

He said he was weary of deadlines.

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Johnson/Writer has had legendary impact



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Don L. Johnson has left his mark on both federal and state conservation regulations. Some are part of the basic policy that governs the management of Wisconsin's fish and game.

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And he gave us a look back to tell us why.

"I began writing conservation and outdoor articles as a 20-year-old freelancer in 1947. I started writing a regular column for the Eau Claire Leader and Telegram in 1951 and came to the Sentinel as an outdoor writer in 1962."

And he also wrote this:

"Although the byline called me a writer, I never wanted anyone to forget that I was a reporter whose assignment went far beyond the acts of hunting and fishing."

In a recent telephone interview, Johnson looked back on his career pretty much as he outlined it in the farewell story.

Always a modest man, he said it sometimes seemed that there were more misses than hits during his daily newspaper days.

"Not everyone has agreed with my priorities. The stories that ran, and the ones that didn't, were the result of judgment calls, often difficult," he recalls.

One of the interesting things

about Johnson is that he never took special pleasure in killing wild birds or animals. He did that, of course, and with great success. The stuff he put down over the years, if put together in one place, would make a mountain of meat.

"I killed and I understand killing," Johnson says now. "Never had a personal problem with it. But it would have been easier for me not to kill than to kill."

He tells of a painting he once saw in a hunting lodge. It depicted the head of a pointing dog reaching out for a hand that held a dead quail.

It's title: "Moment of Regret." "I could identify with that," he admits.

When he isn't fulfilling writing contracts, Johnson spends his time, in season, hunting and fishing with a slight bow to the hunting part.

His current dog, "Brighton," is a slick, sleek, highly skilled German short-haired pointer, and together the two make up a deadly team on woodcock and grouse.

But he retains a deep and abiding love for the Mississippi River swamps where he spent some of his boyhood.

Johnson, although worried by the high-tech aspects that now intrude on hunting and fishing, believes that the future of those two activities is reasonably secure.

"One thing I know for certain," Johnson says, "is that the future of hunting and fishing will be whatever you and I and those who come after us make it. As always, it is up to the people."

As usual, that man's on target.

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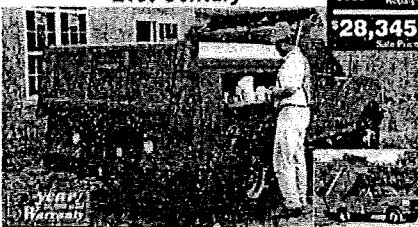
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