

Looking at Warren Knowles' legacy



Sam Sanfillippo (from left), Rep. Mary Hubler, Sharon Cook, Sen. Mary Panzer, former Gov. Warren Knowles and Sheehan Donoghue take a group photo at the Governor's Fishing Opener near Black River Falls in 1993. Credit: Contributed photo by Sharon Cook

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By Paul A. Smith of the Journal Sentinel

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When the Governor's Fishing Opener celebrated its 50th anniversary this year, many people reflected on the life and legacy of Warren Knowles, the Republican governor who started the tradition.

Knowles, a Wisconsin native, graduate of the University of Wisconsin's law school and World War II veteran, served three two-year terms as governor from 1965-'71.

Knowles was an avid angler who knew fishing was good for the soul as well as the economy. He is remembered for pro-conservation and pro-environment policies; Wisconsin's signature public land acquisition program, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund, bears his name.

Knowles didn't just start the Governor's Fishing Opener. He died of a heart attack while participating in the 1993 event near Black River Falls. He was 84.

Sharon Cook of Milwaukee, a regular attendee at the opener, recently shared a story and photo from the 1993 event that helps provide insight into the late governor.

Knowles and Cook attended a luncheon at the Pfister Hotel in Milwaukee on the Friday before the 1993 fishing season. Knowles arranged for Cook to give him a ride to Black River Falls.

After the lunch, Cook said Knowles — "ever the gentleman" — took her elbow and escorted her through the crowded hotel lobby.

"Warren wanted to get to the opener," Cook said. "He said, 'Don't talk, just smile,' as we walked through the throngs."

Fishing was a high priority for Knowles.

Knowles worked at the time for M&I Trust, so they swung by his office parking ramp to transfer his fishing gear and suitcase to Cook's car and they were off.

To have a few hours in the car with Knowles, Cook said, was a "wonderful experience."

She asked Knowles what he felt were themes of his tenure as governor. He said: economy, environment and education.

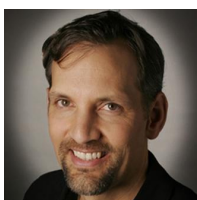
Cook remembers the two discussing the beauty of foliage along I-94 as it was budding out into "wonderful spring green."

At some point, Knowles took a paper from his suit pocket and read a piece of prose about a train as metaphor for life. "The train kept barreling down the tracks," Cook said. "But you never slowed it down and from the windows you saw bits of humanity and then, it was the end of the line."

Knowles enjoyed the Friday banquet, Saturday breakfast and fishing on the opening morning and afternoon of the 1993 season. He died Saturday afternoon, May 1, 1993, after bringing fish to be weighed.

This weekend, on its 50th anniversary, Knowles' spirit was felt by all who participated in the Governor's Fishing Opener.

— *Paul Smith*



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