

# MacQuarrie: Wisconsin's greatest outdoors writer

Gordon MacQuarrie is considered by some to be Wisconsin's greatest outdoors writer. His first full-length biography, *Gordon MacQuarrie, The Story of an Old Duck Hunter*, was written by Keith Crowley of Hudson and has been published by the Wisconsin Historical Society Press.

My interest in MacQuarrie began years ago when I read his book, *Stories of Old Duck Hunters and other Drivel*. I was too young to read MacQuarrie when he was alive and writing for the *Milwaukee Journal* and sporting magazines. Many of his articles were published in book form after his death. I've collected his books and even the audio versions of some of the stories from the books.

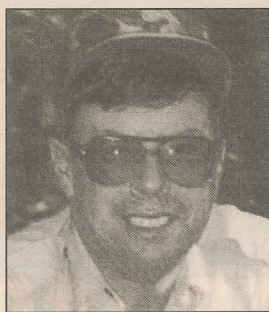
Several years ago, I attended an event honoring Gordon MacQuarrie at UW-Superior. Writer Dan Small put together

the gathering that featured Keith Crowley, who was writing MacQuarrie's biography at the time.

Gordon MacQuarrie was born in 1900 in Superior to Scottish parents who emigrated from Canada. His father, the chief carpenter for the Superior school system, introduced young Gordon to the outdoors. They fished area lakes and streams including the Brule River, later to play an important role in MacQuarrie's stories.

When Gordon was 16, he and his father built a log cabin on middle Eau Claire Lake, south-east of Superior in Wisconsin's Northwest Pine Barrens. At the time, they had to walk 16 miles from the Gordon, Wis., railroad station to their cabin site.

Following high school, MacQuarrie attended Superior Normal School (later the University



## ON THE CONSERVATION FRONT

BY JIM EVRARD

of Wisconsin at Superior) and transferred to the University of Wisconsin at Madison. There he earned a bachelor's degree in journalism in 1924.

While in college, he worked in the summers for the *Superior Evening Telegram* newspaper that led to a permanent job following graduation. MacQuarrie rose rapidly in the newspaper,

becoming city editor in 1925 and managing editor in 1927, a job he held for nine years. He began writing outdoors stories that were first published in the *Milwaukee Journal* and, by 1931, in national magazines like *Outdoor Life* and *Sports Afield*.

In 1927, MacQuarrie married Helen Peck, the only child of Al Peck, a Superior businessman who introduced MacQuarrie to duck hunting. Peck, also a Canadian immigrant, was a respected community leader and consummate sportsman who later became the president of MacQuarrie's Old Duck Hunters Association, Inc. (which stood for incorrigible). A daughter, Sally, was born to the MacQuarries in 1929.

In 1936, Gordon MacQuarrie became the first outdoors editor of a major newspaper in the nation. He was lured to the *Milwaukee Journal* with the promise of higher wages and the freedom to devote all of his writing to the outdoors. He hated to leave his beloved northwestern Wisconsin, but returned as often as possible to the cabin on Middle Eau Claire Lake. His higher income allowed him and his father to rebuild and enlarge the cabin located in the heart of the pine barrens.

In an aside, Crowley has, for one of the few times in popular literature, described the Northwest Pine Barrens in detail. Too often, today's writing gives the impression that all of northern Wisconsin was one vast forest of huge white pine trees that disappeared during the logging era. In fact, many of the sandy areas at the time of European settlement were pine barrens — grassy brushland with scattered individual and clumps of jack and red pine maintained by frequent fires, set both by lightning and native Americans.

In 1939, Al Peck died from cancer. In 1942, MacQuarrie's wife and daughter contracted tuberculosis, a dreaded disease of the time. They were institutionalized in a hospital south of Superior, forcing MacQuarrie to make many grueling trips from Milwaukee to Superior.

Despite these emotional drains, MacQuarrie's writing increased and probably peaked

during the period. Evidently he sought refuge from his many problems in his writing.

Sally recovered from her disease, moved to Milwaukee, met a young reporter from the *Milwaukee Journal*, married, and eventually moved to California. Helen was a different matter. She never fully recovered, and her condition deteriorated. She committed suicide in 1952.

MacQuarrie's writing declined in the late 1940s and early 1950s, paralleling his wife's deteriorating health. He turned to alcohol as refuge, and his quick temper led to problems. His writing reached a low point in the early 1950s.

Following Helen's death, he began dating a young reporter at the *Journal*, Ellen Gibson, and they married in 1953. MacQuarrie's writing increased and he resumed writing the Old Duck Hunters Association stories that had been abandoned following Al Peck's death.

MacQuarrie continued to write his column, "Right off the Reel," for the *Milwaukee Journal* and continued writing stories for national magazines until he died of a heart attack in his Milwaukee apartment in late 1956.

MacQuarrie was popular in life and became more popular in death. His widow Ellen and Walter Scott of the Wisconsin Conservation Department formed the Gordon MacQuarrie Foundation in 1957, which granted a cash award and bronze medallion to writers for excellence in conservation writing. This award exists today and is administered by the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters. Among other recognition given to MacQuarrie was induction into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame and the Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame.

Of what importance and interest is MacQuarrie to today's sportsmen? MacQuarrie was a traditionalist who decried the gadgetry that was creeping into hunting and fishing even then. He believed in conservation and stated so in his writing. He was a nostalgic sentimentalist who believed in the spirituality and curative powers of nature. He believed that the experience outdoors far outweighed the fish and game brought home.

More importantly, MacQuarrie wrote about people hunting and fishing, especially in northwestern Wisconsin. His best writing was not "how to do it" or "me-and-Joe articles," but about the unique human characters found in duck marshes and trout streams. In this genre, MacQuarrie excelled.

Because of Crowley's efforts, I now know more about Gordon MacQuarrie and what motivated his writing. I also know more about the landscape in northwestern Wisconsin that was the backdrop for MacQuarrie's people-centered stories. Crowley's book is an excellent choice for those interested in the Wisconsin outdoors and outdoorsmen. Crowley has developed a web site ([gordonmacquarrie.com](http://gordonmacquarrie.com)), where more information about MacQuarrie is available.

Jim Evrard of Grantsburg is a retired DNR wildlife biologist.

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