

SPORTS

Lynn Burkhead — MacQuarrie and old duck hunters gone, not forgotten

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This week brought a sad anniversary in the outdoors world, although few in this era of instant news and social media trends seemed to notice.

Except for a small group of people on social media, fans of the late Gordon MacQuarrie, the Wisconsin outdoor writing legend who was the nation's first full-time newspaper outdoors writer as well as a widely-recognized magazine freelancer in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s.

It was the latter occupation that brought MacQuarrie his greatest and longest lasting fame as the man who penned a series of famous stories about the hunting and fishing exploits of the somewhat mythical, somewhat real Old Duck Hunters' Association, Inc.

And for the 491 members of the Old Duck Hunters Association Inc. group on Facebook — and yes, I'm a member — there was no way that the passage of Nov. 10 could go unnoticed.

Because it was on the night of Nov. 10, 1956 — exactly 65 years ago on Wednesday — that MacQuarrie died of a heart attack at the age of 56, silencing the Underwood typewriter that had written about the duck hunting, deer hunting, trout fishing, and even the ruffed grouse hunting — or partridge hunting, as Mac called it — exploits of MacQuarrie and his father-in-law, Al Peck.

Peck, an auto dealership owner in Superior, Wis., might have been somewhat fictionalized in MacQuarrie's ODHA stories, but he was very much a real person and an outdoors mentor to Mac. Known as "Mister President" and "Hizzonor" in the stories, Peck was usually the central figure in the tales set near MacQuarrie's lakeside cabin on the Middle Eau Claire Lake near Barnes, Wis.

In MacQuarrie's tales, Hizzonor was a man who was kind, mischievous, hardworking, a bit lazy, ornery, and a barrel of laughs all at once as he out hunted and out fished his son-in-law near their Superior, Wis. stomping grounds.

Some of the stories were hilarious like *To Set a Thief*, a tale of how Peck tried to outsmart an enterprising duck hunter trying to steal a valuable hunting spot. Others — *The Day I Burned the Oatmeal* and *Nothing to Do for Three Weeks* both come to mind — struck a far more serious and somber tone, dealing with the deeper issues of love and loss that all of us face in life.

In nearly every case, the stories contained the kind of writing magic that has made MacQuarrie a legend to many, stories that have been immortalized in a series of books like *Stories of the Old Duck Hunters*, *More Stories of the Old Duck Hunters*, *Last Stories of the Old Duck Hunters*, *MacQuarrie Miscellany*, *Fly Fishing with MacQuarrie*, and *The Gordon MacQuarrie Sporting Treasury*.

There's even an excellent biography about the man, *Gordon MacQuarrie: The Story of an Old Duck Hunter*, penned by Keith Crowley as well as two collections of Mac's newspaper stories and columns. Those two, *Right Off The Reel: Select Columns From Milwaukee Journal, 1936-1956* and *Dogs, Drink & Other Drivel*, have both been published in the last several years and will likely cap the publishing of Mac's works unless some forgotten treasure trove is discovered in an attic or basement somewhere.

Just how special was Mac's outdoor writing? Well, take a look at a handful of descriptions about his craft from the Barnes Area Historical Association website (www.bahamuseum.org/macquarrie-history), including this phrase: "He had an 'uncanny ability to make us want to join him in that icy November duck blind watching canvasbacks and bluebills slash into the decoys.'"

Or maybe these two: "He 'probably could have brought a smile to your face or a tear to your eye if he had written about paneling his basement" and "A 'masterful storyteller', he 'described his duck blinds and hunting sites in terms of what those places could do for your soul.'"

Pretty good praise for a man of Scottish-Canadian descent born in Superior, Wis. in 1900, a man whose many talents included being a champion pole vaulter in high school and a drummer in a band while in college.

After getting a journalism degree from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, MacQuarrie started on his career path as a reporter for his hometown *Superior Evening Telegram*, eventually moving on to the *Milwaukee Journal* in 1936 where he became the nation's first full time newspaper outdoors writer.

Over the next two decades, MacQuarrie became a very popular outdoors writer locally and across the nation, with his work regularly appearing in the big national outdoors publications of the day.

While his death in 1956 was untimely and unexpected--he had recently passed a physical according to Crowley's book and reportedly complained of deep fatigue to his wife before going to bed uncharacteristically early on the night of his death--Mac's impact continues to be felt to this very day.

In the years since his passing some 65 years ago, his stories continue to be occasionally reprinted in magazines and anthologies. He was also the first communicator inducted into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame, he was named one of the 100 distinguished alumni from the University of Wisconsin-Superior in 1993, he was inducted into the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame in 1998, and the University of Wisconsin renamed some wetlands after him as the Gordon MacQuarrie Memorial Wetlands in 2000.

What's more, the Barnes County Museum website even notes that Mac has even been awarded writing awards posthumously and even became a part of the Wisconsin Academy of Arts, Sciences and Letters, which now annually awards the Gordon MacQuarrie Award in his memory for someone who has made a "...distinguished contribution to and achievement in environmental communication."

I was introduced to MacQuarrie's works and became a fan many years ago in the 1980s, through reprints of the story Ducks? You Bat You! in the magazine of WHAT Ducks (Wetland Habitat Alliance of Texas) and The Bluebills Died at Dawn in an issue of Ducks Unlimited magazine.

Over time, other stories have become favorites of mine, tales that I simply must reread again and again like Canvasback Comeback, The Day I Burned the Oatmeal, The Mystery of the Missing Tackle, Upon the Earth Below, We Shall Gather at the Icehouse, In the Presence of Mine Enemies, and The Old Brown Mackinaw to name a few.

All of Mac's tales are as much a part of my outdoors experience over the years as my hunting license, my signed federal duck stamp, my battered Remington 870, or a favored duck call on the lanyard is. If a fall season comes and goes and I haven't sampled Mac's ability to turn commonplace events into outdoors literary magic, has it ever really been autumn?

In the end, as a man now in his mid-50s and with my own health ailments, I find myself realizing that there is more to hunting and fishing than whether or not I got a limit or how

many I may have caught and released.

Because of that, I find myself treasuring soul-stirring words from Mac like these from *The Bluebills Died at Dawn*.

One of those quotes is “Long live the bleak bitterness of such a morning. Long live the memory of that churlish dawn,” a reference to a particularly frigid late season duck hunt when the ducks kept piling into the decoys. I’ve been there at times, lost in my own thoughts as the wind sweeps over the decoys, trying to remember to relish the sunrise, to soak in the beautiful fall colors, and to enjoy the duck blind companionship of family and friends as wings begin to whisper overhead.

Those moments also stirred the soul of Gordon MacQuarrie, who reminded waterfowlers like me that a limit on a duck strap isn’t always the point of a hunting experience: “I pity the duck hunter who goes for ducks alone. I pity the duck hunter who has not filled his being with the dawn magic. I pity the one who cares not, or knows not, what he has killed.”

Amen to that Gordon MacQuarrie. The gadwalls and mallards I hunt and the places I haunt with my decoy spreads are certainly different here in Texas and quite unlike a snow covered marsh in northwestern Wisconsin when the bluebills and canvasbacks were sweeping in on a bitter arctic wind.

But there’s no doubt that the thoughts and feelings experienced by yours truly are much the same, even 65 years down the road.

And on the eve of the 2021 Texas duck season opener this weekend, all that’s left to do for yours truly is to reread a favored story or two, followed by a faint smile and a quiet whisper of “Thanks again Mac!”

For this duck hunter, you’re gone, but certainly not forgotten.