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We Celebrate
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Lee Johnston: Serving Nature

Lee Allan Johnston

Born: December 17, 1939

Died: July 4, 2024 (Age 84)

School: Couillardville Grade School, Oconto High School

Military: Army National Guard

Married: Donna Sadowski Child: Infant son; Lee Jr.

Profession: Forester with WI DNR, Owner: Johnston Forestry

Member: Wisconsin Woodland Owners Association

Lee's professional commitment to protecting and nurturing his beloved Wisconsin forests had occupied his full attention for more than half a century; but his personal devotion to all things natural spanned virtually his entire life of some eight -and-a-half decades.



Remembrance by Leon Janssen

I suppose everyone has warm memories of someone they once knew, especially friends from their youth. In my case, Lee Johnston immediately springs to mind.

We became close pals from an early age, bonding as youngsters at the one-room Couillardville School. Lee and I were classmates from the first grade through our junior

year at Oconto High School when my Mom and I moved to Appleton. But our close friendship survived even this disruption and endured until Lee's untimely passing in 2024.

Perhaps the most gratifying subsequent encounter I had with Lee was a personal interview session more than a decade ago to collect his reminisces for the publication of *Machine Shed Memories*.

We shared a rollicking good time recalling our earlier years together and the many pleasures of growing up in Couillardville. This "remembrance" touches upon many of the highlights from this conversation and will serve as a tribute to this remarkable man who contributed so much to preserving the natural environment of our area.

Setting out in life

“I was born in Green Bay in 1939,” Lee recalled, “and we lived upstairs above the granary at Ma and Pa Johnston’s (his grandparents) in the winter. Because of my Dad’s work, we lived at the fire tower at Stiles in the summer.”

Lee’s father, Allan, was a forest ranger, so the family spent lots of time in the woods of Oconto County. Perhaps that is why Lee developed his own deep love of the outdoors, a passion which would eventually lead him to pursue a similar path in life as his father’s.

I recalling Lee telling me some of the stories he heard about his early years. “Though I was too young to remember these events myself,” he said, “I’m told when I was out riding my tricycle during the summers at the Stiles fire tower I would pick up snakes and things like that just to satisfy my curiosity.”

The Johnston family moved to Couillardville, in 1945, where Lee’s uncle Elmer had been the cheesemaker at the local cheese factory. When the factory was sold, Lee’s mother and father bought the house and cheese factory building so that Lee could go to school in Couillardville. Their house was

just a few buildings from the schoolhouse, so Lee was one of the few kids who could go home for lunch every day. “I had a well-worn path from our house to the school that went through the Jacquart’s backyard next door,” he said. “Whenever Mrs. Jacquart would do laundry, she would leave an open spot where my trail went under the clothesline so I could get home for lunch and back to school again!”

Lee was involved in a youthful misadventure at his new home along the Oconto River that stuck with him throughout the rest of his life. It seems that he loved to collect arrowheads in the field just across the road from the house. According to family lore, one day as George Flynn plowed the plot, Lee followed along and filled his little red wagon with human skulls and bones that had been unearthed by the plow from an ancient Indian burial mound. After being vigorously reprimanded by his parents, Lee took his treasures back and reburied them where they came from. He never repeated that transgression, then or later, developing a fine sense of respect for the native peoples who first tamed the wilderness and created strong cultures and fulfilling lives. Like almost

all of the kids in the area, myself included, Lee received his basic education at the Couillardville School. Several teachers still stuck in his mind many years later. “I remember Mrs. Flynn, our teacher in grades 1 through 3,” he said. “She was a real good teacher, as was Miss Detaeje, who soon became Mrs. Janssen. She seemed very young when she first came – not much older than some of us in the upper grades at the time. But she was an all-around good teacher.” Lee also had fond memories of many of the kids who shared his classroom at Couillardville School. “I especially recall such good friends as Leona Konkell, Leah Huberty, Leslie Burns, the Matravers boys, and, of course, Leon Janssen.”

Lee remembered a shared adventure from those years when we thought we might be arrested. “I was at your house and we noticed a huge flock of starlings had settled into the apple trees,” Lee chuckled. “You went into the house, brought out a shotgun, and fired once toward the birds. Almost immediately the local game warden drove up to find out what was going on. He was concerned we might be firing at a protected species. So we had to go pick up a couple of dead starlings to show him.”

Finding his way

As reported in *Machine Shed Memories*, “Everyone who knew him remembered Allan as a quiet man who was happiest in the woods looking after the natural environment.”

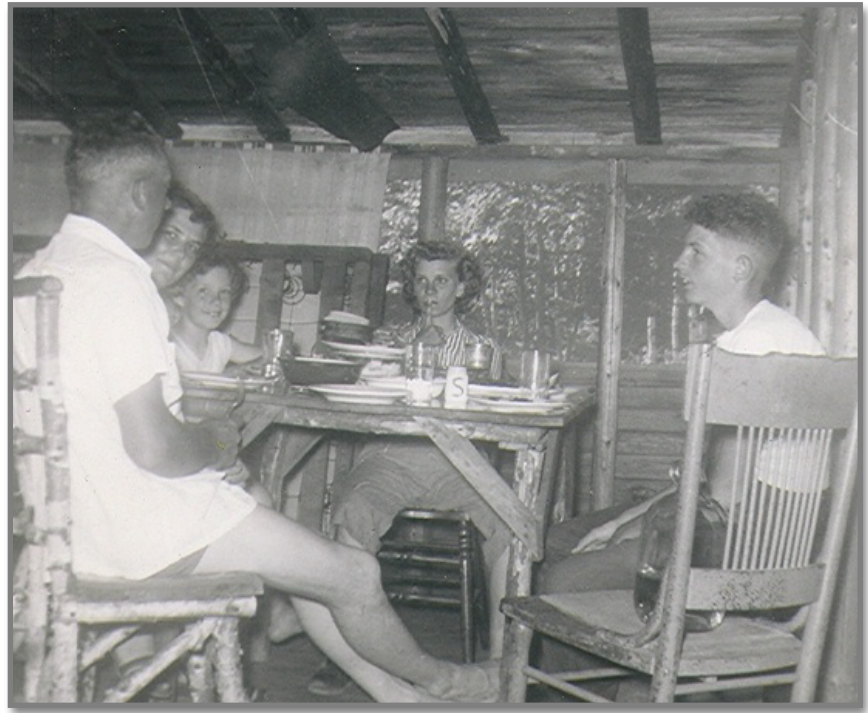


Allan shared his love of the woods

That passion for the outdoors led him to a varied career in public service, including as a fire warden for the State of Wisconsin, a conservationist, and a field representative for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The example Allen set no doubt rubbed off on his son, eventually leading Lee to a similar career in forestry and conservation. More about that in a moment.

In the early 1930s, Allan and Ruth had acquired a share in a



Lee's mother Ruth, sister Lavon, neighbor Doris Detaeje and Lee listening to Allan in their special cabin

cabin “Up North,” near Eagle River, where the growing family was to spend as much time as their schedules allowed. As the other families involved also grew and the title became opaque, the property was relinquished for back taxes. Descendants of the original owners then bought it back with a clear title and divided it among themselves. One group took the old cabin and another several building lots. But Lee's mom and dad opted for a heavily forested tract that included some lake frontage. That's where they built a cabin of their own that

became a centerpiece of their family's lives.

“After high school, I worked at various odd jobs such as at grocery stores in Oconto, helping my dad cut pulp wood, and things like that,” Lee said. “Then I joined the National Guard, took basic training in California and infantry training in Louisiana, and served on active duty for six years.”

Lee's extensive collection of native artifacts including arrow and spear points and other tools was donated to the Oconto County Historical Society.

Into the woods

In 1965, when Lee left the service, he did a stint as a deckhand on Great Lakes freighters. But his inbred passion for the fields and forests of his youth, nurtured by his dad's example, soon led him ashore to take a position with the Wisconsin Conservation Department. His early role was in fire control – manning the fire tower at the Pound ranger station for several seasons. “It was mostly seasonal at the time,” he explained. “I usually started in the spring and worked through the deer season, either on fire watch or registering deer at the ranger station.”

After several years, Lee's job went full time. He continued working at Pound a few years longer until his fellow ranger at Stiles – Fritz Bello — retired and he moved down to replace him. “I worked here until the tower was burned down in 1976,” Lee commented. “We saved a lot of the equipment and eventually stored it into a rental shed in Stiles. I continued to work from home assisting the forester in the Oconto office.”

When a new ranger station was completed in Oconto Falls, Lee took over there, continuing to monitor his beloved Wisconsin woodlands and helping keep them safe.

We occasionally had opportunities to renew our friendship whenever I found time to pay brief visits to my youthful hometown.

after we were married, but we couldn't be working in the same building as a couple,” Lee chuckled. “So she quit and started her own business as a consulting forester. I joined her after retiring several years later and we had a thriving business for a number of years doing what we both loved.”



Lee and Donna

His path to the future now firmly established, Lee recognized that the time had come for another commitment to the future. So, in 1982, married Donna Sadowski who was a forester herself, working for the Marinette County Forestry Department. “She also worked for the State of Wisconsin for a couple of years

Donna unexpectedly passed away, in early 2012, bringing an end to a 30-year marriage literally “made in Heaven.” Her death also signaled the imminent change to his life in service to the woods but did not change his love of the forests.

Lee was one of those rare souls who knew from an early age what was most important - a priceless gift he had inherited from his parents, especially his father Allan. Everyone should admire and praise him for that.