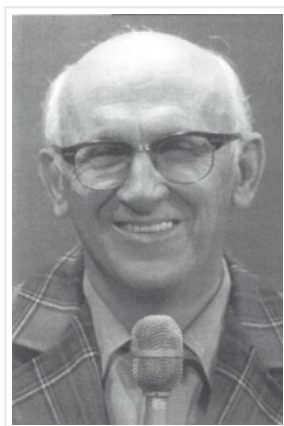




OUTDOOR WRITERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

Gene Little Days

“Call it luck if you wish, but good things just seemed to come Gene’s way.”



By Gordon Charles

Eugene “Gene” Little was one of those rare individuals who was loved by everyone who ever met him. A quiet but gentle man, he was a true gentleman whose life was devoted to the creation of a world of peace and quiet through his love of the outdoors.

Gene was a multi-talented communicator, working with words and cameras to show his fellow man how best to learn about and appreciate the outdoors and its resources.

He was one of the mainstays of the Michigan Outdoor Writers Association (MOWA) and, later, of OWAA after being sponsored for membership by Jerry Chiappetta. All of us prized his friendship.

Little and I traveled on numerous outdoor adventures together. Never once did I see him lose his temper. Gentle persuasion was how he preferred to get results. Nature was always right when opposed by shallow human thinking and efforts to wrong the role of natural resources.

Born Nov. 1, 1914 in southern Ohio, Little acquired knowledge of the outdoors and its workings that was mostly self-taught. During his early years he worked as a printer that ran his own small Michigan newspaper. Along the way he mastered the use of cameras to capture wildlife images. His enthusiasm then led to an extra career in cinematography and television.

When Mort Neff retired from his popular “Michigan Outdoors” television show, Little joined Chiappetta in continuing it. Gene also kept busy writing newspaper and magazine articles as well as outdoor releases for the news services. He served as editor of Michigan Out-of-Doors magazine for Michigan United Conservation Clubs before leaving to become outdoor editor of the Lansing State Journal.

Little was elevated to president of MOWA and took on leadership of the Michigan Bear Hunters Association for several years. It was during this same period when Don Ingle began calling him "Papa Bear."

At one of the bear hunters' meetings, Gene was approached by a member who asked if he would help him sell an 80-acre plot of wildlands in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. He took one look at the price of 1,200 and immediately bought it himself.

Not long after that, he invited me to ride along when he drove to the Pine Stump Junction area to inspect it. The plot included an old lumbering camp building and a beaver pond containing brook trout. Deciding to spend the night on one of the old bunks, we spread our sleeping bags. The old cabin had plenty of gaps and mosquitoes began to fly in. But Gene was prepared, lighting a coil of repellent that burned all night. We slept until nearly daylight before it finally burned out and the skeeters launched new attacks.

Later, Gene and his sons decided the old cabin could be properly repaired and covered the exterior with snug siding. The cabin door, however, was tilted off to one side. When replacing it in the old frame, Gene cut it to fit, even though it was far from square. In pondering what to name the new retreat, Gene came up with the perfect one: Slipshot Manor.

Nature films were always a priority for Gene. One time while riding along with him in northern Ontario on a dark, rainy day, I remarked how it would be nearly impossible to shoot any footage of wildlife, even if we should see something. A short distance later we rounded a curve, and there stood a big bull moose with a great rack of antlers.

Gene stopped his truck and began to ready his camera as I watched in amazement. So help me, the rain quit, and a bright ray of sunshine poured down on that moose as Gene began filming it. Once he had enough footage and laid his camera on the seat, the rain began to fall again as the sun vanished. For a change, I was almost speechless!

Such things, however, seemed to happen to Gene almost routinely, and all of us began to refer to such weather breaks as "Gene Little Days." Call it luck if you wish, but good things just seemed to come Gene's way.

One time he set up in a blind near a fox den, hoping to get footage of the fox family; that project was set aside temporarily by a deer. A big doe, obviously pregnant, walked into view and gave birth to twin fawns, right in front of Gene and his camera. He caught the entire episode, which, he admitted, was a once-in-a-lifetime happening.

Frequently fishing and exploring new places from a canoe, Gene was often joined by Jerry Chiappetta, who usually sat in the bow. When Jerry finally decided to move out of Michigan, Gene phoned to report he had already found a replacement for him. "I was crushed to think he had replaced me so fast," Jerry said. "Then I learned he had just put a cement block in front of the canoe and said it worked fine."

I went along on another canoe trip to explore a remote lake in the Upper Peninsula. Fishing was slow until we figured cold water was the reason and the shallows might be warmer. As he slowly paddled along, Gene directed "Cast over there, Gordie. That log looks like a good place." He was about right about that, but the "log" turned out to be a big muskie.

My plug landed right in front of the fish, which merely opened its mouth and clamped down on it. I was using light spinning tackle and was sure the powerful fish would break my fragile line. Luck was with me, though, as the muskie had grabbed the lure crosswise so none of its sharp teeth could cut the line. After a long and careful battle, I landed what was the first and last muskellunge I ever caught.

Gene also was a hunter, preferring small game with shotgun or camera. One day, he waited in a swamp with his camera on a tripod, hoping to catch some close-up action. A showshoe hare not only came his way but stopped directly under the tripod. It only left when the howling hounds came too close. "I hardly ever find such cooperative rabbits or anything else," he said, "but I did get some great footage!"

Always a devoted family man, Gene met his future wife, Hazel at a Cincinnati Bible school. When they wed, he was 21 while she was 19. They shared many happy years and raised four sons: Roger, Ronnie and Richard, along with daughters Roshell and Roberta.

When Gene learned he had incurable cancer, he took the news calmly. Those of us who knew and loved him decided he wanted to do one last thing for him. It was Ingle who suggested creating the "Papa Bear Award" and giving the first one to Gene as a show of affection and a tribute to his lifetime of caring for natural resources in so many ways. Today it remains the highest of MOWA honors and is awarded only sparingly to members for "excellence in crafts."

Gene Little died peacefully on April 9, 1979. When his memorial services were held near his Barryton, Mich., home, many of his outdoor friends attended along with family members to pay their last respects. It was an outdoor ceremony, and a steady rain was falling.

Then, just before services began, the rain quit and the sun came out. And, as though on a signal, a flock of giant Canadian geese came winging and honking in their familiar "V" formation, like a special wildlife salute.

We all bowed our heads in silent tribute until someone remarked in hushed tones, "It's another genuine Gene Little Day with the weather, too."

An OWAA member since 1954, Gordon Charles is retired outdoor editor of the Traverse City (Mich.) Record-Eagle. His weekly column, "Outdoors with Gordie," is self-syndicated in 15 newspapers. His latest book, Stalking and Capturing the Wild Pun, was published earlier this year. Charles was the subject of a Legends piece, written by David Richey, that appeared in the January 2005 issue of OU. It can be read at <https://www.owaa.org>.

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