

RALPH STEUCK: IN MEMORIAM

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On 2 October 1979, ten days before his 86th birthday, Saskatchewan lost one of its most widely known native naturalists, Ralph Steuck. As a Past President of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society he will be well-remembered by its members, and the readers of the *Blue Jay* magazine.

The thousands of visitors to his bird sanctuary and museum, as well as the countless school children and adults who heard and saw his illustrated lectures on wildlife, will remember him.

Residents of the province will remember him because an island bears his name in recognition of his work in the field of conservation.

"Sleepy Hollow" was the name Ralph Steuck chose for the bird sanctuary he developed in the heart of Abernethy. When he retired from Kerry Farm at McRorie, not far away, he and his wife transformed a piece of vacant property into a place of beauty that not only brought joy to themselves and the townsfolk, but attracted visitors from far and near.

While Mrs. Steuck took full responsibility for the garden, Ralph devoted his energies to the needs of the wild geese. "Once a goose man, always a goose man," he continually reminded his friends. He wanted his geese near him at all times, claiming that in manners, morals and memory they were superior to man.

Surrounding the sanctuary with a secure fence and tall reeds, he built a dugout and landing strip for geese. His first permanent guests, Maggie

and Jiggs, their wings clipped, over the years attracted many others from migrant flocks as they travelled over the area going north or south. Two of the trapped geese, Hiawatha and Queenie, Ralph donated to the Wascana Waterfowl Park, as a nucleus of the congregation that remains there today.

As friend and overseer, Ralph became so studiously aware of the sounds the geese made that he interpreted them. They became known as the talking geese and provided much amusement to visitors as he carried on conversations with his feathered friends.

A long time photographer of wildlife, he borrowed a movie camera from Fred Bard, Director of the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History, to film a Whooping Crane that visited the Abernethy area in 1950. From then on he became fascinated with movie photography. Some of his footage was acquired by Walt Disney and the CBC. While his basement had been used as a place for his taxidermy activity for years, with his increasing interest in film making, he planted a "field" of oats to act as a stage in his basement where he might capture the live antics of small rodents.

Ralph claimed that he was busier in his sanctuary at Abernethy than he had ever been on the farm. He found he must organize his time to continue lecturing to students and entertaining visitors to his museum and goose sanctuary, to which he had added cages for injured birds and hibernating mammals.



Ralph Steuck talking to one of his Canada Geese at Sleepy Hollow Sanctuary, Abernethy, Saskatchewan.
Fenton R. Vance

For years he carried on, travelling over the country in his two-wheeled, camouflaged trailer filming and visiting farmers, urging them to establish goose sanctuaries, capturing animals for zoos and caring for his live animals.

Among his many safaris were several to Churchill to capture lemmings and to Elk Island to lasso buf-

falo. These were to fill requests from all over Canada as he did for mate pairs of his domesticated "wild" goose flock.

No firm plans have been made for the future of his animals or the museum. The sincere sympathy of a members of the SNHS is extended to his bereaved family.