

Saying goodbye

by Robin West

The February 25-26 edition of the *Clarion* printed an excellent obituary for long-time Alaskan David L. Spencer. Dave died on February 9th of this year at the age of 84. Dave was more than an Alaskan pioneer was; he was also a personal hero and a friend. It will be hard to say good-bye.

The Kenai National Moose Range was created in 1941, only a few days after Pearl Harbor was bombed. As the Country went to war, national priorities precluded the timely staffing of the new Refuge. Dave enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1942 and became a naval aviator and flight instructor, teaching new pilots to fly multi-engine amphibious aircraft. The flying skills Dave acquired in the military, complimented by conservation training from some of the nation's best, including Aldo Leopold, uniquely qualified Dave to be the first Refuge Manager at Kenai. He left his position as a flyway pilot biologist in the Everglades National Wildlife Refuge (later to become a National Park), arrived at his new post in Kenai in 1948 and began in earnest the work at hand.

Although there were 14 National Wildlife Refuges in the Alaska Territory in 1948, some dating back to the early 1900's, Dave was only the second manager appointed anywhere in the Territory. Equipment, facilities, and staff were absent and Dave pieced together the early refuge management program by innovation and hard work. Since he was one of a very small cadre of Territorial wildlife professionals, work often took him to other places in Alaska, such as the Yukon Delta, Kodiak, and the Aleutian Islands.

I enjoy looking back over the old reports, one submitted by Dave in 1949, which described supplementing log structures with surplus military Quonset huts, development of an economic use plan, law enforcement patrols, fire planning and training, sealing of beaver hides, Cook Inlet waterfowl surveys, surveying moose on the Kenai Peninsula and elk on Afognak Island, and providing information to the public.

Dave and wife Eloise homesteaded near Beaver Creek where they raised their family and lived until transferred to Anchorage in 1968. Life in the early years was much different than now: fewer people, different values, and a different pace to life. When Dave

first arrived in the area, there was no road from Anchorage to the Kenai Peninsula. A typical day for Dave began with him using a hand pump to fill two 50 gallon water barrels on the second story of his partially plumbed home.

Dave Spencer had vision. He was the single most responsible person that shaped the National Wildlife Refuge System that exists in Alaska today. He fought tirelessly to preserve the refuge lands for wildlife, fisheries, and public use. He led the refuge planning effort which designated the Andy Simons Research Natural Area that eventually became the Andy Simons Unit of the Kenai Wilderness Area within the refuge. Andy was a well-respected guide who operated early last century on the Kenai Peninsula, and provided an early voice for setting aside of some of the nation's finest wild lands for wildlife and wildlife-dependent recreation.

Dave also worked to establish the Swanson River and Swan Lake Canoe Routes. These areas later became the Canoe Lakes Unit of the Kenai Wilderness Area. In 1997 the area was re-named in honor of Dave as the Dave Spencer Unit of the Kenai Wilderness Area.

Dave spent 26 of his 34 years of federal service in Alaska. After managing the Kenai Refuge, Dave served as the regional supervisor for all Alaskan refuges. During this tenure Dave helped add Arctic, Cape Newenham, Clarence Rhode, Izembek, and Simeonof Refuges to the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Stories about Dave abound. One of my favorites involves Dave lassoing a mountain goat swimming in Cooper Lake and, after sheathing the animal's horns with pieces of garden hose and securing it with ropes, flew it to Kodiak Island as part of a transplant effort.

Another great story illustrates Dave's innovation and leadership, when the integrity of the Russian River fishery was threatened by a naturally forming diversion in the headwaters. Without action, the Russian River would have been regularly filled with glacier silt that would have destroyed the fishery. Dave, with the help of several other adventurous types, worked to get a surplus D-7 Cat into the area and built a dam to keep the Skilak Glacier run-off going into the Resurrection

River rather than into Upper Russian Lake. Dave is now gone, but the old Cat and earthen dam remain there today, nearly four and half decades later as a testament to men who did what it took to get the job done.

I have said good-bye to Dave, but I know that I will never forget him. His past work has not only made my

current job easier, it has helped assure a quality of life for Alaskans well into the future.

Robin West is the current manager of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.