

When Bill Stevens first came to visit the Elk Foundation's headquarters back in the early '90s, he had his heart set on a dinner of fresh-caught fish. He dined that night on grilled squawfish and peamouth chubs. That's akin to going out after greenheads in the fabled flooded timber of Arkansas and shooting a mess of coots and mergansers. Then eating them. With gusto.

Bill was in Missoula—the town that gave rise to *A River Runs Through It*—for a site visit in his capacity as Federal Premium Ammunition's Conservation Manager. He loved to fish. So did his host, Ron Marcoux, RMEF's vice president of lands and conservation at the time. Where better to spend a day discussing the nascent partnership than in a raft on a river? It was one of those cloudless, blazing July days that are so wonderful if you're in the business of renting inner-tubes and so brutal if you're a fishing guide. No bugs hatch and the trout sink to the basement of the deepest holes and lay there displaying all the vital signs of tire-irons.

As they were launching, Bill mentioned that he sure would like to eat a few catch-of-the-day Big Sky trout. Ron did his best and managed to get Bill into a couple of rainbows slightly larger than refrigerator magnets. They went back into the river. Enter the squawfish. In weather that will send even 8-inch trout into a snit, king-size squawfish (now known as the northern pikeminnow) are still out on patrol, gobbling whatever comes their way. Bill was soon tight to a fine specimen. He regarded its unlovely form in the net then asked, "Are they edible?"

"Bill, no Montanan would eat one," Ron replied. "They're probably choked with bones. But if you're game, by God, we'll throw it on the barbecue."

Bill soon boated several more and sent them into the cooler. Then he caught a fish with an even less heroic profile and a tiny pursed mouth. Being an old fisheries biologist, Ron quickly identified it as a peamouth chub. It went in the cooler, too. That night on Ron's patio, Bill kept remarking with relish about how fine those fish tasted. Understand this was coming from a man born and raised in the Land of Ten Thousand Lakes and used to eating sublime walleye fillets. "He conned me into trying one," Ron says. "They were ... good."

That's how it was with Bill. He didn't stand on ceremony, he was willing to take a chance and he loved to laugh. In 1991, the Elk Foundation was still just a raghorn of an outfit, but Bill saw the promise and forged a partnership. Federal put the RMEF's name and logo on select boxes of elk ammunition and donated a part of each sale to our mission. They put their name on the line in a way that made every RMEF member proud.

"I really believe that more hunters should take an active role in managing and protecting the resources," Bill said. "More people need to join organizations and put their money where their mouth is."

For 20 years, Bill Stevens and Federal did just that for the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. All

told, through cash donations, sponsorships, licensing, advertising and donated ammunition, Federal and its parent company ATK have now invested more than \$625,000 to help keep elk country wild and our hunting heritage strong. And the RMEF was just one of many hunter-conservation groups Bill stood tall for. In 1976, he spearheaded the launch of the 4-H Shooting Sports Program. The 4-H motto is "to make the best better," and that fit Bill to a T. Thanks to his passion and the support of companies like Federal, more than 300,000 young people in 46 states now get a hands-on introduction to the shooting sports every year, and 4-H has taught more than 4 million kids the pleasures of responsible shooting and hunting. Bill also played a pivotal role in the contentious switch from lead shot to steel for all waterfowl. That took guts, but he believed it was the right thing to do for ducks, shorebirds and raptors.

That's the sort of toughness that growing up on a small family farm in Minnesota will teach you. He got up early, worked hard and learned firsthand that you reap what you sow, that good stewardship was the key to good harvests. He also acquired a healthy appetite for hunting and fishing. That appetite held strong into college, where he earned a degree in Fisheries and Wildlife Management from the University of Minnesota. From there he joined the Army in 1962. Thanks to his background, Bill pulled Game Conservation duty at Fort Hood, Texas. His mission: manage the Fort's fish and wildlife. With over 200,000 acres of whitetail, quail and bass habitat on the Fort, you can bet he took an active hand in that management.

After the Army Bill got a job back home researching the cyclical nature of ruffed grouse populations for the state of Minnesota. Aided by a series of fine dogs and his trusty shotgun, he continued that research independently every fall for half a century.

In 1965 Bill signed on with Federal. For the next four decades, his main duty was promoting conservation and shooting sports. They couldn't have picked a better man for the job. After 42 years with Federal, he retired in 2007. Among scores of well-deserved honors, he was the RMEF's 2010 Conservationist of the Year.

"Professionally, Bill was a person who didn't speak often. He would listen carefully. Then when he was ready to speak he always had sound logic behind him and was creative on how to approach issues—and didn't pull any punches when it was warranted," Ron says. "He was a staunch supporter of RMEF and its mission, but was always one to test us so that we thought bigger and aimed higher. He was a true wildlife conservationist who left his mark on our world."

Bill lost his battle with cancer on the eve of Independence Day. He once said, "October just isn't long enough." I'd like to think he's out roaming with the dogs he loved. I hope the birches are glowing the way they do in October, and there are ruffed grouse in the shadows. May the bulls be bugling. And heck, may there be a few squawfish finning there, too.