

Wednesday, August 27, 2008



I had a wonderful conversation with Jim Richards at his home. He is passionate about whatever he does. Jim was born in Oshawa. His parents were Norm Richards and Hilda Bowers. He has one sister Judy Davidson. He worked at General Motors from 1961-97 doing many things. He was a Quality Inspector. He worked on the Newspaper. He worked in the hourly employment department putting together a two and a half hour training movie for safety, general production and robotics. He did the video and script for potential employees. He worked as a Librarian in the Engineering Department.

Jim is passionate about the environment and conservation. For 32 years he fought the Provincial, Federal and Municipality to save the marshland at McLaughlin Bay. Jim was Founder and Executive Director of the Second Marsh Defense Association (SMDA). Under Jim's leadership they fought off 7 different corporations. Then GM took out an option to buy the marshland at McLaughlin Bay only if they didn't get involved in the controversy. After much negotiation with Jim and the SMDA, GM bought the property, agreeing to leave 51% as public open space, to plant trees, to promote wildlife and only to use 49% for passive development. So the east side of McLaughlin Bay was saved and GM built their new offices. Jim said, "As a result of all of this the President of GM wanted to go further and open up walking trails and make it wheelchair accessible.



Jim Richards

He invited me to come to the new offices and form a one man department to look after this as Manager of the McLaughlin Bay Wildlife Reserve (1992-97). It was very successful and gave a lot of good green publicity for GM Canada. The East side of the marsh behind their corporate headquarters became a showcase." What a tribute to Jim and all those men and women who had worked so hard for so long against insurmountable obstacles to save at least some of the marshlands for future generations. Jim's battles for the environment and conservation are not over. He said the last 2 years he has been fighting against having an incinerator in Courtice. He has been on the Board of Directors for the Orono Crown Lands Trust for two years.

Jim married Sherri Harkin of Oshawa. They moved to Orono in 1967. Jim said, "I enjoy the whole sense of community here." They have two children and two grandchildren. I asked Jim about his wildlife photography. He said, "I guess I would credit that to my father who was quite a fisherman. I went out with him. I got bored after two hours so he would take me ashore and let me wander while he fished. I discovered all kinds of things and that led me later to photograph nature."

I asked him how he got interested in birds. He said, "I collected bird's eggs when I was 10. I started from there to have an interest in birds and wildlife. This has taken me to most of the U.S., South America, and various places in the Canadian Arctic." He has been to the Central Arctic 16 times. He said, "I get a big charge out of all that stuff. I love the peace and tranquility, all that space and all that wildlife. When I go, there are carpets of wildflowers every-where and birds everywhere doing their thing unaccustomed to human beings. I can pick a bird up from its nest and take pictures of the babies. This is my church." Jim said that going to the Arctic is for him a spiritual journey that he tries to take every year.

Over the many years Jim has received numerous awards for his wetlands activities, conservation and wildlife. He has written and co-authored many books and articles over the years. He would say to us, "Pursue your dream. In my case I have a whole lot of little goals but I'm not trying to change the world. The goals I set are achievable. I usually have 4 or 5 projects on the go."

Jim is good friends with Don Lycett, Paul Jones, Ziggy Block, John Slater, Robbie Robinson, Ory Holland, Pat Lycett, Keith West, Gord Lowery and Marilyn Han-cock. Many are coffee buddies. Jim does a lot of birding in the area with Bruno Kern from Courtice, Mike Tobin from Port Perry and Mike McEvoy from Oshawa.

Jim is energetic, enthusiastic, creative and very interesting to sit and chat with. He said to me "I could die right now and not have one regret. I had a super childhood and a wonderful family." Jim is a remarkable man who has pursued his dream and is passionate about everything he gets involved in from conservation and the environment, to wildlife photography and writing. He has made sacrifices. His body of work will stand the test of time and will benefit generations yet to be born.