

## *Dr. W. E. (Wally) Johnson*

1923–1989



the University of Wisconsin. Under the supervision of Dr. Arthur Hasler, he completed his Ph.D. studies in 1954. He accepted in that year a U.S. National Science Foundation post-doctoral fellowship to work at the Pacific Biological Station and a year later was hired as a full time scientist. Within a few years of arriving in Nanaimo, Wally made his decision to stay in Canada and he became a Canadian citizen.

Wally was strongly influenced by the world-renowned Dr. Bill Ricker. He first met Dr. Ricker as a student and it was this meeting that attracted him to Nanaimo where Dr. Ricker worked. They became close friends as well as colleagues. Both played in the Nanaimo symphony orchestra. Wally used to delight in telling one of his favorite stories about how Dr. Ricker asked the conductor of the orchestra what instrument he needed, then went home and learned how to play it in about six months. Later in life Wally's musical talents were enjoyed by others while he extemporaneously performed with a jazz band in Hong Kong while on one of his many trips to Southeast Asia.

In the late 1950's and early 1960's Wally spent most of his time at Babine Lake on the Skeena River system studying the production of juvenile sockeye salmon. He loved his work and he loved the lake. He also had great respect and fondness for the local native Indians. Wally always expected his research would benefit both native and non-native fishermen on the Skeena. It is interesting that throughout his career this desire to apply fisheries science to management issues for the benefit of man never left him.

In 1961 he married Gerd-Elise Larsen after the field season at Babine Lake, and they promptly left for the lake the next spring to get there before the lake turned over. Gerd and Wally built a cottage at Babine and returned to it many times. The "cottage" could rival a resort in size, reflecting that Wally always did everything on a grand scale. His association with the Babine area resulted in world-class research publications that brought him an award from the American Fisheries Society, and came to fruition in a ten million dollar project aimed at increasing sockeye salmon production through use of man-made spawning channels.

During the days at Babine, Wally developed a fondness for hunting. He would hike up into the mountains to seek mountain goats and prowl the lowlands around the lake for moose. On one occasion while cruising down the lake in the company of Dr. A. W. (Alf) Needler, a former Director of the Pacific Biological Station and Deputy Minister of Fisheries for Canada, a moose was spotted on the shoreline. Both Wally and Alf raised their rifles and fired simultaneously. The argument was never settled as to whose bullet felled the moose.

It was only a matter of time before a person of Wally's calibre would be asked to become involved in research management.

The fisheries science and management community lost a dynamic personality with the sudden death at age 66 of Dr. Wally Johnson, in Vancouver, British Columbia, on September 14, 1989. Wally was unique among fisheries scientists. Those who met him never forgot him. He was alive with ideas and his energy was boundless. His accomplishments as a scientist and as an administrator will influence our science long after we are gone.

Wally was born June 10, 1923, in Osseo, Wisconsin, U.S.A. After serving in the U.S. Army from 1942 to 1946, he attended

He was never afraid to express his views on science, on management, or any other topic even if they were contrary to accepted opinion. He was a man of wit and vision and never afraid of taking risks.

Early in 1965 he was called to Ottawa to assist the former Fisheries Research Board with the planning of a new freshwater fisheries research institute. There is little doubt that the clarity of his thinking and his pragmatic approach to science greatly contributed to the establishment of the Freshwater Institute in Winnipeg. As its first Director, Wally had total freedom to recruit the research staff, an opportunity he used to the full. Later in his career he liked to remind over zealous bureaucrats of these marvelous times, when things were readily accomplished without the benefit of their ministrations.

A number of scientists now in the Canada Department of Fisheries and Oceans was hired either directly or indirectly as a result of the establishment of the Freshwater Institute. As always, Wally shot for the stars. He wanted the best people he could find and he got them, whether from North America or abroad. Wally had that rare gift of getting people to do just about anything he asked of them. A combination of respect and charm or, if that didn't work, a good joke and a drink of scotch had you working evenings and weekends. The Institute's staff was stimulated by him and the formative years of the Institute were times of great excitement.

The lure of the west coast was, however, never stilled. Wally accepted the directorship of the Pacific Biological Station in 1973. Twenty-four years after his first visit, he was back, married with three children.

In addition to being a Director of two of Canada's prominent fisheries and aquatic sciences research laboratories, Wally was deeply involved with a CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency) project in Thailand. He was responsible for the establishment and construction of the National Inland Fisheries Institute in Bangkok and became influential in many aspects of fisheries development in that country. He was revered by the Thais. For his assistance and contributions in fisheries research and development, he received from the King of Thailand the highest civilian award available to a foreigner. Recently, the library at the Inland Fisheries Institute in Bangkok was named the *W. E. Johnson Library*.

Wally moved from Director of the Pacific Biological Station to Director General of the Pacific Region after four years. It was a turbulent time in the late 1970's and Wally met the challenges head-on. The extension of coastal states' fisheries jurisdiction, the salmon enhancement program, declining salmon

stocks, and a herring fishery that seemed headed for disaster were some of the major issues to confront Wally in his new post. Wally made decisions. He provided direction. Staff and fishermen knew that if he gave you his word "you could take it to the bank." As Director General the challenges took their toll and in 1980 Wally accepted an Order-in-Council appointment to become the first head of FORAC (Fisheries and Oceans Research Advisory Council). Reporting directly to the Minister, he formed a council of the best fisheries advisors in the country. The council provided recommendations to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans similar to the function of the old Fisheries Research Board but without its independence. Wally was a particular favourite of the Minister of Fisheries, again, because of his experience and his incisive logic.

Wally retired in 1985 and subsequently accepted a position as a contractor to coordinate the Northern Fisheries Project in Thailand, his second home. Forced by an illness to return home after two years, Wally was at once appointed as the Canadian member of the first Canadian-U.S. Free Trade Panel, dealing with the controversial Canadian landing requirement for Pacific coast salmon and herring.

Before the Panel finished its work and with Wally already planning his return to Thailand, he died of a heart attack while strolling in his garden as he loved to do.

In all his tasks Wally has been an intrepid scientific leader in a field where much controversy prevails. In his private life he was a devoted parent and husband. To those who knew him only professionally it might come as a surprise to learn that he was an accomplished handyman, able to fix plumbing or set his hands at any small but necessary task at home. He designed his house in Nanaimo, he was an accomplished musician, a basketball player, a passionate gardener, and a person with whom you could easily converse. For his contributions to fisheries in Canada and abroad, he was awarded the Order of Canada in 1988.

Our Department and our Government will miss Dr. Johnson, and his contributions to fisheries in Canada will long be valued. It is rare to find someone of such vitality. All who knew Wally will remember him with great fondness.

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