

Frank Kuiack: the stuff legends are made of



By Mike Riley

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The last of the Algonquin Park fishing guides passed away May 4 at the age of 84 years. Frank Kuiack was a fishing guide in the park for over 75 years and in that time enlightened his clients about fishing and nature, helped to enact conservation measures for Algonquin Park's lakes and participated in many charitable causes within the park. Photographer Wayne Simpson, South Algonquin Township Councillor Bongo Bongo, the Ministry of the Environment, Parks and Conservation's communications officer Gary Wheeler, and his niece Sharleen LaValley all give their insights into Kuiack and his legacy.

Kuiack was raised on a farm outside of Whitney on Long Lake, which is now called Galeairy Lake. He was one of 16 children and he began guiding in the park at the age of 8 years when he showed a group of travellers from Ohio where to catch the best small mouth bass on Galeairy Lake. That piqued his interest in guiding and he never stopped.

Kuiack was married and widowed twice, with his second wife Marie passing away in 2005. There is a lake in Algonquin Park where he spread Marie's ashes and it's named in her honour. He was also a proud father, grandfather, great grandfather and great-great grandfather.

Over the years as a guide, Kuiack gained extensive knowledge about fish populations in the lakes within Algonquin Park and helped park staff put in place conservation measures for those fish populations, according to the Friends of Algonquin Park. According to an interview he did with the Blue Fish Radio podcast in 2018, his all-time favourite fishing spot in Algonquin Park was Pen Lake. In the short documentary Lost Line-The Last Guide by Cristian Gomes, Kuiack said there used to be about 140 fishing guides in Whitney alone at one time servicing Algonquin Park, but for the past 20 years, he had been the only one.

Kuiack was also an avid participant and volunteer with the Rock Bass Family Fishing Derby at Whitefish Lake every July, where according to the Friends of Algonquin Park he would spend hours catching and cleaning a vast amount of rock bass, which were later cooked and fed to the derby's participants. He also constantly donated his time to the North Hastings Community Fish Hatchery and he donated a guided two-day fishing trip to help raise money for Algonquin Park's visitors' centre, according to LaValley. For significant contributions to the park, he was awarded the 2021 Director's Award from the Friends of Algonquin Park in March, 2021.

The list of people Kuiack guided on fishing trips was impressive, hailing from all over the world and numbering in the thousands. They ranged from average park visitors, to the entire cast of Bonanza, to a Mexican president, to Michael Douglas and Catherine

Zeta-Jones, and many more. He was also featured in an Explore Canada video with food blogger and influencer Katie Pix, who originally worked for Chef Jaimie Oliver. The fish Pix caught with Kuiack were subsequently prepared by Arowhon Pines resort Chef David Cooke. A shore lunch of freshly caught fish was always part of Kuiack's guests' guided trips.

Simpson took some amazing photographs of Kuiack that will be included in his forthcoming book *Resilient: The Portraiture of Wayne Simpson*, due out this fall. Kuiack was also featured in a short film with Simpson by Kyle McDougall for Sigma Canada called *Legacy*. Simpson says in a Facebook posting from May 4 that meeting Kuiack was like stepping back in time; a time when honesty integrity and family were everything. A time when cell phones, video games and Facebook did not exist and fishing filled the soul.

“There is a reason why politicians, celebrities and people alike loved to spend time fishing with Frank. He's the stuff legends are made of. Every once in a while, we are lucky enough to meet someone who truly leaves a lasting impression on us. I can say without a doubt that Frank Kuiack was one such person for me,” he says.

According to Simpson, the little time he spent with Kuiack left him with an immense sense of family devotion, honesty, integrity, pride, love of community and love of the natural world. He says that getting to know Kuiack made him look inward and he felt he was a true inspiration with the life he lived, the way he lived it, the company he kept and all that he overcame over the years.

“In his own subtle way, [he] showed me that I can be better and he showed me that I can overcome my struggles in life and appreciate what I have more deeply. My thoughts are with his family in this difficult time,” he says.

Bongo extended his deepest condolences to Kuiack's family and said that Kuiack lived and breathed South Algonquin township.

“He captured the spirit of this township perfectly. He was an entrepreneur who mixed his passion for the outdoors with smart business savvy. A generous neighbour, who always dropped off fresh garden vegetables at our doorstep every harvest. And he was a dedicated community member, serving on council, and always making appearances at local gatherings. Frank will be missed, but never forgotten. Rest in peace,” he says.

Wheeler says that Frank Kuiack was a true park character; a legendary fishing guide, story teller, shore lunch cook and passionate supporter of Algonquin Park.

“For over 75 years, he introduced his love of fishing, and love of Algonquin Park, to thousands of people. He will be dearly missed by his family, his friends and the park,” he says.

LaValley called Kuiack not only her uncle, but her mentor, her teacher and her best friend. Although she learned everything from Kuiack and guided for a year, LaValley is also a teacher with the Renfrew County School Board and has a background in fisheries biology, doing the lake sturgeon and the American eel projects for the Ottawa River.

“We did a lot of things together. We'd start the morning off having coffee at his place, the old instant coffee and end in the nights here, sitting on my deck, drinking tea,” she says.

LaValley was inspired by Kuiack's passion for everything, including fishing.

“We'd be in a boat fishing. I've never seen a guy that has caught so many fish in his lifetime, to be as excited about that last fish on the boat like it was the first fish of his life. That passion was unbelievable,” she says.

LaValley recounts how he would bring fresh vegetables and baked goods to her and her sons after she separated from their father and she lived alone. He would always be around her house if she needed him, helping out with a multitude of projects.

“Every time I'd see Uncle Frankie, I'd learn something new,” she says.

LaValley points to Kuiack's resilience as something else she was in awe of. Kuiack had been fighting cancer for many years, and was receiving treatment in the summer of 2019 when the Rock Bass Family Fishing Derby came up. Knowing his condition, she asked him if he was still okay to participate. She recalls that he said "If I have to crawl there, I'm going to be there."

Even when he was being treated for cancer and in a lot of pain, LaValley recalls during one fishing trip that he would forcefully push the canoe up onto the shore so he could get out and pull it up, so she wouldn't get her feet wet.

"There was no obstacle. I've never seen such perseverance and determination. I've never seen anybody be in that much physical pain be so resilient," she says.

LaValley says that you just went along with Kuiack, there was no negotiation. She says that there was no way you could help him and that you just had to stand back and let him do what he loved.

"Everything was fun and he was extremely competitive. He was like being with a teenager. So, we never used nets when we were fishing those pike, because we were just too busy trying to out fish each other," she says.

LaValley says that all she wanted was Kuiack's old thermos, and she got it, because of all the good memories it held for her, so many good memories.

According to LaValley, one of the things that will be missing for so many people now that Kuiack is gone is the old school way of fishing he did with steel lines.

"So, going in there, steel line fishing. Having a shore lunch cooked by a guy that's been doing this his entire life. You feel secure with a person like that. Even a problem wasn't a problem with someone like Frank. If something broke, he'd somehow twine it together with something. He was that kind of guy. It was all solutions with Frank," she says.

LaValley says that ultimately Kuiack loved life and he loved the people that he loved. "And of course, fishing. The passion and excitement in his eyes never got old. And I looked into those old eyes for a long time," she says. "And that guy, like I said, the last fish of his life was like the first fish of his life. It really was."