

From Springfield, Missouri

Johnny Morris, Southwest Missourian who loves to fish

BY BRUCE MENZIES

Let's call it a classic case of hometown boy makes good. Here you have a young man growing up in the Ozarks and developing a passion for all things having to do with field and stream. Yes, you could argue Johnny was heir to advantage but he didn't let that ruin him. He was smart enough to monetize that advantage; combine it with hard work; surround himself with top notch people; and the result is an ever-growing enterprise built on the love of conservation, support of outdoor education, and the pursuit of excellence.

John L. Morris has validated the saying that success truly happens when preparation and opportunity meet. Part of that preparation included education at Southwest Missouri State University (now Missouri State University) and Drury College. Obviously to run any enterprise you need to know the business of owning a business. I'm just guessing here, but probably another part of his preparation was learning from and listening to his late father, John A. Morris, himself an entrepreneur in retail and real estate.

Having said all that, however, nothing can take the place of the gut feeling an entrepreneur has about what will be successful and what won't. Of course, there is trial and error, but how of us learn from our errors? A real entrepreneur does and builds on what he has learned and learned from others. Johnny's gut feeling was that the timing was right and bass fishing was about to dramatically increase in popularity. His instinctive understanding of bass fishermen led him to pioneer a one-stop shop with all the latest tackle and gadgets. Bass Pro Shops published its first mail-order catalog in 1974. Later, Johnny's instincts proved correct to begin manufacturing "fish-ready" professionally-rigged boats and motors with the brand Tracker Marine. Today, his boats are among the nation's best-selling.

Anytime I see Johnny on the news, he's still the casual and unassuming person I've known for the past 58 years. Never pretentious, not seeming to take himself too seriously, he seems more comfortable in khakis, open-collared shirts, and Hush-Puppies than a three-piece suit and wing-tipped Bostonians. He even calls himself "Chief Fishing Officer." In spite of being the recipient of honors such as the Teddy Roosevelt Conservationist Award, the Sport Fishing Institute's Fisherman of the Year award, as well as others, and fishing and hobnobbing with past U.S. presidents,

Johnny is still a very humble guy that has not forgot his love of family, friends, and fishing.

While researching information for this article I discovered a story published in *The Tampa Tribune* from January 12, 2013. The article explained how Bass Pro was challenging a small business owner over their logo design that was similar to that of their own. Johnny visited the owner of the small business and explained that he was unaware of what was going on and that was not how he did business. He informed the owner he would stop action against him and refund their expenses.

Another interesting bit uncovered in my research was a “fun fact” about Morris: He was married by the late Pentecostal preacher Bonefish Willie from Bimini in the Bahama Islands. Turns out I met Bonefish Willie back in 1965 while SCUBA diving in Bimini with the late John the Diver from Branson. (Legend has it, Bonefish was possibly the inspiration of Ernest Hemmingway’s novel *The Old Man and the Sea*.)

Johnny could have gone to almost any city in America and set up “base camp” for Bass Pro Shops. Those of us in the Ozarks are fortunate to have the mother of all sporting goods store located right here. I’m proud to call Johnny Morris my friend and happy for him to be able to live his dream. Hopefully, he can continue spending as much time with his rod and reel as he does expanding his business.

Being an FOJ (Friend of Johnny)

Johnny and I attended school together for about twelve years. We played years of baseball and basketball together and often we were on the same bus route. After high school we went in different directions. I pursued a career in printing and graphic arts and, well, we all know what Johnny pursued. One day walking down an isle in the back of his store, I came face to face with Johnny. He spent several minutes with me asking about my parents and reminiscing about our younger years. I last saw him at the funeral of our mutual school chum, Mark Estes. Occasionally I still see his sisters at a local grocery store and always ask them to tell Johnny hello.

When the Wonders of Wildlife Museum originally opened my wife and I were quick to become members. My daughter and I attended the pre-opening tour and I wrote a brief note to the editor of the Springfield News-Leader stating “...the half has not been told.” (I was comparing my initial reaction to the Museum to that of the Queen of Sheba’s at the empire Solomon had built in the Old Testament.) I ended the note with, “Way to go Johnny!”

A couple of days later an official rebuke by a local citizen appeared in the same paper stating, "...someone should point out to Mr. Menzies, Mr. Morris is just one of 24 board members." "Furthermore," the critic continued to lecture me, "Even more troubling in Mr. Menzies' comment than lack of recognition of people who have played a greater role than Johnny Morris in the museum is the implication in his statement of a connection between Bass Pro Shops and Wonders of Wildlife." He concluded his reprimand, "Mr. Menzies should understand and acknowledge that the Wonders of Wildlife Museum is not part of any Johnny Morris' business."

Well, here's a little news-flash that that author. I acknowledge this: without Johnny Morris there would have been NO Wonders of Wildlife Museum.

We all know the Museum has been closed for a major expansion and grand re-opening scheduled for 2015. I'll just bet our initial reaction to the new and improved Museum will be, "The half has not been told! Way to go Johnny!"

In the late 1950s, Kickapoo had two schools: Kickapoo North served as the elementary school while Kickapoo South was the junior high. Older students traveled to nearby Springfield or Nixa for their high school years.

The junior high students moved into a new building in 1960. It retained the name of South Kickapoo School. The new school had twelve classrooms and a multipurpose room. In 1961 the Kickapoo School District merged with the much larger Springfield School District. North Kickapoo was renamed Walt Disney Elementary School while South Kickapoo was eventually renamed Cherokee Middle School.

Blurb:

"I feel very blessed to have spent my whole life around the great sport of fishing."

Johnny is still a southwest Missourian who just happens to love to fish.

Uncle Buck introduced Johnny to fishing, possibly the reason so many store-branded items honor his name.