

William E. (Bill) Clark: Tough Texan to the “Glass Half-full Guy”

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December 9, 2013 was a sad day for the family, friends, and colleagues of Bill Clark. His sudden passing was a loss felt heavily by the wildlife conservation community throughout California. Bill's professional career was cut short by a life threatening stroke in 1995, and we lost him to a similar event in December last year

Bill was a man of contrasts: rough around the edges at times, yet always sensitive to the needs of other people. He was a prime example of a wildlife professional who—through his personality, hard work, and dedication to conserving wildlife—set the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) apart from being, “just another State Agency.” Underneath a tough exterior, Bill was a people person. As an example,

for many years, Bill and his wife Jeanne hosted an annual Fish and Game Picnic at “Rancho Clark”—their home in Newcastle—for 100–150 of their friends. He was a generous and gracious host who loved to share Fish and Game stories with anyone who'd listen.

I met Bill Clark in 1972. He impressed me as a colorful “Tough Texan” on the team at CDFG's Wildlife Investigations Lab (WIL). As an eager, but somewhat naive, graduate student, I was in need of technical support for my Master's project, which focused on physical condition indicators in black-tailed deer as a reflection of habitat quality. The WIL was widely recognized for its technical expertise in wildlife food habits, parasites, and diseases. I showed up looking for handouts in the form of food habits analyses and technical advice, and I talked Bruce Browning into helping me with the food habits work. During my first visit to the Lab and after meeting with Bruce, I recall a brief conversation



William (Bill) Clark (1941–2013)

with Bill. He showed interest in my project, even if it was only to offer encouragement and advice to be thorough in my work and ask questions of experienced people as a means of learning along the way. His advice made a positive first impression.

After completing my graduate degree in 1974, I was fortunate to land a job as a field biologist with CDFG in Monterey County. It didn't take long for me to push my boss to allow me to attend the Department's Wildlife Restraint class taught by the WIL staff, including Bill. Although the WIL team taught hundreds of students in California and other western states, Bill took the time to try and get to know each student, make every session special, and insisted on a post-class review and evaluation to help improve future classes. He used the same approach with respect to wildlife capture projects, where human and animal safety were critically important issues. Bill was a very effective teacher and project leader, and also was a coach and mentor for hundreds of CDFG employees, other agency staff, and university students. Despite his tough exterior, he was always considerate of others and willing to help solve problems by sharing his knowledge and experience.

In late November 1995, life changed drastically for Bill and his wife Jeanne, as well as for those of us who worked closely with him. Bill suffered a major stroke and we nearly lost him. I vividly remember visits to see him in the hospital ICU, holding his hand, and assuring him he'd be OK. It was a difficult time, yet I needed to let him know I was there. It was tough seeing Bill in that condition, yet I felt better doing what I could just to let him know I cared. He repaid the favor many times over in the following years.

Soon after he regained consciousness, Bill demonstrated his toughness during long months of intensive, tedious, and often painful medical treatments that were followed by years of physical, memory, and speech therapy. Despite a few setbacks along the way and the loss of his short-term memory, it didn't take Bill long to show signs of the guy we all knew, including an amazing sense of humor in the face of a life threatening situation. He even joked with one of his doctors about contracting a new disease, which he termed "CRS". When the doctor questioned Bill, he merely smiled and said, "Can't Remember Sh__."

Once he gained enough strength to assess his condition, Bill wasted no time getting focused on the positive aspects of surviving his ordeal and making the best of the cards he'd been dealt. One of his favorite sayings became, "Look at the glass as half-full." Since his short-term memory was limited by the stroke, we heard that phrase often, along with a few other original sayings like, "no brain, no pain." Humor served Bill well, and it helped the rest of us deal with his limitations during recovery and adjustment to his new life. It wasn't long before we were out hunting pheasants with our dogs and taking a few trail rides with our horses. Although things were different following Bill's stroke, it was great to just go out and have fun with him doing the activities we both enjoyed. Yes, I was there when he killed his first post-stroke pheasant!

During his career, Bill was widely recognized as an innovator and problem solver. Those traits came to the surface often as he helped develop leading edge techniques for capturing, restraining, and sampling a wide range of wildlife in support of scientific studies and population management and restoration programs. He played a major role in a number of high profile projects, including the restoration of tule elk, pronghorn, and bighorn sheep to many of their native ranges, resulting in numerous populations that now support public use and enjoyment, including regulated hunting.

This tribute would not be complete without describing the close and mutually respectful friendship we shared for many years. In retrospect, I now realize that relationship

was unique in that it covered a period in which our roles at CDFG evolved in terms of job duties and reporting relationships. We used to joke about the challenges at various levels in the “food chain” and how it sometimes got a bit lonely as one moved up in the organization. Nevertheless, we maintained a close personal friendship, regardless of our respective roles, including me serving as Bill’s supervisor.

Our friendship began when I was as a newly minted biologist and Bill a seasoned WIL staffer. He loved his work, and made the decision to remain there rather than pursue promotional opportunities elsewhere. As fate would have it, things changed over time, with Bill being promoted to WIL Coordinator and me running the gauntlet through the ranks including Big Game Supervisor, Assistant Wildlife Division Chief, Wildlife Chief, and Deputy Director. For >15 years, I was Bill’s boss—in title anyway. It’s rare that two people stay friends while balancing those roles. Yet, throughout that entire period and beyond, we remained close in a trusting friendship. I didn’t fully realize how special that relationship was until I left CDFG in 2002. It became clear to me then, and I think to Bill after he retired, how relationships with people around us can change, especially under challenging circumstances beyond our control.

Bill Clark was a good man and left his mark on the world around him. His legacy is reflected by the many people whom he helped during their careers, and the diverse wildlife resources he worked so hard to enhance for Californians to enjoy. I, and dozens of others that he worked with, hold many great memories of Bill. Our long and mutually respectful friendship sits on top of the stack, as I’m sure it does with many others. Collectively we, and I personally, could not have asked for a better friend and mentor during the more than 30 years that I, and many others, had the privilege to know and work with him. Bill will be greatly missed by the many people whose lives he touched.

Editor’s note—On 15 November 2014, Bill’s family and friends gathered in the Mojave Desert at Clark Mountain (below), and distributed Bill’s ashes and some mementos among the peaks and canyons that he so loved. Dick Weaver—a retired CDFG Wildlife Biologist and who was present that day—who survived the helicopter crash at that location on 6 October 1986 that resulted in the deaths of two of the best friends that bighorn sheep ever had—proclaimed the massive peak would, in the future, be known as Clark’s Mountain.



Photo by George Kerr