

Dave Titus

Model of humility, sacrifice and character

By Steve Sorensen

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“WHEN I GOT out of the training school, I was the luckiest student there ever was,” Dave Titus said. His assessment of his days as a fledgling game protector reflects his perpetually positive attitude, but good fortune is also what led him to seek admission to the first class at the Ross Leffler Training School in 1936, and his life is proof that good fortune follows good character.

The luck he spoke of relates to his first assignment in Huntingdon County under Bill Davis, the Southcentral Division Supervisor. Davis offered him a choice of serving at Saltillo or Three Springs, and Titus sought Davis’s advice.

In March of 1937, Davis escorted the lanky 6-4 newly trained officer into Three Springs National Bank to ask the president,

Allen Cutshall, where Titus might stay if he chose Three Springs instead of Saltillo. At the time he didn’t know that the two were rival communities, but that was why Cutshall readily said, “We want him.”

After investigating various housing options, and with no hotel in town, Mr. and Mrs. Cutshall put Dave up in their home, one of the nicest in Three Springs, offering him a bed, meals, laundry and mending for a dollar a day. When Dave needed information, he was lucky to have a ready source in Cutshall, who knew every person and every place in the area. Even that advantage, however, wasn’t enough to earn the respect of the locals.

Dave remembers his first year at Three Springs as a time of loneliness. Although a stalwart Christian, he went to church only

one time while in Three Springs. The cold looks he got made him too uncomfortable for a return visit, but church wasn’t the only place where he received a chilly reception. Whenever he appeared in public, from the post office to the coffee shops, people turned their backs and lowered their voices.

“They were measuring me,” Dave re-



Members of the first class at the Ross Leffler Training School in 1936. DAVE TITUS is second from the right in the back row.

calls. Finally, relationships thawed when he arrested a man who had a notorious reputation, and had served time for bootlegging. The man was rumored to be shooting turkeys out of season, so one Sunday morning Dave staked out the suspect's house. At about 11 a.m. he heard a shot along the ridge. When the man was returning to his house Dave stepped out and said, "I want to talk to you, Elmer." Elmer responded by thrusting the cold muzzle of a double-barreled shotgun against Dave's stomach.

"I grabbed the shotgun and took it away from him," Dave said. Fortunately, his training served him well, as the shotgun was loaded. The man had no turkey, but a squirrel was in the pocket of his denim jacket. "I told him he wasn't going into the house." Dave knew that if the man went into the house, he'd never get him out. Trying to buy time, the suspect asked his wife to bring him a glass of milk and a piece of pumpkin pie.

Patience is one of Dave's many characteristics, so he waited while the man ate his pie, and then completed the arrest. Thankfully, that was the only time in his entire career that anyone pulled a gun on him, but his courage helped earn the respect of the people of Three Springs.

Those days were vastly different from today. The world was struggling to emerge from the Great Depression, and few resources were available for equipment. Game protectors did much of their work on

foot, and often used personal vehicles. Officers were spread extremely thin and averaged only 20 to 30 arrests each year, even though rural society had far less respect for game laws and subsistence hunting was commonplace for many families then.

Dave served in Huntingdon County from 1937 until 1948, with a call to military service interrupting that assignment from 1941 to 1946. Thanks to his excellent Game Commission training, Dave was placed in the military police, ending up a captain. In 1948 he was reassigned to Warren County, his native stomping grounds, where he served until his retirement.



This photograph of the Northwest Division officers and staff was taken at a region meeting. It is one of the few photos of DAVE TITUS (standing at extreme left) in uniform.

Dave says that enforcement was by far the most difficult part of his job, but not because of the dangers that came with it. He often felt sorry for the people he arrested. With deer season coming just before Christmas, he knew that arresting a man sometimes meant that children would be without presents. Many arrests brought pain to his heart, but he knew his integrity depended on treating everyone alike, even friends. "I once arrested a man three times and we still remained friends. That's why

both the general public and the outlaws appreciated me.”

That wasn't the only reason. People also saw Dave's humility. He was not one to brandish his badge and take a hard-nosed authoritarian approach with every incident. He respected people as individuals and his good judgment made him a model law enforcement officer.

Even though Dave's heart wasn't in enforcement, he says he remembers virtually every person he ever arrested. I decided to test him and asked if he remembered arresting a man named Leonard Garvin. He raised his eyebrows and softly said, “Yes. Thompson Hill. He shot a ringneck in a safety zone.” I told him that Leonard Garvin was my grandfather. Dave went on to say that he and my grandfather ended up becoming friends. I wasn't surprised. Dave was a gentleman, always firm and fair, and my father says that when Dave arrested a man, the man knew he deserved it and he respected Titus for it.

Dave Titus gained immeasurable gratification from other aspects of being a game protector. He recalls that Mr. Cramer, the superintendent of that first class in the training school, told the students, “Your life will be completely different now that you're a game protector. Your job will be your recreation.” That proved to be true, and Dave naturally appreciated the things that went beyond his Game Commission paycheck.

Throughout the years he enjoyed countless experiences that he would not have had without that job. “I saw so much — watching a fawn born, chances to see and do things that the average person never has.” He knew the deer of Warren County intimately when they were suffering and when they were healthy. He knew where every rattlesnake den was in the county. He



DAVE TITUS and a deputy are releasing some 5-week-old mallard ducks at Akeley Swamp at SGL 282 in Warren County.

knew where the small game populations thrived, where the turkey flocks were, and which hillsides were producing food or cover for wildlife.

His knowledge of the woods and wildlife of his area would have made it easy for him to have great success hunting, but Dave sacrificed his own hunting during his years of service. “Before I worked for the Game Commission, my brothers and I would get together and plan. That was as enjoyable as the actual hunting. But as a game protector, if I came across a nice buck and would shoot that deer, I wouldn't get any enjoyment out of it because I didn't plan for it. And I never felt it would be right to compete with the hunters. I knew where the game was, including some big bucks, but during all the years I served I never once shot a deer, a turkey, a ringneck or a rabbit.”

Dave shot his first turkey in the fall of

1972, after he retired. It happened near Barnes in Warren County, where he grew up. A story about that hunt appeared in the January 1993 *Game News*, written shortly after the hunt but published more than 20 years later.

Dave made research his recreation, collecting hundreds of deer jawbones for analysis in Harrisburg, for example, scouring creek bottoms doing winter deer starvation surveys, taking photographs and planning presentations. He presented many programs to all kinds of organizations, particularly favoring those for children. His camera was an enforcement tool, a research tool and a creative tool.

As a boy, Dave first appreciated the outdoors through the writings of James Oliver Curwood, a wilderness adventure novelist popular in the first two decades of the 20th century.

Dave credits a man named Byron Horton with being the most important influence on him. Horton was one of the wealthier citizens of Sheffield, and in 1930 he offered Dave work on his property. Dave mowed acres of lawn, worked in the greenhouse, cut firewood and kept a dam in repair. It was Horton who steered Dave toward his career with the Game Commission, perhaps because he knew about Dave's reporting of an illegal deer kill and the seriousness with which he had handled it.

In the spring of 1936 Horton encouraged Dave to answer a newspaper notice that sought candidates for the Game Commission's first training school class. Dave mailed in the application, thinking he had little chance of being admitted. He had nearly forgotten about it until one day he received an envelope that said "Open At Once." Inside was a letter announcing that he was one of 428 people eligible to take the exam for state game protector, and compete



In 1968, DAVE TITUS received the Wildlife Officer of the Year award from the Shikar-Safari Club International.

for one of the 35 seats in the class.

Horton heard the news and said, "I hear you're going to Harrisburg."

"I'm not going. I don't have a chance. I haven't had any schooling since 1928," Dave replied.

Horton knew it was Dave's humility speaking and told him that he had to go, so Dave boarded the train for Harrisburg at 7:30 a.m. that Friday. "If it hadn't been for Byron Horton, I would never have become a game protector." When talking about Horton, even after these many years, Dave's voice carries a respectful tone.

Although it was 68 years ago, Dave remembers everything about that trip, including what he ate, whom he talked to, and how lost he felt on that first adventure to Harrisburg. On the train he noticed a man reading a bulletin from the Game Commission. Dave says that although he was relatively shy at the time, he was interested enough to inquire. He introduced himself to Richard Earl, who was headed to Harrisburg for the same purpose. The two became friends, and upon arriving in Harrisburg that evening they found accommodations at the YMCA.

The next morning they reported for the

exam. When Dave realized that 349 people showed up, saw that every room was monitored by two uniformed and seemingly intimidating game protectors, and being separated from the only person he knew, he wondered what he was doing there. But, he proceeded to take several timed exams, lasting until 5 p.m. Dave felt that there was no way he had passed.

After rejoining Earl, the two ate a big dinner and spent the evening at a movie. They hoarded the train at 11 p.m., arriving back in Sheffield at 7 o'clock Saturday morning.

On Monday he was back at work for Mr. Horton. At lunchtime the phone rang and Dave was advised to report to Harrisburg on Wednesday for a comprehensive physical exam. The examiners offered no word on whether he had passed the written exam, and Dave returned to Sheffield on the 11 p.m. train, arriving at 7 a.m. Later that day he got a call to report to the training school on July 2, 1936. Of the 27 who graduated from that first class (on February 28, 1937), only Dave Titus and Clyde Laubach are still living.

Dave believes the course of study in that first class was solid, but says, "We were guinea pigs. We were breaking new ground, and there were few role models." Certainly, Dave's success can be traced back to the rigorous training, but also to his own solid character, his humble love for people and the natural world, and his keen powers of observation, memory and deduction.

Today Dave Titus lives at home. Despite a recent broken collarbone, diminished hearing, and the pains and weaknesses brought by advanced years, he is as active as his body allows. His mind and memory are acute; his many stories are full of names, places, times and relevant details, and are marked with insights into the connections between the details.

In 1968 the Shikar-Safari Club Interna-

tional gave Dave Titus his just dues by making him the first Pennsylvanian to be named Wildlife Officer of the Year, "in recognition for meritorious service in the field of wildlife conservation and law enforcement." It was well deserved for his depth of commitment to his profession, his advocacy of hunting, and the distinction with which he served both wildlife and hunters. In typical humility he accepted the prestigious award, commenting that there were many others who worked harder and did a better job than he did. It's not easy to believe that was true, but knowing Dave's modesty, it's easy to believe he truly meant it.

For Dave Titus, the Pennsylvania Game Commission was like a family. It was his life, and he feels fortunate to have had a long and happy association with the agency. He finally hung up his broad-brimmed hat in 1972 after some heart trouble, convinced that age was catching up with him and that he couldn't continue doing the job the way it should be done.

Few More Passionate

More than 32 years have passed since his retirement, but few men are more passionate about wildlife conservation in Pennsylvania than Dave Titus. He has led a blessed life, and it's my good fortune to be acquainted with him. In 2004 Dave turned 94, and he still cares deeply about the health of our game animals, their relationship to man and the habitat they live in. Dave Titus's philosophy of wildlife conservation includes the view that man always has been and continues to be a part of the natural scheme, and that we live in interdependency with the animal world. His passion for communicating truths about the natural world remains with him today. His love for teaching about the outdoors has never waned, and he is preparing one more presentation called "Why I Loved Being A Game Protector. □

Additional Dave Titus Photos



At the end of the severe winter of 1935-36, a 24-year old DAVE TITUS found a young buck that was starving. He rehabilitated it, giving it a mixture of milk and oatmeal, which he mother called "oatmeal gruel." The deer was released after it regained strength. This photograph was taken in June, 1936, one month before Dave entered training school.



This was an unusual call. The bear's head was stuck in a milk can. DAVE TITUS and some helpers tried a number of ways of removing it. Grease solved the problem.
(Photo by Gordon Mahan)



DAVE TITUS took every opportunity to work with children. This photo was taken around 1968 at a Hunters' Safety Course at Pine Grove Sportsman's Club in Warren County.
(All photos courtesy of Dave Titus.)



Here DAVE TITUS poses with fellow officers Bill Overturff (left) and Don Farr (right) of Tidouate during a public tour of a State Game Land. Few photos exist of Titus in uniform. He always felt that he was more effective, in both enforcement and public relations, when dressed in "plain clothes." Titus is wearing his trademark plaid jacket, and was respected whether in or out of uniform.