

DR. WILLIAM ROSTON (1936–2019)

Casper Cox

Chattanooga, Tennessee

I have often referred to Dr. Roston as the “Grandfather of freshwater underwater photography.” He passed away on December 7, 2019, at his home in Forsyth, Missouri, with little pain and in peace surrounded by his family. He was 83, being born in Gallion, Ohio, on August 29, 1936, and he lived a long, productive life with adventure and service to others. His interests were underwater photography, scuba, ultralight flying, gardening, sports, teaching, and medical service.

Years ago, as my interest in native fishes grew, I began to encounter his photos in publications or on the covers of state fish books such as the 1997 edition of *Fishes of Missouri* and *Fishes of Arkansas* or even recently at the Meramec State Park Nature Center. My Dad had stacks of Arkansas nature magazines, and when I would read the fish articles, the beautiful photographs were often credited to Dr. William Roston. His photographs were used in over 50 publications including *Outdoor Life*, *Field & Stream*, *Ranger Rick*, and *National Geographic*, as well as various state magazines. The cover of John Quinn’s 1994 *Fishwatching* features Dr. Roston’s snorkel-masked 10-year-old daughter, Stephanie, eye to eye with a Longear Sunfish *Lepomis megalotis*. Other notable places to see his photos are in the *National Audubon Society Field Guide to Fishes* and on the photographic panels at the Tennessee Aquarium.

Dr. Roston started out with film cameras, graduated to Super 8 film, and then later used micro videotape cartridges. In his later years, he digitized much of his work and saved it on CDs and DVDs. During his last year, Dr. Roston would watch these and narrate as his wife Judy wrote notes on the species and behaviors. I hope that his work will not be lost or forgotten, and that a regional university will commit to documenting and cataloging all of his photographs and videos. Many of the sites he visited, and quite possibly the species found there, have been lost to ongoing human development. His work documents their past presence and the once-healthy waters he filmed.

I had the pleasure of meeting Dr. Roston at the 1999 NANFA convention in Illinois/Indiana, where he conducted a photography/videography workshop. NANFA member Dr. Larry Page had recommended him to our host Elmer Guerri. We met again at the 2005 meeting in Little Rock, Arkansas, where he screened a VHS tape compiled from his underwater explorations of creeks throughout the Ozarks and in several Southeastern states. He spoke during his video as all of us sweltered in a Little Rock brewery while we finished our banquet of fried catfish. Dang, it was sweaty hot! We rounded up a few box fans, but they did little to cool the brewery and all the attendees crammed within. We ended the evening with our auction, and I remember his VHS cassette being awarded to the highest bidder, Christopher Scharpf.

My first rendezvous in the field with Dr. Roston was during an Arkansas adventure that my son, Cobalt, and I were on, traveling the Ouachita and Ozark back roads. We met up with him somewhere in north-central Arkansas and drove for almost two days seeking out snorkel sites, nearly driving into Oklahoma. Everywhere the water was an odd, nearly opaque, blue. I don’t know if it was timing, conditions, or bad luck, but by the late afternoon of the second day we stopped at a stream running through a culvert beneath a low road crossing. I was worn down from all the unproductive driving, but the Doctor quickly stripped down to his shorts and waded into the chalky blue water, snorkeling into the culvert’s outflow. I admired his undaunted dedication, but it was not for me as I decided not to join him. Standing overhead, the only thing I could make out were Brook Silversides *Labidesthes sicculus* holding steady, swimming near his head in the murky blue current. I have no idea what he could have been seeing or whether he had seen the Brook Silversides. We chatted a bit as he dressed, and he commented with a smile how bicycles, being quiet, had sneaked up on him during those roadside changes.



Two kinds of doctors: Bill Roston and Larry Page seining at the 1999 NANFA gathering in Illinois/Indiana.



Dr. Roston, Judy, and their grandson Vincent, in 2013.



Shivering prayers at Swan Creek, 2013.

I think of that now, listening for cars and watching for bicycles as I dry off and get my britches on as quickly as possible after a snorkel.

Several years later, in 2013, I visited his home during a 12-day Missouri/Arkansas wander. Though Dr. Roston had not snorkeled in over eight years due to a stroke, we spent the next couple of days snorkeling his favorite clear waters around Forsyth. What a treat it was enjoying his company, floating free in the sunshine, pointing out various fishes, crayfishes, bugs, mussels, and later listening to his stories into the evenings. I am so pleased he was able to get out and enjoy snorkeling again and I felt privileged to be with him. Father's Day fell during this visit and his wife Judy baked a Texas chocolate sheet cake for us to share. I felt welcome and relaxed in their home and enjoyed listening to them tease one another about their years together. We watched videos he had made of his creek snorkeling well into the evenings, sharing stories and experiences.

I made a 45-minute DVD documenting that MO/AR 12-day adventure calling it "Show me the Fishes in their Natural State," so named for each state's motto. Every day was excellent, each offering clear water, blue skies, and new snorkel sites. Three of the days featured my time with Dr. Roston, and the experiences during those days are still among my most treasured memories.

A couple years later, in 2015, I detoured to Forsyth, driving east after attending the excellent Tahlequah, Oklahoma, NANFA convention. My daughter Cyan and I spent the day snorkeling with Dr. Roston, assisting him as he carefully eased in and out of the Ozark streams near his home. Once in the water he floated weightless, free of the gravitational limits the stroke had burdened him with. He showed us different mussel species, telling of the various techniques he used to photograph their lures. One trick was to gather them into his pockets and then place them in a convenient, ideal site. He would return at night with night-vision videography equipment and capture their various displays. Years before, he mailed me a VHS tape documenting the great variety of mussel lures he had found. The tape included several slow-motion edits of mussel lures exploding glochidia (larval mussels) onto unsuspecting fish. I lent the tape to someone and, sadly, it has been lost. Many unique mussel lures were documented. I remember one mussel that emitted a long, transpar-



Show Me the Fishes in Their Natural State. MO/AR. Contact Casper Cox if you would like a copy.

ent ribbon with what appeared to be a fish carcass at the end, twisting slowly in the current. Another trick he shared was crushing a few Asian Clams and luring fishes in for a hand feeding. He presented a freshly crushed crayfish, and when I cringed, he said sometimes you have to sacrifice a crayfish or two, and sometimes a frog, as his \$10,000 photograph attests. With the day nearly gone, we headed back to his home and cleaned up for dinner. I wanted to visit an oddly signed restaurant that I had noticed on the previous visit. He had never eaten there, but we settled in for a unique meal of Ozark Rainbow Trout and a confusing mix of Chinese rickshaw burritos.

Dr. Roston was a country doctor; he would make house calls and could skillfully stitch folks back together. Without today's helicopters and interstate ambulances, he responded to emergencies with experience, saving many lives. The Rostons did not live in opulence; their home was simple and surrounded by many potted and carefully nurtured hostas, a favored plant he used on their remote property known as The Garden of Dreams, or GOD. The garden was well-tended and included a pavilion where couples married and families gathered for holidays, plus a waterfall, stream, and pond set in the terraced ravine. I hoped to one day visit this garden he spoke of so often, but it was sold in 2019. I recall him telling me of Copperhead strikes as he worked in his gardens. I guess he knew what to do if things went bad, but he said they never bothered him, possibly being dry strikes, although Judy remembers his arm swelling up after one bite. Hearing that, I will continue to not handle serpents. He had several near-death experiences. He told me of being lost in a cave chamber, his scuba air nearly depleted, turning off his flashlight to die quietly in the darkness, and then seeing the light. Or the encounter with a recently released mental patient, careening off his medications and experiencing a severe psychotic episode while holding a gun to Dr. Roston's head. Words came to Dr. Roston and he said, "I want to be your friend." In each case salvation was provided by his clear, calm manner and God's spirit of words and guidance. Dr. Roston was a Christian, a member of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, and he often spoke of God and the wonders provided to us.

Dr. Roston's interesting obituary can be found at: <https://www.whelchelgracefuneralhome.com/notices/WilliamDoc-Roston>.

Here is an appropriate excerpt:

Doc was always expanding his knowledge. Learning scuba led to his successful underwater photography career where he photographed hundreds of species of North American



Dr. Roston speaking of the wee mussels in 2015.



Dr. Roston with his \$10,000 photograph. He was determined that his expenses, equipment, and travels were covered by the sale of his photography to various publications.

freshwater fishes and later mussels. His natural talent and countless hours of lying still with his underwater camera in streams and creeks came with rewards. His pictures have been in more than 50 different publications. The famous Jacques Cousteau personally called upon Doc to discuss his pictures. In 1982, his picture of a wide mouth bass eating a frog won a worldwide Nikon photo contest. But Doc's true motivation was to capture the unique beauty and life which happens in our freshwater creeks and streams and share it with others. He gave countless presentations to help educate the public and bring awareness to the importance of keeping our environment clean. In his honor, the path running from Powersite Dam to Shadowrock Park was named "Dr. William Roston's Nature Trail."

If you go to YouTube.com and search for "williamroston," you will find 33 videos ranging from Cardinal, Tennessee, and Rainbow shiners to Flame, River, and Hornyhead chubs; from snakes to crayfish to mayflies; as well as an assortment of other aquatic videos.

You can also search for his website, "Within Our Waters," which is still active (for now) to see various images of game and nongame fishes along with other critters and links to his various YouTube videos.

I regret unknowingly missing the opportunity last year to sit by his side and enjoy his company, to hearing his stories and thank him for the wonder he provided to so many of us with his beautiful images of our aquatic world. He was a pioneer aquatic photographer, "The Grandfather of freshwater underwater photography."



The Doctor insisting the author plunge deeper into his garden pool.



A Forsyth oddity eatery.



At the trailhead, Dr. William Roston, 2018.

A REMEMBRANCE OF DR. BILL ROSTON

Henry W. Robison

Southern Arkansas University

I first met Dr. Bill Roston back in about 1985 or so shortly after I saw his fish pictures featured in a story in *National Wildlife Magazine*. I tracked down the writer of the article and called him. I commented on his “fantastic underwater photos of Southern Redbelly Dace *Chrosomus erythrogaster*,” which were absolutely stunning! Quickly, the writer told me, “Oh, those were not mine, they were Bill Roston’s of Forsyth, Missouri.” Slightly embarrassed, I quickly got off the phone with him and located Bill Roston’s phone number and called him personally. He told me how he took the pictures and invited me up to Forsyth, Missouri, to see how he did it. I accepted and within a few weeks I journeyed to Forsyth to meet Bill and see how he took his underwater fish pics. I remember vividly when he opened his office door to greet me, I thought, “Gee, you are older than I thought” and I later told him that. He laughed and said, “Well, you were younger than I thought!” Bill put me immediately at ease with his easy-going demeanor and lack of pretension. He took me out to his local stream to show me “his pets” and showed me how he took his underwater photos of fishes. He had trained the Smallmouth Bass *Micropterus dolomieu* in his local stream

to literally take food from his hand literally. He showed me how he was able to feed the Smallmouth Bass by hand in his local stream and take photos of them eating frogs, crickets, etc. He also told me that was how he won first place in the world in the Nikon contest of a Smallmouth Bass just before it gulped a frog. I actually remember seeing that photo in a camera magazine several years earlier and I told him, “Although frogs do not have expressions, I could actually see the fear on that frog’s face as he realized he was about to get eaten by the bass!” Later that night he took me to the local spring on the property of a friend of his where he had previously made numerous photos of Stippled Darter *Etheostoma punctulatum*, one of which we used in the first edition of *Fishes of Arkansas*. He showed me his technique of having a type of framing device that extended from just below the closeup lens, which he used to lift up the darters in the clear spring. As they began to settle back to the substrate, they spread their fins fully. He told me that he had discovered this behavior accidentally while working with darters in this spring, and he could get them to spread their fins at night, whereas he could not even get close to them in the daytime. Bill even

Yellowfin Shiner *Notropis lutipinnis*. (Photo by William Roston)Bluehead Chub *Nocomis leptcephalus*. (Photo by William Roston)

insisted that I try my hand at using his underwater camera system, which I eagerly did. He was surprised at how quick my reactions were. I told him that quickness was from playing basketball for years! Thus began my long friendship with Bill Roston.

Later, Bill allowed me to use all of his underwater fish photos in our 1988 first edition of *Fishes of Arkansas*. One of the funniest things that ever happened regarding Bill was one time he invited me to drive up to Forsyth to see him at his doctor's office on a workday while I was staying in nearby Fayetteville, AR. So, I drove up to Forsyth and arrived a bit ahead of schedule. Since I knew I was early, I casually entered his office, which was full of patients and a receptionist asked me who I was and what I needed. I simply told her, "I'm Henry Robison and I was there to see Dr. Roston", figuring I would sit in his office and read magazines until he finished seeing his patients for the day. Unbeknownst to me, his receptionist went in and told Bill I was there, and immediately, he opened the door to his waiting room, and ushered me into his private office. I was taken aback by the suddenness, and as I entered his office, he said, "I have a slide show all set up to show you my latest fish photos." I stammered, "But what about your patients?" to which Bill replied, "Oh, they will be okay," and with that, I sat down in a comfortable chair he had arranged for me, and he sat down at the projector, and proceeded to give me a personal slide show of his new fish photos! He went through the entire carousel and told me something about each fish photo before he finished up. As I quietly left his office through the waiting room, I could feel all of his patients' eyes on me as they wondered, I am sure, "Well, who was that guy!" Ha!

In those early days, Bill sold his fish photos to numerous fishing magazines, which of course were interested in those great shots of bass

eating frogs, crickets, worms, etc. In his office, he had all the covers of the various fishing magazine, which were of his fish photos. He had a lot of covers! He also took long "hunting" trips to Alaska, the Rockies, etc., to photograph things like big trouts, pikes, and graylings, which were prime subjects for covers of fishing magazines. He told me that he used the money from selling the cover photos to finance additional expeditions to photograph fishes where he had not been.

Once, Bill came down to my house in Arkansas and spent several days with me as I took him around to various streams to photograph local fishes like the beautiful cyprinid fish, the Bluehead Shiner *Pteronotropis hubbsi*. I remember him getting up early each day, having coffee and breakfast at my house, and then insisting on washing the dishes for my wife before we left because she had fixed us breakfast each morning! Bill was indeed a humble, true friend, brilliant medical doctor, fascinating colleague, and the greatest underwater fish photographer of our time!

After our second edition of *Fishes of Arkansas* was published and Bill became more widely known to the general fish community, he became interested in spreading his knowledge of photographing fishes underwater. Bill came to an ASIH meeting years ago at the University of Tennessee or Florida, I cannot remember which, and gave a talk on how he took his underwater photos, freely sharing his expertise that had taken him years to perfect! He even allowed the American Fisheries Society to use his 35-mm fish slides to sell to raise money for the AFS back when they had a program whereby a person could purchase individual 35-mm slides from the AFS. Bill did that freely and asked nothing in return! Bill was a dear friend and wonderful colleague who is already sorely missed!

MY MEMORIES OF BILL ROSTON

Brooks Burr

Southern Illinois University-Carbondale

I was very sorry to learn of the passing of Bill Roston. We had been friends for decades and I used his color slides in many fish articles and books. Bill was a good man, very dedicated, and a skilled photographer who learned it all by himself. He told me that he did not want to photograph reef fishes (even though he has many nice slides of that sort of thing) after he went snorkeling and noticed all the beautiful fishes in the Ozarks. He would drive a long distance to meet me for a class field trip and show us what he had photographed on the way. He also came to SIUC and gave a special presentation of his photography. We talked him into meeting us at Eigenmann's cave in Indiana to photograph what is now *Amblyopsis hoosieri*, but the photos were not his best. We went photographing at night and he taught me all sorts of things about the process of getting a good photo. He would use a hand net to capture a particular individual and then "wear it out" place it on a rock in very clear water and then start photographing. He never used an aquarium box or anything like that. It had to be in clear water of the stream. He sometimes caught the fish he wanted and then moved to another part of the stream where it was gin clear. Of course, this was all before digital cameras, but he made a huge impact in ichthyology because he was the first to travel all over North America getting color photographs underwater and most ichthyologists had never seen such colors and beauty. He gave a

special presentation at the ASIH meetings in Knoxville, Tennessee, that everyone attended just to see his photographs! I can't say enough good things about Bill. I miss him and being around his energy and enthusiasm, but also his willingness to take his time to teach me what he had learned. I wish sometimes I could go back to those days. He had a very good run.



Rosyside Dace *Clinostomus funduloides*. (Photo by William Roston)