

Staff Member Tells Sam Campbell's Story

Terry Dodge uses free time for research and filming

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Sam Campbell is well-known for his "Living Forest" series of books, including "Loony Coon," the story of "the antics of a frolicking raccoon." (Photo courtesy of Terry Dodge)

by Becky St. Clair

In 2011, Terry Dodge, PC support specialist at Andrews University, took his family to Four Mile Lake near Three Lakes, Wisconsin. They paddled a canoe around the island and explored there, an adventure the whole family enjoyed.

The trip was inspired during family worship one evening when Dodge's daughter asked who Sam Campbell was. It was then that Dodge really began thinking about the bigger picture answer to that question.

"A lot of Adventists know Sam's name thanks to the Living Forest series he published," says Dodge. "I think he became popular due to being such a big outdoor enthusiast and promoter. His message of enjoying nature is such a part of the Adventist Church that we easily and fully embraced his perspective of going out in nature and meeting God."

Though Dodge found and read a book about Campbell's life by Shandelle Henson, chair of the Department of Mathematics at Andrews University, he was unable to find much more.

“I figured since I enjoy filmmaking, why not tackle this myself?” says Dodge. “I wanted to celebrate Sam’s life and promote his message and invitation to come out to the wilderness, enjoy and preserve.”

An avid photographer since he was a child, Dodge felt there was always something missing in his photography ventures. When he realized what was missing was motion, he enrolled in filmmaking classes, shadowed anyone in the field who would let him tag along, and volunteered anywhere he could to get additional experience.

Today Dodge is only a year away from finishing his film documentary on Sam Campbell, and, alongside writers Steve Yahr and Alison Vilag, is also working on a biography.

Despite the large amount of time Dodge has spent working on these projects, there are still mysteries that surround the story of Sam Campbell. One, for example, is that of his military service.

Though there are records of Campbell’s draft just a few months before WWI ended, as well as his discharge a month to the day after the armistice, most of his records were destroyed in a fire a few years ago.

“We may not have a lot of detail, but there are indications that he did indeed integrate into the life of a military draftee,” says Dodge. “His attire of choice is one example; he liked high-top boots, dark shirts and short, dark khaki breeches. Basically a modified WWI uniform. He also mentions ‘KP duty’ in one of his stories, a military reference to a soldier’s assigned time to work in the kitchen.”

When asked, Dodge listed some of his wishes for putting together Sam’s story: A way to find or get back school records from his early childhood; access to details about his college career; locating Sam’s grandparents’ farm where he spent summers during his childhood; what remains of the things his wife Giny took with her when she moved following his death.

Studying Sam’s life has definitely had its share of perks, though. Dodge describes one of his most memorable experiences while on a trip to gather information.

“I sat on Sam’s pier; the sun had come up and the lake was glass. Duck hunting season started the day before, but no boaters had entered the lake nor had I heard any shots. I just sat there and watched the water and the trees and the sky, and soaked it all up in silence. The lighting was perfect and you could see the trees themselves and the reflections in the water perfectly. It was one of the most peaceful, beautiful moments I’ve experienced, and in that moment I truly began to feel I understood Sam’s deep attachment to this place.”

Dodge has met several individuals who had significant relationships with Sam and Giny, and each has contributed greatly to Dodge’s project. “Research will probably never end on this project,” he says. People continue to come out of the woodwork with stories and information, and Dodge readily admits he’s sure that will continue to happen.

Sam's message about spending time in nature with God and with people speaks loudly to Dodge. He feels this idea is even more important today than it was back in Sam's era, and has personally experienced a time when Sam's writings helped bring healing and focus into a difficult time in his life.

"Life had gotten tough and I had begun to question a lot of things," recalls Dodge. "I was really discouraged. I have always had a love of nature so I turned to Sam's writings. There I found encouragement and an urging to go outside and spend more time finding God. That perspective and that positive influence was a huge help through those difficult situations. There's a spiritual side that Sam brings into his writings. He wants his readers to find that quiet place where God can speak to them. I appreciate that, and I know others have, too."

Dodge plans to have the documentary film and the biography completed in fall 2015. Regular updates can be found on Dodge's project website, philosopheroftheforest.com, as well as on his Facebook page, facebook.com/PhilosopherOfTheForest.

To watch a trailer for the documentary, visit vimeo.com/97209266.