

A Tribute to Jim Flynn #3975-HL

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It is with considerable sadness laced with fond memories that we report that Jim Flynn passed away on June 16, 2013, at age 93, from complications of a stroke. Jim was predeceased by his lovely and wonderful wife, Mary, in 2008.

After over 30 years of active contributions to IWCS and its mission to advance information on wood, Jim Flynn had been “gearing down” from the active pace that he had set for himself. Since joining IWCS in the early 80s, Jim played many roles in the area of research and publishing within IWCS — not to mention other publications. Jim most often worked quietly in the background but was always ready with thoughtful suggestions and guidance for IWCS management on a broad range of issues involving IWCS governance and the role that IWCS should aspire to in the world of wood. But Jim was best known for his custodianship and authorship of the popular “*Wood of the Month*” column later to become known as the “*IWCS Wood Data Sheet*” (WDS) series.

It had been over thirty years since Max Kline started the *Wood of the Month* column as a feature in *World of Wood*. Max devoted twelve years to this work and passed along the custody of this column to Jon Arno who spent another 6 years enjoying his avocation, wood. Then Jon had to relinquish control for health reasons.

So the baton was passed to Jim. Jim Flynn provided 14 years in the role of providing this valuable wood species information. After editing and publishing two books for IWCS involving the bringing together of these WDS articles, and with a third about to be released at the IWCS 60th anniversary meeting, Jim ceased creating new *Wood Data Sheets* for the column, but continued to come up with other fascinating ways and avenues for IWCS to advance its mission by “*Exploring...*” many other facets of wood. We pay tribute, then, to the tremendous dedication made by this long time member of IWCS and recognize the legacy that Jim made to our organization over nearly three decades.

A snippet of Jim’s achievements

Jim was a native of Fall River, Massachusetts, the second of eleven children, the father of four sons, and grandfather of four. He retired from the Department of Defense as Senior Operations Research Analyst. During World War II, Jim was stationed on the Island of Saipan and was a radio/radar technician on a P-61 “Black Widow” Night Fighter. He retired in 1976 after 36 years of service and his life-long interest in wood continued and broadened. While his interests in wood were varied and many, Jim undertook a highly specialized study of two Russian folk musical instruments, the balalaika and the gusli. Not contented with just building them, he experimented with a variety of woods to determine their effects on the quality of sound they produced. This work culminated in the publishing of a book “*Building the Balalaika*”. This publication is a record of the history and dimensional data needed for the five sizes of these instruments and the only book of its kind printed in English. A similar manuscript was published on the gusli.

As an Associate Editor of *World of Wood*, and after authoring many of the “*Wood of the Month/IWCS Wood Data Sheet*” articles, Jim self-published the

first 201 of these as the first Edition of “*A Guide to Useful Woods of the World*” in 1994. By 2001, another 78 *Wood Data Sheet* articles were added, and the second - much revised and expanded edition - of the “*Guide*” was published. This time, involving the Forest Products Society in Madison, Wisconsin, and bringing that organization’s considerable editing, publishing, management and marketing skills. That edition has been a tremendous success for both the Forest Products Society and IWCS and has led to other joint publishing efforts between the two societies, both of which, coincidentally, were established in 1947. In 2007, a third volume in the series was published. “*A Guide to More Useful Woods of the World*” was released at the 60th anniversary meeting of IWCS – thanks to Jim’s efforts in bringing together 71 more *Wood Data Sheet* articles and the work of a number of IWCS members who contributed a series of in-depth essays on various aspects of wood.

Along the way, Jim also did free-lance work for the Discovery Channel in assisting in the publication of their book “*Trees*” in 2000. Home Furniture, a publication of the Taunton Press, also featured a series of his monographs on furniture timbers. All the while, Jim continued to add to his collection of 2,200 wood species and to make more room for his extensive library of tree and wood related titles, not to mention develop the skills and equipment to produce photomicrographs of wood end grain sections used in the *Guide to Useful Woods...* books. His collection was entrusted several years ago to Mihaly Czako, WoW Editor, of the University of South Carolina.

Attracted by the “Taters”

Jim became interested in IWCS in 1986 when a local hardwood lumber dealer mentioned that he had heard of a “wood collecting society”. The dealer had a guest speaker in from Virginia Tech to give a talk on Wood Identification and Jim got the IWCS address from him. Mary and Jim went

to the annual meeting in Indiana that year where they met such notables as past presidents Bill Perkins and Alan Curtis as well as many others with whom they became life-long friends. Jim recalls that their first meeting not only featured wood, but “Creek Bank” potatoes. Those tasty three inch thick “veneers” of sliced potatoes were layered with bacon, cooked outdoors all day on large baking sheets, then, served red hot. Never had he tasted anything so good and he decided right then and there to join IWCS. At that meeting, his late friend, Rex Vaught, gave him a cane shaped from a piece of grape vine with instructions to use it “in case he got old”. Jim always cherished that cane — not to mention all the great folks he has met in IWCS over the years.

As well as donating his wood collection, he also donated his microtome equipment to some members who are making worthwhile use of it in some pioneering work related to tree species discovery and wood identification.

Jim the man

The above has been a quick summary of some of Jim’s interests and activities and his introduction to IWCS — but what was the man really like? Anyone who ever met Jim Flynn cannot help but be impressed with his gentle but persuasive nature and his ability to communicate his views in like manner. Anyone who was ever a guest in Jim and Mary’s home in Vienna, VA was treated to true hospitality and the delightful company of both Jim and Mary. It can be truthfully said that Jim was a true, “gentle-man” in the very best sense of the term.

Alan Curtis reminisces that “*Jim always impressed me with his quest for knowledge about trees and forests. Together we were walking along a narrow forest trail in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico when I mentioned that the tree we were passing had red-colored sap. Out came Jim’s pocket knife and he made an incision through the bark (probably to see if I knew what I was talking about – I did). That led to a discussion about other trees that have colored sap,* July/August 2013

its importance in identification, and the economic value of some of them. Another day and another trail found us in the jungle again. As I walked I was looking upward, searching the foliage for clues to help identify trees. Suddenly, and with alarm in his voice, Jim called to me, “Keep walking, don’t stop!” I took a couple more steps and turned around to look back at Jim and then I saw the reason for his concern. I had just stepped over (rather than on) a large snake that was stretched across the trail. Although it could easily have bitten me on my leg, it did not. Jim’s concern abated when I told him the snake was a boa and not to be feared. Earlier that very day we had talked about other snakes that live in the forest, including the aggressive and deadly viper, also a good-sized critter. We were both very thankful that we had no bad encounters during our many hikes in the forest. And what we learned helped us to better understand these tropical forests.”

Chuck Holder recalls that, “*Mary and I had the pleasure of visiting Jim and Mary Flynn at their home prior to the 2001 Pennsylvania meeting. I was amazed by the sheer mass of the display of his collection and by the amount and variety of the literature and library he had on wood and trees. Jim and Mary took us on a memorable outing to the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia and we got to spend some quality time in the woods learning to identify local trees – a day we will never forget. Unbeknownst to Jim, I had adopted him as my “mentor” soon after I joined IWCS. Later, I was honoured to be able to work with him on the second and third books. IWCS is all about learning from other members, and I have been truly blessed to learn from and be associated with Jim Flynn over the years”.*

Reflections from Dave Mouat. *I first met Jim and Mary Flynn sometime in the mid 1990s. Jim drove to the Doring Metro stop in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC, miles out of his way, to pick up “this stranger” and take me back to his house for our first get together (and to talk about wood). At the house I met Mary, one of the warmest most positive people I had*
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ever met. We talked about wood (of all things), about travel and about our professional work. I was so impressed by Jim’s breadth of interests and experience. I have never heard Jim say a bad word about anybody. He may differ (even be passionate in his opposition) with the views of others, but he separates the views from the person or people who make them. Jim is a person who follows his interests in a reflective and interactive way. Immersing himself in the study of wood anatomy, for example, he found and rehabilitated a microtome to make thin sections for his studies- this is impressive! What always brings a smile to my face is Jim’s joking, and good natured exasperation with friends like me who can’t resist a serendipitous wood acquisition without a plan for how to get it back home. For me and others, Jim willingly provided “temporary” storage at his house, sometimes for years. Thanks Jim.

Mihaly Czako reminisces that, “*I met Jim very soon after I joined IWCS. He immediately made an impression. I visited him several times. We had spent many hours with discussing and handling wood. Jim processed many species of my collection into standard specimens and we saved cutoffs for other projects, i.e., the Wood Data Sheets. I helped him grow his collections of books and wood with a modest number of species and we discussed sectioning and photo-graphing wood. Besides his wood collection and many odd pieces, he gifted many books to me. He has been my mentor and an inspiration. He once invited me to be his guest in Cancun to join him and Alan Curtis. It was exciting to collect and identify the giant vine, with black heartwood like a rosewood, *Dalbergia glabra*, in the spirit of IWCS’s mission.”*

IWCS also salutes Mary Flynn, who has always been there, encouraging you every step of the way, in her quiet and effective manner.

IWCS owes both Mary and Jim a great debt of gratitude. This tribute is a slight revision to one that first appeared in World of Wood in 2007.

