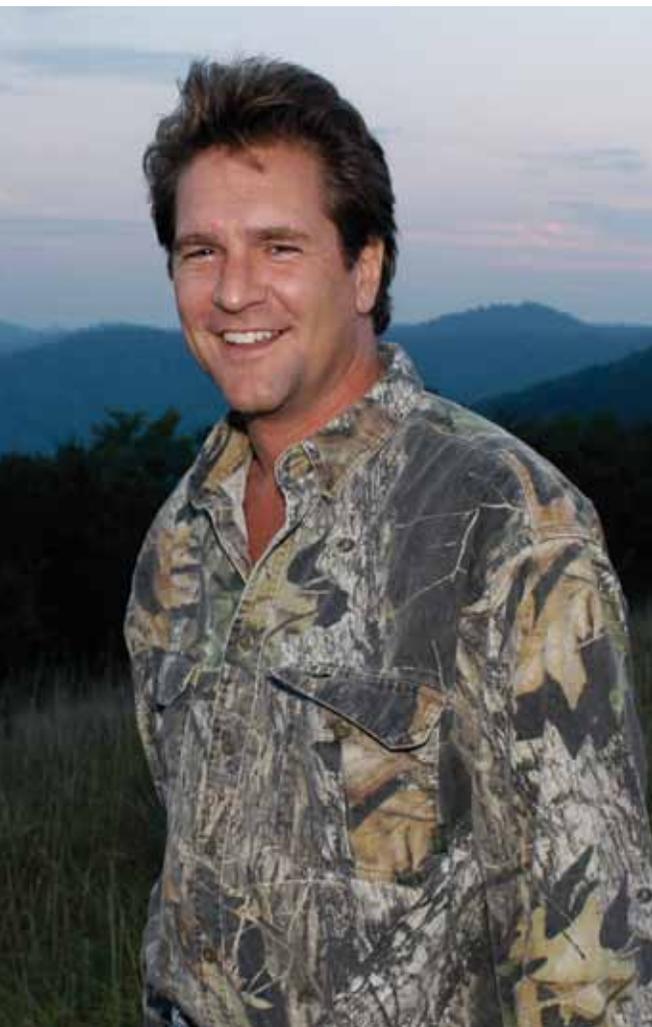


Chance ENCOUNTER

How a trapper from long ago shaped Kentucky Afield TV

By Tim Farmer

OBIE WILLIAMS ILLUSTRATION



Editor's note: Tim Farmer recently retired after serving as host of Kentucky Afield television since 1995. In this farewell story, he discusses some of his influences that helped shape the show.

I AM TRULY a product of my environment. I come from a family with a loving mother and father. I come from rural Kentucky and its miles of open country.

My earliest memories include watching a cork bobber, waiting for a hand-sized bluegill to grab the freshly dug redworm at the end of the line. I remem-

ber, too, suffering sleepless nights in anticipation of a fishing trip with my father. There would be many such nights in my future.

My father is a quiet, humble man. He taught us first and foremost to honor and respect our elders. He also taught us to detest arrogance. He was a draftsman, land surveyor, teacher and preacher. My mother was a pretty, red-headed, energetic, story-telling, outdoors girl who filled our heads with fantastic stories, mostly dealing with nature themes.

It wasn't unusual to see our whole family out in the yard, engaged in some sort of energetic game, usually ending when the sun went down and spoiled the fun.

My older sister, Debbie, younger brother, Jonathon, and myself weren't exactly on a tight leash. We were given our space and allowed to roam rural Mason County – within



KENTUCKY AFIELD STAFF PHOTOS



limits of course. My boundary started at the tobacco barn at the top of the hill all the way to the Methodist Church at the opposite end of the narrow, paved road.

My parents were wise in the ways of the woods and waters. They shared their knowledge freely and frequently. The ultimate punishment for any of our transgressions was hearing the words, "Go inside."

School came along and spoiled the fun. Riding the bus to and from Orangeburg Elementary School took up a large portion of the day.

One afternoon, while the school bus stopped to drop off the Whisman kids, I noticed movement under a small bridge. As the bus began to drive away, I locked eyes with a little old man who was effortlessly skinning a muskrat.

He took his pocketknife and deftly broke the joints of its lower legs, all while looking at me. Traps with their little chains hung from his belt. His face was etched with wisdom. He had a three-day growth of beard and a little wrinkle below his lip that created a drainage ditch for tobacco juice. He looked ancient. I wanted to talk to him, but I knew I'd never see him again. The bus pulled away as we continued the stare down. His hands continued their task effortlessly.

One chilly winter day, I glanced back at the house to make sure no one was looking, and decided to go past the boundary at the church for a steep downhill ride on my bicycle. I had to be quick, because if I was caught, I might have to spend the rest of the day inside. One more look over my shoulder and I was off. The cold air caused tears to pour as I sped down the hill. I knew pedaling back up would be rough, but it was worth it.

As I reached the bottom and began to slow down, I saw movement in the little creek to my right. It was the old man with the traps! I was so excited that I indifferent-



ly dropped my bike alongside the road and walked toward him. The old man started to turn away and quickly gather his things to go. I was shocked when I heard the words "WAIT!" jump out of my mouth. I had to talk with him.

His face showed equal surprise. His body language was that of someone getting ready to flee, getting ready for some abuse. I can't remember what I said, but words poured from my mouth. Questions about muskrats, traps and as many things as I could come up with in one breath.

His body language changed from flee mode to what the heck mode. When he opened his mouth to speak, I was expecting a thick, barely understandable mutter. What I remember hearing was a trained Shakespearean actor projecting with clarity.

"What's a young fellow like you doing out here in this cold?" he asked.

I told him quickly of my boundaries and the temptation of the fast ride down the hill. He smiled, revealing a wad of chewing tobacco tucked away in the side of his mouth. "Well, since you're in a hurry, I'll try to answer a few of those questions," he said cordially, as he placed his small backpack on the ground.

A few hours later, I knew that muskrats were good to eat. I learned how to pick the right area to trap them, how to skin them, how much you could get for pelts and other interesting tidbits.

I also learned that he had fought in the war. That he liked to be away from people. He told me about his wife, who had died from tuberculosis when he was a young man. He never bothered looking for another wife. He said it was because you only get one chance like that. He had a son who never visited. He was probably the most intelligent, well-spoken person I had ever met at my young age.

Then he gathered his belongings, shook





my hand and thanked me for the good company. He turned back and said with a smile, "I hope you're not in too much trouble."

I assured him the worst that would happen is that I'd have to go inside. I was getting cold anyway. I gathered my bike and watched him trudge down the creek with his patched waders, rattling with each step. I'll never forget every wrinkle on his face or the expression in his eyes when he spoke. It was the last time I saw him.

Mom was waiting for me with that "you're in trouble now, this had better be good" look on her face. Then, not even caring about the consequences, I unloaded. I told her how I met the most interesting person in the world, about his muskrats, his time in the war, his wife and his son. She brought me a cup of hot chocolate, caught up in my story. Yup, she was hanging on every word.

Now many moms would say, "You'd better watch out for strangers," but my mom trusted my judgment. She knew that she had taught us well about our fellow man. I remember her talking about not judging a book by its cover.

That summer, mom lifted my restrictions on travel. My range increased dramatically.

I kept an eye out for that old man throughout the years, but somehow I knew I would never see him again. Some 20 years later, I became the host of Kentucky Afield television. Then my quest began.

I found incarnations of that old trapper time and again all over the state. I found

such guests as Willie Penn, Bruce Midkiff, Randell Gibson, "Red" Harrod, Ruth Brame, Bill Dixon and others. I tapped into their wisdom with the same childlike curiosity that I had somehow kept from my youth. As I learned, hopefully, we all did. They became fixtures on the show and more importantly, friends.

I am truly blessed to have served in a department dedicated to the resource.

Every employee is a hub in the wheel of the machine that is funded by sportsmen's dollars. It's a fine-tuned machine that cannot exist without your help. We must find that next generation of eager youngsters and guide them in the ways of the woods and waters. We must answer their questions with the same energy in which they are asked.

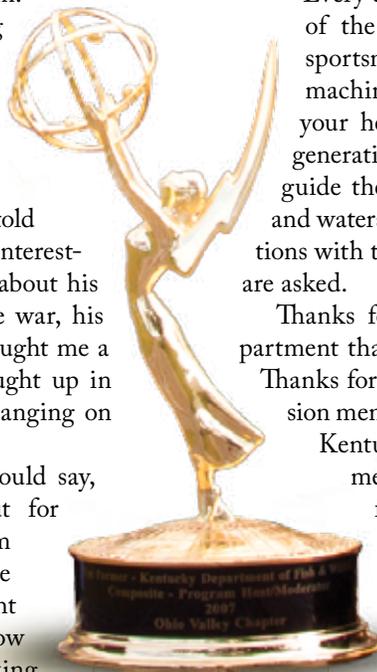
Thanks for the leadership in the department that allowed us to tell the story.

Thanks for the bold ideas from commission members and biologists that made Kentucky the paradise for sportsmen that it is today. Let's never forget how far we have come in the last several years.

Thank you, the Kentucky Afield viewer, for inviting us into your home on Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons. We have no idea who the next host will be, but I think an agency that engineered the biggest wildlife comeback in our nation's history can handle finding that next person to take

you across the Commonwealth in search of outdoor adventure. Welcome them into your homes – and into your boats as well!

As for me, it's pretty simple. I'll see you in the woods or on the waters. Seriously! I will... ■



Kentucky Afield has garnered 13 Emmy® Awards since 2005.