

FOUNDATION

EVENING ON THE PLAZA

Forrest L. Wood to Receive 2007 Ozarks Ambassador Award

So many stories have been written about Forrest Wood. The “Father of the Modern Bass Boat” has been labeled as an icon, a pioneer, and a legend in his own time.

When asked about his fame and accomplishments, the 74-year-old founder of Ranger Boats and namesake of the renowned FLW Tournament Circuit replies, with characteristic modesty, “I’ve been lucky.”

But, to get the whole story, dig a little deeper, because Forrest Wood is living proof of how much luck a lifetime of hard work can bring a man.



Forrest L. Wood

Award in recognition of his lifetime of achievements. The presentation will be made by Wood’s longtime friend, retired U.S. Rep. John Paul Hammerschmidt, a former recipient of the award.

Born and raised near Flippin, Wood’s childhood was a lot different than some people probably imagine.

“Times were pretty tough,” he remembers. “We had little time to go fishing. I can only remember twice my dad had time to take me fishing before I was old enough to go by myself. But I learned a good work ethic.”

Forrest and his wife, teammate and best friend, Nina, have been married 56 years.

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They were born 14 miles apart, along the banks of the White River, but didn't meet until high school. "We were both too busy working," Forrest remembers. "Nina and I didn't have any choice but to work when we grew up."

A couple of years after the end of World War II, a project came along that would

dramatically impact most families in the Flippin area, including Forrest's and Nina's. Construction of the Bull Shoals Dam began July 9, 1947. The facility was dedicated July 2, 1952, by President Harry Truman.

"It was the biggest single life-changing event that has happened in my lifetime,"

Wood says. The Bull Shoals Dam project provided Wood's father and many other men in Marion County with good jobs and changed the area. "It was not only the wages it paid," Wood points out, "but the recreational opportunities it provided."

Wood himself became a highly successful fishing guide on the White River for 14 years. In those days, he and Nina operated a cattle ranch, construction company, and the fishing guide operation—all at the same time.

Before long, Forrest and some friends started building river boats, "then we decided to try our hand at building bass boats," he recalls.

They built six bass boats in 1968, 600 in 1969, and 1,200 in 1970.

On May 4, 1971, a fire burned Wood's business to the ground. He and Nina were uninsured. "All we had left was 60 employees and my army surplus desk with 60 boat orders," he says.

Those 60 employees made the difference.

"The key was the people," Wood explains. "Buildings and equipment are important, but not as important as people."

Forrest and Nina "mortgaged every hoof of livestock

OZARKS AMBASSADOR AWARD

The Ozarks Ambassador Award will be presented to Forrest Wood during the Foundation's annual Evening on the Plaza Dinner Friday, May 4. North Arkansas College President Dr. Jeff Olson, who will host the dinner, and retired U.S. Rep. John Paul Hammerschmidt will make the presentation.

The Evening on the Plaza Dinner will be held in the Conference Center of the John Paul Hammerschmidt Business and Conference Center on Northark's South Campus at 6:30 p.m. It will be preceded by a reception on the JPH Plaza at the college from 6 to 6:30 p.m. Tickets for the event are \$25 each. For more information, contact Jacquie Markle (391-3159) or Micki Somers (391-3242).

The special menu for the evening will include a catered fish, shrimp and chicken dinner, with all the trimmings.

Established in 1990, the Ozarks Ambassador Award is presented to someone from northern Arkansas who has represented the area with distinction nationwide in one or more of the following fields: agriculture, finance, medicine, education, politics, law, business, social services, the ministry, or industry.

Robert M. Eagle of Dallas, TX, was the 1990 recipient; James H. Jones of San Francisco, CA, was honored in 1991; David R. Banks of Fort Smith received the award in 1992; William P. Stirtz of St. Louis, MO, was the 1993 honoree; James F. Keenan of Palm Beach, FL, received the honor in 1994; Dr. Ronald C. Jones of Dallas, TX, was the 1995 recipient; Tom and Don Salmon of Little Rock were honored in 1996; John Paul Hammerschmidt of Harrison was recognized in 1997; C.D. Wright of Barrington, RI, was the 1998 honoree; Sheridan Garrison of Harrison was presented with the award in 1999; David Perry of Mountain View, Calif., was the 2000 recipient; University of Arkansas Chancellor Dr. John A. White was honored in 2002; former Arkansas Supreme Court Chief Justice Jack Holt, Jr. received the 2003 honor; Northark graduate and former Tyson Foods General Counsel Les Baledge was recognized in 2004; and John Arthur Hammerschmidt of Harrison was the 2006 recipient.

The award was not presented in 2001 or 2005. Instead, the Foundation recognized retiring North Arkansas College President Dr. Bill Baker at the BBB Bar-B-Que and Blow-Out in 2001 and honored former Twin Lakes Vocational Technical School Director Weldon Stevenson in 2005.

we had,” he remembers. “We never considered quitting. The odds were against us, but we didn’t know it.”

From those ashes has risen a company, Ranger Boats, with a world class reputation for quality and excellence, as reflected in The Ranger Standard: “We Still Build ‘Em One At A Time So You Can Fish Hard, Run Strong, And Rest Easy.”

Wood, who will be honored by Northark on the 36th anniversary of the fire, takes great pride in the people who still make up the Ranger Boats family.

“It’s such a relief to have employees you can depend on—to have people who will ‘shut the gate,’” says Wood, using a saying anyone who grew up on a farm or ranch will understand.

Over the past four decades, Forrest and Nina Wood have been honored in many ways. But the things that give him the most pride are “the high esteem that Nina and I and the Ranger employees are viewed with wherever we go,” Forrest says, “and the many professional fishermen, national heroes, we have been able to help get started.”

Wood has been widely recognized during his career for his personal and financial

contributions to conservation causes. He has been inducted into the Professional Bass Fishing Hall of Fame, National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame, International Boating Hall of Fame, National Marine Manufacturers Hall of Fame, and Arkansas Game and Fish Foundation Outdoor Hall of Fame. In 1998 he received the American Sportfishing Association Lifetime Achievement Award.

Forrest and Nina were prominently featured in the books *Rare Breed-The Entrepreneur, An American Culture* and *Living Legends of Fishing*. In 2003 the B.A.S.S. Federations presented Forrest with the Lifetime Achievement Award as a “visionary in the bass boat industry” and praised him for his continued support of the Federations. He and Nina were also featured on Outdoor Life Network’s “Circle of Honor” program as Americans who have made great contributions to protection of the environment and promotion of the great outdoors.

Wood was named as one of *Field and Stream’s* top 50 fishing legends in the May 2005 issue. That same year, he was honored by the Arkansas Walk of Fame in Hot Springs, and in 2006 he was inducted into

the Arkansas Business Hall of Fame at the University of Arkansas’ Sam Walton College of Business.

Reflecting on his life growing up and building a business in the Ozarks, Wood notes the changes over time in opportunities for young people in the area.

“There are great opportunities here,” he points out. “Kids don’t have to leave here to better themselves.”

That advice comes from a man who felt compelled to move to Kansas City and take a job at an aircraft plant, helping build the first F-84 fighter jets, early in his married life.

“We didn’t have any other choice, but we were very unhappy in Kansas City,” remembers Wood, who had to take the job to pay off a cattle loan after a draught. “Nina cried every day. We made up our minds we were going to make our life here. We had seen the elephant—and we didn’t like it.”

Forrest and Nina, who have supplied college scholarships for numerous area students, are proud of the two-year colleges in Harrison and Mountain Home.

“I think students are better off to stay at home for the first two years,” Forrest

Forrest L. Wood to be Honored

says. "We're lucky to have the educational opportunities we have in our area." He points to many Ranger Boats employees who attended the former Twin Lakes Vo-Tech, now Northark's North Campus.

Today, Forrest and Nina Wood continue riding herd over the family's extensive cattle ranch. They enjoy their four daughters and their families, including 11 grandchildren and 12 great grandchildren.

In 1998, Forrest was "humbled by the responsibility" of being appointed to the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission.

During his seven-year term, he helped ensure conservation efforts in Arkansas.

Wood tries "never to miss an opportunity to hunt and fish" across his beloved America. He continues his efforts to promote his company, tourism along the White River in northern Arkansas, and the environment. Naturally, he takes great pride in Ranger Boats, now run by his son-in-law, Randy Hopper, and recipient of the prestigious J. D. Power Award in 2001, 2002, and 2003.

Near the entrance to the Forrest L. Wood Outdoor Gallery,

a must-see stop for visitors to Flippin, is a beautiful cup presented to Forrest Wood commemorating the 10th anniversary of the World Championship of Bass Fishing, the FLW Tour. The inscription on the cup reads: *Forrest L. Wood, An American icon and a true legend.*

"All I did was to do my best to get along and make a living. And I had a lot of good help," Forrest says. "Work ethic is so important. It really doesn't matter too much where you grow up, if you have someone to teach you to work. I just feel real lucky."

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