

Of Fish and Men: Willis Evans' Life of Dedication to Fisheries

by Ann Thomas
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Hold a meeting about fish or waterways almost anywhere in Marin County and Willis Evans of San Geronimo is apt to be there: ready to offer comment based on six decades of experience from the Central Valley to West Africa and back again.

Willis, who moved to Sleepy Hollow in 1971 and now lives with wife Betty Jean in San Geronimo, has spent his life outdoors since graduation from Oregon State College in fish and game management in 1940. The Pasadena native began his career as a ranger/naturalist in Yosemite with the National Park Service, later going to work at the Department of Fish and Game's marine fisheries laboratory at Terminal Island in Los Angeles. Within six months at Terminal Island in the early 1940s, Willis said, "it was easy to see we were losing the sardine fisheries." The reason: "over-fishing." Since then he has, for much of his life, played the somber role of observer to the decline of fisheries worldwide.

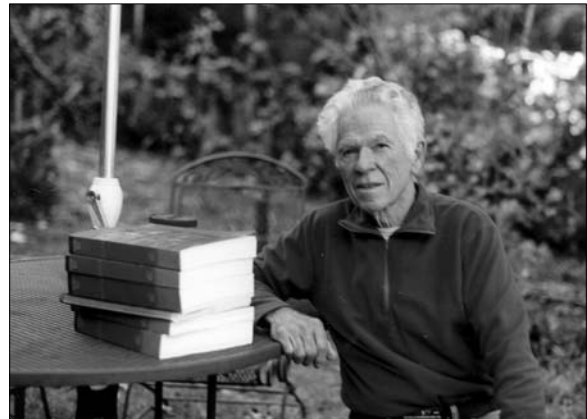
World War II found Willis in Pennsylvania training medical field staff, then officer candidates. He started training and learning Japanese to join the mountain troops in the South Pacific, but the bombing of Hiroshima occurred before that assignment materialized and he went instead with occupation forces to assist with rehabilitation of the Japanese fishing industry. He was happy to spend three years working at something positive rather than fighting, but found the three-year stint "frustrating...the industry was far from rehabilitated."

Following the war he worked on a Central Valley project to save salmon by putting electrified screens across irrigation canals to prevent young salmon from winding up in growing fields. The project was unsuccessful. From the Central Valley he went to work for State Fish and Game supervising fisheries, first in southern California then along the central coast. On a five-year leave, he worked for the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization in West Africa as a project manager for a the man-made lakes program on the Volta River in Ghana – at that time the world's largest reservoir, about 550 miles long. He noted that the project, modeled after the Tennessee Valley Authority, was "one of the biggest boondoggles I ever worked on. The reservoirs weren't really developed for the benefit of the countries. The foreign powers got most of the benefits."

Back in the U.S. Willis joined the U.S. Forest Service for eight years, in time to witness major destruction of streams and salmon habitat due to road-building and logging. He decries the decline of Marin streams. Early in the '70s he was called one spring day by the principal at Drake High School because a salmon run in the creek had totally disrupted students who left classrooms to "catch the salmon in their hands." Fish were coming up San Anselmo Creek "by the hundreds." He rushed over to talk to students about conservation and why fish must be allowed to make their journey upstream.

The cause of the decline "is no mystery," he said. "People want to build homes and live in nice areas along the creek. Every house we build on the creek, every road and every driveway, means flood runoff is greater in winter and sustained flows in summer and fall don't occur as they once did."

Not one to retire from work he enjoys, since leaving the Forest Service Willis has free-lanced as an environmental consultant, for example giving expert testimony in fisheries cases. He works out of an office in his home that houses a library of 4,000 volumes on fisheries and the outdoors, books he has collected for six decades and which he has organized with a cataloguing system he designed himself.



Willis Evans at home. Photo by Ann Thomas

The breadth of his interests shows in the books, which reach from floor to ceiling: titles ranging from John Gunther's *Inside Africa* to Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* to *Applied Entomology*, *The Evolution of Earth and Man* and *Manual of Aquatic Plants*. He spends a good deal of time preparing comments on projects. At the moment he is involved in a supplemental environmental impact statement on the recently announced Yosemite Plan, documents filling 18 inches of shelf space in his library.

Willis recalls days when steelhead ran up the Los Angeles River and he was called out to stop children from molesting the fish in downtown Los Angeles. "If people would look at southern California's history of expansion," he said, "it would be an awfully good lesson. We have a little more left than they do in Los Angeles, but we're losing it."

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