

# CHARLES KEMPER, THE BIRD MAN OF CHIPPEWA FALLS

By Paul Cantor

Dr. Charles Kemper, the *Bird Man of Chippewa Falls* and Richard Kemper's first cousin will be 103 on December 29, 2022. Charles was a flight surgeon in the Pacific in World War II, a country doctor for 40 years after the war, an editor of the *Wisconsin Society for Ornithology*, president of the *Inland Bird Banding Association*, author of *Birds of Chippewa Land* and founder of the *Kemper Woods* wildlife preserve (<https://gochippewacounty.com/listings/kempers-woods/>). The articles below by and about him provide a fuller picture of this remarkable veteran, doctor, and environmentalist.



## REMEMBER THOSE WHO SACRIFICED, SUFFERED

By Charles Kemper, *The Chippewa Herald*, May 20, 2015

[https://chippewa.com/news/opinion/columns/charles-kemper-remember-those-who-sacrificed-suffered/article\\_73061894-acfb-5f6d-b16e-1cd61678f1cf.html](https://chippewa.com/news/opinion/columns/charles-kemper-remember-those-who-sacrificed-suffered/article_73061894-acfb-5f6d-b16e-1cd61678f1cf.html)

My generation was shocked by the Japanese attack on Hawaii and the declaration of war against us. "A day that will live on in infamy," declared President Franklin Roosevelt. **My oldest brother then said to me, "You know what? People we know are going to get killed."**

**We lost one first cousin in France**, shot down by enemy aircraft. **Another was blown up in the deadly hedgerows beyond Utah and Omaha beaches.** I lost a college teammate at Pearl Harbor. But I was not unusual; just about everyone I knew could relate similar stories of friends and family who lost their lives or were seriously wounded.

On this Memorial Day, I want to especially remember my Duke University roommate of three years, and my lacrosse teammate. Herbert James (Jim) Levy was my pen pal for 75 years and lifelong friend.

As a Southern-born lad, Jim initially knew nothing about lacrosse when he came to Duke. I helped teach him. A natural athlete, he became a star mid-forward. We were teammates on three championship teams. Jim was something of a prodigy. He studied classic courses and eventually majored in chemistry. He loved to listen to classical music. We enjoyed the university. Those were golden years.

During the pre-war days like today, there were very divisive opinions about the United States getting involved. Some of Duke's faculty members were isolationists. Though the Nazis were overrunning Europe, these professors thought there was no virtue in our getting involved in war.

But when the Japanese allies of Hitler bombed Pearl Harbor, our nation's parties — unlike today's politicians — united. Divisiveness ended at our borders, and everyone pulled together. In those days returning veterans never heard, "Hey, hey, hey! How many people did you kill today?"

But we all paid a price for our unpreparedness. The country suffered from its military laggardness. **I remember my brother Millard, a member of the National Guard in Maryland, drilling with**

**broomsticks instead of rifles.** And so many of our youth went to face deadly enemies, highly professional experienced battle veterans. There wasn't much time to adequately train our young drafters before they entered the combat theater.

Jim majored in chemistry at Duke, so the army assigned him as 81st chemical mortar battalion commander. He was a good choice, but he wrote later how he felt when he went into action with his unit. They had rehearsed landing maneuvers beforehand. But it was different the first time the enemy fired back, and Jim admitted he was scared. No wonder. It was hell. Many young Americans were to perish. Jim was the lone battalion commander who survived the initial wave of invaders at Omaha Beach.

Jim was a modest person, and he did not consider himself a hero. But he said he had a strong determination to conceal his personal fear from his command. Personally, this is a big part of being a military hero. He was explicit in telling me of that lonely feeling in the pit of his stomach that grew with each maneuver and preparation for the assault. And just as it began, the infantry commander of four assault teams on board his headquarter craft, along with a team of officers and personnel, were all killed.

They were all victims of a direct hit by large-caliber shore-based artillery. There were no survivors. Jim turned out to be the only one of the four company commanders of the 81st division who survived that day. Of the assault vehicles of Jim's company, only one jeep survived. So typical of almost every historical military battle, the stench of dead bodies of people and animals was unforgettable.

Despite the horrors and havoc and confusion and devastation, the beach was narrowly won! And what a price was paid to save future civilization from the likes of Adolph Hitler and his cohorts.

There isn't space here to quote all of Jim's detailed accounts. He passed away a short time ago. **Not too many World War II survivors are still alive. So, I stand among the few of his contemporaries to bear witness. Memories are fragile. The sad truth is that so many young people nowadays have never heard of these events. They know nothing about these fateful days, nor do they really care. How sad it is to learn that many Americans have never heard of any of this, as if it never happened.**

Monday is Memorial Day — time to refresh our memory and salute all our heroes. Jim became not only a great soldier, he was a superb historian, excellent writer and great American. He wrote:

*I was called upon to spend five years of my life in the army and I count myself most fortunate. I have no regrets of this segment of my life and feel that I paid an insignificant price for the privilege of being an American. I am still intensely patriotic and take great pride in what my generation accomplished. My prayers are that the real sacrifices made by so many will not have been in vain.*

Jim, I consider myself so fortunate to have known and shared some of your life; I wish it could have been more.

To the millions of American families who can relate to the sacrifices and suffering endured in this historic saga, I salute you. Give credit to the brave men and women who bravely suffered later in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and wherever called upon.

# A COUNTRY DOCTOR CAN'T FORGET HIS 40 YEARS OF HOUSE CALLS

*Wall Street Journal*, February 9, 2018

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-country-doctor-cant-forget-his-40-years-of-house-calls-1518134157>

**'If someone was calling at 3 a.m.,' he says, 'I was out of bed and out of the house within 10 minutes.'**

'The relief in their eyes,' said Dr. Charles Kemper. "That's what I saw when they opened the front door. There was often deep worry in their eyes, too, but the main thing I saw was relief: relief that I had come to their home, that I had arrived. That's a look that a man never forgets."

Dr. Kemper, now retired, is 98 years old. He lives in northern Wisconsin, in the town of Chippewa Falls, population 14,000, where he was a single-practice family physician for more than 40 years, from the 1940s into the 1980s.

We were talking about house calls. I wanted to speak with him because, with all the current controversy about health care—the fate of the Affordable Care Act; the recent proposal by business-and-financial titans Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffett and Jamie Dimon to upend the economics of medicine; the machinations of the big insurance companies—we sometimes forget that the so-called health-care industry was not always, to America's families, a confusing and intimidating behemoth. Health care was life-size: a doctor you knew, a doctor who would drive his car to your house if you said you needed him.



"It was never a nuisance," Dr. Kemper said. The number of doctors who remember when house calls were common is shrinking fast; Dr. Kemper told me that, for him, it was not a once-in-a-while thing, but a basic part of his medical practice. When his patients were very sick, he went to them instead of asking them to get out of bed and come to him. "You could tell in a glance, when you arrived at a home, how serious the situation was," he said. "And then my attitude was: time to get to work. Let's get you the help you need."

He is dismissive of the term "health-care provider": "I saw myself as a country doctor," he said. He is mightily impressed by the technology available to physicians today, the myriad medical specialties and advances. He knows that the days of routine house calls are never coming back. But when the phone by his bed would ring in the middle of a cold Wisconsin night, there was no feeling like it: "If someone was calling at 3 a.m., I didn't have to ask them if it was an emergency. They wouldn't be calling me if it wasn't. I was out of bed and out of the house within 10 minutes. I didn't waste time asking if they thought it could wait until morning. Of course it couldn't. They needed me there, and they needed me now."

The reward? "Every day, still, when I'm walking around town, people come up to me," he said. "They thank me. They say, 'You delivered all of our children, and now I'm a great-grandparent.' There were so many patients over the years that, I have to admit, sometimes I don't recognize them. But they will thank me, and I'll say, 'You're looking good,' and I don't know if they realize that they are making my day."

He still has his doctor's bag, black and bulky, that he carried into the homes of Chippewa Falls and the surrounding countryside. He believes that just the sight of it calmed his patients. It meant

that help had arrived. He keeps the bag in a closet at home: “There’s a stethoscope in it, a blood pressure cuff, an otoscope to look in the ears, a light to look in the throat, some things to measure blood sugar . . . I had to replace all of those over the years, but the bag itself was sturdy. It made it through my whole career.”

As medical care has become increasingly corporate, he said, “the private practitioners have been swallowed up, and the groups they become a part of have strict guidelines about how much time to spend with a patient, and how much to charge.” A doctor getting into his or her car to drive 20 or 30 minutes to an anxious patient’s home? Much too inefficient.

Yet Dr. Kemper said he would not trade those years of house calls for anything. His wife has died; his three children have long since left home. He moved out of the house on Maple Street where they were a family, and now lives in his modest old medical office next door, which he has converted into a residence.

Which may explain the recurring dream he has. “I’ll dream that I have forgotten to see a patient,” he said. “That I’m supposed to be somewhere to help someone, and that they’re waiting for me, and I’ve forgotten. I’ll wake up, and it will take me a few minutes to realize it was just a dream. I suppose that sounds ridiculous.”

I told Dr. Kemper it didn’t sound ridiculous at all. I asked him why he thought it was that he spent all those days and nights—all those years—driving to the homes of the ailing people who were waiting for him.

“That’s why God puts a country doctor on Earth,” he said.

# BIRDS AND SURVIVAL

Charles Kemper, Duke Magazine, Fall 2019

<https://alumni.duke.edu/magazine/articles/charles-kemper-40>

Studying birds is a kind of passion of mine,” says Charles Kemper of Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. Kemper, an old-style country doctor, remembers making house calls out in the country: “I always had my binoculars on the seat in the car beside me.” **Kemper retired from medicine in 1992, but it doesn’t look as if he’ll ever retire from birding.**

Kemper, eighty-seven, is **an active member of the Chippewa Wildlife Society.**

He still participates in the group’s Christmas bird counts, although he missed the most recent one because he got snowed in while visiting family members in Denver.

But Kemper is more than your average weekend birdwatcher. **For some fifty years, he has been banding** birds as a licensed volunteer for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. So far, he’s banded about 86,000.

**In 1996, he published a paper in Passenger Pigeon, an ornithological journal that is frequently cited in scientific literature.** The paper details his decades-long study of avian deaths at a local television tower. For forty-five years, beginning in 1957, Kemper or a helper visited the tower before dawn every morning during spring and fall migration seasons to count and identify the birds that had died in collisions with the tower the night before. His data provided scientists with valuable information about migration times and routes. “I guess if I wasn’t such a nut, I wouldn’t have bothered with it,” he says. “But I was intensely interested.”

Migrating birds are attracted to the lights on television, radio, and cell-phone towers and will circle them for hours. Many mornings, Kemper found hundreds of dead birds. One morning he found 11,000. In 2002, he discontinued his study because he was no longer finding dead birds. He says he’s not certain why but speculates that birds are becoming accustomed to the towers.

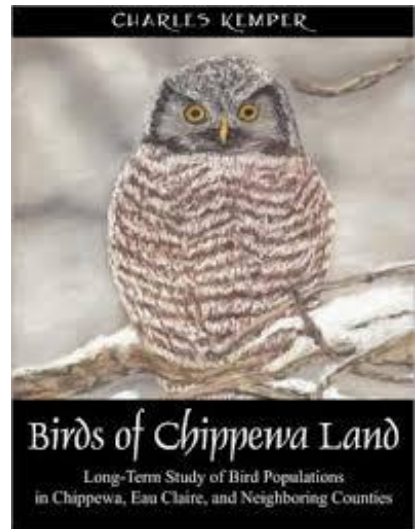
Legendary ornithologist Chandler Robbins, a senior author of *Birds of North America*, says Kemper’s tower study has been a significant contribution to ornithology. “Bird kills vary day to day and season to season, so it’s important to get a long-term record,” he says. “Quite a few people have done this for a night or two, but Dr. Kemper did it for years and years.”

**At Duke, Kemper majored in biology, then attended medical school and interned at the University of Maryland in Baltimore. He served as a flight surgeon in the U.S. Air Force during World War II. While training at Fort Kelly in Texas, Kemper met Margaret Johnson, and they were married. Three weeks later he shipped out.**

After the war, Kemper and his wife settled in west-central Wisconsin, and he began his career as a general practitioner. “We did everything,” he says. “We delivered babies and did appendectomies and gall bladders.” The Kempers raised three children; today they have six grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Despite his busy career and family life, Kemper always found time for birds. These days, he still bands birds in his back yard and in a nearby eighty-acre woodlot he owns, and he participates in meetings and bird outings of the Chippewa Wildlife Society. Patty Henry, the group’s secretary and treasurer, says, “If he is not the most knowledgeable birder in the state right now, he ranks up there. **Everyone knows Dr. Kemper.**”

Kemper, who recently finished a book, *Birds of the Chippewa Land*, that will be published this year, has no plans to slow down. “I’m still going full blast working with birds.”



# PLANS FOR KEMPER'S WOODS TAKING FLIGHT

By Rod Stetzer Apr 21, 2007

Dr. Charles Kemper stunk as a fisherman.

Oh, he tried. He had moved to western Wisconsin from suburban Baltimore, Md., not long after the end of World War II. He tried a hand with saltwater fishing and thought he could try his skills on Lake Wissota and Duncan Creek.

“I never had any luck,” said the retired physician.

It was a big break for wildlife in Wisconsin, because the hard-luck fisherman dived into another outdoor activity.

“I took up bird watching and never got skunked,” the 87-year-old Kemper said.

Since 1953, he had helped to capture, measure, band and release over 87,000 birds on 80 acres of property he owns southeast of Chippewa Falls. He authored a landmark study covering 45 years of why birds kept on flying into and dying after hitting a TV tower.

Now Kemper, who lives in Chippewa Falls, has agreed to sell his beloved woods to four conservation groups so the land that the birds love will be preserved in its natural state.

Kemper’s incredible efforts to help wildlife will be recognized in a ceremony from 1-3 p.m. today at what’s called Kemper Woods, southeast of Chippewa Falls.

Kemper will also talk about his new, **over 200-page book, “Birds of Chippewa Land,”** that will go on sale this year. The book will include many color photos of birds.

He’s been helped with the book by friends Bruce Steger and Mike Dahlby. Proceeds from the sales of the book will be donated by Kemper for the new preserve and to manage the woodlot.

The groups wanting to buy the 80 acres include: Chippewa County Land Conservancy, Inc., Chippewa Valley Wildlife Society, West Wisconsin Land Trust and Friends of Kemper’s woods.

County and local conservation groups have applied for state and federal grants that are expected to pay nearly 80 percent of the purchase cost.

The rest will be paid for from contributions from the community.

Kemper has been working with birds on the 80 acres since the early 1950s, when a lady owned the land.

One day she told him she had received an offer from a gravel company to buy the property. “I offered her \$5,000 for it,” he said.

But to pull off the deal, Kemper had to borrow against his life insurance to get the \$5,000, then a hefty sum of money.

“That turned out for me to be the best investment I ever made,” he said.

Not because of the rise in property value, but because buying the land allowed Kemper to have a good place to monitor birds for decades.





Kemper figures about 150 different species of birds, both migratory and those sticking around year-round.

Kemper said he's seen an increase of wild turkeys, Canadian geese, Starlings and Cliff Swallows. The latter birds have benefited from the development of highway overpasses.

"They like to nest on the sides of bridges," he said.

But a loss of habitat, or changes in breeding grounds, have hurt other kinds of birds. Kemper said the number of purple martins has declined.

When he first began bird watching, Kemper stood out. People thought he was kind of strange carrying binoculars on his car's front seat in case he spotted a bird while driving to a patient's home for a medical house call.

"Today, it's a big pastime," he said. People invest a lot of money into binoculars and telescopes to watch birds, or fancy cameras to photograph them.

If the plans for Kemper's Woods get off the ground, birds will continue to find a warm welcome on 80 acres of undisturbed land near a metro area.