

RIP: John “Mad Dog” Fewkes

June 16, 1956 to April 8, 2016



John "Mad Dog" Fewkes has been the face and spirit of the Quapaw Canoe Company in Helena since 2007. He was a prolific artist, poet and vociferous philosopher. He painted a giant mural depicting the Lower Mississippi River which covers 2 walls of the Quapaw location at 107 Perry street. He will be forever remembered by us Mighty Quapaws. His spirit will live forever in the work we do, and in the creative flowing throughout the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas.

Mad Dog, this is to you from us Mighty Quapaws, we raise our paddles to you and sing your praises: you have been a leader on the big river, and now you have gone on to join others on the greatest river of them all. We send our love, prayers and blessings. And as always, we hope that wherever we are in our daily lives that the spirit of the river is with us all.

Paddles up to you Mad Dog, and from all of us Quapaws we send resounding up and down the Mississippi River a mighty resounding “Whoo-whoop!”



John Fewkes and John Ruskey at Quapaw Helena Ribbon Cutting, Sept 2007

Mad Dog served faithfully as our manager in Helena since 2007, but we have been friends since I first met him sometime in the mid 1990s. We had an immediate friendship, perhaps due to our many shared interests in art, music and philosophy.

I was amazed at all of John's talents and enthusiasm for life. Somehow at some point I started calling him "Mad Dog" and it seemed to fit. His madness was of the kind that made the world a better place through painting, poetry, story-telling, and good humor. I will miss his good spirit and good council. He was my trusted advisor for decades, a touchstone of sorts for the Quapaw Canoe Company. I really don't know what I will do without him, but I do know that when I seek him out in prayer I will feel him out there. His prints and paintings are a reminder of that zeal for life, and his stories will live on.

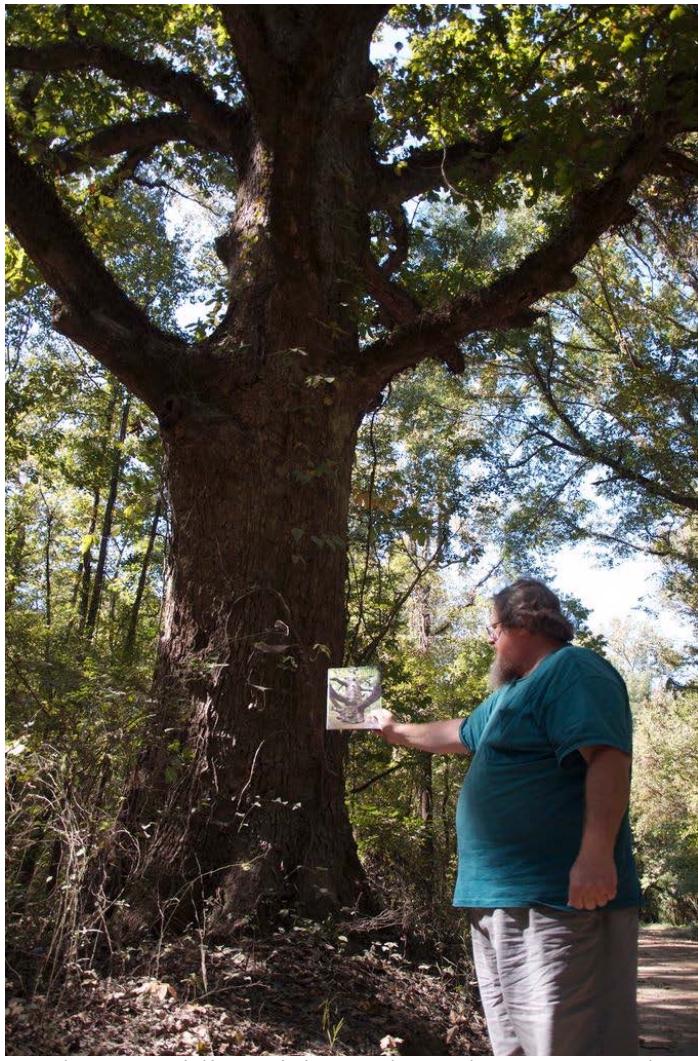
We river rats believe that all life is connected, and water is the medium. In the big canoe, we all paddle together, eat together, and make camp together. It is an ideal example of democracy at its best. John was like family. My words today are spoken in behalf of all of the Mighty Quapaws of Helena Arkansas and Clarksdale, Mississippi.



Mad Dog, Buck Island, which he helped save as a place for public recreation

We will be telling and re-telling Mad Dog stories as long as we are paddling canoes on the Mississippi River. Some of his stories were told over and over again, like the stained glass window story:

“Very sad and sorry to hear about the passing of Mad Dog. He was extremely kind and gracious to us in extending friendship and hospitality. He showed us around Helena and introduced us to the community garden he was tending. He joined us for literally hours in your Quapaw office philosophizing over cups of coffee. One of the many wonderful stories he told was that of how he met his wife. If memory serves correctly, he had noticed a stained glass window in a house he often passed. He said he could imagine what the room on the other side of the window looked like and also the view out of that window from inside the home. As fate would have it, the home is where his eventual wife was living. When he went inside the room in question, he said it looked exactly how he imagined.” (John and LaNae Abnet)



Mad Dog guiding visitors along the Low Road
Crowley's Ridge, St. Francis National Forest

A former Mighty Quapaw guide wrote:

"He always made everything better. I always enjoyed the ride to the St Francis launch when he was driving. It's a beautiful drive through the forest, but his narrative seemed to unlock the magic of the forest. On the return leg just above the harbor, I would always look forward to Mad Dog's call from the river overlook platform. Sometimes he was drumming and chanting, sometimes just a chant, but he would always follow it up with a Quapaw "Who-Ute!" He was a pleasure to be around and I always looked forward to seeing him. His loss just like his life will be felt by many." (Braxton Barden, Athens, GA)



Mad Dog enjoying early morning colors in the sky, Helena, Arkansas

An adventure expedition leader wrote:

“My heart is heavy today with news of the loss of our friend Mad Dog. We felt right at home at the Helena Outpost as Jordan, Markus, Pat and I rowed into the boat ramp and got set up for our memorable stay with the Quawpaw clan. Mad Dog made us feel welcome from the outset, and our time cruising around town or right there at the outpost was about sharing story on life, the river, adventure, family, kids and their future, his loving wife.... what an amazing, kind hearted, sweetheart of a gentleman. He'll be sorely missed by us out here in the great northwest.” (Greg Spooner, Seattle)

I think all of you might commiserate with Mark Bix’s sentiments, sent from Japan.

“SSSOOOO SAD to hear of John’s passing. He was a special person and I feel an emptiness filled with pain in my heart. Please extend my condolences to his family and friends. You and your extended operation are in my thoughts.” (Mark Bix, Japan)

John’s philosophizing affected many people in our daily routine as a business. A friend from Memphis wrote:

John, this is good news, bad news. Bad news – Of course, John Fewkes passing. But maybe good news, in a way. After reading your excellent and moving tribute to him, and after wondering , given your depiction of John's life and service, what in the world am I doing with my life , I've decided to recharge my efforts to make a difference. Stay tuned... (Harry Freeman, Memphis)

This would make Mad Dog happy, to hear Harry say that. He loved having an effect on people. He loved talking, but also listening and learning. As Socrates said, "the life un-examined is not worth living!"



Mad Dog teaching KIPP Canoe Club

Finally, If I may, I wanted to share some facts about John's life that some of you may not be aware of:

John came to the Delta in 1994 as plant manager for Pillowtex Corporation's Tunica Branch. Fewkes also began teaching business and marketing classes for Coahoma Community College's Adult Outreach evening program in 1996, where he has continued to serve until present. John met Edna at a local church and they started a beautiful life together in Dundee. Y'all know that love story better than I do!

In 2001 John was asked to take over as curator and executive director of Tunica Museums, Inc. where he directed the design and installation of the museum's permanent exhibits and curated, created and developed several temporary exhibits and research projects.

While working at the museum, Fewkes became interested in helping low and very low income families purchase their own homes. He was asked to join the board of Tunica County Housing Project, Inc. where he has served since 2002.

John then turned his sights to Clarksdale for a while, helping clean, organize and sort the WROX Museum extensive record and tape collection. Next door to the museum, he helped open Gimme Gumbo Gallery with owner Debbie Watson, filling the space with his own acrylic paintings of blues musicians and interpretations of blues lyrics and song titles. Fewkes was also a substitute teacher for the Tunica County School District.

In 2007 John turned his attention back to one of his favorite places, Helena, Arkansas. Wanting to participate in the rebirth of Historic Downtown Helena, Fewkes began supporting and helping out at Grounds, a Habitat for Humanity donation center, by purchasing used books and hanging artwork which he donated a portion of any sales to Grounds. He encouraged other artists to show their work at Grounds and helped create an entire gallery space on one side of the building. He is a regular at Grounds poetry night on Thursdays, and through Grounds has met many citizens and businesspeople of Helena.

John served as the Arkansas GardenCorps service member for the THRIVE Helena Community Garden at 112 Walnut Street in downtown Helena. When John joined the team, they had an overgrown garden with no plan. In the short time John turned this around, and now the HCG is a fully functioning nutrition education program that has a sustainable plan to last over the long-term. Terrnace Clark wrote "Words cannot describe how much he will be missed at Thrive. John was ALWAYS thinking ahead when it came to the garden. And this was how we have the plan we have today. His vision is why we will be able to carry on. We couldn't have done what we have done without him, and we will now not abandon our path forward because of him."

When friend and fellow artist John Ruskey asked Fewkes if he would be interested in managing the Helena Outpost, Fewkes gladly accepted, noting, "This is the perfect combination of the use of mind and body."



Mad Dog helping celebrate the completion of the KIPP Dugout Canoe

Mad Dog led the Helena Outpost of the Quapaw Canoe Company from 2007-2016. During this time he oversaw the KIPP Canoe Club and the Helena Canoe Club. These after-school leadership programs included the construction of dugout canoes, hand-crafted paddles, and experience on the wild Mississippi River for hundreds of East Arkansas youth.

Mad Dog helped the American Land Conservancy save Buck Island in 2008, which today is owned by Arkansas Game & Fish as a protected public place for generations to come.



Mad Dog with Chinook Tamanahwis, 2007

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Mad Dog demonstrating carving with an axe, KIPP Dugout Canoe