

How did Tex and Judy Cathey become founding members of FODR?

By the time Tex and I became founders of FODR, Jimmy Morgan had been working on his vision of preserving the Dragon for many years. We were new to the area and didn't know anything about the Dragon, but his passionate enthusiasm for the project was contagious and we were hooked. Little did we know that our original donation for the purchase of Big Island would reap so many benefits for the future of the land, water and people of the community. We also didn't realize that signing up with Jimmy wasn't just a donation and done. He needed the time and talents of all the founders. We helped build and install wood duck boxes and picnic tables, plant bald cypress saplings, attend meetings and picnics and everything else needed at that time. We all followed Jimmy like children behind their Pied Piper and were happy to do so. He had a vision and it was exciting to be part of that vision.

What was the greatest challenge in building the organization?

We think that some of the greatest challenges facing FODR today are the same challenges it's been facing since its inception. Most local folks live their lives never knowing that the Dragon exists, much less knowing that it is the northernmost habitat for bald cypress in the country and that the Smithsonian Institution and The Nature Conservancy named it the "most pristine water body" in the commonwealth of Virginia and the second most "ecologically significant area in the whole Chesapeake Bay." In 1974 when these statements were first published, I don't think that more than a handful of people in the Middle Peninsula knew, or even suspected that. Now, fifty years later, I bet the majority of the residents of the area still don't know they have a hidden natural treasure in their own backyard. We believe that if more people knew about the uniqueness and value of the Dragon and what FODR does, there would be a stronger grass roots support for its preservation.

Favorite memories of FODR

We have many fond memories of the Dragon and our participation in FODR but here are just a couple of them.

After Jimmy Morgan died in 1997 the members of FODR decided they wanted to do something on the Dragon to memorialize him. Eventually they decided to place an engraved memorial stone on Big Island commemorating Jimmy. That decision led to a whole list of practical problems. Where do you find a 250 pound river stone in Tidewater, Virginia and how do you get it engraved? Another big task became how to get the stone from the Big Island parking area across the Dragon to its final resting place on Big Island. Lastly, we wanted Jimmy's mother who was in her 80s or 90s and wheelchair bound to be able to attend the service. How could we get her across the water? Tex took the project on with gusto. He found the perfect water worn stone in the Watauga River near Banner Elk, NC.

We loaded it in the truck and brought it home. Next, he had it engraved by a local funeral home. Lastly, he and Davis Rhoads and a few other Board members built a contraption that held the stone and had four long handles that rested on the gunwales of two canoes and paddled the stone across the Dragon. Another crew built a temporary bridge across the Dragon so Jimmy's mother could attend the service. As I remember there was quite a turn out for the service and not more than a few dry eyes that day. Jimmy would have enjoyed it all.

The second account that I would like to include didn't have anything to do with FODR, but is still a great Dragon story. My mother and her siblings grew up in Middlesex County in the 1920s and 30s hearing all kinds of scary stories about the Dragon. They were told that it was dangerous and no place for children. It was full of snakes and runaway enslaved people and native Americans living off the land and hiding from the local population. Once we became members of FODR my mom and Aunt Mary started hearing about a very different sort of Dragon and they were intrigued and wanted to see it for themselves. We were more than happy to lead them on an expedition. A date was set and plans were made. However, Mother Nature intervened and about three weeks before our launch date we had a hurricane and the Dragon rose over its banks. Tex and I ran reconnaissance about a week before to make sure the water level had fallen to a safe level. It had and we had a beautiful, sunny day of paddling and exploring. Tex paddled with Aunt Mary and I went with Mom. They were mesmerized. At one point Aunt Mary reached up about four feet above the water line and grabbed a small bald cypress branch with the dead brown needles still attached. She turned to show us what she'd found and said, "Look, it's dragon fur!" And indeed, that little bit of dried cypress needles did look like dragon fur. We laughed about that for many years.

How to protect the Dragon

We're not scientists, educators, policy makers or government power brokers. Without an area of specialty, it's difficult to have well thought out answers to the question of how best to continue to protect the Dragon other than to continue working with other agencies, organizations, state and local government authorities and anyone else with a place at the table. We all know what the end goal is. Control the watershed so what goes into the Dragon can be controlled. Anyone who has much time on the Dragon or roamed its swamps and woodlands has felt the majesty of the big bald cypresses, especially in their bronze fall finery, or has spent time watching a dragonfly or damselfly land on your kayak or canoe or shoulder and stay there for what feels like forever, or seen the yellow water lily blooms or noticed the clear water stained by tannic acid knows that these experiences are valuable. Valuable for all of us now and even more valuable in the future when the wild places become fewer and farther between.