A River Runs Through It

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New Floating Classroom Honors Cal Fremling’s Legacy
By Sarah Certa ’11

For many years Dr. Calvin R. Fremling was an active, influential and beloved member of the Winona State University community. Passionate about biology and wildlife science from an early age, Fremling earned several degrees in biology and physical science before completing his doctorate in zoology at Iowa State University in 1959. He then joined the Winona State faculty, where he taught and conducted research for 32 years until his retirement in 1991.

Fremling devoted much of his time and work to the Mississippi River, including numerous studies, publications, and teaching manuals. His life’s work includes authoring and co-authoring 47 publications concerning aquatic ecology, especially that of the Mississippi. His book, Immortal River: The Upper Mississippi River in Ancient and Modern Times, is one of the most comprehensive and readable accounts of the river’s ecosystem available today. He is also known for his work on mayflies, which has been featured in an Encyclopedia Britannica film and on the television program “Those Amazing Animals.”

Fremling received many awards and well-deserved recognition for his dedication to both the river and the land and people it influences. His detailed and original work on the Weaver Bottoms Rehabilitation Project was recognized by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which presented it with its highest award for projects worldwide. In 1976, the Minnesota Academy of Science honored Dr. Fremling with its Distinguished Service Award in Scientific Research, and in 1992 the Mississippi River Research Consortium presented him with the “Friend of the River” award in recognition of his efforts in providing a better understanding of the ecology of the Mississippi River.
His enthusiasm for the mighty Mississippi was particularly evident in his classes at Winona State, where he provided students with elaborate slide shows illustrating his numerous field projects, including fishing and hunting expeditions and national and international travels.

But Fremling didn’t limit himself or his students to the classroom. He was well known for granting his students a rich hands-on learning experience. “Cal’s way of teaching was to show rather than to tell. He would take students out on the river, bring them to Whitewater (State Park) rather than lecture from a podium in the classroom,” says his wife, Arlayne Fremling, whom he married in 1952. “And Cal was always teaching: ‘Look at that, tell me about it.’”

While Dr. Fremling passed away in August 2010 at the age of 80, his spirit and legacy continues to influence the Winona State community and is what has inspired the Cal Fremling, a floating interpretive center and classroom, WSU’s latest innovative educational resource.

The floating classroom is just that – a 49 passenger, double-decked, steel-hull boat that comes fully equipped with Wi-Fi access and everything else needed to be a fully functioning classroom. Dedicated to creating a greater understanding of the broad multi-faceted nature of the Mississippi River and the people and places it touches, the goal of the interpretive center is to provide students, scholars, and the greater community with opportunities to enhance their relationship with the river through the type of hands-on research and education Fremling devoted his life to. The center aims to provide experiential learning opportunities through varied curriculums, including exploration of the river’s ties to history, environment, literature, natural and social sciences, folklore, visual and performing arts, and economics.

The boat, which launches on June 6, will be primarily used for undergraduate study and other WSU related activities, though it will also be open for community use and students of all ages, offering “University-on-the-River” classes. Local and regional groups, businesses, and corporations will have the opportunity to rent the boat for educational excursions, strengthening not only the community’s relationship to the river but also the relationships between people who share interest and passion for this magnificent body of water.
The new boat comes as a replacement to its predecessor, The River Explorer, a floating classroom that was docked in 2009 due to updated Coast Guard regulations. During its life The River Explorer offered unique opportunities for education, stewardship, and awareness, including water sampling, species identification, and overnight trips that encouraged students to fully engage in studying various aspects of the river’s ecosystem.

The Cal Fremling will enable WSU to once again provide rich and innovative educational experiences to thousands of students in the region, as well as commemorate Fremling’s influential work.

Arlayne Fremling is happy to see the boat come to life. “The boat is a way to honor his legacy,” she says. “I think Cal would be overwhelmed and humbled that we would name this learning resource in his honor.”

The Cal Fremling, a floating interpretive center and classroom, will be christened on June 6 thanks to your generous gifts. There’s still time to get on board with your support: contact the WSU Foundation at 507.457.5020 or wsufoundation@winona.edu. View updates on the Cal Fremling: www.winona.edu/foundation/boat.asp