The life and legacy of Billy Frank Jr.

March 9, 1931 – May 5, 2014
“We live along the river in these mountains, along these hundreds and hundreds of watersheds, our Indian people. Everything that’s floating out there has got a meaning to it. Everything in this watershed is important.”

“I don’t believe in magic. I believe in the sun and the stars, the water, the tides, the floods, the owls, the hawks flying, the river running, the wind talking. They’re measurements. They tell us how healthy things are. How healthy we are. Because we and they are the same. That’s what I believe in.”

From “Where the Salmon Run”

Billy Frank Jr. took his first breath on March 9, 1931, six days after President Herbert Hoover signed “The Star-Spangled Banner” into law as the national anthem. One day, Billy would defend his country; then he’d spend a lifetime challenging the nation to rise to its ideals.

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One day in the winter of 1945, as the temperature hovered in the mid-forties, Billy Frank Jr. became a fighter. Along the Nisqually River, Billy pulled thrashing and squirming steelhead and dog salmon from his fifty-foot net. To avoid the keen eyes of game wardens, he’d set his net in the river the night before. The downed branches of a fallen maple covered his canoe perfectly. But in the stillness of those early-morning hours, as he diligently butchered the chum, a yell pierced the silence. For Billy, life would never be the same.

“You’re under arrest!” state agents shouted with flashlights in hand.

Billy Frank Jr. at the dedication of the NWIFC’s fish health lab:

Martha Kongsgaard, Chair, Puget Sound Partnership Leadership Council:

Billy was a long-term optimistic thinker and strategist. He was the personification of what it means to be courageous. Not brave. Bravery is temporary; it’s a rising to an occasion not necessarily of one’s making. It is a kind of daring, but not enduring. Courage, on the other hand, is a disposition, a quality of character. It endures. Central to the word courage is of course “coeur,” meaning heart. Heart was Billy’s defining feature. He knew no stranger, was alien to no injustice.

Billy Frank Jr. talking to then candidate Bill Clinton in 1992:
From “America Has Lost a Giant” by Jeff Shaw:

Up until his last days, Billy was working to make sure that his kids, and yours, and theirs, and theirs — and however many “theirs” you want to attach on the end — would have a healthy planet that would support wild salmon. He was working to protect the sacred commitments that in turn protect the communities he loved.

If you care about the U.S. Constitution, you should care about Billy Frank. If you’re concerned with honoring oaths and the dignity of keeping your word, you should be glad he lived. If you fight for social justice in any capacity, you had a fellow traveler. If you’re concerned about the fate of the planet we’re leaving to our children, you owe him a debt.
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Remembering Billy
Share your memories of Billy Frank Jr. here or read memories left by others.

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Remember Billy by contributing to Salmon Defense and the Billy Frank Jr. Salmon Forever Fund

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