

Bob Bieri

Bob Bieri was one of the strongest, purest, wisest advocates of ecology we have had among us in Yellow Springs. We will miss him. His death last week deprives us of a uniquely valuable community resource: a source of broad knowledge and technical expertise, for he was a scientist, and a source or inspiration too, for he was a passionate lover of the natural world, a dedicated naturalist and a teacher whose moral commitment to respect for the environment was contagious.

Over the years he taught Yellow Springs great and useful lessons, about the town's trees—he seemed to know them as one knows intimate, longtime friends—and about the whole intricate, lovely system of nature of which the trees are a part. And of which we human beings are a part. Bob Bieri taught that lesson, too, that nature is what we live in, day by day. And that we need to learn to live in it better than we do.

And so we will miss him. But perhaps we won't miss him enough—not as much as we should. Several years ago, when a pesticide-spray plan threatened some Yellow Springs trees, Bob Bieri's advice and counsel helped inspire a grass-roots community movement that replaced the state's pesticide poisoning plan with an ecologically responsible local project that successfully saved the health of the trees (and of the air and the earth).

Since then, times have changed. Our local environmental energy has declined. It's not likely that Yellow Springs would be capable of such a community-based movement today, in this era of local enthusiasm for subdivisions and asphalt bikeways and industrial parks. Last year, Bob Bieri's was one of the voices raised in fervent opposition to the bikeway's paving of the earth—on of the environmentalist voices overridden and ignored. That his voice is now lost is a loss to the community and its future quality of life.

But we learned a lot from Bob Bieri, lessons that will not be lost. I remember one day, visiting at his home—nature was vividly present there; natural things grew in abundance — to see the Indian-style canoes Bob build, out of birch bark and paper, so lightweight you could pick them up in one hand. He showed them to me and my daughter with intense enthusiasm.

Bob's son George was there; he remarked that the canoes were, being so light in the water, difficult to balance. Bob said: "You can learn to balance them." in a pointed, meaningful tone of voice— he was saying, clearly: "you can learn to live in nature." For that was the point of those wonderful canoes: they were natural boats, to float down a stream in. That is why Bob made them.

One day in late summer in the south Glen, sitting on a sycamore log staring at the smooth river, I saw George Bieri drift by in one of his father's Indian canoes. It rode so light and full of grace in the water that it made no sound; it left just a silent trace of a ripple on the river's surface, a smooth gentle arc slowly spreading bank to bank. As he drifted by me in the canoe we did not speak, careful not to break the silence.

—Don Wallis