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'Swan Lady' created a haven for trumpeters

Sheila Lawrence, who died Saturday, April 2, 2011 fed more than 1,500 swans each winter near her Monticello home. It was typical of Sheila that she didn't take her leave of Monticello until after her beloved trumpeter swans, nurtured and fattened all winter long on the Mississippi River below her house, were on their way north once again.

Lawrence, 65, died Saturday after an eight-month battle with cancer. She left a legacy for her river town in the large graceful birds that now winter there, thanks to the "Swan Lady" who fed them for more than 20 years.

"Maybe she was the bird whisperer. Some people have it," said her husband, Jim, who took over the feeding for his wife this winter when she became too sick to continue. "I don't know when she became the Swan Lady, but it kind of fit. She accepted it as a badge, and it worked for her and everybody else."

Carrol Henderson, nongame wildlife program supervisor for the Department of Natural Resources, said that Lawrence "single-handedly speeded up the recovery of this threatened species in Minnesota." He called her "a great conservationist."

Sheila Lawrence's daily feedings of shelled corn have regularly drawn more than 1,500 swans to Monticello in the winter months, making the community of 13,000 northwest of the Twin Cities a destination for hundreds of tourists from Minnesota and outside the state. "She has put us on the map," said Sandy Suchy, director of the Monticello Chamber of Commerce & Industry.

The Wisconsin native graduated from high school in Somerset, Wis. After a stint as a beautician, she worked in several manufacturing plants before joining Medtronic in Fridley as an assembler. There she met Jim Lawrence, whom she married in 1980.

While still working for Medtronic, the Lawrences in 1984 built a house in Monticello above a stretch of the river that remains open in the winter due to the water discharge from the nearby power plant. Sheila began feeding the ducks and geese that stayed over the winter.

Four years later, the first few pairs of swans arrived. "She said 'Wow, look at these big things,'" Jim Lawrence said. The more swans she fed, the more came.

She worked hours moving buckets of corn from a grain hopper in her driveway down to the shallows where the swans rested. In recent years, the couple rigged a conveyor system using an auger that empties the feed into a tub near the water. Sheila was quiet and didn't seek attention, her husband said, and years went by before her efforts became widely known.

As more tourists came to watch the growing number of swans, the city set aside a vacant lot next to the Lawrence home to accommodate them and dubbed it Swan Park. The chamber published a brochure with directions, a history of Monticello's swans and a food and lodging directory.

In recent years, Sheila was feeding the birds 1,200 to 2,000 pounds of corn each day. More than 2,200 birds were fed this winter, at a cost of nearly \$20,000, but Jim Lawrence said that he plans to continue. "That is my intention. I'm not going anywhere," he said.