

Ken Hofmann greets fellow hunters at a California Waterfowl event in 2017.  
PHOTO BY ANDREW CREASEY



Ken Hofmann



Ken Hofmann aspired to a career in boxing, but was persuaded to go into business – and take up duck hunting – instead.

• 1923-2018 •  
REMEMBERING  
**KEN HOFMANN**

by **ERIK BERGREN**, COMMUNICATIONS ADMINISTRATOR

**K**enneth H. Hofmann – Bay Area homebuilder, philanthropist, outdoorsman and former co-owner of the Oakland A's and the Seattle Seahawks – passed away peacefully at his home with his family by his side on April 22. He was 95.

Mr. Hofmann was a tireless supporter of youth and wetlands whose contributions will continue to leave a mark on our community for decades to come.

California Waterfowl President John Carlson, Jr., counted Mr. Hofmann both as a personal friend and as a great ally to waterfowl and wetlands. “His one-of-a-kind generosity and philanthropy will be greatly missed,” he said.

Mr. Hofmann was born February 15, 1923, in Oakland and graduated from Fremont High School. He went on to attend St. Mary's College in Moraga before graduating from the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, New York. Mr.

Hofmann served in the Merchant Marines in various theaters during World War II, earning a rating of Master Mariner.

Mr. Hofmann originally wanted to be a boxer, and was quite good at it. “I remember him saying once he was doing pretty well in the semi-pro ranks,” said Carlson. “Then his mom had a heart-to-heart with him and asked, ‘Is this what you really want to do? It's not a way to make a living and go through life,’” Carlson remembered.

It was also, indirectly, something that led him to become a duck hunter, Mr. Hofmann said in an episode of “The Fowl Life” in 2015. “My sport was boxing. I had a black eye and a busted nose. My cousin got tired of seeing me like that and asked, ‘You ever been hunting?’

“Not in my life,” he responded. “So, he took me duck hunting. I was 30 years old.”





Ken Hofmann with longtime friend Claude Grillo.

If it was his mom and his cousin who got him out of boxing, it was his father who got him into construction and home building. His father was a plasterer who would teach him that trade, as well as something else.



Ken Hofmann with CWA President John Carlson, Jr., at a luncheon honoring California Waterfowler's Hall of Fame inductees in 2016. PHOTO BY PENNY PERKINS

"Ken told me a story once about his father," Carlson said. "He was 16 or so and all his friends were getting cars. He was excited about getting a car too, and asked his dad 'What kind of car are you going to get me?' and his dad replied, 'I'm going to give you something better than a car, something you will use for the rest of your life: a work ethic.'"

In 1948, Mr. Hofmann started his career as a plastering contractor and moved onto home building in 1951. He started the Hofmann Company in 1957, and by the mid-1980s, the company had built more than 30,000 homes and apartments, and more than \$150 million worth of commercial and industrial properties, including Discovery Bay in the California Delta. He was a two-time president of the Building Industry Association.

He also owned two sports teams: In 1988, Mr. Hofmann and fellow Bay Area real estate developer Ken Behring purchased the Seattle Seahawks. The pair sold the team in 1997 to current owner Paul Allen. And in 1995, Mr. Hofmann and

Steven Schott bought the Oakland A's Major League Baseball team, keeping the team in the Bay Area and thwarting a potential move. They owned the team for 10 years.

Mr. Hofmann's tremendous success allowed him to become a dedicated philanthropist, earning him a spot in the California Waterfowler's Hall of Fame in 2008.

Mr. Hofmann's storied contributions to waterfowl and wetlands began in 1990, when he purchased Rancho Esquon, a sprawling agricultural property in Butte County, and began working to restore its natural habitat. Today, the ranch consists of 10,000 acres, including rice, almond orchards, cattle grazing and a pristine 900-acre wetland. All told, it is home to more than 173 species of birds.

It also serves as a valuable educational resource. Over 4,000 students have taken class field trips to Rancho Esquon, where they can witness the successful interplay of agriculture and wildlife habitat, as well as tour the ranch's egg salvage hatchery.

Mr. Hofmann's contributions to waterfowl and wetlands extended far beyond Rancho Esquon. In 1994, he was awarded the prestigious National Great Blue Heron Award by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for making the largest contribution ever to the North American Waterfowl Management Plan – \$3 million. He made the contribution as a challenge gift to jump-start the Central Valley Joint Venture's goal to restore 300,000 acres of habitat.

California Waterfowl District 2 Director Rocque Merlo met Mr. Hofmann 26 years ago. "Since that time, I personally learned a great deal from him with respect to philanthropy, business, youth education and his deep passion for waterfowling and conservation," Merlo said.

"What stands out to me the most is him being a hero and champion for so many youth groups and educational institutions," Merlo said. "The man's legacy shall never be forgotten, and it's up to a new generation of waterfowlers to carry on his youth education mission."

In the mid-2000s, Mr. Hofmann kick-started two California Waterfowl Youth Education Challenge Grants with \$250,000 initial donations. The end result was \$2 million total raised for CWA's Youth Education programs.

In 2012, he donated \$1 million to California Waterfowl's Ray Lewis Program Center Campaign, which helped CWA establish a new headquarters in Roseville, California, providing long-term stability through ownership, allowing more donations to be used for programs.



Leveraging his donations was also very important to Mr. Hofmann. “Ken always wanted me to take his donation and use it to get others to donate as well,” said Carlson. “He wanted people to step up and give to the extent they could. He never gave a gift without the assurance it would be used to get more donations.”

Mr. Hofmann is one of only seven donors to reach California Waterfowl’s Diamond Benefactor level, the highest giving level possible.

“Mr. Hofmann had a reputation for being difficult to work with,” said Carlson. “But he just wanted the best for everybody. He was very demanding, but his heart was full of love for the outdoors, youth education and equal opportunity.”

Mr. Hofmann and his lifelong contributions have been honored by CWA for over 10 years in the form of the annual K.H. Hofmann Youth Education Award, presented “to the individual or entity that has made an exceptional effort to educate future conservationists and hunters.” Some of the award winners include many of Mr. Hofmann’s contemporaries and fellow philanthropists, including Johnny Ribeiro; the late Henry Trione; Stephen D. Bechtel, Jr.; and the Joseph and Vera Long Foundation.

Mr. Hofmann also received many CWA awards throughout the years. In 2005, he won the Harry C. Adamson Award, given to the person who has demonstrated exceptional service to California’s waterfowl, wetlands and outdoor heritage. In 2012, he won the Ray Lewis Lifetime Achievement Award, presented to the individual who has dedicated a lifetime of outstanding contributions to waterfowl and wetland conservation in California.

Mr. Hofmann also touched the lives of young people with his seemingly endless generosity. His charitable organization, The Hofmann Family Foundation, has worked for over 20 years to help young people in need. It was a 1995 gift from the foundation that created the Concord Community Youth Center, which today provides educational and athletic opportunities for 1,900 underprivileged young people. In 2015, Mr. Hofmann opened the De La Salle Academy, which provides a program — including food, books and tutors — for underprivileged youth to help prepare them for high school.

From the mid-1990s to 2010, Mr. Hofmann would invite underprivileged kids and their families from the Chico area to Rancho Esquon during the holidays and treat them to a Christmas they wouldn’t soon forget: Santa Claus would arrive in a helicopter full of presents, and a full Christmas dinner would be served to sometimes over 300 people.

Mr. Hofmann’s last major project was one that will bring together his two major philanthropic passions: youth and waterfowl. The proposed Pacific Flyway Center will be a \$75 million facility and wetland located at the edge of the Suisun Marsh, along Interstate 680 south of Fairfield.

Like a Monterey Bay Aquarium for wetlands, the Center will include a beautiful marsh laced with walkways that make it accessible to all, an IMAX-style theater where audiences can enjoy bird’s-eye views of the Pacific Flyway, and exhibits that will illuminate the creatures normally enjoyed primarily by duck hunters, dedicated birders and biologists. It will delight children and adults alike.

The location midway between San Francisco and Sacramento will put the facility — and the beauty of California’s wetlands — within reach of more than 10 million people. The project is seeking final permits.

Claude Grillo, a close friend and vice president of the Pacific Flyway Center Foundation, said he enjoyed every minute he spent with Mr. Hofmann, and every challenge he brought to him.

“He offered me this great, second career and took me on the ride of a lifetime. He taught me a lot about work ethic, education, family and how to rise to his challenges,” Grillo said. “Ken brought me into his family and treated me like a son. I will miss him and will try to follow through on his wishes.”



Ken Hofmann celebrated his 95<sup>th</sup> birthday this year with cake at the California Waterfowler’s Hall of Fame luncheon. PHOTO BY REBECCA FABBRI

Mr. Hofmann is survived by his loving wife of 60 years, Jean; daughters Lisa and Lori; eight grandchildren, Vita Sechrest, Amanda Sechrest, Gabriella Seeno, Alexie Shurtz, Dominic Seeno, Kenneth Shurtz, Sophia Seeno and Anthony Shurtz; his sister Hope Hofmann; sister-in-law Carolyn Dahl; niece Elizabeth Westbrook; nephews Gregory Dahl and Eric Dahl; and two first cousins, Angela Cognato and Jay Leone. Mr. Hofmann’s daughter Linda preceded him in death. 🕊