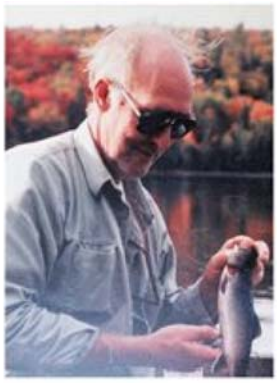

John Spencer

December 10, 1929 - May 11, 2017

John Roger Spencer, M.D., passed away sleeping peacefully at home on Friday, May 12th, 2017, while in the loving care of his son, Brian.

Father of seven - John (Ann), Jim (Kelli), Steve (Jan), Mark (Kathy), Jill (Tim) Drake, Brian, and Cathy (Paul) Minster; grandfather to 12 - Lindsey and Daniel; Jenny (Gunar) Luhta, Sarah (Justin) Cahill, Betsy and Jayna; Melissa (Nick) Erikson, Jeff (Judy), Chris and Laura (Peter) Rigan; Tim (Katie), Ryan and Mary Drake; Elyse; John and Leah Minster; and great grandfather to Kayden, Fallon, Kai, Eva, Anders, Ellis, Brayden, Cason and Reid, he leaves an indelible mark on family, friends and the community he has left behind.

Born and raised in the Detroit suburb of Bloomfield Hills, John graduated high school from Cranbrook then went on to receive his B.S. in Zoology from Michigan State University and his M.D. from the University of Michigan.

After completing his residency at Munson Hospital, followed by a year hanging his shingle in Elk Rapids, John served two years as Captain and Chief of Medicine at Selfridge Airforce Base. Returning to Traverse City, he spent a year on staff at the Traverse City State Hospital, then established his private practice in family medicine, retiring in 1985.

During his many years as a family physician he cared for countless numbers of patients and delivered hundreds of babies. An adroit clinician, he favored calmly serving up his patients' diagnoses with a rational explanation, followed by a few encouraging words, and occasionally sprinkled with his wry sense of humor. Of course, this befuddled the youngsters who were often intimidated by his towering 6-foot-6 frame. His typical office visit was $15, but when cash was short, "Doc" was happy to barter with those in his care, accepting vegetables from a garden or any other service in lieu of cash payment; his medical expertise would never be denied because of one's hardships. As Tri-County medical director, he oversaw the first oral polio immunization effort and was able to deliver it to three-quarters of the area's population at that time. This was an effort close to his

heart having lost his own brother to that terrible disease at a young age. John also served in leadership roles for Munson Hospital, area and state medical associations, and other non-profit local chapters.

While the word “passion” gets a lot of lip service in today's culture, there is none more appropriate to describe Dad’s pursuits to protect and conserve our area’s natural resources. He was a passionate environmentalist long before it was popular to be so. His leadership and influence on environmental causes was profound, particularly those invested in cleaning up the area’s watershed – with special focus on the Boardman River and East & West Bays – and in securing public access, in perpetuity, to the beauty of our natural surroundings.

In his purpose-driven way, he spear-headed the first-ever volunteer clean-up of the Boardman River. Working from Union Street bridge to the river’s mouth, he and his fellow volunteers were able to drag 14 tons of waste from its riverbed. Traverse City’s Open Space, Grand Traverse County’s acquisition of Power Island and its development of the Civic Center/Howe Arena, and the Boardman River “fish ladder” were completed and secured during his 17-year tenure on the County Parks and Recreation Commission, and in his capacity as trustee and executive director of the Oleson Foundation for 30 years. As Director of the Tri-County health department he was instrumental in instituting the first sanitary codes in Benzie and Grand Traverse Counties, securing clean water for use and raising its natural awareness and value locally.

On a state and national scale, Dad was appointed at age 36 to the federal Great Lakes Fisheries Advisory Commission as advisor for Lake Michigan, a role he faithfully served for 27 years, the Governor’s Great Lakes Fishery Advisory Committee, and Ducks Unlimited as national trustee. As a national director for Trout Unlimited, he was instrumental in its growth from the first Michigan-only chapter along the banks of the AuSable to its current countrywide membership of 150,000+. He also helped to enhance and achieve Great Lakes Fisheries rehabilitation through both management and lamprey control and influenced the establishment of water pollution control and related local and statewide legislation including the DNR’s hatchery system and their management.

In honor of his service, leadership and vision, he was humbled to be the recipient of Rotary International’s Paul Harris Award and the Traverse City Area Chamber of Commerce Distinguished Citizen Award.

Dad was also a strong believer in supporting the local economy and in helping others to help themselves. As a local entrepreneur and business owner of Northern Michigan Inns

(TC, Alpena Holiday Inns), Big Jon Downriggers, and McLellan Industries (Burke Lures), he and his partners were able to provide jobs for hundreds of area residents during some of the most challenging economic conditions in recent history.

As a young boy, Dad started coming to northern Michigan with his father – who had spent much of his youth living in the Point Betsie Lighthouse, where his own father was keeper - and fell in love with its natural beauty and history. Later, our grandfather built a small cottage along the shores of big Platte Lake and the Platte River which still stands today as a favorite gathering place and legacy to the family's 100+ year history in the area.

Dad taught his children to appreciate and experience nature as he did, which often came in the form of long walks or drives through the countryside. Beyond northern Michigan, he and Charmaine introduced the family to beautiful places like Yellowstone, and took us on exciting excursions, from tarpon fishing in the Florida Keys to hunting in British Columbia. He was a wonderful storyteller, relating many true stories of history and adventure, mixed in with danger and injected with humor - recallable at a moment's notice in striking detail, as if it were only yesterday – at the ready for young ears or old. We hope that many of you reading this were fortunate enough to have heard at least one firsthand.

Upon his (second) retirement from the Oleson Foundation in 2008, Dad pursued another passion of his, searching out and recording champion trees for The Big Tree program, an effort of the Michigan Botanical Society, including the 114-foot black willow on the grounds of the Grand Traverse Commons. He felt strongly that large trees are a memorial to our biological history and should be protected from unnatural harm. His personal favorite was an Eastern Hemlock he had discovered as a boy, which has been standing for some 600+ years (or so he thought), perched in a high meadow in the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. Like an old friend, he returned to visit that tree throughout his lifetime.

John was preceded in death by his loving wife of 51 years, Charmaine, sons John and Steve, brothers Robert (Gussie), Wilbur and Louis Spencer, parents, Louis and Augusta Spencer, and many close friends. In addition to family and many friends, he is survived by special friend and companion, Nancy Ausum, of White Lake.

The family will welcome visitors on Thursday, June 29 from 4PM to 7PM at Reynold's-Jonkhoff Funeral Home on 6th Street in Traverse City. A memorial service and luncheon will be held Friday, June 30, at 11AM at GT County's Twin Lakes Camp (Gilbert Lodge) on North Long Lake Road. Cremation has taken place. Anyone wishing to honor John's memory with a contribution may direct it to The Grand Traverse Regional Land

Conservancy [which, upon request of the family, will be directed to benefit the Platte River], or a charity of his or her choice. Please visit John's tribute page and share a memory with the family by visiting www.reynolds-jonkhoff.com. The Reynolds-Jonkhoff Funeral Home and Cremation Services is serving the family.