



James Kelsey Countryman

August 24, 1931 - February 20, 2026

Age 94, of Deephaven, passed away on February 20, 2026. Preceded in death by his wife, Nancy; parents, Kelsey and Lillian; and sister, Joyce.

He was born in Minneapolis as the second of four children. At a young age, the family moved "way out" to the Wayzata Highlands, which became home for him. He spoke fondly of those years in Wayzata - sledding down the road next to the house, waking up early during the winter months to stoke the coal furnace, walking to school a few blocks down the road just past a candy store (thereby growing his sweet tooth for life), and attending Sunday school at Wayzata Community Church. In high school at Wayzata, he made friends with four teammates, forming what they referred to as the "Wicked Five". Far from wicked, this group of friends was focused on sports, school leadership, and occasionally skiing behind a car on a good snow day. He graduated from Wayzata High School in 1949, earning varsity letters in football, basketball, track, and baseball. After high school, he graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1953 and then joined the Naval Reserve along with two other members of the Wicked Five.

His professional sales career began at General Mills, but meeting Nancy at Snuffy's Drive-In would change everything. A few years after they married in 1962, he joined Palm Brothers, where he spent the next 35 years selling and designing everything from family restaurants to large-scale truck stops

throughout the Midwest. Starting a family, however, didn't mean slowing down. In 1964, Jim and Nancy partnered with Bill and Franny Owen to start Skijammers, a west-metro ski school that would introduce alpine skiing to thousands of children over the decades. Jim remained actively involved in his own children's sports - sometimes coaching first base in dress clothes after a week on the road getting to Bennett just in time for the first pitch, or by teaching proper jump shot mechanics in the driveway, though his right-hand hook shot was his go-to move. He also served as a deacon at the Colonial Church of Edina and belonged to Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, and the Fur, Fin & Feather Club.

In whatever free time he could find, he'd enjoy biking on weekends including a 75 miler on his 75th birthday, race in a couple of Birkebeiners, play in couples' tennis tournaments with Nancy, sneak in a round or two of golf, and go hunting or fishing any chance he could get. Whether it was the annual trips to the Boundary Waters chasing bass, or the sloughs of North Dakota for waterfowl, or the fields of Iowa for pheasants, he was always game to get outside and play.

He had a knack for making life's moments just a little sweeter by knowing exactly where the closest Dairy Queen was at any given moment. It didn't matter whether it was on the way home from a fishing trip up north, an away game on the other side of town, or just heading to Glen Lake on a hot day with the family, you could count on his DQ GPS to put you on the most direct route. As it turned out, that sweet tooth, born from the candy shop in Wayzata, became a treat for all of us in his adult life.

In his early 50's, he earned the nickname "Shoulders" because of his incredible ability to simultaneously portage a canoe and a heavy pack into the Boundary Waters. In life, the nickname more precisely described who he was as a person. His humility, wit, and unconditional love were foundational to his

nature, enabling him to carry many of life's heavier challenges with a patient, tender, grace.

Survived by his sister, Joan Hunt; brother, Dan Countryman; children, Stephen (Mary Kathryn) Countryman, Catherine (Tim) Maes, Scott (Amber) Countryman, and Rob Countryman; as well as his grandchildren, Brett, Stuart, Chloe, Chaucer, Sally, Kason, and Madden.

A celebration of life will be held at Wayzata Community Church on May 29 at 2:00 p.m. with a reception to follow. In lieu of flowers, please post your favorite memory of Jim on this site.

Tribute Wall

CP

“ I met Jim (and Nancy) in 1969 as a ski instructor, I had participated in the certifications for the Central Division of the Professional Ski Instructors of America (PSIA) and Skijammers was looking to recruit instructors. I began four years of Saturdays and learned the process of placing over 100 young persons into ski classes. And I loved most of the young people who were assigned to me. I still communicate with one, who went on to be a CEO of a local investment firm.

What a wonderful life Jim lived and how proud he would be of his family. I am thankful I knew he and Nancy, Sincerely, Cindy LaBelle Piper

Cindy Piper - May 26 at 09:36 AM

RB

“ I enjoyed knowing Jim, as we shared meals and experiences here at The Waters of Excelsior!

Rhoda Brooks - February 28 at 12:48 AM