

A Voice for the Wilderness



NORTHLAND COLLEGE SALUTES SIGURD F. OLSON

Sigurd F. Olson: Activist and Philosopher

The value of Sigurd Olson's legacy is that it continues to inspire people at so many different levels. Olson was a private and deeply spiritual man whose writing appeals to those who seek spiritual fulfillment in nature. He was a scientist, whose awe for nature was also firmly rooted in methodical study. He was an educator, who both in and out of the classroom mentored countless young people and encouraged them to pursue their dreams. He was a writer, whose commitment and dogged determination in the face of criticism and rejection is a model for anybody who dares to exercise creativity. And he was an activist who turned his personal beliefs public and helped define contemporary understanding of wilderness values.

Through all these avenues, Olson brought a new idea of "wilderness" into 20th-century consciousness. The span of his life parallels the rapid growth and industrialization of the North American continent, a time when urban centers burgeoned and undeveloped land and natural resources were carelessly exploited as commercial commodities.

Against that backdrop, Olson offered another vision, accompanied with action.

Starting in his own backyard, in the 1920s he fought to keep roads and then dams out of the Quetico-Superior region of northern Minnesota. In the 1940s he spearheaded a precedent-setting fight to ban airplanes from flying into the area. His role in these conflicts propelled him to the front ranks of conservation, where he first saw himself as "a freelance canoeman trying to get the rest of the world excited about saving what to me is the finest recreational resource on the continent, our wilderness canoe country."

Olson matured in his role; his many leadership positions included wilderness ecologist for the Izaak Walton League of America, president of the National Parks Association, president of The Wilderness Society,

and advisor to the National Park Service and to the U.S. Secretary of the Interior.

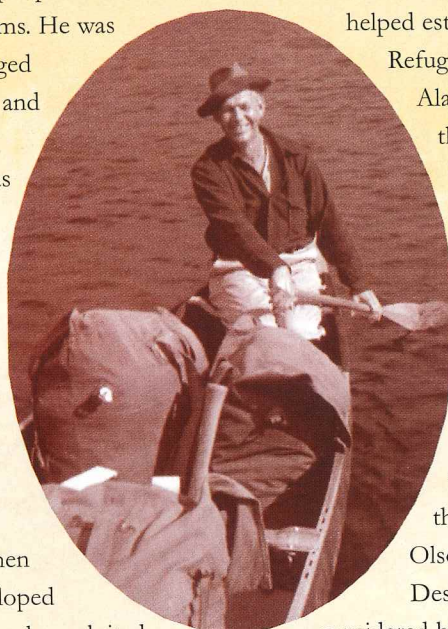
He also helped draft the Wilderness Act, which became law in 1964 and established the U.S. wilderness preservation system. In 1978, President Jimmy Carter granted full wilderness status to Olson's beloved Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, today the most-visited wilderness area in the country. Olson also helped establish Alaska's Arctic Wildlife

Refuge, and worked to identify other Alaskan lands ultimately preserved in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980. He also played key roles in establishing Point Reyes National Seashore in California and Voyageurs National Park in Minnesota. In recognition, four of the largest U.S. conservation organizations – the Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society, the National Wildlife Federation and the Izaak Walton League — gave Olson their highest award.

Despite this prestige, Olson never considered himself beyond the reach of ordinary people. In fact, he always welcomed visitors into his home, and carried on a steady correspondence with people of all ages. He especially encouraged young people – whom he called "the hope of the world" – to find their own best path toward environmental action.

In the end, all Sigurd Olson's achievements – the awards, the battles, the books, the laws – were motivated by a simple, timeless belief:

"Wilderness . . . is a spiritual necessity, an antidote to the high pressure of modern life, a means of regaining serenity and equilibrium," he once wrote. "I have found that people go to the wilderness for many things, but the most important of these is perspective. They may think they go for the fishing or the scenery or companionship, but in reality it is something far deeper. They go to the wilderness for the good of their souls."



Father, Voyager, Visionary: Sigurd Olson's Sons Remember

By Robert K. Olson

Had Sig Olson been born at midcentury, he would have been all over the world, writing about the ecological disasters overtaking the globe, condemning the polluters and exploiters, calling for a sustainable, ecologically sane society. In his private moments, he would be putting his experience into poetry and reflection. The spirit of the times would have set his course today as surely as it did during the half century in which he did grow up and during which he defined himself and his world.

Those days come back as days of action, excitement, and the out-of-doors. Summers were spent guiding on the lakes or running the Border Lakes Outfitting Company. Fall started the school year, but more importantly, the hunting season. There are unforgettable memories of annual duck dinners with friends – bluebills for the kids and mallards for the grown-ups, with wild rice, cranberries, and the little pile of bird shot by the plate when it was all over. With November and the snow came deer season, with venison steaks and tales of the hunt around the dinner table at night. Winter was all

about snowshoes, ice fishing, and skis. How we skied! We had brushed out miles of trails where we skied daily, sometimes before breakfast, always after school, often at night in the magic half-light of the full moon. Spring brought the delights of trout fishing. No matter what the time – six or eleven o'clock at night – when Dad came home, we cooked up a supper of “brookies,” never so good as when they were fresh out of the creel, crisp tails and all.

These were the years when he was cutting his writer's teeth, putting his experiences and his thoughts into words.

Each story then was a major or an unforgettable family event.

When my father wrote these stories, I never asked nor thought to ask. All I knew was that it was important. We held our breath when the reply came back from the editors, then gloom and scattering to our respective retreats over a rejection, rejoicing and relief when a piece was accepted.

All that under difficult conditions, I might add. We lived in a small house bursting with boys. In addition to my brother Sig and me, our cousin Curtis came to live for two years to attend Ely Junior



The Olson family in front of their Ashland, Wisconsin, home c. 1915: (from left) Lawrence, Sigurd, Ida May (Cederholm), and Leonard. Missing is eldest brother Kenneth.

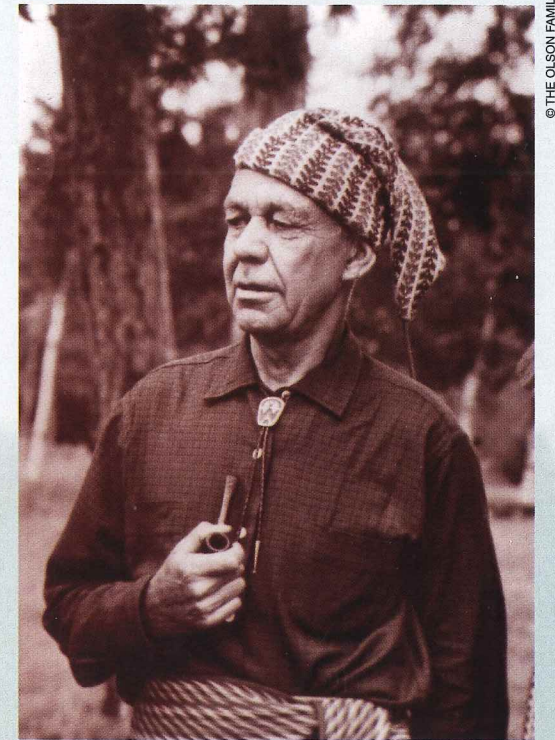
College. How Dad ever wrote I will never know. Ultimately, he acquired the “shack,” the old garage converted to a study where he could be alone just a few paces from the house. It must have been a blessing, for all of us I think.

But there was another man, too, to those who knew him as a friend and father. I have never known anyone before or since who had such a rare and boyish appetite for action and experience. He loved living rough, bashing his way along through wind and weather, mosquitoes and alder swamp, the worse the better. He loved the elements, the icy bite of the winter wind, the hardness of the rocky land, and the truth of elemental things. To him it was a joy, and he sang and whistled his way through it all.

It is not surprising, then, that the voyageurs, rough and ready, jolly and tough, became his folk heroes. Not surprising that he reveled in his role as “the Bourgeois” and relished the history of the fur trade days. It was an elemental part of his life, and out of it came the great trips with his Canadian friends to the far reaches of northern Canada and the material for his book *The Lonely Land*.

On a deeper level, Sig Olson was a sensitive and tender man, who felt things keenly and loved his world for its very self. He was a child of nature, if you like, to whom the sights and sounds and smells of the wild were a vivid language that we understood in our hearts. The days of his youth and young manhood were the most important days of his life, for they were the bank in which he stored his thoughts and feelings and the direct experience of the out-of-doors. He had tried to express them in gentle essays, but these were filed away along with the rejection slips. Those were the days when he gradually forged his wilderness ideas, which he was to carry to fruition in the years ahead. He had chosen a way of life, defined himself, established a home, and raised a family – all the conventional things. And then, so soon, it was all over.

We had spent an afternoon skating on a little bay of One Pine Lake outside of Ely. It was a grey day, cold and rather bleak, with the dark pines frowning along the lakeshore. But we had a fire and were having fun. Then we were standing around the car listening to the radio. The announcer was



Olson treasured the culture and adventurous spirit of the voyageurs, who explored much of North America's lake country by canoe.



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“The real significance of wilderness is a cultural matter. It is far more than hunting, fishing, hiking, camping or canoeing; it has to do with the human spirit.”

speaking excitedly about the Japanese attacking a United States base at Pearl Harbor. I had never heard of it and didn't know what it meant. But my parents were suddenly quiet and grim. We packed up and went home, the fun gone from the day. A week later, we got the news that cousin Curtis, who had lived with us for those two years and then joined the navy, had gone down on the *Arizona*. I can still hear my mother's cry.

There must have been something of the pioneer in all of us. After the war, we never looked back, never sentimentalized the past. My father shortly became involved in the national wilderness movement and especially the controversial fight for the preservation of what has become the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. This battle took him all over the country.

His writing seemed to have become a thing of the past, except for an article or two here and there that was nothing to get excited about. I thought my father had put all that aside; it seemed something over and done with, a forgotten and not very important phase of the past. How wrong I was. In fact, it became and

Lessons for a Lifetime

By Sigurd T. Olson

Thanks in large part to my father, even as a young boy I realized that one of the most important ingredients of life was love of the outdoors. I learned this lesson through countless family picnics, hikes, canoe trips, skiing and snowshoeing ventures. These important experiences created unforgettable memories and fostered within me a basic desire to continue such activities throughout my life.

However, I remember few, if any, formal or structured training sessions on how to put on snowshoes or skis, paddle a canoe, or properly load a packsack. Dad had a

manner of teaching that made it natural and easy for me to pick up these skills. I learned by imitating what Dad did and how he did it. When necessary, he would show me how with patience and understanding. He knew that young hands and feet were prone to stumble now and then. However, Dad insisted on one basic requirement: things had to be done right. Long after there was a need to tie a fly properly, handle a gun safely, paddle a canoe well, make good pancakes, pick a campsite, or use a reflector oven effectively, that basic requirement to do things right, with no excuses, guided all my endeavors.

Dad's sense of humor and imagination also shaped my life. His hilarious “moose and chipmunk” stories, told before our childhood bedtime, still bring back wonderful

remained to his dying day the *raison d'être* of his life.

It took a new member of the family, my wife, Yvonne, to see things in a fresh light. It was she who one day discovered the old essays filed away and now all but forgotten. By that time, even he had lost interest, I think. He was a busy man already – speaking and traveling all over the country. But she persisted. She typed them over in fresh copy and together they assembled them into a manuscript broken down by seasons. The result was *The Singing Wilderness*, a resounding success, reviewed on the front page of the New York Times Book Review section, runner-up for the American Library Association book-of-the-year award. We were dumbfounded, to tell the truth. But, more to the point, it opened the floodgates for a stream of books to follow.

I have said that Sigurd Olson was a man of his times, and he was. But in a deeper sense, he was a throwback to an ancient, more arcadian view of life. He cared nothing for machinery, for

memories of laying across our beds shrieking with laughter at the wild adventures of the forest animals he portrayed in his tales. This sense of humor and imagination has added important balance and perspective to many aspects of my life.

I never had a serious problem deciding what to do with my life as long as it was in some way similar to what my father had done. The result was a degree in wildlife management from the University of Minnesota and a career in wildlife biology in Alaska. The fact that Dad had conducted the first research on the wolves of northern Minnesota was a contributing factor in my choice of professions. In a sense, my move to Alaska had been somewhat influenced by Dad, for it fulfilled his early desire



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“Lake Superior has dominated my dreams since the days of my boyhood. Its beauty has power over those living near

Lake Superior speaks for itself, telling its own story of the past, present, and future.”

to spend time there.

On one occasion in his later years, I had the opportunity to take him on a trip to the wild interior of the state. I remember sitting together in the sunshine on a high mountain ridge, watching a dozen or more dall sheep resting and feeding only 100 yards away. The look of wonder and enjoyment on Dad's face told me that regardless of our age, we can still experience deep appreciation and awe at the treasures of the natural world.

This is one of the values that has continued to guide and influence me as my life goes on. I am sure that for a larger audience as well, the example my father set will continue to influence how wilderness is managed and treasured into the future.

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industry, for politics or trade. He loved nature, the land, and elemental things, literally fire, air, water, the earth. He liked to get his hands on it, smell it, play with it. Thoreau had been his inspiration and guide for cutting through the shallow pretensions of conventional life. He would have found a friend in old Hesiod or romanced his life away with Rousseau. He had the soul of a Wordsworth mixed with the rough-and-ready streak of the American frontier. Modern times have labeled him an environmentalist or conservationist. But he was that only by association or incidentally to his fight to preserve the Quetico-Superior wilderness. It was the whole system he defied, not, God bless him, by protest but by standing up for and expressing his own vision of the beautiful and the good.

He died literally with his boots on, on a cold January day, snowshoeing his favorite trail around the bog behind the house. The usual arrangements followed. But I wished we could have left him there, let the snow fall to cover him until he was only a mound beneath. We should have let nature have its way with his remains, to break him down into the soil of the forest. His body would have joined his spirit in the flow of life that had nourished him for over eighty years. In the fall, his shroud would be a blanket of autumn leaves, his anthem the far calling of strings of geese heading south, the low organ tones of the winter winds. It would have been fitting, I think, and a far, far better thing.



Olson's rustic cabin at Listening Point near Ely, Minnesota.

"Listening Point is a bare glaciated spit of rock in the Quetico-Superior country. Each time I have gone there I have found something new which has opened up great realms of thought and interest. For me it has been a point of discovery and, like all such places of departure, has assumed meaning far beyond the ordinary."

To Learn More About Sigurd F. Olson

The Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute

As the outreach arm of Northland College, the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute works with citizens to build environmental awareness, encourage responsible action, and forge lasting solutions to environmental challenges in the Lake Superior region. The Institute's many programs revolve around education, be that working with the forestry industry to encourage socially and environmentally responsible forestry practices; protecting habitat for northern species like Timber Wolves and Common Loons; or convening industry, community, and environmental leaders from the United States and Canada to share ideas and map a sustainable future for the Lake Superior region. The Institute also works to interpret, preserve and promote the literary and conservation legacy of Sigurd F. Olson.

For more information about the Institute, contact:

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Books by Sigurd F. Olson

The Singing Wilderness (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1956; reprinted by University of Minnesota Press, 1997)

Listening Point (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1958; reprinted by University of Minnesota Press, 1997)

The Lonely Land (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1961; reprinted by University of Minnesota Press, 1997)

Runes of the North (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1963; reprinted by University of Minnesota Press, 1997)

Open Horizons (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1969; reprinted by University of Minnesota Press, 1998)

The Hidden Forest (Viking Press, 1969)

Wilderness Days (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1972)

Reflections From the North Country (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.,



1976; reprinted by University of Minnesota Press, 1998)

Of Time and Place (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1982; reprinted by the University of Minnesota Press, 1998)

Songs of the North. Howard Frank Mosher, ed. (Penguin Books, 1987)

The Collected Works of Sigurd F. Olson: The Early Writings, 1921-1934. Mike Link, ed. (Voyageur Press, 1988)

The Collected Works of Sigurd F. Olson: The College Years, 1935-1944. Mike Link, ed. (Voyageur Press, 1990)

Books about Sigurd F. Olson

A Wilderness Within: The Life of Sigurd F. Olson, by David Backes. University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Wilderness Visionaries, by Jim Dale Vickery. North Word Press, 1994.

Sigurd Olson Web Site

www.uwm.edu:80/Dept/MassComm/Olson

This award-winning site, devoted to Sigurd F. Olson, was created and is maintained by David Backes, author of Olson's biography *A Wilderness Within*. The site features text, graphics and photo essays profiling Sigurd F. Olson's life and exploring his wilderness theology; the site also features a collection of personal anecdotes from people who knew Olson, and provides links to people, places and topics that were important to him.

Sigurd Olson: Wilderness Evangelist

By David Backes

Sigurd Olson wasn't the first American to discuss the spiritual values of wilderness, nor was he the most scholarly. He simply was the most beloved wilderness advocate of his generation.

Something in his bearing had a strong effect on people. It was a combination of gracefulness, poise, confidence, and an engaging voice. His wife, Elizabeth, recalled times when Sigurd entered a room and everyone rose as if on cue, heads straining to see him. And when he spoke, people hung on his words.

"Sig conveyed a religious fervor and a depth of conviction that no one else I know succeeded in generating," said former Minnesota Governor Elmer L. Andersen. "Others could win adherence; he produced disciples."

Not surprisingly, this disciple-producer was the son of a minister, and nearly became a missionary himself. Born in Chicago on April 4, 1899, Sigurd was the second of three sons raised by the Reverend Lawrence and Ida May Olson, Swedish immigrants who met and married in the United States. Sigurd's parents were Swedish Baptists, a branch of the Baptist faith toughened by decades of persecution in Sweden.

Sigurd's mother was a devout Swedish Baptist who stood firmly against drinking and dancing, but she was sweet, generally cheerful, and had a good sense of humor. Sigurd's father, on the other hand, was a strict fundamentalist who always told his sons to turn their heads whenever they passed a Catholic church. Lawrence – or L.J., as he was called – also was a stern, grim man, very reserved and formal, always concerned about doing the right thing. He had little sympathy for amusements. One time he discovered that Sigurd and his older brother, Kenneth, had saved up money and bought a chess set. L.J. grabbed it away from them and threw it into the fire.

Whether it was because of this background or in spite of it, as a young adult Sigurd nearly became a missionary. While attending the University of Wisconsin in Madison at the end of World War I he became chapter president of the Student Volunteers, American Protestantism's most important missionary organization. But during this same period doubts about his calling and his faith assailed him. The night before he was to publicly make his

commitment to the missionary life he climbed the roof of the YMCA building where he lived, looked out over Lake Mendota and up at the stars, and struggled with his conscience. He decided that his fascination with the missions had more to do with his interest in visiting the wild places of the world than with saving souls.

When he came down from the roof the next morning, he resigned from the organization, and in effect also broke from his Baptist faith.

For years afterward, he was obsessed with what he called his search for meaning. To lose belief in the dogma of his parents' church was one thing, but to lose faith in the idea of a mission or a calling in life cut deeply into his psyche. "For years I went on getting more bitter and disillusioned all of the time," he recalled in his journal on January 14, 1930. His only hope for happiness was to recover a sense of mission. Before that could happen, however, he needed to regain his faith in a greater power.

He found it, of course, in nature. As a young child he began to sense what he would later call "the singing wilderness." His family moved from Chicago to several small Wisconsin towns during his youth, and he formed a passionate, visceral connection to the natural world. But the defining moment came to him as a young man during the early 1920s, while on a canoe trip into the western portion of Ontario's Quetico Provincial Park. By then Sigurd was married, had the first of his two sons, and lived in the northern Minnesota city of Ely at the edge of what is now called the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, a wilderness adjacent to the Quetico. He taught biology at the local high school, and then at the Ely Junior College, where he later became dean. During summers he made extra money and satisfied his craving for the outdoors by working as a guide for a local outfitting company. One summer evening, camped on an island in Robinson Lake, Sigurd got into his canoe after dinner and paddled to the nearby eastern shore of the lake where there was a peak with a gorgeous view of the wilderness to the west. Sigurd climbed to the top in time to watch the sunset, and experienced a deep communion with nature. Years later, he described



Sigurd Olson at Listening Point in 1981.

"I named this place Listening Point because only when one comes to listen, only when one is aware and still, can things be seen and heard."



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it in his first book, *The Singing Wilderness*, in a passage that set the tone not only for that book, but for the message he brought in all of his books and speeches:

“The movement of a canoe is like a reed in the wind. Silence is a part of it, and the sounds of lapping water, bird songs, and the wind in the trees. It is part of the medium through which it floats, the sky, the water, the shores.”

As I watched and listened, I became conscious of the slow, steady hum of millions of insects and through it the calling of the whitethroats and the violin notes of the hermit thrushes. But it all seemed very vague from that height and very far away, and gradually they merged one with another, blending in a great enveloping softness of sound no louder, it seemed, than my breathing.

The sun was trembling now on the edge of the ridge. It was alive, almost fluid and pulsating, and as I watched it sink I thought that I could feel the earth turning from it, actually feel its rotation. Over all was the silence of the wilderness, that sense of oneness which comes only when there are no distracting sights or sounds, when we listen with inward ears and see with inward eyes, when we feel and are aware with our entire beings rather than our senses. I thought as I sat there of the ancient admonition, “Be still and know that I am God,” and knew that without stillness there can be no knowing, without divorcement from outside influences man cannot know what spirit means.

During his summers as a canoe country guide Sigurd noticed how often his clients, too, were transformed during the course of a canoe trip. Gradually, during the first few days of paddling and portaging, they would peel away the layers of their business personas and expose their true selves. They laughed more, sang songs, played practical jokes. They watched the sun set and the moon rise, and listened to the roar of rapids and the soft sighs of wind in the pines. Like Sigurd, they became re-connected to the grand, eternal mystery of creation.

Sigurd came to believe his mission in life was to share with others what he had found in the wilderness, and to help lead the fight to preserve “a few last entrenchments of the spirit.” Science, technology and materialism were turning many people away from the

religious truths and practices that had given spiritual sustenance, and offered nothing in their place. The result was a widespread, if often vague, discontent, partially hidden underneath fast-paced lives, yet also nourished by that same fast pace that left little time for reflection.

Sigurd knew that the silence and the solitude and the noncivilized surroundings of wilderness provide a physical context in which people can more easily rediscover their inner selves. Just as important, wilderness gives people a chance to feel the presence of a universal power that science can never explain, but that brings meaning to their lives. “Wilderness offers [a] sense of cosmic purpose if we open our hearts and minds to its possibilities,” he said at a national wilderness conference in 1965.

It may come in . . . burning instants of truth when very thing stands clear. It may come as a slow realization after long periods of waiting. Whenever it comes, life is suddenly illumined, beautiful, and transcendent, and we are filled with awe and happiness.

Sigurd spread his philosophy in nine books, in many magazine and newspaper articles, and in countless speeches and conversations across the United States and Canada. He read and thought deeply about the works of others who were searching for meaning in the modern world – intellectuals such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Lewis Mumford, Aldous Huxley, Josef Pieper and Piere Lecomte du Nouÿ – but was able to get across his deep message about the spiritual values of wilderness mostly by writing about simple things: the sound of wings over a marsh, the smell of a bog, the memories stirred by a campfire, the movement of a canoe.

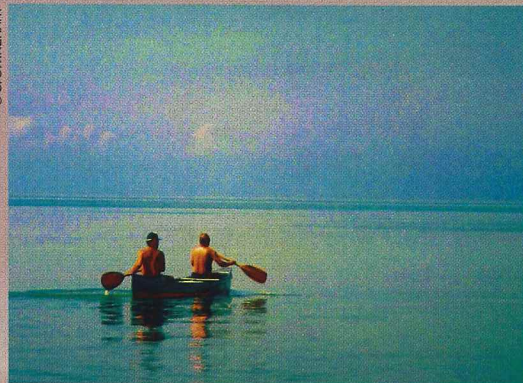
Sigurd Olson may not have become the Baptist minister his father once hoped for, but a missionary he was, a wilderness evangelist with legions of followers. He was an apostle of awe, a witness for wonder, and an icon of the modern wilderness movement whose words will continue to stir hearts and souls for generations to come.

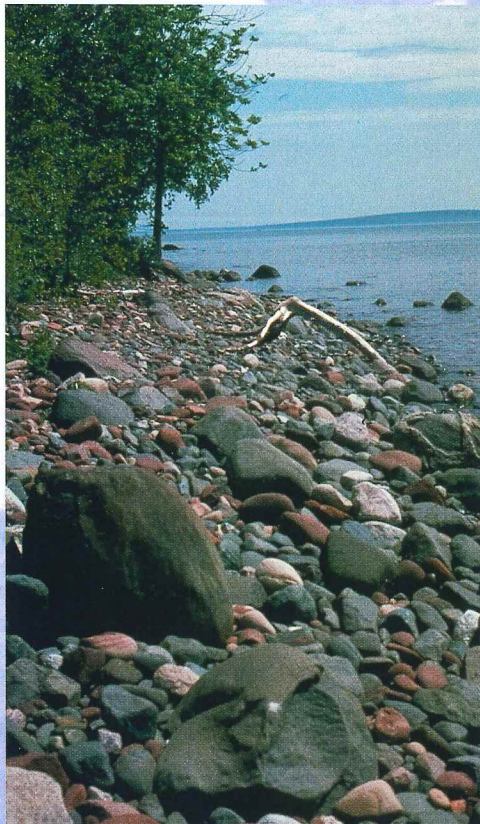
David Backes’ biography of Sigurd F. Olson is titled A Wilderness Within.



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“When you lose the power of wonder you become old, no matter how old you are. If you have the power of wonder you are forever young – the whole world is pristine and new and exciting. And that, I think, is the secret.”





“Wilderness can be appreciated only by contrast, and solitude understood only when we have been without it. We cannot separate ourselves from society, comradeship, sharing, and love. Unless we can contribute something from wilderness experience, derive some solace or peace to share with others, then the real purpose is defeated.”

The Inspiration of Sigurd Olson: A Personal Memory

By Becky Rom

Sigurd Olson had a passion for wild places and wild creatures and a deep and abiding tenderness toward the natural world. He felt exhilaration in connecting with the past and in exploring the unknown waterways and paths of the “old wilderness” much as those who traveled before him. He was driven to express his feelings of reverence for wilderness through his writings and his speeches. Sig understood that his passion and talents led to a responsibility to defend these wild lands from human exploitation and abuse. In fulfilling this responsibility, Sigurd set a standard for conservation advocacy that begins in the canoe country of the Quetico-Superior and stretches from coast to coast and north to Alaska.

I grew up in Ely, Minnesota and Sig Olson was always a part of my life. His ties to my family began in 1935, when he befriended my father, Bill Rom, then a first-year student at Ely Junior College. My grandfather, Casper Rom, had been killed in a mine cave-in when my father was several weeks old, so Bill Rom grew up dirt poor and without a father. His childhood playground had been the three-million-acre Superior National Forest, where he hiked, fished, and hunted.

As a dean of the junior college, Sig took a liking to my father, finding in him a kindred spirit, and directed him to summer jobs with the U.S. Forest Service that kept him in the woods. Sig suggested that my father finish his education at the University of Minnesota in wildlife management. But Sig did more than accommodate my father’s desire to be in the woods and to find a profession that suited his desire; he instilled in my father a commitment to protect the canoe country, something he did for many others as well. During World War II, when my father was in the Navy, Sig wrote to him:

My conservationists are certainly well-scattered in this old world of ours, but one thing you fellows never lose [sic], that is the love of the lake country of the north and the old wilderness. No matter where you happen to be, that longing stays with you and I can say this from personal experience, that no matter how long you are gone or how old you get, those memories will remain as vivid and fresh as the day they

were made . . . I hope that when you fellows come back that you will tie into this conservation problem with all your young energy and enthusiasm and really give us the kind of a program that the country needs. It is men like yourself . . . who will eventually put the country back on its feet from a forestry and wildlife standpoint. You have real conservation at heart and are not bogged down with political considerations or commitments.

After the war, my father returned to Ely and the canoe country. Today, at the age of 81, he continues to do all he can to preserve the Quetico-Superior.

The guiding hand of Sig Olson extended far beyond my father. My older brother, an experienced canoe guide, spent countless hours with Sig poring over maps of the far north and planning my brother’s long canoe trips into the Arctic. I felt Sig’s influence in a different way; in his moving and courageous speeches, Sig spoke with a quiet eloquence about the intangible values of the canoe country. To him, the wilderness canoe country of the Quetico-Superior was a sacred place.

In 1977, Sig testified during a congressional field hearing in Ely dealing with the future of the canoe country. Despite his international prestige, his Ely neighbors hanged him in effigy outside the hearing and attempted to prevent him from speaking. When Sig was called to testify, wave after wave of thunderous yelling, booing, and jeers swept over the auditorium. Despite the deafening cacophony from the partisan Ely crowd, Sig calmly testified for full wilderness protection – no motors, no mining, no logging, no development:

My name is Sigurd F. Olson. My home, Ely Minnesota. I support the Fraser Bill whose purpose is to eliminate all adverse uses from the BWCA and give it complete wilderness status.

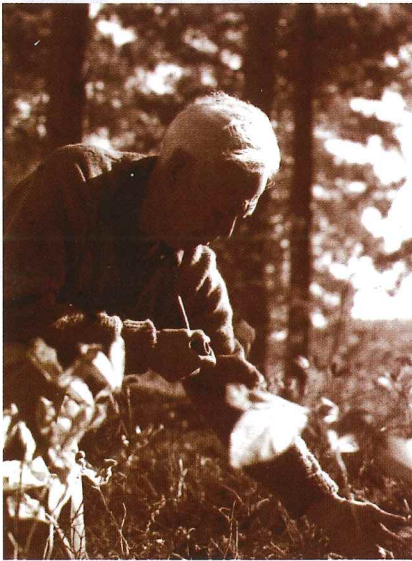
He went on to talk of how he had crisscrossed the BWCA and Quetico countless times since his early guiding days, and spoke of the value of this special wilderness:

This is the most beautiful lake country on the continent. We can afford to cherish and protect it. Some places should be preserved from development or exploitation for they satisfy human need for solace, belonging, and perspective. In the end, we turn to nature in a frenzied, chaotic world, there to find silence – oneness – wholeness – spiritual release.



“Ethical and moral questions and how we answer them may determine whether primal scenes will continue to be a source of joy and comfort to future generations. The decisions are ours and we have to search our minds and souls for the right answers We must be eternally vigilant, embrace the broad concept of an environmental ethic to survive.”

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For these values, and the courage to speak about them, Sig and his family were harshly criticized and even ostracized. His sacrifices were not in vain; Sig's wilderness values were widely embraced and were the basis for extended protection of the Quetico-Superior canoe country, both in the Wilderness Act of 1964 and the 1978 Boundary Waters Wilderness Act.

Sig loved the woods and the natural world. Through talent and perseverance, he mastered the art of translating what was in his heart into the written word. But his greatest gift to the world was to recognize that he had to protect wild lands. He succeeded magnificently. But where he ended, we must begin.

Thirty years ago, Sig inscribed a message in my copy of *The Singing Wilderness*: "As a guide in the Quetico-Superior, you have heard the singing in many places. Wherever you go, I know you will always be listening to the old refrain." The refrain will always be with me, along with the commitment to do what I can to protect the Quetico-Superior canoe country.

Becky Rom is a governing council member of *The Wilderness Society*, vice-chair of the *Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness*, and chair of the *Boundary Waters Wilderness Foundation*.



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