

Zimmerman, peaceful fighter

What a happy and proud moment it was on Friday morning, Aug. 28, 1992, when our teacher of the boreal forest workshop at the Ridges Sanctuary, Dr. James Zimmerman, told our group that having 475 species of plants, excellent biodiversity, growing within a half mile in the sanctuary pointed toward a very healthy area. What a feather in the hats that statement was for all the members, volunteers and contributors to this ecologically important area.

I met Jim in 1955 during my first teaching job at Shorewood Hills in the Madison area. It very likely was at one of the Madison Audubon Society field trips. At about 30 years of age he was already deeply involved in teaching people about the native landscape, its plants and animals and their relationships.

It was at the end of that first year of teaching, in June of 1956, that Jim Zimmerman offered a week-long class, "Reading the Landscape," to Madison area teachers. What an exciting eye-opening week that was, undoubtedly one of the most important weeks, a turning point, of my life.

Highlights abounded that week as we were introduced to climax oak woods, prairies, and even a bog surrounded largely with poison sumac. I can clearly recall learning the call notes, "TIK-ger, TIK-ger" of the scarlet tanager, and whistling into close range a tufted titmouse with its rapid-fire "PEETo PEETo PEETo" song.

Jim still hadn't learned to drive a car, apparently a method of transportation he despised for a long time (he was an avid bicyclist for many years) and I picked him up on several of the mornings of the classes. His lunches in the field were unusually simple, such as several dates stuffed with peanut butter followed with an orange for liquid.

Eventually he taught his Reading the Landscape class to thousands of people, unquestionably making a positive difference in the leaders he influenced and the students he inspired. Even though he was a pusher, a strong preservationist, a person who liked action, he also was kind, extremely hard-working and generous, soft-spoken, peaceable and gentle in his ways.

It was Jim who strongly urged us students to read and re-read Aldo Leopold's book *A Sand County Almanac*. It soon became very obvious, through our discussions, that Jim had been strongly influenced by the teachings and writings of that great man.

In reading the excellent book, *Aldo Leopold, His Life and Work*, By Curt Meine (Univ. of Wis.

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Roy Lukes, Naturalist

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Press, 1988) I learned that Mrs. Aldo Leopold was questioned several years before her death in 1975 as to what she thought her husband's outlook for the future was. He had died in 1948 at age 61 while fighting a grass fire on a neighbor's farm. Mrs. Leopold replied, "I think he was just hopeful that people would become aware of things." I have the feeling that this might have been one of Jim's hopes too.

Jim was taken out of the public school around the sixth grade and taught by his mother. Fortunately he was invited often to join many of the field classes of the famous botany professor and author, Dr. Norman Fassett. Prof. Fassett was also Curator of the University Herbarium. Jim went on to earn his Ph.D. in botany in 1958 at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

By 1966 Jim had collaborated with Booth Courtenay in writing *Wildflower Families and How to Know Them*. In his discussion of plant communities he writes, "A prairie is not JUST grass, nor a forest only trees. They are complexes of hundreds of competing, dependent, or cooperating organisms — herbs, grasses, shrubs, trees, fungi — all struggling and working for survival."

Indeed, Jim became well respected for his extensive knowledge of plants of all kinds and how they grew together in specific habitats. Quite a bit of his *Wildflower Families* writing also appeared in his next book, also with Mrs. Courtenay, *Wildflowers and Weeds*, an unusually fine and successful book that is still in print.

One of Norman Fassett's several botany books, first published in 1931, was *Spring Flora of Wisconsin*. The fourth edition, 1976, was revised and enlarged by Olive Thomson and includes a 40-page section on the sedges of our state written by Dr. Zimmerman. Through the years Jim became one of the sedge experts in the U.S. and world, an extremely difficult and demanding plant group to master.

Having been so deeply involved with environmental work, writing, consulting, attending hearing after hearing, I can still visualize Jim saying to our group after one

of the controversial meetings, "That was a LULU of a situation — Locally Undesirable Land Use."

Dr. Zimmerman's next important book contribution was a 55-page section, "The Landscape and the Bird," in *Wisconsin Birdlife: Population and Distribution, Past and Present*, by Samuel D. Robbins, Jr., 1991. Jim was a masterful field ornithologist too, had an incredibly good ear for their songs and call notes and knew them well.

I shall never forget one of his surprise visits to the Ridges Sanctuary shortly after I began work there in June of 1964. Under no circumstances was I going to conduct a tour with Jim in the group, and fortunately he agreed to do the leading that morning. Much to our amazement he spent around two hours just interpreting nature between the lower range-light and the beach, the amount of time I ordinarily would spend on the entire tour of the Ridges!

We returned from that exciting little niche of a couple hundred yards, of two ridges and one swale, with a much better understanding of what grew and lived there and why. He was indeed a genius at putting nature's pieces of the puzzle together and, finally, informing his listeners what actions were necessary to keep the puzzle, the particular niche or habitat intact, functioning and healthy.

His incredible knowledge of plants in the field was impressed upon me many times. For example, having spent an entire grueling day together in the field at the ridges and Toft Point, we'd return to the rangelight where he would proceed to list in botanical order, from memory, all the plants we encountered plus those he was quite sure should have been seen but, because of the route we took, weren't. He would leave me with the suggestion that, "Those species not found today need checking."