

# Leo Nickasch is "Mr. Trees"

by Larry Van Goethem

The children in Neenah-Menasha schools call Leo Nickasch "Mr. Trees" because years ago he was asked to take over a job that had no fringes, no pay and no tenure—work, in short, on top of what he did as a maintenance man for Kimberly-Clark Corporation's Lakeview plant.

Since 1971, when he took on the challenge of promoting Arbor Day activities for Neenah-Menasha schools, Nickasch has been a leader in the environmental education of children, and the planting of thousands of seedlings for the forests and pulpwood of the next century.

He got his name when children of Lakeview School cried out "here comes Mr. Trees" when he arrived with seedlings to plant.

The name stuck because Nickasch stuck to it; it was volunteer work that became a cause.

Nickasch retired ten years ago, but he hasn't retired his interest in conservation. Now 73, he puts it this way:

"You don't retire to do something. You don't retire to die either." This crusty old countryman, his face set in the creases of a bulldog, considers trees the basis of all life. "I think (the forest) serves the purpose for everything," he commented at his home on the outskirts of Neenah, near Lake Winnebago. "Watershed, jobs, wildlife, paper."

Nickasch has had a fulfilling life. He's done what he had to do, what he was ordered to do and, unlike many, what he was supposed to do; he put some beans back in the pot.

When last seen, Nickasch was fretting about the effect of drought on seedlings planted this spring.

Such effort by an ordinary person moved a retired minister, who saw an article about Nickasch in a Fox Valley newspaper, to request his autograph, adding that he intended to include him in his personal list of great Americans.

The odyssey began in 1971 when Nickasch formed a committee to promote Arbor Day in Twin City schools. The Fox Valley is rooted in wood. Once its cities belched sawmill smoke; these days the river is flanked by paper mills.

Nickasch and the committee led the distribution that year of 18,000 seedlings donated by Kimberly-Clark which every student in the school system planted.

When the AFL-CIO decided to form a conservation committee a year later, Nickasch became a member. When a sub-committee on forestry was formed, he became a member.

Committees have a way of becoming graveyards where dead wood is stacked, in many cases almost an alternative to action. But Nickasch, a member of Local 482 of United Paperworkers International, didn't allow rot to set in. He decided that the assignment entailed follow-up. In other words, he took the job seriously.

He began working with youngsters in the schools and each Arbor Day the kids planted tiny trees under his and the committee's tutelage. When the state Legislature in 1981 passed an act instructing the DNR to provide seedlings to grade school pupils, Nickasch was a key lobbyist.

He and the Arbor Day Committee got behind the legislation, which observers don't think would have passed without some extra push.

It was in pushing conservation programs for children, however, where Nickasch hit his stride. Over the years Nickasch and others button-holed industry, including Kimberly-Clark, and

area businessmen to finance sending more than 3,000 community school children to the Central Wisconsin Environmental Station at Amherst and Trees for Tomorrow at Eagle River.

Since 1980 the committee has sponsored field trips by 5,000 pupils to the Rat River Wild Life Area.

Meantime, that seminal tree planting program goes on at the 4th Grade level. "That's the ideal time to get 'em," says Nickasch. "Once we get them ... they're good for the rest of their lives."

Instilling love of the land and the importance of resources wasn't a mere preservation effort to the committee. Nickasch understood that trees, like people, must serve. Therefore conservation is approached not just from the standpoint of saving the watershed, but of using trees like a crop.

He notes that aspen grows quickly and regenerates itself, which is why it can be clearcut, as with plantation pine which is managed for industrial use.

In addition to bringing trees to the schools, Nickasch has participated in countless meetings aimed at fostering environmental concerns. He's raised money to send poor kids to the conservation camps.

When he retired in 1978, three

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Friends say Leo Nickasch is "tenacious" in pursuing objectives.

PHOTO: LARRY VAN GOETHEM



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months short of 40 years, Nickasch was given Kimberly-Clark's community service award for his volunteer work. When the local asked him to stay active in the committee, he consented.

Nickasch isn't one to blow his own horn, but he is proud that Neenah and Menasha parks are almost free of vandalism—a result, it's believed, of the schools' longterm conservation programs.

Not long ago Nickasch's family gave him a Christmas present that he had to go to the driveway to see. They installed a plastic bug screen on his Chevrolet Blazer that announced to all viewers:

#### Mr. Trees

Born in Menasha and raised in Appleton, Nickasch has lived in the Fox Valley all his life except for a stint as a crew leader with the Air Force in the northern Pacific during World War II.

He belongs to a score of organizations, including Wisconsin Woodland Owners Association, National Forestry Association, National Wildlife Federation and the Governor's Forestry Council.

Leo and his wife Verna are parents to three daughters and a son and midwives to thousands of trees and the conservation-minded children who planted them. Some of those early kids are adults now, and occasionally one of them recognizes Nickasch, stopping to say hello.

They and the trees they planted are young adults and Leo is getting on, but, like a big tree, he's supported by the younger ones around him.

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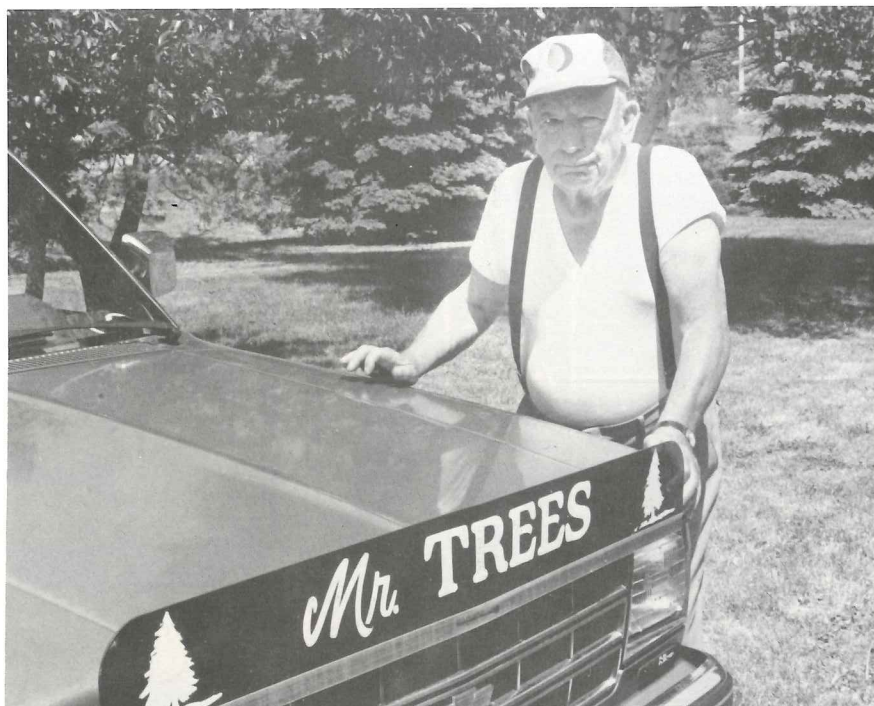
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Neenah residents always know when Mr. Trees is coming.

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