

NEWS RELEASE

WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY-STEVEN'S POINT 54481

NEWS SERVICE

TELEPHONE: 341-1251 EXT. 239
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Mail
Thursday
1-14-71
13

January 12, 1971

STEVEN'S POINT--"People today are placing their wants above their needs, and through poor management about one-fourth of our land has been destroyed in the United States. Unless greater strides are made in conserving natural resources, what will the situation be a few years from now, with the present steady rise in population?"

A recent political speech by Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson? No, the words were uttered nearly 20 years ago by the late Fred J. Schmeckle, father of Stevens Point State University's conservation program.

With a breakdown of the environment much in the fore of American thought today, Schmeckle's work has reached a high position of honor, especially in this 25th anniversary year since the popular teacher established a conservation major here which was the first of its kind at an American school of higher learning.

Surprisingly, Schmeckle didn't have a long list of academic qualifications for exerting his pioneering influence. Instead, he was "extremely visionary," according to Dr. Bernard Wievel, who was the first to join Schmeckle as a faculty member in the new department.

Wievel lauded his longtime colleague (who retired in 1959 and died eight years later) for an ability to sell sound conservation attitudes to a public little concerned or aware of an impending ecological crisis. "Fred spoke all over," Wievel recalls, "and people liked him. His enthusiasm for conservation always permeated his audiences."

Why did it all start? Schmeckle, a Nebraska native, was an outdoor

more

enthusiast and from the time of early manhood on, was active in the Izaak Walton League. His training to be an agriculture and science teacher undoubtedly brought him into the problem of forest and soil depletion on a professional basis.

Schmeeckle came to Stevens Point in 1923, and 12 years later was one of the promoters of a bill in the Wisconsin legislature requiring public schools to establish courses in conservation. That same year, he began teaching the subject on the university level to prepare future secondary and elementary educators. But not all of the then state teacher colleges were enthusiastic about the subject, Stevens Point's Emeritus President William C. Hansen recalls. "Some of the colleges dragged their feet."

Schmeeckle not only had enthusiasm for the subject, he also enjoyed support. And among his strong backers were President Hansen and Professor May Roach, who then headed ^{the} rural education division. She once attended a seminar in Chicago at which the president of the Ohio Medical Association ^{more} expressed concern for loss of elements in the soil than for germs. "Those were pretty strong words," she recalled many years later.

So when conservation curriculum development was underway, Miss Roach was the only woman on the committee and could easily claim the title as mother of the program.

In the mid 1940s, Hansen took a proposal to a board of regents meeting in Milwaukee seeking establishment of a conservation education major. With little opposition, except from a member representing the River Falls campus who thought the courses should be developed in his hometown where an agriculture program was fast developing, approval was granted. In 1946, the school catalog listed the major for the first time, and the pace was on.

As the major grew, so did Schmeeckle's stature as a conservation leader. By 1952, for example, he was among Wisconsin's most popular speakers,

more

ing at least one per week throughout the state and sometimes in more distant places.

But more importantly to Wievel was Schmeeckle's ability to relate to students--"there was no generation gap when Fred was around, he had rapport with his students."

Roy S. Swenson, now director of community resources for the Milwaukee Public School System, was one of the students. He recalls that "Fred was more than a teacher to all of us, for he taught by leading an exemplary life of practicing what he preached."

Professor Mildred Davis, the senior member of Stevens Point's faculty and a close friend many years to the Schmeeckle family, said "Fred was a great man to see far ahead of his time. He foresaw depletion of our natural resources and warned his students about it."

Others recall the professor as being "down to earth." And one of his favorite stories was truly earthy. If seeing a manure spreader in a farmer's yard while taking his students on field trips, Schmeeckle would say that that was one piece of machinery the implement dealer wouldn't stand behind.

But when he was serious, there were such remarks that "development of the right attitude is more important than laws and law enforcement in the promotion of conservation of our natural resources."

By 1947 student interest created need for more conservation faculty. That year, Wievel and Walter Sylvester were hired to teach generalist approaches to soils, wildlife, forestry and so forth. At the same time, a Trees for Tomorrow Camp was being established near Eagle River and Arol Epple, a new biology professor, was assigned to take a group of students there for a six-credit summer school course.

A few years later, Sylvester and his wife, Charlotte, conducted what was to develop into an annual summer encampment of field work and study. They went to Devil's Lake with about 10 youths who lived in tents,

worked for the State Conservation Department half days to pay their expenses and studied the remainder of the time. Mrs. Sylvester was the cook.

When he arrived, Wievel brought a new Ph.D. in vocational education from Iowa State University where he was the first, probably in the country, to have arranged an academic program dealing with a generalist background in conservation-oriented fields. Sylvester, who had done graduate work at the University of Michigan and Pennsylvania State College, was layed off for several years during the early 1950s because of a state budget crisis. used the time to receive his Ph.D. at Ann Arbor, Mich., but returned to campus where he died in 1957.

Eventually, the department added more faculty and specialized curriculum to include majors in soils, wildlife, water, forestry, and resource managements. Today the program has a new name--natural resources-- and has grown into college status as one of the five major divisions of the university. There now are more than 1,300 majors, including several women, who comprise the largest enrollment in any worldwide conservation curriculum.

Schmeeckle

In 1951, / bitterly attacked the legislature for cutting the budget of state teachers colleges, which resulted in a lay-off of several faculty members in Stevens Point, including Sylvester. Schmeeckle pointed out that Stevens Point pioneered in the field of conservation education yet lacked backing from the legislature for this important work. "We have billions to prepare against an outside invasion of the nation, but in our haste for preparedness we are permitting an internal invasion of our resources, the source of our future strength," he warned. "We are again ruhning our mineral, soil and forest resources through the ringer, much of it in a wanton irresponsible destruction which is playing into the hands of the enemy."

In 1959, Schmeeckle made a specific prediction which fast is becoming a reality. He said that within 15 years, zoning ordinances more

...ll set aside areas in every county for recreation. The need was paramount, he noted because of recreational outlets for an exploding population. "By 1975, for every table in the land that has four people around it now, there will be five," he said.

When he retired during his 36th year on the Stevens Point faculty, Schmeeckle said his intent in conservation was to not only train professionals in that subject but to make such people as lawyers, farmers, teachers and tradesmen aware of problems created by eroding resources.

And when he left campus for Eagle River, where he could be close to activities at Trees for Tomorrow, which he had helped organize, honors began coming in for him from across the country. He and President Hansen jointly received the national award from the Conservation Education Association, The Lions Club presented him with its international distinguished service award, and numerous organizations held testimonial dinners for him.

A memorial library was established in his name the following year at Trees for Tomorrow.

And in the fall of 1967, a half year after his death, a residence hall on this campus was dedicated in his name.

Today, its rare when a conservation meeting in America does not have in the crowd a graduate from Stevens Point State. Wievel believes that is one of the best tributes to the colorful Schmeeckle who long ago wanted to get his students "out into the world" and with a physics professor Raymond Rightsell floated a loan so the university could purchase a bus for field trips.