

**INDUCTION CEREMONY FOR  
ROBERT A. MC CABE  
APRIL 17, 1999  
WISCONSIN CONSERVATION HALL OF FAME  
Presented by  
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**RLR  
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Robert Albert McCabe was born January 11, 1914, and passed away on May 29, 1995. In the intervening 81 years, he accomplished much in each of his roles as husband, father, grandfather, athlete, student, research scientist, professor, colleague, administrator, hunter, fisher, botanist, field ecologist, land steward, art connoisseur, literary critic, author, mentor and just plain friend. Indeed, he received numerous and meritorious awards throughout his life for his professional accomplishments, and genuine respect and admiration for the conduct of his personal life. I will recount some of his more significant recognitions shortly. Still, I believe Bob would be incredibly proud and truly humbled today by his induction into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame where he will join an elite cadre of true icons of natural resources conservation, all of whom gave so much of their time and energy to ensure that Wisconsin maintained its leadership in conservation in the past and in the future.

Bob McCabe was born on the south side of Milwaukee, the eldest of 4 sons of working-class parents. Even as a youth, he helped with family earnings as an employee in a fish market and as a bootblack. He was a football and track star in

school, and graduated at the virtual height of the Depression. These were truly difficult times, but in retrospect, a defining time in Bob's life. A group of rabbit hunters in rural Waukesha County engaged him to care for their dogs and clean their game, and in exchange, loaned him a shotgun and a chance to join in their hunts. He was simultaneously befriended by a Mr. Schumacher whose home along the Bark River functioned as a headquarters for the hunters.

Mr. Schumacher served as a mentor to Bob as he developed and honed his hunting and fishing skills; skills that he practiced with family and friends even to the last few months of his life.

Bob entered Carroll College in Waukesha in 1935 with both a football scholarship to pay his tuition, and a dishwashing job to cover room and board. He lacked the physical size for varsity competition and eventually obtained a teaching assistantship in biology to help meet expenses. He was encouraged by his biology teacher to explore opportunities for graduate study at the University of Wisconsin-Madison after graduation from Carroll College in 1939. While at Carroll College, he met Marie Stanfield. They married in 1941 and had 4 children; Colleen, Richard, Thomas, and Kevin. They enjoyed 54 years of marriage, adventure, trials, tears, laughter, and love along the way; these would cement their relationship and that of their family.

Armed with his B.A. in biology and speech, Bob traveled to Madison in August, 1939 to enroll in the Zoology Department. An advisor queried Bob as to his preferred area of study, to which McCabe replied, "Game Conservation." The advisor curtly told Bob to "Go see Leopold in Ag." As he would later describe in his book, *The Professor*, Bob was devastated. He wanted to study in Zoology, not Ag, and he had never even heard of Leopold. He did, however, make his way across campus to 424 University Farm Place, a rather dilapidated old frame house that once housed Dean Harry L. Russell, (CALS 1907-1930; WARF Director (1930-1939), who in turn was previously instrumental in creating a Chair in Game Management for Aldo Leopold at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1933. That act marked the infancy of today's Department of Wildlife Ecology, and in fact, represented the real beginning of wildlife management as an academic discipline. At 424 University Farm Place that day, Bob did meet Aldo Leopold and saw the beginning of a professional and personal relationship that flourished until Leopold died in 1948.

Bob initiated his graduate work on gray partridge under the tutelage of Professor Leopold in 1939, and graduated with a Master's degree in 1943. He then became the Biologist for the University of Wisconsin Arboretum and Wildlife Area. In 1945, Bob became Leopold's assistant and an instructor in the Department of Wildlife Management while initiating his Ph.D. work on

ring-necked pheasants. Following completion of his Doctorate degree in 1949, Bob became Assistant Professor in the Department and then, Department Chairman in 1952. He held that position for 27 years, one of the longest chairmanships ever at UW-Madison. He brought to the task an intense loyalty to the Department and to his students. Throughout his career he fought for recognition and funding for both. All his Ph.D. students went on to become full professors, department chairpersons, or top-level administrators of conservation agencies, a tribute to his judgement and his nurturing and teaching skills. It was his admirable practice never to add his name as coauthor to his students' publications, thus ensuring their recognition while downplaying his own. That practice quite possibly would have been his undoing in today's "publish or perish" academia but I doubt that Bob would have cared. His students simply came first.

Bob McCabe's own research centered on wildlife and plant ecology, farm game management, ornithology, and wildlife field techniques. Via his fabled wildlife techniques course he continued to teach field savvy to students well after curricula at other schools were confined to lab and lecture hall. Techniques were his forte: he was among the first to use radio isotopes as markers under field conditions and infrared light to observe nocturnal behavior of animals. He pioneered the use of egg-white electrophoresis to test phylogenetic relationships—a basis for the concept of DNA/RNA affinities. And early in Bob's long-term

association with the Delta Waterfowl Research Station in southern Manitoba, he built the first duck decoy trap in North America for the capture and banding of waterfowl. Although an advocate of innovative techniques and equipment, Bob was quick to point out the folly of measuring “with a micrometer when a yardstick would do.” He produced over 140 publications, most dealing with his field research, technical reviews, and assorted educational papers. Had he co-authored with students, the list surely would have doubled. He also produced a number of Extension bulletins which served to encourage and enhance wildlife management by landowners.

Among his most significant accomplishments are the following:

- He wrote with A. S. Hawkins (another of Leopold’s students) a classic paper on the gray partridge (*Perdix perdix*). A quote from one of England’s eminent partridge specialists (A. D. Middleton) reads as follows: “Personally, I think it takes a place among the first six publications on any American game matters, and will be a constant Bible to me for many years to come.” Yet, this publication was McCabe’s M.Sc. thesis!
- He served on the Wisconsin DNR Research Advisory Committee from its inception in 1952 even through his retirement years until 1985. That committee guided the entire research program for the

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Twice in his tenure he was elected chairman of the group.

- He was awarded a Fulbright professorship at University College-Dublin (Ireland) in 1969-70, and he had 5 graduate students (in Ireland) between 1972-1980.
- In 1972 he also acted as a consultant for the National Parks (and Game Branch) of Ethiopia, where he conducted surveys of several National Parks and also game “problem areas”.
- He was chairman of a National Academy of Sciences Subcommittee on Vertebrate Pests. The committee was made up of a distinguished panel of wildlife biologists, and a report entitled *Vertebrate Pests: Problems and control* was published in 1970 by the NAS. It stands today as an important work in this ever-expanding area of impacts created by humans as they encroach into wildlife habitats on all fronts.
- In 1976, he was honored by his alma mater, Carroll College, as a distinguished alumnus.
- He was Vice-president for Sciences, and then President of the Wisconsin Academy of Science, Arts and Letters, and served in that capacity in 1977 and 1978.

- He received "The Wisconsin Award" in 1982 from the Wisconsin Chapter of The Wildlife Society for his professional contributions in Wisconsin and the Nation.
- From August 20, 1965 until his death, he served as the principal investigator for the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation program at the University of Wisconsin and at the organization's holdings near Dundee, Illinois.
- He always recognized the need for long-term research. For example he had a project on woodcock that had run for over 40 years and a Trillium study that ran for 36 years beginning in 1948. He had four songbird studies, each of which has at least 8 consecutive years of data.
- From 1967 until his death, he was very active in the International Congress of Game Biologists (largely European) and has presented papers at these meetings. I traveled to those meetings myself on several occasions (as did Marie) and I can only tell you that the community of European biologists had the greatest respect for McCabe. He was constantly fielding questions on not only his research, but that of others at the University of Wisconsin and by the WDNR.

- In the 1960s, he was appointed to two Wisconsin state boards of directors by then Governor Gaylord Nelson (a political act?-you bet!); the Department of Resource Development, and the Exposition Department.
- He was a member in 1973-74 of the Secretary of the Interior's Committee on Policy regarding the use of lead vs. steel shot in waterfowl hunting.
- Some of the committee assignments he undertook for The Wildlife Society included: Member since 1942 and life member in 1955; service on the Committees of; nomenclature, terrestrial publications, Leopold award, position statement, nominations, international affairs; representative to the International Game Biologist Congress; and an advisory committee to editors of the Journal of Wildlife Management.
- In 1976-77 he was elected president of The Wildlife Society.
- Ten years later, in 1986, he received the Aldo Leopold Medal. The salient context of that citation is that: "The Aldo Leopold Award is presented for distinguished service to wildlife conservation and is the highest honor bestowed by The Wildlife Society. It is the ultimate recognition of a wildlife professional." I must add that 2 graduate students of Bob McCabe also won this award, as did another faculty,



another Leopold student, and Leopold's son; 6 medals from one University; no other has won more than one.

- On June 24, 1988 he received an honorary Doctor of Laws degree (LLD) from Ireland's National University, the largest university in Ireland. I can only imagine his pride on that one!

After 27 years as Chairman of the Wildlife Ecology department, Bob stepped down in 1979 to assume his regular professorial duties, and he retired as Emeritus Professor in 1984. Retirement apparently was not in Bob's lexicon, for he continued to go to the office very day until stricken with cancer and even then, managed to regularly visit his office to check his correspondence up until 3 weeks before his death. Indeed, Bob's "retirement" years were some of his busiest. He brought to conclusion some of his long-term data sets, particularly his research on the willow flycatcher, which culminated in 1991 with the book *The Little Green Bird: The Nesting Ecology of the Willow Flycatcher*. Another book that occupied Bob's attention had its timely appearance in the centennial year (1887-1987) of Aldo Leopold's birth. Although reticent to discuss his very personal relationship with Aldo, Bob collected his remembrances in that book entitled *Aldo Leopold: The Professor*, for which he received the Wisconsin Historical Society's Award of Merit.

I now want to read you a brief excerpt from a summary of Bob's career as prepared by 2 of McCabe's students (Jim Teer and George Burger) upon the death of Bob McCabe:

"Bird hunting was a hallmark passion with Bob McCabe. He rarely missed an opportunity to hunt with his current and past students on their study areas, where appropriate. We co-authors like to think that he was especially fond of the annual trips to West Texas quail country, hosted by Teer, as part of the "Unholy Four" (McCabe, Teer, Burger, and E. L. Kozicky).... A splendid wing shot, Bob competed only with himself. More than 2 misses in a row (a rare event) brought silent contemplation but never a word about his gun, the wind, or any such excuse. His fervor was the same whether birds were abundant or nearly nonexistent, and he was legendary through his 70's for walking much younger companions into the ground."

Although I hunted with Bob on only a few occasions, I too experienced the latter.

While building a career, an academic department, and a reputation, Bob also managed to raise a daughter and three sons, but he could not have accomplished any of these tasks without the love, support, and counsel of his wife, Marie. As I mentioned previously, they married in 1941 after Bob had started his graduate program and Marie had taught school for a year. Bob was a loving father to his children, and he instilled in all his offspring a love of the natural world and the art of being afield. Bob's family was his pride and joy, and his grandchildren were particularly special. Marie was Bob's strength throughout and according to his children, she remains the lynch pin of the McCabe clan today. Indeed, upon

Bob's passing, the family immediately set to work to establish the Robert A. McCabe Undergraduate Scholarship for Academic Excellence at the UW-Madison. This handsome gift now generates 2-4 scholarships each year for outstanding students, thereby continuing the legacies of both Aldo Leopold and Bob McCabe in our Department of Wildlife Ecology at the UW-Madison.

*In Aldo Leopold: The Professor* Bob wrote:

"In . . . A. L.'s essay 'Goose Music' is his statement, 'I have congenital hunting fever and three sons.' I too have the fever and three sons. A. L. and I also shared the same birthdate . . . , a sweet tooth, and a desire to leave a legacy of 'good health, education and a degree of competence.' I have attempted to provide this trilogy of obligation for my children."

He was entirely successful in that regard. And he instilled very similar goals in each of the students, faculty, and staff who crossed his path in life.

When Bob accepted the Aldo Leopold Medal from The Wildlife Society in 1986, his acceptance speech was short, and simple; "I hope Aldo would approve." All who were present, through their applause and moist eyes, knew that was the case. Today, as Robert A. McCabe joins his mentor with his induction into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame, I submit that we can all adjourn with the knowledge that both men are extremely proud at this moment.

Footnote: In preparing this induction material, I borrowed heavily, and in some cases, verbatim, from two obituaries as cited below:

- (1) Burger, G. V. and J. G. Teer. 1995. Our respects. . . Robert A. McCabe, 1914-1995. *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 23(4):812-816.
- (2) Emlen, J. T., Jr. and T. R. McCabe. 1996. In memoriam: Robert A. McCabe, 1914-1995. *The Auk* 113(3):674-677.