

WISCONSIN CONSERVATION HALL OF FAME
INDUCTION CEREMONY - Leslie S. Woerpel
Stevens Point, WI
April 28, 1990

I am honored to have been given a very special privilege by your Chairman, Earl Spangenberg, to give this presentation about Les Woerpel and his contribution as a pioneer in the Wisconsin conservation movement. As his son, I have grown to appreciate the enormity of what he did from my perspective of a 29 year career as a professional in forest management.

In our family, there is a wealth of oral history, told each time we get together. The stories are triggered by browsing through stacks of picture albums and old home movies that go back to 1938. When I was young, and then when my children were growing up, the most fertile story time was the annual gatherings for deer hunting. Hunting and fishing stories are mixed and laced with a four-decade history of the inner workings of the lay conservation movement and the people that made change happen in Wisconsin.

This presentation is a result of study of the written records still stored by Les, and the combination of my recollections and the collection of family oral history told so many times that nearly all of the grandchildren and even grandnephews can also tell you many of the same stories.

1929 was not the best of times for the family of a house painter. Grandma's garden and chickens helped keep food on the table. Les was two years out of high school, graduating a year ahead of time with honors. Musical talent seemed to run in the family so he and his older brother mixed playing in a dance band with jobs they could get around Madison, or at home in Sun Prairie. Les had a dream about a career in a newly developing profession of forestry. A friend helped him apply to the University of Montana where he had arranged to earn his way by playing in a band.

It never worked out, as family crisis interfered with his plans to head west. Instead, Les stayed in Wisconsin, finally landing a job with the American Telephone and Telegraph Company.

Hunting and fishing was a love passed through the Woerpel and Sweet families from generation to generation. Stories like how old Uncle Ed liked to use his 10 gage double barrel for goose hunting, so if it rained all he had to do was crawl inside, was normal stuff told to every child. There were true stories as well, but a person never could really trust about how many or big the critters were that were bagged.

The telephone job landed him in Minnesota and North Dakota for a time, giving him new perspectives on hunting, fishing, and the land uses of the prairies; and a new wife, Lucille, and father-in-law

who shared the love for hunting and fishing.

Returning to Wisconsin and Stevens Point in 1941, he became an Isaac Walton member, and began to participate in the Conservation Congress meetings held each year to provide citizen input to setting annual game regulations by the Commission. By 1943, he became personally involved in the controversies of deer management as a member of the conservation congress. Friends and co-workers at the telephone company began active participation with the local warden, Frank Hornburg, in law enforcement and dead deer counts, or projects like planting trees along trout streams as volunteers for the Conservation Department. This was a chance to learn and debate the scientific principles with people in the conservation profession.

Les was a prolific reader and possessed a great capacity to remember the details of what he had read. His ability to sharply define the issue and then bring everything he had read on the subject into heated debate was the strength he gave to the cause of conservation. He was trained in this technique of survival in the Woerpel household, ruled by the germanic old country authority of his father, who challenged the children in debate of anything, at nearly every dinner setting. It is a vivid memory of mine, watching grandpa sitting at the head of the table, in front of the hutch, egging on the evening's argument with his sons and daughter.

By 1947, Les convinced the friends that they needed to become more activists if those things they supported were ever to get done. Conservation decisions were too political, and made little sense scientifically. The Governor was dictating game seasons based on his desire to influence votes in the north counties, not on whether deer were starving in piles. The friends were also interested in fish habitat and pheasant habitat improvement, but saw a conservation department promoting fish and pheasant planting and "put and take" policies as being better politics. At the time, the Ikes, an older established organization, didn't have the interest in fighting like these young "turks" had in mind, as managing the club property and shooting interests took up their energies. So the "turks" found a place to meet downtown and formed the Portage County Sportsman's Club, and their outspoken, prolific reader became the first President.

The prolific reader also enjoyed writing. One of the interesting historic documents I ran across was a 1938 first person story written about that year's hunting trip with his father-in-law into northern Minnesota, complete with carefully drawn maps showing all of the deer trails and places of events in the account. So it was natural that from the power base of the Portage County Club, Les's style of networking began through the written word. The Stevens Point Daily Journal both reported on the clubs positions and became a vehicle for raising the issues through articles written by Les and reacted to by the editor.

Les also became a prolific letter writer. Linking up with Jack Seville of Sports Afield, they began to plant the seeds for the need of a strong state-wide organization of conservation clubs, dedicated to the education and advocacy for scientific, conservation management. A network of concerned citizens emerged, linking opinion leaders from Portage, Wood, Vilas, and Clark counties.

The Conservation Commission's setting of the 1948 deer season was described as a political fiasco perpetrated by then Governor Rennebohm. The deer season became a political football passed back and forth all year, until finally the Commission decided in September against all recommendations of the biologists of the Department. That became the last straw.

While anger and indignation were shared by all of the conservation advocates, Les's upbringing meant that he couldn't let it go. He needed action, and it started with letters to the clubs he was now friends with. The Wood County Conservation League, the Portage County Sportsman's club, the Vilas County Sportsman's Club, and the Land O'Lakes Fish and Game Club became the nucleus of the promotional organization to become known as the Wisconsin Federation of Conservation Clubs. Joyce Larkin, Editor of the Vilas County News in Eagle River lent the support of her paper and printed the first promotional materials.

How do you bring together sportsmen who are notorious for disagreeing with everyone about their favorite sport? Forty years later the solution now seems apparent, but up until then it had rarely been tried. You seek common ground, and bind the group together in principles of common concern while preserving the right of the individual or individual club to disagree and to debate the conservation priorities from their own values. Today people who manage National Forests will recognize those principals in the concepts of public involvement under the National Forest Management Act.

The solution acted upon by Les, and agreed upon by the originating group was a conservation pledge, one that stated high principles of conservation stewardship for the generations to come. The idea was to personally agree to the pledge, then work together for the common good to get politics out of resource decision making as much as possible. They encouraged argument of the scientific principles and intended to hold resource managers to a high level of professionalism.

The pledge was the medium by which the clubs would agree to withdraw from political activity designed to dictate conservation decisions based on campaigning for votes. Les wrote then, "We expect to use the pledge to show the department, commission, legislature, and the people of the state of Wisconsin that we will

not stand for political meddling in our conservation affairs, that we want those affairs to be regulated and administered according to the department's scientific and biological findings and the commission's honest opinion as to the solution." This statement could also be used today to express the intended purpose of the National Environmental Policy Act, if you understand Les's intent for full disclosure of those decisions based on scientific and social impact analysis and not on politics.

The pledge campaign was a significant breakthrough. Clubs who knew they were on the opposite side of the deer question, took the pledge and expressed interest in joining a state-wide federation for the principles expressed by the founding group. In March, 1949, the organizing meeting of the new Federation, which later was changed to the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, was held in Stevens Point. My job was to hand out name tags and mementos from Weber Fly Company.

Les became the first President, and served until 1951, when he became the Executive Director, serving in that capacity until 1965.

By 1952, he was traveling the state, using his long weekends and vacation time from shift work at the telephone company to try to hold the Federation on a steady course. He had a 12 year old son with him a lot, and car rides became the quality time to challenge the son in debate, as his dad did him at the dinner table. He invented a communication vehicle called the "News and Views", and published it sometimes more than once a month. (I remember, it was my job to fold the darn things and lick stamps and mailing labels. Later, my younger sister Linda, took on those responsibilities. My then future wife, Donna, even did "News and Views" duty at one time. Mother had the job when we weren't available.)

Les was controversial, challenging lay and professionals alike, and some thought, pretty downright brash. With a passion, he was playing Herman Woerpel at the head of the conservation dinner table, laden down with a great variety of issues. He insisted that he wasn't alone in advocating change, but many of his antagonists believed that only ego drove the man from Stevens Point.

Few knew what it was that went into the growing confidence and knowledge of activist Les Woerpel. Adding to his knowledge besides his ability as a prolific reader, writer, and now club organizer, was a growing network of friends and confidants who were professional leaders in their fields, or were the outstanding lay conservationists of their day. Not only did I grow up with them around the house, or on the phone, and spent time with them in the field hunting and fishing, but in the research for this report, I read again their letters, personal notes, and references. Some too, like Ernie Swift, and Harley MacKenzie wrote in their fading days of retirement, remembering the warrior days of the 40's and 50's, and felt good about their efforts together.

Les was being fed and nourished by such people as Swift and MacKenzie, Dr. Durwood Alan, Dr. Ira Gabrielson, Sigurd Olson, Dick Hemp, Les Voigt, Russ Neugebauer, Cy Kabot, Bill Grimmer, Staber Reese, Walter Scott, Leo Roethe, Harry Ruhle, Harry Gaines, and Bill Ruth to name a few. Also included were journalists, Tom Guyant, Mel Ellis, Gordon MacQuarrie, Don Johnson, Ruth Hine, Russ Lynch. (Some of whom engaged in a few good fights together, Grandpa Woerpel style.) Some of his correspondents included Gaylord Nelson, Rachel Carlson, Forest Service Chief Ed Cliff, Regional Forester George James, Congressman Henry Reuss, Senator Alex Wiley, and many employees of state and federal conservation agencies, in Wisconsin and throughout the country.

But the inner circle was special. In retrospect, I think they became like brothers. In my view there were four people that affected most of the lay conservation strategies of those days. They were: Dick Hemp, the experienced and influential political mind from Mosinee; Bill Ruth, the quiet and steady voice of the native north from Eagle River; Russ Neugebauer, the professional public relations staff from the Conservation Department, and Les Woerpel, the point man, activist, who executed the visible actions of the strategies. They hunted and fished together, argued together, and hung together when things got tough. They took this kid along on a lot of the outings, and I picture them as they were then, often with their dogs, arguing about which got the point first, or laughing, as they sat on a tree stump, about the game that just got away. Their point man is their last survivor.

Some of the issues he affected were strictly Wisconsin's, but many were not. He authored outstanding papers of national interest on pheasant management, pesticides, and water law. He championed the Wilderness Act, the Multiple Use and Sustained Yield Act, and promoted scientific forest management that served well the needs of wildlife and recreation.

In arguing against the proposed Little Eau Pleine River flowage, he forced the Wisconsin Valley Improvement Corporation through what would now be recognized as an Environmental Impact Statement, with full disclosure of findings and analysis. It was a long hotly debated issue, with the Federation taking some heavy shots for ever questioning such an important Corporation's impact on fragile wetlands (called swamps by developers). Once he was taken to task by the Stevens Point Journal for questioning the statements of the company about their legal rights of eminent domain against the townships. Les's position that they had no such authority was confirmed by the State Attorney General in an official opinion. In the end the proposed flowage area on the Little Eau Pleine is now owned by all the people, and known as the George W. Mead Wildlife Area.

Les, like an old soldier, never did quit, even though he retired

from his positions in the Federation as his health faded. His last major writing was a 30 year historical account of the Federation, completed in 1978. He wrote some of his last pieces for the Federation newspaper in the early 1980's. His influence in conservation and his writings span six decades.

The "News and Views" was a formable force in Wisconsin Conservation evolution for 22 years. It represented a number of Les's principle values; learn the facts, debate the issues, make up your own mind, and take action. For some, it offended, for others it was a beacon that helped them find their own way. Celebrated Milwaukee Sentinel outdoor writer, Don Johnson, echoed many other notes from people about the demise of the News and Views in 1974; "The passing of "News and Views" is viewed with sadness here... It was a real labor of love, I know. It was always well read here, both for the information (I often found really significant things there before I saw them anywhere else) and for your views. I usually agreed with them; always respected them."

There was one other theme that you also find embedded in Les's writings that stayed consistent for those six decades. I call it the Conservationist's Ethic of Legacy. There has to be a reason why a person endures so much personal pain in a labor as rigorous and draining as conservation advocacy, especially for a lay volunteer. That ethic of legacy is best expressed by a poem I rediscovered mixed in with his records. It is one I remembered hearing him use in my High School days, but I had lost track of it. The author is Will Allen Dromgoole.

"An old man, going a lone highway
Came, in the evening, cold and gray,
To a chasm, vast and deep wide,
Through which was flowing a sullen tide.
The old man crossed in the twilight dim;
That sullen stream had no fear for him.
But he turned when he reached the other side,
And built a bridge to span the tide.

Old man, said a fellow pilgrim near,
You are wasting strength in building here.
Your journey will end with the ending day,
You never again must pass this way.
You have crossed the chasm, deep and wide;
Why build you the bridge at the evening tide?

The builder lifted his old gray head.
Good friend, in the path I have come, he said,
There followeth after me today,
A youth whose feet must pass this way;
This chasm, that has been naught to me
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be.
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building the bridge for him."

The Hall of Fame's recognition of a lifetime of building bridges by Leslie S. Woerpel, son of Herman and Julia, is a great gift to him and to all the Woerpel Family. He has succeeded in building bridges for his grandchildren and his brother's grandchildren, and has contributed, with his peers, to building a conservation legacy for all of the peoples' grandchildren to come. For those pioneers, the elders of resource conservation, every day was earth day.

Thank you.

Loren S. Woerpel
His Son