

SU JUN 18 1978

Afield with Ellis / Mel Ellis

SU JUN 18 1978

The most neglected nature writer

The snow-world grays into dusk; then blackness. Color vanished with the dim sun.

Life, too, it seems, journeyed over the hills to sleep below the horizon for the night.

There remains in the world the bleakness of more snow, sifting, sifting, inexorably — tiny, hard, sharp, broken flakes jostling in their wind-tossed descent.

THUS begins what I consider a classic, *Those of the Forest*. It was written more than 25 years ago by Wallace Byron Grange, only to vanish from book shelves after many stirring tributes from the scientific society, but only a smattering of approval from the general reading public.

Why, I often ask myself, did this book — scientifically sound but still a crackling adventure — find so few readers while other books of the same genre sold by the tens of thousands?

The only answer I can come up with is that it was not written by an Easterner whose efforts were promoted by such as *The New York Times* and some canny big-time publisher.

Grange, in my opinion, topped the late Hal Borland or any of the other more widely read nature writers on the national scene. Yet, when perverse circumstances forced Grange to take his manuscript to a vanity publisher (where an author must pay production costs), the book died aborning.

Grange, in case you don't remember, once owned the Sand Hill Game Farm (now state property) just outside of Babcock, and not far from Wisconsin Rapids. But even though we lived little more than 100 miles from each other, I first saw him in the Everglades of Florida while on a state supervised panther hunt.

Subsequently I came to know him better — though never well, unless you count what I discovered about the man in reading and re-reading *Those of the Forest*.

I wouldn't be surprised if few remember him. Because who, if I may digress, remembers Ernest Swift? Of those who remember Swift, how many know of his contributions to Wisconsin and the nation? And how many know that when he was director of the old Federal Fish and Wildlife Service, the politicians dug his grave because he wouldn't play their little games?

WALLACE Grange's dream began taking shape in 1928, when he started a small game farm at Ephraim in Door County. Subsequently he became state game manager and a member of the old Biological Survey. I didn't meet

him until many years later, after World War II. Following a visit to his Babcock home, I wrote:

Wallace Grange glided up out of the woods with the ease of the big bull elk that followed a short distance behind. He moved easily, almost regally, and when he reached the crest of the small rise, he turned and looked back. The elk paused too, and a silken maned bison came through the trees to stand beside the elk.

It was nearly night, and shadows were in the marsh pockets, but pale tips of aspens still glowed faintly in the red left by the setting sun. A little frost, like wood smoke, curled from Grange's nostrils. The three of them — the elk, the bison and the man — stood silent and without moving.

I remember, as I stood watching the three, that I knew intuitively I was looking at a man of vision, a man with dreams. I knew he had bought the 9,600 acre farm while it was on fire.

Men who negotiated the sale for him said he was crazy. "Why it's on fire, man! It's all wasteland! There isn't a tree on it big enough for a respectable fence post. There isn't an acre that isn't plain wasteland!"

They were exaggerating, of course, but even if they hadn't been, I'm sure Wallace Byron Grange would have bought the land anyway. You see, he not only knew about the earth's tenacious ability to resurrect itself, but he was convinced that he could give the land a hand and create a habitat so ideal that from the prolific overflow of wildlings he might show enough profit to put other "wastelands" to similar use.

I'll not detail the struggle to get miles of deer-proof fence around the place; the labor and money needed to impound water for ducks, geese, beaver and muskrat, and for fire protection; the necessary plantings to lure hare, grouse, mouse, coyote, deer — all the wild ones — into taking up lodging.

But his labors in the field of habitat resurrection were nothing compared to the opposition of hunters who converged on Madison to get a restraining injunction against the erection of the fence and issuing of the game farm permit.

Though he met all opposition head on, and won his right to see his dream materialize, "they" never desisted, and when "they" could no longer enlist the law, "they" cut his fences, killed his animals, turned hounds into the enclosure and set fire to his forests.

Cousin of former football star Red Grange, Wally battled them all with the help of his

wife, Helen. And if he was not financially successful, at least he proved that given the proper habitat, all game species could not only survive, but flourish.

Grange was no fly-by-night entrepreneur as many would like to picture him. He was solid, a biologist who did many wildlife studies and published *The Ways to Game Abundance* and *Wisconsin Grouse Problems*.

BUT, back to *Those of the Forest*. To me, the hero of the book, a snowshoe hare who survives every danger a wilderness can throw at it, is Grange himself making his way through a predator's world. It is a book written with brush strokes of genius, and a publisher somewhere (perhaps right here in Wisconsin) should resurrect it.

Like Aldo Leopold, Grange was and is a complex man. To take any one passage from his book to sum up his philosophy is nigh impossible. Perhaps, however, what follows, is close:

The chant of the earth and sky and of living creatures is old. It sings in every green leaf. It is proclaimed again in each feather of the raven, in each hair of the mouse, and by every grain of sand upon the ridge. It surges through the veins of the living, and in the dust of life that has passed by. In them are all the prophecies of the forest, of time fulfilled, and by them is Creation eternally made new.

In the chant plainly heard by all those of the forest is the struggle of them all, their lives joined together and indissoluble in the on-rushing sweep of time and life that is neither accidental nor purposeless, but contains always the thought and destiny of Creation.

Lepus (our hero, the hare) shall never grasp its purposes. He shall never penetrate the mystic mists beyond his rabbit knowing. It is quite sufficient to live.

The days of individual life are numbered. Those of species know longer time. Forests have died, wilderness communities have passed beyond time's view, and beyond comprehension.

Upon this ridge, perhaps the wilderness community may perish from some moment of time, in which climactic phases again reverse their pulsations. Yet the wilderness community, upon some other ridge, will survive, finding there the circumstances of living it has so long known. In its day, it shall return.

Helen and Wallace Grange now live in Calio, N.D., where he is working on a book about Wisconsin. □