

by Michael Irwin

# Con Man on Crutches

*conservationist Paul Olson*

"I am a devious man; I am a con man. I am an Old Testament prophet; I am an evangelist. I am the cheerful ecologist."

When people who know Paul Olson phone Midvale Elementary School in Madison, they simply ask if it is possible to speak with the Pope. From a bulging four-drawer file, a telephone, a loyal secretary's typewriter, and a listing, rolling chair in the principal's office, Paul Olson administers the Wisconsin See. His dominion is the unique woodlands, marshes, prairies, and wild creatures of Wisconsin. His hoarded treasures, he pronounces to audiences, are "the crown jewels of the state." His imprimatur reads: "Save them now. We can do it." His empire grows by politics and persuasion. His is an *honest* grand larceny, performed with winking wit and broadsides of papal bull.

Education and environment are recurring themes in Paul Olson's life. Sometimes alternately, sometimes in concert, he has played the roles of educator and naturalist for most of his sixty-four years. First as a science teacher, then (at the request of neighborhood parents) as an elementary-school principal, he has followed the educational pathway right up to the edge of retirement. Yet at each workday's end, when the children's chatter falls from his ears, he crosses the short, quiet blocks between school and home and enters the environmental arena.

He steers his "Kenosha canoe," a late-model Ambassador, past a few unyielding elms he once rescued from Mayor Ivan Nestingen's snorting Caterpillars but now cannot save from burrowing beetles. In the drive of the small white house, he skirmishes a moment with his aluminum crutches. He does not curse—about this. Standing skinny-legged and hunched, like a little gray-topped heron, he drags the crutches from the car and nestles forward into them.

Inside, letters from members of the flock are waiting, matters concerning the Dane County Conservation League and its offshoot, the Prairie Chicken Foundation; the Wisconsin Chapter of The Nature Conservancy; the Madison School Forest; the Tympanucus Society; or the Friends of the Arboretum. One of his two grown sons has stopped by, and his grandchild Jennifer, one of seven, is eager to hear one of his homespun animal stories. His wife, Alice, always a strong tower for him, stands nearby and listens. Even as he tells the story, he thinks, "Life is beautiful, and men—they are decent after all." The words have become a private and published dictum in recent years. Like snatches of Romantic poems and Scripture, they return to him in cycles along with other things worth preserving... in his lifetime of preserving things.

He finishes the tale and negotiates a noisy kiss on the cheek for his efforts. Then he turns back to the mail. He raises a letter from a prairie-chicken lover up high, flaps it once or twice, then lowers it for his brandy-on-the-rocks.

"These letters—two or three like this one arrive each week—I give to Fred and Fran Hamerstrom, the research team up on the Buena Vista marsh. They know more about prairie chickens than anybody in this country. Compared with them, I don't know anything. I'm just a con man," he says with typical good-natured irreverence. "I just relieve people of their money."

His cobbler's face starts into a grin that pushes wrinkles against the gradual, broad prow of his hairline. But first, from behind his bifocals, he offers a characteristic wink, which lets everyone know he has issued forth another of his universal half-truths. Serious again, he continues, "There are 1,500 birds on the 12,000 or so acres we purchased up around Plainfield. Folks used to call that area the 'great dead heart of Wisconsin.' Settlers would buy, then sell; buy, then sell. Nothing would grow but brush and blue grass and prairie chickens." He pulls hard on one of a dozen battered pipes standing in a rack near his chair, profanes its dying charge, and takes up another.

Pieces of simple hardwood furniture turned on his lathe in the basement and three oils decorate the modest living room. He honors the two smaller paintings as the work of Pauline and Karen, his daughters. Then he motions to the other painting with hands that are large but smooth, younger than the rest of him. He pulls his muddled feet a few degrees toward the scene. Two big painted chickens are bowed, full of desire.

"Well, back in the fifties, I went up and saw the prairie chickens—the real thing. I came back excited. I thought, 'Here is something so dramatic, so wonderful, that I can't permit it to disappear.' The Dane County Conservation League had always been a sucker for me, so together we got the chicken project started. Everything just came together. We found the Hamerstroms and got support from a wealthy businessman from Racine. I have a feeling, almost like religion, about the way that project developed. When you really want something, and believe in it, you'll get it. There's a way. You can win, by God; you can win. Those chickens were something superb." His voice is thick but not hoarse or throaty, and it ascends to a jubilant kind of clarity at the end of the best lines in his favorite stories.

"A cold frosty morning in April is the best time to go to the booming ground. Before sunrise, you hear them coming in and coming in... the soft rustle of wings. Only the males are there first, defending their territory. There are the tough guys who play for Leo Durocher in the middle, the nice guys on the edge. Then the hens fly in. It becomes frantic."

Suddenly, he is a male prairie chicken, dropping his head, rapping the arms of his chair, shuffling his yellow feet. "This big orange sack sticks out, and they make this booming call: *O! mul doon! O! mul doon!* Some people say it sounds like 'ole damn fool.' The hens stroll around like coeds on State



*The cheerful ecologist, the self-professed con man on crutches, Paul Olson is the Wisconsin environment's best friend. Working through favorite organizations like the Wisconsin Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, he has spent a lifetime preserving treasures of Wisconsin landscape.*

"You have to build coalitions to get what you want for the environment," says Paul Olson. "Yet all coalitions are of the moment and will pass away. The moment of victory carries the seeds of defeat." The following list illustrates some of the ways he has achieved his environmental ends.

**DANE COUNTY CONSERVATION LEAGUE AND PRAIRIE CHICKEN FOUNDATION.** Paul Olson joined the DCCL in 1950, became a director, founded its monthly newsletter, and served as the paper's first editor. He helped plan the group's game-management, watershed, habitat, and reforestation projects. Before developing the DCCL's Prairie Chicken Foundation in 1958, he helped establish cooperative planting projects between the league and the Department of Natural Re-

sources. In this continuing program, 1,000 DCCL members plant 15,000 to 20,000 hardwoods and conifers in the state each year.

After visiting the prairie-chicken booming ground on the huge Buena Vista marsh near Plainfield in southern Portage County, Olson asked his friends in DCCL for \$200 to purchase some habitat for the native Wisconsin birds then dangerously close to extinction. From 1958 on, under the DCCL's auspices, he has bought 6,000 acres of prairie-chicken range—using contributions ranging from \$50 to \$50,000. Beginning in 1960, he also cooperated with a Milwaukee-based protection group, the Tympanus Society, as it purchased another 6,000 acres. Today, 1,500 prairie chickens thrive in the area, and barring natural disaster, their survival in Wisconsin has been assured.

Street pretending they don't notice. But I've seen one or two look out the corner of their eye. After all this"—he winks at Alice—"the females pick the males just as they have throughout all history."

Paul Olson, more than anyone else, can reflect on the chickens' territorial behavior and see it in human terms. Friends in The Nature Conservancy, like Gene Roark and Professor Hugh Illis, know what it's like to see him lowering his head, ready to give the big boys at the dance a good elbowing. They recall the time the conservancy's national organization wanted a bigger slice of the Wisconsin chapter's dues.

"I'll run Wisconsin," he told his friends. He set his jaw, his eyes glinting. There was an edge in his voice, and he started to swear a little. Then Roark and the others at the meeting tables understood that the gentle schoolteacher was also a fierce, provincial border-guard. They could tell he would resist, whether it be the national conservancy, the Department of Natural Resources, or the Wisconsin legislature. And he would pressure those establishment groups to get what he wanted for Wisconsin.

Olson is himself a territorial male, and not the least bit self-conscious about it. He seldom loses ground; he *never* loses it without a fight. He did lose much of Cherokee, his dream project, his "second Horicon Marsh," to Madison developers in the early sixties. He still drives past its golf course and trim houses with a sense of bitterness. But he has won much too. One of his favorite organizations, the Wisconsin Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, started with \$250. Now it's about to start on its third million and has saved 2,500 acres of rare woods and prairie for scientific study. Not bad for an immigrant tailor's polio-stricken son.

Paul Olson has put conservancy philosophy into Everyman's language. Fran Hamerstrom says he's effective because he deals honestly with people. It is true. Even more important, he can build coalitions because he can talk to people, can touch them—university experts who look down their intellectual

noses at emotion; big-city industrialists who mix noble end with cool, business-minded means; farmers who are untainted by too many books.

"Up until the fifties, I was a local do-gooder tending the Madison School Forest. I was reading Aldo Leopold for the first time then. Though I had his daughter in one of my classes while teaching at West High, I never met this man who was the greatest ecologist of them all. Out of his shack, his retreat alone



*After forty-three years as a teacher and principal in the Madison school system, Paul Olson will retire this summer. This photo shows him seeing a shack through one of his West High School science classrooms many years ago.*

**MADISON SCHOOL FOREST.** The same year Olson first forested in prairie chickens, Madison philanthropist Joseph Jackson arranged the purchase of 160 acres of hardwood forest southwest of Verona in Dane County. The timing was perfect for school principal Olson, who headed the Madison schools' work-learn program for teenagers. Olson moved his young workers from DCCL's earlier Black Earth Creek project to the Madison School Forest, which, through more gifts, grew to 263 acres. He became known as "director" of the forest, and hired a fine naturalist, James Zimmerman, to lead tours and offer nature study for Madisonians of all ages. Last year more than 10,000 school children hiked and camped in the woods and studied in the log shelters Olson and the young work-learners built with trees from the forest itself.

**SUGAR RIVER PROJECT.** Thirty years ago Aldo Leopold wrote scholarly papers about this lovely winding stream originating in western Dane County and flowing southeast into Green County. The DCCL has made a thirty-year commitment to improving the Sugar River watershed. Paul Olson's coalition of people from the DCCL, the DNR, and the Madison school system will begin fortifying and rebuilding stream banks, clearing debris, and installing flood-control devices during the summer of 1974. Olson calls the Sugar River project and his current nature-conservancy work "my valedictory," even as he talks about new plans and projects for environmental protection.

**WISCONSIN CHAPTER, THE NATURE CONSERVANCY.** A handful of environmentalists gathered in 1960 to save Abraham's Woods, forty acres of climax maple forest near Albany in Green County. Professor Hugh Ittis and Gene Roark from the DNR were driving forces in the early years—along with Paul Olson. Olson was elected the Wisconsin chapter's first chairman, and he has remained its chairman to this day. The chapter has grown to 2,000 members who, through Olson's skill as a negotiator, have purchased 2,500 acres from Door County south to the state line. The land harbors Wisconsin's rarest plants and animals. After it has been purchased, the land usually is given to universities for scientific study and research.



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the Wisconsin River, came an immense understanding. Well, I could never be the same again." The tempo in his voice quickens, the narrative flowing from some inner source through rich and earnest embellishments of memory.

"The university was trying to fill the Lake Mendota shoreline with rubble about that time, and it just wasn't right. You can do certain things with a lake—fish in it, swim in it, look into it—but you can't park cars on it. I found a professor on campus. He'd sit in his office overlooking the lake, and every time they dumped something illegal into it, he'd call me. Then I'd call the Public Service Commission. They'd have an investigator down there before the rocks hit the bottom. The legislature finally repealed the whole damn thing. The fight had only cost me \$28.60 for postage, and it whetted my appetite."

The ice tinkles in his empty brandy glass as he rolls it between his palms. "None of it was planned, this involvement. But Gaylord Nelson made a mistake. He put me on the old Conservation Commission while he was governor. And once I get into an organization, I can't rest. I won't go to a meeting unless I can run it. I'm like Teddy Roosevelt. He had to be the center of interest. When he went to a funeral, he wanted to be the corpse."

"There was a Jewish fellow once who had a vision for man, but he needed somebody a little devious to carry it out. Leopold had a vision too, and I would be happy to be his Saint Paul. The trouble with most conservationists is they are basically prophets of doom. Hell, I've saved the last prairie in Wisconsin six times. I am a politician of the possible. Opportunity is out there. It can be done. Doomsaying is the wrong way to attract people, certainly young people. So I am the cheerful ecologist. Let's take the young to the hills and woods and show them the glories. There *is* a future, and man will be part of it. If that's not true, why educate?"

Earnest now, he continues. "An ecologist *should* be emotional. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said education is a preservation of wonder. The Madison School Forest

*"Maybe Genesis has affected the way we relate to nature. I was trap-shooting once. When I got back, my car had six grasshoppers in it. I chased out all but one. I couldn't catch that son of a bitch. I'd move; he'd hop. I'd move; he'd hop. When I got into the car the next day, he was still sitting right there. I sat down behind him and gave him a good snap! After he stopped bouncing, he looked up at me. And I said unto him: 'The Lord gave man dominion over the birds of the air, the beasts of the field, and those that swim in the deep.' I didn't want to hurt him, but I was jealous of him. I have limped through life; he could jump a long ways. I just wanted to be equal with him. There are times when the human spirit has to triumph."*

project was like that from the beginning—an emotional thing. The teenage boys who work with me out there represent a lost generation in a lost summer. They are too old to play and too young to work. I won't say working in the forest makes a good boy, but it *does* give him pride. And it gives him a chance to get hurt, to feel pain, to go to the edge of that final violence that is genetic in us. So much of what we give kids to do these days is antiseptic and without value."

He pauses for a moment. "There are still years of work ahead on the school forest project, but I've only got about one more year in the old bones before I'll have to quit. That awful drive that used to be there is beginning to ease off. It is true a man grows old." His voice trails off. "A man grows old. But I wanted to leave something."

His tone is flat, his face open but without its familiar flash of discovery. He recalls the lines from Tennyson's *Ulysses* that he has recited to himself so many times before:

*"Though much is taken, much abides and though  
We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven, (that which we are we are—  
The equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield."*