

Conservation group adds Olson to Hall

By Tim Eisele

For The State Journal

Paul J. Olson of Madison, the retired principal of Midvale Elementary School and a member of the Dane County Conservation League, will be inducted into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame April 15.

Olson joins the likes of Aldo Leopold, John Muir, Harley W. MacKenzie, Ernie Swift, Sigurd Olson and Gaylord Nelson in the Hall of Fame, which opened its doors in 1985.

Olson, interested in the outdoors since his days as a science teacher at Madison West High School, organized archery and fly tying clubs for students. In 1953, he helped launch a summer work-learn program where students earned credits by working on conservation projects.

He later instigated the deeding of 300 acres of virgin oak forest to the Board of Education for use as the Madison School Forest.

But Olson, retired and living in Madison with his wife, is most noted for forming the Prairie Chicken Foundation under the sponsorship of the Dane County Conservation League.

The Foundation purchased 5,000 acres of land, including the Buena Vista Wildlife Area near Plainfield, during the 1960s to preserve the last stronghold of the prairie chicken in Wisconsin.

"It started when I drove up to Plainfield in 1954 with several Dane County League members and found the prairie chicken spring booming performance to be remarkable," Olson recalled.

"We talked with researchers for the Department of Natural Resources, Fred and Fran Hammerstrom, about preserving the chickens, and learned the necessity of buying and managing the grasslands."

The DCCL donated \$200 to start the project. Olson published newsletters and gave talks to raise the \$800 needed for the first 40 acres.

Subsequently, Olson managed to catch the attention of a Racine businessman who donated substantial sums of money to purchase more land. But why prairie chickens?

"Because I was swept off my feet while watching the spring courtship



— 1977 photo

Paul J. Olson

activities of the birds," he said. "It's a spectacular experience that you'll never forget. We learned of the needs these birds had for open grassland."

Prairie chickens are one of four species of grouse native to Wisconsin. These birds thrived in the low grass prairies, once extending from Canada to Texas and from Colorado to Ohio.

As the grasslands were plowed under and successional vegetation closed in the open lands, the chickens disappeared. They are now gone from Ohio and Indiana, and only a handful are left in Illinois and Michigan.

For his work, Olson has received the American Motors Conservation award, Pace Maker Award from the National Education Association, and conservationist of the year award by the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation.