

An Appreciation of E. M. Dahlberg

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It is fitting that recognition and honor be accorded E. M. Dahlberg for his contributions to conservation -- particularly to the teaching of conservation -- since he was active in, and pioneered, this work long before it received its present formal place, emphasis and organization in the Wisconsin educational curriculum.

A graduate of Beloit College, and having determined to make teaching his profession, Mr. Dahlberg, and his wife Stella, chose to locate in a community close to wild places, wild rivers and natural surroundings. They chose Ladysmith, in Rusk County, as their home. Here, they have resided since 1917, and here Mr. Dahlberg taught at Ladysmith High School, of which he became and remained Principal until his retirement from teaching. He served at more publicized official conservation work for some years, but it is the imprint of his thought, of his life, and of his example upon the lives of his students, and upon Ladysmith High School itself, which, to my mind, comprise the most enduring achievements of this man and superb teacher: And I believe that, as an educator, it is this recognition that Mr. Dahlberg will most cherish.

It is one thing to build an edifice, to captain an organization, to achieve acclaim because of one's official position (and all honor to those who merit credit for such activity) but it is another thing, less spectacular, certainly less publicized, but of far larger significance, to have influenced the lives of a multitude of people, as Mr. Dahlberg has done; and to have directed so many of them toward conservation and natural history work to such an unusual and successful degree. If memory serves correctly, some three dozen of Mr. Dahlberg's students selected conservation and natural history professions for their life work -- a record I think is unparalleled. Hundreds of other students left his classrooms with a new and sound outlook on the world about them, and they left his classrooms uncommonly well equipped, through his teaching, to better take their places as men and women of responsible character. Character is a key word in any reference to E. M. Dahlberg.

In 1927, Mr. Dahlberg was appointed by Governor Fred Zimmerman to the then brand-new Conservation Commission, and he served as Secretary to this first modern Conservation Commission until 1933, having been reappointed by Governor Walter Kohler, Sr. It was during this term of office that the groundwork for the present Commission and Department organization was built. His service to the state was that of an outstanding man among outstanding men, for in numerous respects this "first Conservation Commission" had a stature and degree of dedication which probably will never be matched. No doubt it is this contribution of Mr. Dahlberg's which is best known; and any adequate perusal of the history of those first years of the new order of things will reveal his dedication, intensity and self-sacrifice.

Mr. Dahlberg is a Charter Member of the CNRA. He served as Vice President in 1952, Secretary for two years, and was on the Council and Advisory Committee for a number of years.

But to return to "E. M. D." the teacher! I can speak with some authority because both Hazel and I were students of his and know first-hand what was gained in his classroom. In the first place, there was no conservation course then, and what Mr. Dahlberg taught on that subject was incorporated into and interwoven throughout his courses in general science, botany and zoology. The word "conservation" was not at that time in over-use, and it had not yet been cheapened to cover whatever might occur and which (because it pertained to hunting, fishing or logging) was so termed. What Mr. Dahlberg taught on this subject of conservation was not natural resources economics, nor cold, hard statistical facts, nor dollar values. Rather, his teaching had a fervor, a zeal, a feeling for wildlife and for natural places. It had emotion, depth and conviction to it. Without such content, the teaching of conservation can be a dull, and even a stupid, exercise in mere language.

More often than not, in his classes, some of us forgot that we were being taught -- new worlds were opened to our eyes, and there was such interest, such good nature, amiability, and a keen sense of humor, as made the period interesting, exciting and eventful. We discovered not only how little we knew about the world, but also that much can be known about it. He taught us that each one of us has responsibilities, as a living being. It was not vague theory, nor remote from us. Learning is awakening. Mr. Dahlberg's superb contribution was in helping to awaken and quicken our interests. One student recalls that she was assigned an outside project of keeping track of the wind for the period of a month, and that through this her own ability to observe was brought into play; and her interest was aroused in something she had taken for granted, or paid no attention to. One thing I would emphasize is that conservation as Mr. Dahlberg taught it was not in a separate compartment. It was foundational to living, and he taught that we segregate it from the rest of life only at our own peril.

Mr. Dahlberg is a man who is not only capable of feeling "righteous indignation" but who has, on many occasions, and when it was not popular to do so, taken a positive stand on issues and in no uncertain terms. Without this capacity, those who wish to lead often do not attract, or long retain, followers. His book, The Conservation of Renewable Resources, which has gone through three editions, illustrates the point, for some people have found portions of it "controversial"; that is, expressing deep feeling. That is one of its virtues, and it does not make the mistake of making conservation appear to be only a subordinate branch of business economics.

Mr. Dahlberg has battled for unspoiled rivers, for virgin wilderness, for natural places, for the preservation of roadside plants, and for compassion toward wildlife. I would like to quote one paragraph from an article that he submitted in 1952 to the then-existing magazine, The Wisconsin Conservationist. The magazine (which has long since perished) rejected his article -- probably on the grounds that it breathed too much fire. This is what Mr. Dahlberg wrote:

"Surely out of the vast natural resources of Wisconsin, we would not have been too much impoverished to have preserved against all artificial intrusion, one whole river with wooded banks and wild unharnessed rapids. A river free of sewage, barbed wire, garbage and beer bottles. Surely we could have spared one township of untamed wilderness without a road or a resort, or any summer cottages; a township where even a

coyote or a wildcat could find sanctuary from the bounty hunters, and a porcupine might escape the professional zeal of the foresters."

In 1917, the Dahlbergs purchased a wild forty acres on the Thornapple River, a tract since enlarged to half a section, and on this the family has spent many wonderful days afield and has found ample opportunity for practicing at first-hand the principles of forest and wildlife conservation which have been part of the Dahlberg Creed.

Mr. Dahlberg took a very active part in the first establishment of School Forests in Wisconsin. He has battled for both state and county parks, and to preserve them from overdevelopment. He has been active in community affairs, serving on the Ladysmith City Council and in other capacities. It is significant that as an avocation and then as a business upon his retirement from teaching, he has worked with flowers, trees and soil in building The Dahlberg Nursery. He has lived an exceedingly useful and busy life. In his own community, throughout the length and breadth of Wisconsin, and in many other states and places, this good influence goes on and will endure.

Mr. Dahlberg is a modest man. As a matter of fact, he shuns publicity and has learned a truth which many another man has not, namely, that the greatest satisfactions in life come from work well done, and which one himself knows has been well done.

This does not change the fact that every human being appreciates recognition. That is the purpose of this award, and of these words of appreciation -- to express formally and tangibly the esteem and friendship we feel for E. M. Dahlberg; to recognize the contributions he has made; to say "Well done!"; and, as citizens of Wisconsin, to say to you, Mr. Dahlberg, "Thank you!"