

George S. Wehrwein, Conservation Prophet

By Austin C. Wehrwein

At The Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame Ceremony, April 20, 2002

We are gathered here today to honor those who have contributed to the cause of Conservation. My father, George S. Wehrwein, made his contribution by teaching and preaching land economics in the classroom, the civic forum and the political arena.

My father died 57 years ago. He is entering the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame at long last thanks to Professor Edward E. Daub who did yeoman's work in reviving his legacy. So I am here, representing the Wehrwein family, to thank Ed Daub and the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame for recognizing my father as a pioneering conservationist. But George Wehrwein was more than a pioneer. He was also in a certain Biblical sense a *prophet*. . . And, broadly stated, his message was that the purpose of Conservation is to benefit posterity. Is there a better one?

His academic soul-mate, Aldo Leopold, a vigorous naturalist and outdoorsman, wrote in his book, *A Sand County Almanac*, that the best definition of a "conservationist" is written not with a pen but an ax. But Leopold added the caveat that "signatures" do of course differ, and "conservationist" can be written with either an ax or with a pen. I don't know whether Leopold had my father in mind. But he was right on the mark: my father was definitely a pen rather than an ax conservationist. He did not fish, neither did he hunt. Or camp. Or sail. Or watch birds. Or chase butterflies in the wild flowers. He didn't garden -- or even mow the lawn -- which of course was my duty anyhow. He did like long walks, which was fortunate because he never learned how to drive a car. He was in sum a *bookman of the old school* -- "*learned and studious*" -- not an outdoorsman ax in hand.

And yet nobody in Wisconsin could have been more down-to-earth, in a most literal sense. He was born and reared on a poor 79-acre Manitowoc County farm that had been settled by his German immigrant grandfather only 19 years before his birth. In this *echt Deutsch* environment he absorbed a land ethic described by Sonya Salamon of the Max Kade Institute at the University of Wisconsin. She said that Wisconsin German settlers held their land as a "sacred trust" for their families, in contrast to English-speaking settlers who used land as a commodity for speculation. Although he was not cut out to be a dirt farmer, my father had a spiritual feeling for the family homestead to which he returned many times and which stayed in Wehrwein hands for 98 years.

From this beginning grew a value system that shaped both academic land theory and land law. He was ahead of his time. For example, he predicted the dangers of what he called the "rural-urban fringe." Or as we say now, "suburban sprawl." And he warned that we can enhance or destroy the world all around us. "Every farm, forest, marsh, lake, stream, village and city is part of our scenery," he said. Or as we say today, "the environment."

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As the leading professor of land economics in his time, he was respected as much for his heart as for his head. One of his former graduate students, Philip M. Raup, professor emeritus at the University of Minnesota College of Agriculture, put it this way:

His effectiveness owed much to his personal qualities. He was a kindly man, and a gifted and patient teacher, who inspired confidence and loyalty in his students. There was about him a touch of the 19th century image of a German "father professor", but completely free of any autocratic tinge. He was "long-sighted", and enriched his teaching and counseling with historical references, reflecting his wide knowledge of literature outside his chosen field.

Let me tell you a bit about his "wide knowledge." It embraced many things about economics and all manner of other things. He was one of those avid Gilbert and Sullivan fans. And he collected the programs from all the plays of any kind that he had seen since 1903. He had piles of clippings and reference materials and kept stacks of scrapbooks on subjects ranging from the LaFollette Progressive movement to art and architecture. Naturally, he had a special interest in Frank Lloyd Wright, who still was strutting around Madison and Spring Green in person .

Although he never "navigated " anything bigger than a leaky wooden rowboat, he loved everything about ships and the sea as only an armchair sailor can -- and he made for me a huge "boat book" that inspired my own slightly more active interest in boats. And, of course, he was an erudite collector of books -- many in his large library were old and rare. I think that he was a historian at heart. Certainly history informed his economics.

One of the most revealing aspects of his intellect and personality was his love for extensive research of Biblical history. Although he was born into the Lutheran church in Manitowoc and became a Congregationalist in Madison his *nonsectarian* research was concerned with the *economic* background of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. He shared his popular Bible lectures with a radio audience and several adult Bible study groups around Madison and at one time with students at a religious seminary in Evanston, Ill. He was not a preacher, but rather a theologian -- and theologians are historians under the skin.

Gerald Vaughn raised a majestic banner in his 1999 article on the religious roots of the Wehrwein--Leopold views of property rights and America's future land use and conservation. Vaughn's title for his article was nothing less than, "The Sovereignty of God." Now, my father would have found that banner too glorious. But Vaughn got it right: in more earthy language, my father *was* talking about God as the ultimate landlord. And the duties that entails.

His thesis was that the Old Testament and its Prophets grew out of the soil. He said, "Strong, simple men coming from farms and the wilderness became fearless prophets who defied kings and priests to proclaim Jehovah as the one God of all nations." He said that Leviticus 25 recognizes private property in land but also imposes limits. Biblical property rights are not absolute, as the possibility for repossession indicates. But on "possession" rides profound obligation.

"In fact," he wrote, "it is proclaimed that Jehovah is the ultimate owner of all land and men hold possession as tenants at his pleasure. 'The land shall not be sold forever; for the land is Mine, for ye are strangers and sojourners with Me.' "
[Lev.25: 23]

Turning to the Lord's Prayer in the New Testament, my father took the words, "*Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven,*" to mean our neighborhoods should be clean and wholesome wards in the City of God. As some modern churchmen have put it, conservation is "caring for creation." One of the reasons Wehrwein and Leopold worked so well together is that they shared this Bible-based feeling for land ethics. Leopold wrote: ". . . thinkers since the days of Ezekiel and Isaiah have asserted that the despoliation of land is not only inexpedient but wrong." All that said, I must add that to my knowledge my father *never* injected religion into his university class room –except, I'd venture, as the unstated implied moral basis for farsighted and virtuous land use.

Half a century ago my father was among the first economists to find common ground with creative conservationists, who like Leopold were clearing the way for *the modern universal ecological movement*.

They were not only present at the creation – they were creators !

Sixty-one years ago my father said that the land economist must not only consider human institutions but also have some understanding of ecological relationships and the human impact on environment. Few, even in Texas, would dissent to that rubric today. But in 1941, Bible-based or not, it was a new challenge. Then, most land owners claimed a God-given right to do as they pleased on -- and to -- their plot. If they didn't cite God for this claim they relied on Adam Smith.

But back then George Wehrwein, speaking as Adam's fellow economist, argued that classical self-interest philosophy [today's "free market"] must yield to the "conservational utilization of natural resources."

The marketplace may indeed be magic -- but there's more magic in nature's places !

[Minor revisions were made after the address was given. None changed the content]