

**INDUCTION CEREMONIES FOR
ROBERT S. ELLARSON
INTO THE WISCONSIN CONSERVATION HALL OF FAME
APRIL 20, 1996
SENTRY THEATER, STEVENS POINT, WI**

My name is Bob Ruff. For the past 26 years, I have served as Professor and Extension Wildlife Specialist in the Department of Wildlife Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and for the last 10 of those years, I have served as Department Chair. That department was the home department of Aldo Leopold, the recognized Father of Wildlife Conservation and who, along with John Muir, was the first to be inducted into this the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame. It was also the academic home of Robert S. Ellarson, the last student accepted by Leopold for graduate studies and one of today's inductees into the very same Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame. Bob was my mentor, close friend, colleague, and important sounding board on matters of professional and personal importance. I am pleased and honored to present just a few of the accomplishments that qualify him for induction into this very prestigious group of individuals who have helped make Wisconsin a leader in conservation thought and action.

Bob Ellarson spent his entire professional career in the Department of Wildlife Ecology, first as a graduate student, then as an instructor, then as

professor and Extension Wildlife Specialist, and finally as professor emeritus. That departmental career, incidentally, spanned 47 years; 32 as an official employee and 15 as an emeritus faculty.

When I joined the faculty as Extension Wildlife Specialist upon my arrival in Wisconsin in 1970, Bob Ellarson quietly assumed the role as my mentor; in fact, his entire family befriended me and my family. For the next decade, Bob and I had occasion to travel various areas of the state and Nation as we either conducted or participated in workshops, field days, and professional conferences. And for 18 years prior to Bob's passing in 1993, I was also a guest on his Iowa County property during the gun deer season. His wife and sons extend me that privilege even to this day.

Before detailing the specific teaching accomplishments for which he is being recognized I wanted to share with you his other side; that of practitioner, and land steward. Many of you know that Bob owned a 200-acre farm in Iowa County. He used some of the land for cultivated crops, but mostly it produced fine oak timber, firewood, fruits, nuts, mushrooms, and of course, a crop of wildlife. And in the tradition of Aldo Leopold, he took some of the wildlife crop from the land for utilitarian purposes, but never to excess. Those many hunting seasons brought us close together for at least a few days each year, and I will

always cherish those moments of wandering the Iowa County farm with Bob and his "boys" as we called his sons, Scott and Bruce. In reality, the "boys" towered over both of us. And in the background, there was Bob's wife Jean, trying to remain calm as we converted her year-around home into a seasonal hunting camp! Over the years, I came to realize that it was not the act of hunting per se that sparked significant memories; rather, I remember the excitement of returning to the house each evening to see what the day had yielded in deer and deer stories alike. Bob was always there to greet us as we emerged from the woods, carefully skidding our harvest back to camp. He invariably inspected each animal as it was hung to cool, and regardless of its appearance or condition, he would step back and declare that each was a fine animal. They were indeed! I relished the look of deep satisfaction in his eyes that the management efforts on his woodland and cropland acreages consistently paid off with an abundant harvest of deer, turkeys, grouse, squirrels, fish and assorted furbearers. His woodpile was a special source of pride.

Bob Ellarson was born on March 17, 1916 in Bay View, an Irish/Polish enclave on the southeast side of Milwaukee. He was truly a child of the Great Depression. After graduation from Bay View High School, he worked a placer gold mine with his father and uncle on the Salmon River in central Idaho in

1934-35. That venture was not economically profitable, but it did pay handsome dividends later for Bob and for the citizens of Wisconsin. Conducted in the heart of some of the most pristine and beautiful wilderness of the time, that year of mining in the West created a biologic mindset in Bob that was to guide him in a lifelong pursuit to understand the workings of nature and his place in the greater scheme of things. Already smitten with a love of plants, apparently initiated by his mother, Bob longed for a career in the out-of-doors. After 4 years as a salesman and clerk with a manufacturing firm in Milwaukee, he enrolled as an undergraduate in the College of Agriculture in Madison where he began studies toward his baccalaureate degree in Soils. While in school, he worked as a Conservation Aide (1943-44) and then as an Engineering Aide with the U.S. Soil Conservation Service (1945-46). Bob received his B.S. at the UW-Madison in January, 1946, but it was during the previous fall of 1945 that he was to hear of Aldo Leopold for the first time. At the urging of a friend, he sat in on one of Leopold's Wildlife 118 lectures. Ellarson was "absolutely enthralled" by the presentation, met with Leopold immediately after class, and subsequently was invited to Leopold's office at 424 University Farm Place to discuss his future. Bob explained his plans to enroll in Botany for a graduate degree in spring, 1946; nonetheless, Leopold invited him to attend regular seminars in Wildlife

Management that spring and subsequent fall. Bob also enrolled in Leopold's Wildlife 118 course in the fall of 1946, and with that, came a visit to Leopold's shack in the spring of 1947. Following a tour of the property, and some industrious work planting trees, Leopold noticed Ellarson dutifully cleaning his own and the shovels of other students who had abandoned their tools outside the shack in their haste for rest and lunch. Leopold commented that he appreciated a person who took care of his tools; and Bob obviously appreciated the comment as he recalled it to me on several occasions over the years.

Bob reveled in a reading and discussion seminar conducted by Leopold that year as well, and upon receiving his M.S. in Botany in spring 1947, he decided that he would like to do graduate work in the Wildlife Management Department. He visited Leopold in August to formulate a plan. Leopold expressed the need for someone specially trained to inform the public of recent advances in wildlife management; in other words, Extension work. There were no wildlife specialists in the Extension Service at the time, but Bob was enamored with the concept and began graduate work with Leopold in the fall of 1947. Ellarson trapped and banded pheasants at the UW-Arboretum the winter of 1947-48, and then the ultimate in tragedies occurred in the spring of 1948. Aldo Leopold died while fighting a grass fire near his beloved shack, and Bob Ellarson, Leopold's last

student, was “. . . deprived of the opportunity to work closely with a person I deeply admired.” Bob went on to study the status of Oldsquaw ducks wintering on Lake Michigan, and received his Ph.D. in Wildlife Management/Botany in 1956.

Prior to that, he served as Instructor in the Department of Wildlife Management from 1950 to 1956, and then became the state’s first Extension Wildlife Specialist at the rank of Assistant Professor in 1956, just as Leopold had encouraged him nearly a decade earlier. For the next 22 years, Bob Ellarson took his charge seriously, and his message of conservation and land stewardship was delivered throughout Wisconsin to youth and adults alike.

A principal vehicle he used to spread the conservation message was the “Wisconsin School of the Air” on the University of Wisconsin radio station, WHA. Begun in 1956, some additional details of which you will hear from Bob Ellarson, this program was entitled “Wonderful World of Nature.” It typically began with the now celebrated words of, “Good morning, boys and girls.” Those 5 words endeared Bob Ellarson in the hearts and minds of 30 thousand young people each Monday morning for 26 years, extending even beyond his retirement. Today, I cannot begin to describe for you the excitement those words

and Bob's resonant voice generated among students who were waiting for the message that followed; I suppose you just had to be there.

Subject matter dealt with all aspects of the living environment, from lichens to oak trees and waterfowl to small mammals. Understandable and accurate information were the hallmarks of a fascinating program that offered a foundation for shaping attitudes about conservation among the young and for their heightened environmental awareness. As part of this program, he developed a teachers' manual to help teachers who were not sufficiently informed in the natural sciences. Revised and modified each year to keep pace with social and environmental change, the manual allowed teachers to conduct intelligent discussions with students having heard the Wonderful World of Nature over the air. Direct correspondence with young people who wrote to him concerning the program and related matters was also instrumental in shaping their ecological attitudes and conscience. Throughout, Ellarson relied almost exclusively upon his own intellectual resources for program development, and the Wonderful World of Nature became synonymous with his name. Since its inception, the program format has been adopted in other states and its impacts have now become national in scope. In the context of the time, this program and Bob's

abilities in educating people on new subject matter on a weekly basis were truly remarkable achievements.

In addition to his radio work, he made a series of 15 television programs for in-school use and served as head of wildlife project work for state 4-H clubs. His 4-H conservation camps and tours for members and leaders enjoyed heavy attendance each year at Camp Upham Woods in south-central Wisconsin. Emphasis was placed on the need for a land ethic among all who enjoyed the natural world, and he encouraged their active involvement in the out-of-doors where events could be experienced firsthand. Indeed, over the years Bob Ellarson played a lead role in the development of hiking trails, camping and recreational facilities, meeting and lodging accommodations, and the creation of a full-time naturalist position at Camp Upham Woods. The camp, now referred to as the Upham Woods Environmental Education Center, is now recognized as one of the finest of its kind anywhere, due largely to Ellarson's efforts and many contributions. Following retirement in 1978, he was still called upon for his advice and assistance in the development of new camp programs and continued with his School of the Air program until 1981.

Professor Ellarson's contributions in environmental education have also been felt among the numerous committees which he has actively advised

throughout his career. The Wisconsin Recreational Laboratory Association, the University of Wisconsin Arboretum Committee, University Experimental Farms Committee, Pesticide Use Committee, Conservation Curriculum Committee of the State Department of Public Instruction, UW Subcommittee on Integrated Conservation Education, and several wildlife-related subcommittees of the Natural Resources Council of State Agencies in Wisconsin all benefitted from Bob's unique expertise in the fields of plant ecology, soil and water management, wildlife ecology and environmental education. These were all voluntary or solicited contributions because of his broad knowledge base. His membership on assigned University committees was equally as extensive and the products of his efforts are living testimonials of his environmental concerns. Wisconsin now enjoys a roadside management program, wildlife management demonstration areas on experimental farms, native prairie establishments on private and public properties, improved and expanded facilities at the University of Wisconsin Arboretum, nature trails and wildlife plantings at state youth camps and school forests, and improved woodland management on private forests. The latter constituted a clientele group with which Ellarson worked closely for more than two decades in the form of field days and seminars throughout Wisconsin. The state's fish and wildlife resources and its citizenry are the richer for it.

The extraordinary enthusiasm and sincere dedication with which Bob Ellarson approached his work distinguishes his many contributions from those which are simply expected of any employee in public service. He invariably gave an extra measure in carrying the natural resource message to young people and to the training of teachers in the area of conservation. The importance of inspiring and molding the minds of young people in the world of ecology and natural history cannot be overemphasized. A child given the proper yardsticks will be able to make wise value judgements as an adult. It is in this area of achievement that Professor Ellarson especially excelled.

Recognition of his hard work and successes came from many fronts:

- 1963 - First Award for Excellence from the Institute for Education for Radio - presented to WHA Station (Wisconsin School of the Air Programming) for "Wonderful World of Nature" prepared and presented by R. S. Ellarson
- 1966 - Achievement Award from the Wisconsin Chapter of the Soil Conservation Society of America
- 1966 - Conservation Education Award from the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation in cooperation

with the National Wildlife Federation and the
Sears Roebuck Foundation for outstanding
contributions to the wise use and management of
the Nation's natural resources

- 1967 - Conservation Education Award presented by The
Wildlife Society, Washington, D.C.
- 1975 - The Gordon MacQuarrie Award ". . . for telling
the conservation story" presented by the
Wisconsin Natural Resources Foundation

In March of 1993, when I received word that Bob Ellarson had passed away, I retrieved his personnel file and thumbed through it for a little better sense of the man, and perhaps for a little security at a very sad time. On the very top of the stack of papers that served to chronicle his professional life was a note to his close friend and then Chair of the Department, Bob McCabe. It was dated January 9, 1978 and it read, "Dear Bob, This letter is to inform you of my intent to retire from my present position in the Department of Wildlife Ecology on August 31, 1978. Sincerely yours, Robert S. Ellarson, Professor of Wildlife Ecology." Short, simple, no fanfare, no hoopla . . . this was a hallmark of Bob Ellarson. Hard work,

dedication, sensitivity to people and his profession . . . no attempt to draw attention to himself and no need to put on airs.

The last page in the folder was a carbon copy of a letter from Aldo Leopold to the UW-Madison registrar. It was written in support of Bob Ellarson's application for a scholarship while pursuing his M.S. degree in Botany. Leopold's assessment of Ellarson read in part, "I regard him as a student of exceptional merit as to intellectual capacity, personality, and character. I recommend him very highly for your consideration." Following the typed copy was a penned postscript, "I have been especially impressed of late by his ability to absorb, analyze, and apply a wide range of scientific literature."

Needless to say, Bob Ellarson "especially impressed" many individuals in his lifetime in addition to Aldo Leopold. It is fitting that he now joins his mentor of nearly 50 years ago in this Hall of Fame. I believe both are very proud at this moment. Thank you.

Presented by Robert L. Ruff
Sentry Theater, Stevens Point, WI
April 22, 1996

On the occasion of induction ceremonies for Robert S. Ellarson into the
Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame