

Robert Ellarson

I can't tell you all how proud my family and I are to be here today honoring the life's work of my father . I would especially like to thank the WI Conservation Hall of Fame for recognizing dads contributions. I was hoping to just say a few things about dad on a personal level.

First of all any ceremony honoring dad must mention his mother Millie. Her love of nature was as contagious as dads. She had a house and gardens filled with plants. As I recall African violets were her favorite specialty. She knew the latin name of each plant in her gardens, even the weeds. I am quite sure that it was her love of plants and indeed all other living things in the natural world that inspired dad to go on to college and pursue an education first in soil science then botany and finally in wildlife ecology under his close friend and mentor Bob McCabe.

I feel lucky to have been raised by such a patient teacher . At the time I took for granted the weekly sessions at the dining room table after the dishes were cleared away when he and mom would sit down and flesh out the next weeks installment of Wonderful World of Nature. Dad providing the knowledge and ideas, with mom taking it all down in shorthand and kicking in here and there with punctuation....

One of my earliest memories of dad is of tagging along on his weekly bluebird

house checks through the UW Arboretum. I remember one spring day in particular on the Curtis Prairie when he amazed me with his intimate familiarity with all the asparagus patches, he loved creamed asparagus... Dads ashes are now scattered by one of those asparagus patches.

All through our childhood and teen years dad influenced us. He taught us about us about the prairies and oak savannas that once nearly covered southern Wisconsin. (Some of you are probably familiar with the vegetation map he drew up of pre-settlement Dane Co. from early survey records while doing research for his masters thesis.) He taught us how the fires allowed the prairies to thrive. A lesson that nearly cost our neighbors their wood lot when my brother Scott and I decided to "kill some brush" one windy spring day back in about 1969. I don't remember dad being that upset. Instead, when the flames were out he explained why our fire had gotten out of control and how it would affect the area it had scorched. Then, over the years he pointed out the continuing effects of the fire.

This incident and a lifetime of others took place on a piece of land very dear to dad. "The farm" as we call it; a couple hundred acres of steep rocky woods in northeast Iowa Co. that mom and dad bought back in 1965. As I recall it took him a while to convince mom they could afford the place. Today it would be a down payment on a new car.

Growing up we spent nearly every weekend and vacation at the farm. It

provided a fantastic training ground for us boys and the various friends that accompanied us. There, dad taught us to identify trees, wildflowers, shrubs, birds, animals, and the relationships between them. He taught us forest management, we made maple syrup, caught fish in the pond, and learned to hunt among other things, squirrels. Taking care to only shoot at those animals we could kill instantly with a shot to the head from our 22 rifles.

The whole time we had dad to guide the way for us; always the teacher, making sure that we knew the reasons to cut the box elder that shaded the red oak, and plant the walnut seedlings we had started in the garden at the heel of a north slope. Those walnuts are growing straight and tall now and every spring we go out to prune them as dad taught us. We learned to leave woodpecker trees when scouring the woods for dead firewood, build brush piles, and promote diversity in the forest.

Dad encouraged us to take only what we needed from the land and always give it back something in return. He taught us to be observers, learning from our natural surroundings which led to a concern and respect for the land.

Dad spent a lot of time away from home when we were growing up. He taught at 4H camps, other youth groups, landowner groups, sportsmen s clubs, really wherever his job as an extension professor led him. Often he could be found working with various conservation groups at Upham Woods, a beautiful outdoor

education facility just north of the Dells on the Wisconsin river. Last fall I had the pleasure to be part of such a group there and met a number of people who had known dad. It was a wonderful event for me. I was excited to be a part of such a dynamic group with similar interests to mine and very proud because I felt dad's shadow everywhere. I feel that way today.

I think that what made dad unique was his extensive traveling within the state and his broad base of education. With a bachelors degree in soils, a masters in botany and a PHD in wildlife ecology he could speak just as knowledgeably on sand barren ecology in northwest WI as he could about about the tall grass prairie in Rock county. I remember my brother and I would try to stump him on the locations of small towns we encountered in our travels across the state or the routes leading to them. We never could.

A few years ago dad and I took a special father /son trip together. It was to be a spring steelheading trip to the tributaries of lake Michigan. I had been doing a lot of steelheading and was quite proud of my grasp of the fishing holes from Door Co to Racine. Well, the rainbows really weren't running, we did pick up a few nice browns out of the lake, but did I ever get a lesson on eastern WI ecology. I was amazed by dad's mental road map. All the secluded back road places I'd ever been he was not only familiar with he also knew the history of the ecosystems going back many years. He kept saying "turn here, there's a great wildflower wood lot two

miles down" or "take a right at the next intersection an old friend of mine has the best patch of snow trilliums in the state down that road." By the way we finally did find a nice stretch of river with a beautiful pair of rainbows finning over a gravel bar. I got all excited and tried to maneuver dad into good casting position but he hesitated. I wanted him to hook a steelhead in the worst way. Instead he just watched them for a while admiring them in the water and said "no, I don't want to disturb them they just look too peaceful." After a long while we got back in the car and drove home leaving the fish to spawn and the wildflowers to bloom.

Dad would have been very honored indeed to receive this award from you.

On his behalf thank you very much.

Testimonial

Bruce Ellerson

4-20-96

Conservation Hall ? Jones