

William J.P. Aberg
1889-1968

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Conservation cannot afford to enter the political arena as a candidate or partisan.”

--William J.P. Aberg

A front page story in the Wisconsin State Journal of Tuesday, March 19, 1968, announced "Aberg, Conservation Pioneer, Dies."

It credited the native of Sweden with participating in the formulation of two major pieces of legislation affecting Wisconsin's early conservation efforts.

"Mr. Aberg joined with a group of pioneer conservationists, including the late Aldo Leopold, University of Wisconsin conservation leader, to forge the Conservation Act of 1927, which created the Conservation Commission form of resource management," the newspaper said.

Aberg also aided in the construction of the state's forest crop law, which provided an incentive to growers for the perpetual continuation of timber growth and harvesting, the newspaper said.

Like several other early conservationists in Wisconsin, Aberg must have performed his conservation duties out of love. He was a successful Madison attorney and active in civic circles, although he was described as a private man. Conservation, though, received a great deal of his attention.

A native of Sweden, he came to the Shell Lake area with his family when he was a child. As a schoolboy in Shell Lake, he earned 9 cents an hour, working an 11-hour day for the Shell Lake Lumber Co., according to his obituary.

After graduating from high school, he worked three years on the Mesabi Iron Range in the Upper Peninsula before attending university in Madison, where he received his bachelor's and law degrees. He became a partner in a Madison law firm and built a strong reputation in his chosen field.

But as the newspaper noted, "his origins in Sweden and northern Wisconsin provide the backdrop to a life dominated by love of nature."

That would steer him to early involvement with the Izaak Walton League both at the district, state and national level. He was also a founder and member of the National Wildlife Federation.

"An enthusiastic fisherman, he has served as chairman of the national executive board of the Izaak Walton League and has been especially active in the conservation work of that body," noted the book "Southwestern Wisconsin A History of Old Crawford County."

The Wisconsin Division of the Izaak Walton League was one of the most influential in the nation, noted Leopold biographer Curt Meine.

The League in Wisconsin pushed hard for removal of the state conservation administration "from arbitrary political considerations," wrote Meine.

"Conservation policy, requiring above all continuity, skill and autonomy, was dictated by the political whims of every new governor and legislature," Meine wrote.

"Leopold and Bill Aberg, the legal brain of the IWL, were assigned to the task" of coming up with a new system. "Aberg complemented Leopold well. An intense, private man, he had an insider's understanding of Wisconsin's politics."

The effort to introduce reforms played a big role in the 1926 elections. Conservationists had gathered political clout, and one candidate, Republican Fred Zimmerman, embraced the program forwarded by the Ikes. He was elected, although he would later disappoint the conservation constituency by failing to keep a promise about who to appoint to the Conservation Commission. He told conservationists he would consider a list of 20 applicants they prepared, but after being elected, ignored that list and gave the positions out to pay political dues. The six men he nominated "didn't know a carp from a herring," said one conservationist. Actually, one nominee, Ladysmith educator and conservationist E.M. Dahlberg, was quite good at identifying species.

Meine noted that Aberg and Leopold worked through several drafts of the new conservation legislation before it was introduced in the Wisconsin Senate. National conservation figure Gifford Pinchot was brought in to speak in support. The new law was passed and signed by the governor in July 1927.

Clearly, Aberg was a chief architect of the new law, which set up a Commission comprised of unpaid citizens to oversee the Conservation Department. This system remained in place until 1968. The Aberg-Leopold alliance would continue after both men were named to the Conservation Commission. Aberg served on the Conservation Commission from 1939-51. He was elected chairman in 1943, and served until 1946.

Leopold created controversy across the state when he suggested as a commissioner that the northern deer herd had grown too large and that it was denuding forest undergrowth. More than once, Aberg joined him in the minority on votes to control the herd.

Aberg was active in Republican politics, but he remained steadfast in his conviction that politics and conservation didn't mix.

Meine quotes from a letter Aberg wrote to the editor of the Milwaukee Journal in 1942: "Individuals may come and go, but the conservation program, which such deviations of time, experience and learning may necessitate, must go on without interruption... Conservation cannot afford to enter the political arena as a candidate or partisan."

His loyalty to an independent Conservation Department predictably earned Aberg the admiration of the conservation community. He received numerous honors late in his career, including the dedication of the Conservation Department's Area Headquarters in Spooner in his honor in 1964.

He is also credited with being among a group that fought for restoration of the Horicon Marsh as a wildlife area and the establishment of several national forest areas in the state.

Indeed, Horicon Marsh purchases were highlighted in a timeline of Conservation Commission accomplishments in 1940, a couple of years after he had been named to the commission.

Like several other key conservation figures of his time, William J.P. Aberg could be called an "enlightened citizen." He had an active career outside of conservation, and other civic and public service duties, too. For instance, he was called upon during World War I to be a representative to Sweden of the War Trade Board. His native country was neutral in the war. In 1940, he would lead a fund drive to raise money for Finnish War relief.

But conservation was clearly a major love. He devoted countless hours to this love of the outdoors and his desire to see it protected, and he used his skills as an attorney to help fashion some of Wisconsin's most important conservation legislation.

WILLIAM J.P. ABERG

1889-1968

BIRTH: Jan. 31, 1889, in province of Smaland, Sweden, to John and Johanna Aberg.

DEATH: March 18, 1968, in Madison, Wis.

EDUCATION: Grammar and high school in Shell Lake, Wis. Bachelor's degree, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1912. Law degree, UW-Madison, 1914.

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

Practiced law throughout his life in Madison area. Began his practice on June 13, 1913, was partner in Sanborn, Blake & Aberg firm.

A native of Sweden, he was selected a representative to Sweden of the War Trade Board, serving in 1918-19 by appointment of Secretary of State Lansing. He was designated a special assistant to the department of state, headquartered at Stockholm. Duties were in the administration of trade treaty between Sweden and allied powers. Sweden had declared its neutrality in 1914.

Led drive in 1940 to raise \$6,000 for Finnish War relief.

Among a group of conservationists who pushed for establishment of Wisconsin Conservation Commission.

Served on Conservation Commission from 1939-51. Elected chairman in 1943, served until 1946.

Instrumental in restoration of Horicon Marsh.

Instrumental in establishment of several national forest areas in Wisconsin.

Member of Izaak Walton League. State Division President 1927-29 (two-year term). Served as chairman of national executive board of the League. Was active in Izaak Walton League throughout his life. Served as a Chapter Director in 1948.

Founder (1936) and Director of National Wildlife Federation.

Honored July 5, 1951, by Wisconsin Conservation Commission and Conservation Department members at testimonial dinner.

Honored by Wisconsin Conservation Congress in 1951.

Conservation Department Area Headquarters in Spooner dedicated in his honor in 1964, plaque presented "in recognition of unselfish service to conservation in Wisconsin."

Lifelong friend, colleague and fishing and hunting partner of Aldo Leopold.