

George Becker

Those who know George Becker will say with conviction that he was a thorough and careful scientist and a dedicated teacher. Those who know him will say with similar conviction that he was outspoken and drawn to controversy. George Becker wasn't afraid to step out of the crowd and speak his mind, whether the topic was science, religion or social issues such as birth control.

This blend of outspoken activist, scholar, teacher and scientist (he was also an accomplished musician) has made for an interesting man, one who left several legacies.

Becker is best known for his monumental book, "Fishes of Wisconsin," first published in 1973 by the University of Wisconsin Press. The 1,052-page volume covered 157 fish species and was the first of its kind for the state and one of the first such comprehensive works in the nation. A second limited edition was recently published at Becker's urging. Becker first conceived of the idea in the 1940s. The book started as a family project that included many fish seining outings with his sons Kenneth, Dale and David. Later, classes from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point participated. Becker taught biology there from 1957-79, earning professor emeritus status, among other accolades.

Born Feb. 26, 1917, in Milwaukee, to European immigrants Peter and Theresa Becker, George Becker spent his childhood there, where his father worked as a tailor. His education included a degree from Washington High School, and an undergraduate degree from Downer College, both in Milwaukee. He also obtained master's degrees in German philology (literary study) and science, with emphases in both zoology and botany. He earned a Ph.D. later in life at UW-Madison.

Straddling the study of languages and the sciences during his education, Becker said that auditing a class at UW-Madison taught by Aldo Leopold finally convinced him to follow science as a profession.

Becker was married to the former Sylvia Helen Klenk in Milwaukee in 1941, but was soon inducted into the Army and served during wartime with the Army Signal Corps. He earned the rank of master sergeant, and his duties included supervised the first radio stations serving Australia, New Guinea and the Philippines.

Postwar stints in teaching and administering at several Wisconsin high schools led to a job as professor of biology and chief ichthyologist at the University of Wisconsin-

Stevens Point. There he would raise his family, challenge his students, author scholarly and popular works and raise cane about social and environmental issues. During his career, he was named the school's second recipient of the Excellence in Teaching Award. At career's end, he was named professor emeritus.

Becker was well known as an advocate for environmental cleanup in an era when it was sorely needed but often resisted by politicians and business leaders. The late John Anderson, who headed the UW-Stevens Point News and Information Bureau in the 1970s and 1980s, wrote this of Becker upon the professor's retirement in 1979: "Particularly familiar with the levels of pollution in the Wisconsin River, which flows through the community in which he lives, Becker voiced some of the early concerns about the problem and the need for massive cleanup efforts."

Becker served as president of the Citizens Natural Resources Association of Wisconsin (CNRA) from 1972-74. He interested fellow members of this activist organization in his concerns, and that led to creation of the Wisconsin River Restoration Committee, which he chaired.

In that role, Becker proposed a sanitary authority for the entire Wisconsin River Valley. His plan involved a huge pipeline that would carry liquid and solid wastes to a treatment plant, presumably at Prairie du Chien, and another pipeline to haul the cleaned water back upstream. He posited that revenues could be generated by extracting chemicals.

"The idea became known as 'George's Pipe Dream,' and he was sometimes chided for taking a pie in the sky approach to the cleanup effort," Anderson wrote. "But some leaders in the State Medical Society weren't among the cynics and provided him with a grant to construct a 15-foot diorama that illustrated the recycling system." The system itself was never built, but the concept of ringing large bodies of water with sewage systems was put successfully into practice at Shawano Lake and the Waupaca Chain O' Lakes in Wisconsin.

Becker recently authored his own recollection of those times. "The 1960s were frustrating times for those of us who cared about the lakes and rivers in Wisconsin," he wrote in a 2001 publication, "CNRA, The First 50 Years."

While working and living in Stevens Point, “the Wisconsin River was at our doorstep,” he said in his essay. “We could see the decline in water quality during the fifties and sixties. The river was brown and lacked its former clarity. It had a terrible odor. Massive fish kills were occurring, including a remnant sturgeon population... We were turning the river into a sewer, and I knew something had to be done.”

Becker recounted how CNRA created a Water Pollution Fund, offering \$1 trial memberships with the idea of raising funds to conduct a pilot study of the Wisconsin River. Response was gratifying, he said. The message was getting out.

The Wisconsin River Restoration Committee was determined to “spread the word up and down the Wisconsin River Valley, from Lac Vieux Desert to Prairie du Chien, that this great valley must be a model of cleanliness,” Becker recalled in the CNRA essay. The group testified at hearings and submitted numerous resolutions and petitions to various branches of government to clean up the river. In 1972, with funds from CNRA, the committee published “Stream of a Thousand Isles: The Wisconsin River: Its History and a Plan for Restoration.” The report was widely distributed. Sylvia Becker wrote a poetic introduction about a beloved resource now polluted beyond belief.

The report also asked the U.S. attorney for the Western District of Wisconsin to take action against nine major industries to force them to desist from dumping harmful waste into the Wisconsin River. One industry was fined \$1,000, and CNRA received \$250 of that money to promote environmental quality.

The report also contained “George’s Pipe Dream.”

“I have a 1972 letter from Al Berkman, CNRA’s president at that time, confirming CNRA’s willingness to publish this report. In the letter, Al says, ‘George’s Pipe Dream may not come true, per se, but something akin to it will,’ ” Becker recalled.

Sometimes men live to see their dreams, or variations of them, come true. Becker happily noted that in his 2001 essay. “I guess Al was right, because everybody I talk to now says the Wisconsin River is in its best shape in memory. Shortly after the report was published, the national 1972 Clean Water Act set the goal that all waters were to be swimmable and fishable by 1983.” He noted that “just as I recommended new state-of-the-art treatment plants, so too most municipalities eventually had new plants, and all

industries updated their treatment methods to meet the requirements of their legally assigned discharge permits.”

Becker not only tangled with polluters, but also with the agency charged with fighting pollution: the Department of Natural Resources.

Longtime Stevens Point Journal Editor George Rogers, himself an ardent conservationist, nominated Becker for the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame. In his nomination, Rogers noted: “Becker was a fierce opponent of a Department of Natural Resources plan in 1971 to chemically treat the entire Tomorrow-Waupaca River basin to eliminate a rough fish (a term he dislikes) and improve conditions for trout. He contended it was too drastic a solution and would, among other things, wipe out rare species. He lost the battle and the project was carried out, but in time the DNR stopped using the technique in streams.”

Rogers noted that Becker was also an outspoken opponent of unchecked population growth and fought the use of nuclear power. No solutions had been found, he noted, to the disposition of nuclear wastes. “In 1976 he and his wife Sylvia installed a solar furnace in their Stevens Point home, saying ‘We’ve done some acting after a lot of talking,’ ” Rogers wrote.

“Fishes of Wisconsin” came about, Rogers noted, “because he recognized the state lacked an up-to-date work on the subject. The chemical treatment issue and the apparent lack of interest in the ongoing loss of fish species also stimulated him to write.” Becker studied the literature, worked in the laboratory and spent summers seining the state’s waters. Rogers wrote: “The seining was a family project because there was no money for that sort of thing.”

Becker recalled those outings fondly in a Conservation Hall of Fame telephone interview from his home in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. “If it weren’t for my sons, I would never have been able to make it. I had a home-raised team for getting this under way. It was a great thing for me to be able to get the boys into it. They appreciate it, too,” he said.

Later, his biology students at UW-SP carried out surveys on weekends.

The students seldom even received gas mileage, but Becker recalled, "They considered it the highlight of the course." When they found something unusual, "there were a lot of happy people, including the instructor."

The writing itself took three years, and the result was a book detailing the status, distribution, habitat and biology of the state's fish species. He enlivened it with anecdotes and even some small fishing tips, making it readable for the fisherman and the scholar. "To do this, he had to overcome some opposition from the publisher," Rogers noted.

UW-SP's Anderson noted another accomplishment for the man who studied fish. "...the Stevens Point professor is credited with a significant finding: how to pinpoint age and growth of the creatures, which is important in determining breeding potential. He developed a system of investigating scales and growth rings in them to obtain the data."

At home in Stevens Point, Becker was outspoken on issues like birth control, to the point of criticizing Roman Catholic teachings against birth control while living in a heavily-Catholic community.

"Procreative passions must be controlled so we can maintain our present population where it is now and move on to improve our life – otherwise we're stacking the deck against ourselves," he told Anderson.

He also held strong opinions on an array of other social topics and was unafraid to voice them.

Colleague Charles Long, another longtime biologist at UW-Stevens Point, now retired, summed up his colleague this way:

"He is a remarkable intellect, naturalist, professor and scientist. Although thorough and careful by nature, he often was involved in controversial issues...He spoke fluent German, knew as much about music as any biologist I ever knew and was chosen by the students as the outstanding teacher at UW-Stevens Point."

One such student was Michael Dombeck, who first encountered Becker as an undergraduate at UW-Stevens Point. Dombeck would later go on to serve as acting director of the Bureau of Land Management and Chief of the U.S. Forest Service in the Clinton Administration. Now pioneer professor of global environmental management at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and UW System Fellow of Global Conservation, Dombeck credits Becker for instilling in him an interest in natural

resources and resource issues. He noted that while chief of the Forest Service, he took regular calls from Becker, who felt free to offer both advice and encouragement.

George Charles Becker
1917-

BIRTH: Feb., 26, 1917, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, son of Peter and Theresa Becker.

EDUCATION: Washington High School, Milwaukee.

Bachelor's degree, Downer College, Milwaukee.

Master's degrees in German philology and science (zoology and botany), University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Ph.D, UW-Madison.

MILITARY SERVICE: Inducted 1942, master sergeant, U.S. Army, in charge of first radio stations serving Australia, New Guinea, Philippines.

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

EDUCATOR

Teacher, Port Edwards High School, Wisconsin.

Principal, Clintonville High School, Wisconsin.

Teacher, West Division High School, Madison (modern languages, Greek during noon hours).

Professor of biology, ichthyologist, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, 1957-79.

AWARDS

UW-Stevens Point Excellence in Teaching, second recipient in institution's history.

Professor Emeritus, UW-Stevens Point.

Namesake of UW-Stevens Point's vast fish collection.

AUTHOR

Author, "Illustrated Key to the Minnows of Wisconsin," with Tom R. Johnson, 1970, published by University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Department of Biology.

Author, "Fishes of Wisconsin," 1,052-page book, 1983, published by University of Wisconsin Press.

Author, "Inland Fishes of the Lake Michigan Drainage Basin," 1976, published by Argonne National Laboratories and U.S. Energy Research and Development Administration.

Author, "Time for Confrontation," 1970.

Author, "Plan for Restoration of the Wisconsin River," with John R. Holland, 1972, published by Citizens Natural Resources Association of Wisconsin.

Co-Editor, "Contributions to Ichthyology, with Henry E. Booke and Charles A. Long, 1975, published by University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Museum of Natural History.

ORGANIZATIONS

Member, Citizens Natural Resources Association of Wisconsin. President, 1972-74.

Founder and Chair, Wisconsin River Restoration Committee, 1970s.

President, Wisconsin Society of Ornithology.

Vice-President of Sciences, Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Sources used in the compilation of this biography include:

“CNRA—The First 50 Years,” published in 2001 by the Citizens Natural Resources Association. Pages 34-38 include an essay by George Becker.

“Fishes of Wisconsin,” by George Becker. (See publishing information in Becker biographical sketch.)

University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point documents, including a Dec. 20, 1979 report by the late John Anderson, director of the News and Information Bureau. (In Hall of Fame archive.)

Notes on Becker’s nomination by George Rogers, conservation writer and longtime editor of the Stevens Point Journal. (In Hall of Fame archive.)

David Becker of the town of Hull, son of George Becker, provided information for the biographical sketch.

Michael Dombeck, former student, provided recollections.

George Becker provided comments from his home in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, in a February 2002 Conservation Hall of Fame interview.