



KNOWLES KNEW NATURE

SAINT CROIX COUNTY

Did you know that Warren Knowles helped make Wisconsin a fishing paradise?

Saint Croix County native Warren Knowles LLB'33 loved to fish. The water and the quiet simplicity of nature cleansed his soul. As Wisconsin's 37th governor, he couldn't wait for the yearly tradition that he established in 1968: the Governor's Annual Fishing Opener, the unofficial kickoff to the Wisconsin summer-tourism season.

For Knowles, the environment, jobs, and the quality of life in Wisconsin were intertwined. Born in River Falls, Wisconsin, he earned his law degree at UW-Madison. After joining his uncle's practice in New Richmond, he ran for the Saint Croix County Board. Knowles later told a reporter, "From that time on, I had some interest in politics."

State Republicans convinced Knowles to run for governor in 1964 — a bad year for Republicans. On election night, his candidacy appeared doomed. “I went to bed defeated and woke up as governor,” Knowles said. Despite a Democratic landslide across the country, he won.

Known for his sense of humor, Knowles was liked by Democrats and Republicans. He guided the state’s purchase of land for recreational and park use, developed programs to clean up lakes and streams, and helped to create the slogan “We Like It Here,” which emphasized the quality of life in Wisconsin.

Knowles drew national attention by calling out Wisconsin National Guard troops to control civil-rights and Vietnam War protests in Milwaukee and at his alma matter, the University of Wisconsin in Madison. The decision to deploy troops took its toll on Knowles’s reputation and his well-being. “I was tired and frustrated,” he said. “I told my assistant [that] for the good of my own health and because of frustration, I decided not to run for reelection.” He left office in 1971.

On May 1, 1993, Knowles grabbed his fishing gear for the 25th annual Governor’s Fishing Opener. He passed away that afternoon as he brought in fish he’d caught on Lake Arbutus. “If he has to go, I’m sure this is the way he would want to go,” said then-governor Tommy Thompson ’63, JD’66. “He was an outstanding governor and a perfect gentleman.”