

Stevens Point Journal

www.stevenspointjournal.com

MONDAY, JULY 4, 2005

50 CENTS

Senator, environmentalist Gaylord Nelson dies



The Associated Press

GAYLORD NELSON, the former governor and U.S. senator from Wisconsin, founded Earth Day and helped spawn the modern environmental movement.

BY RYAN NAKASHIMA
The Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Gaylord Nelson, the folksy Democratic senator and governor from Wisconsin who helped start the modern environmental movement with the creation of Earth Day 35 years ago, died Sunday. He was 89.

Nelson died of cardiovascular failure at his home in the Washington suburb of Kensington, Md., said Bill Christofferson, his biographer and family spokesman.

A conservationist years before it was fashionable, Nelson was recognized as one of the world's foremost environmental leaders.

The former governor and senator started Earth Day in 1970, when an estimated 20 million people participated. April 22 is still celebrated today by planting trees, cleaning up trash and lobbying for a clean environment.

Nelson's environmental efforts left a lasting legacy at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. UWSP's College of Natural Resources

— and more specifically, its Global Environmental Management Education Center — were formed with the ideals of the late Wisconsin senator in mind.

Based on the conservation heritage of Nelson and other environmental leaders, the CNR in 1946 was the first institution in the nation to establish a conservation education major. Fellowships bearing Nelson's name still are given annually within the CNR.

In the Senate, Nelson had a reputation for cocktail

party stunts, like ripping up a Milwaukee phone book (there was a trick to it) or doing one-arm push-ups.

"He was just an incredible person: humble, funny, proud of his roots in Clear Lake, Wisconsin, and never changed by the power and pomp of the offices that he held," Gov. Jim Doyle said in a statement Sunday.

Fifteen years after he left office, Nelson received a Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1995 for his environmental efforts from then-President Clinton.

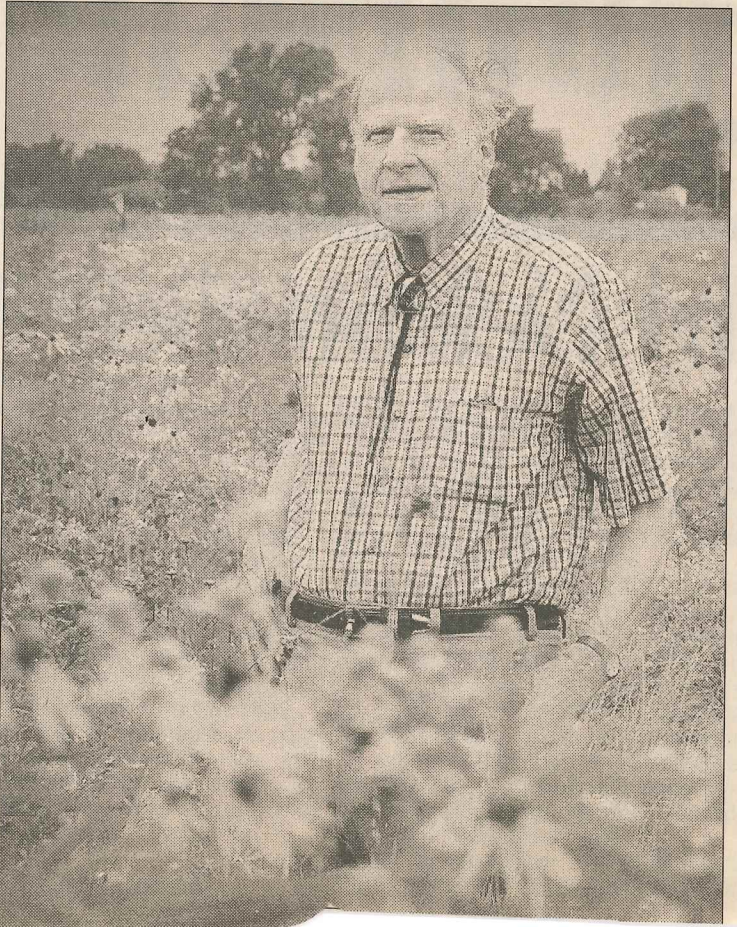
"As the father of Earth Day, he is the grandfather

of all that grew out of that event: the Environmental Protection Act, the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act," read the proclamation from Clinton.

In 1958, Nelson became only the second Democrat during the 20th century to be elected governor of Wisconsin.

He used a penny-a-pack tax on cigarettes to allow the state to buy hundreds of thousands of acres of park land, wetlands and

SEE NELSON, A2



FORMER WISCONSIN GOVERNOR, senator and founder of Earth Day Gaylord Nelson stands in a prairie of blooming wildflowers at Governor Nelson State Park in Waunakee in July 2001.

NELSON: Earth Day

FROM A1

other open space to protect it — an idea that became a model for other states.

After two two-year terms, Nelson was elected in 1962 to the first of his three terms in the U.S. Senate, unseating 78-year-old incumbent Republican Alexander Wiley.

In the Senate, Nelson championed conservation policies, including legislation to preserve the 2,100-mile Appalachian Trail and create a national hiking system.

"Gaylord's contributions in the fields of conservation reform and environmental improvement are a living memorial to him," said Melvin Laird, a nine-term congressman from Marshfield and secretary of defense in the Nixon administration.

Nelson's most recognized effort, however, was Earth Day, which he started as an environmental demonstration based on the anti-war teach-ins of the Vietnam War.

"It suddenly occurred to me, why not have a nationwide teach-in on the environment," Nelson said. He announced his idea at a speech in Seattle in September 1969, and it "took off like gangbusters."

For the first Earth Day in 1970, tens of thousands of people filled New York's Fifth Avenue, Congress adjourned so members could speak across the nation, and at least 2,000 colleges marked the occasion.

"I wanted a demonstration by so many people that politicians would say, 'Holy cow, people care about this,'" Nelson once said. "That's just what Earth Day did."

Growing up in the northern Wisconsin town of Clear Lake, Nelson said he learned to love the outdoors "by osmosis" and learned frugality from his father, a country doctor who conserved paper by writing on the back of drug advertisements.

After receiving a bachelor's degree from San Jose State College and a law degree from the University of Wisconsin, Nelson served in the Army during World War II before returning to Madison to set up his law practice.

In 1947, he married Carrie Lee Dotson, an Army nurse he had met in Pennsylvania. They had three children.

Nelson entered public life in 1948 as a Wisconsin state senator, a position he held for 10 years before becoming governor and senator.

In 1972, Sen. George McGovern, the Democratic presidential nominee, sought out Nelson as a potential running-mate. Nelson said no.

"Behind his humor and behind the sort of rough-cut, down-to-earth manner, there was always a person of sober conviction," McGovern said later.

Nelson continued to represent Wisconsin in the Senate until he was narrowly defeated in 1980 by Robert W. Kasten Jr., one of a raft of Republicans swept into office with Ronald Reagan.

He turned his full attention to the environment, joining the Washington-based Wilderness Society and serving as its legal counselor. There, he focused his attention on the world's quickly multiplying population.

Bud Jordahl, who worked with

The Associated Press

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT GAYLORD NELSON

"When I became governor, Gaylord Nelson gave me some very important advice: to stay focused on the things that really matter to people. He lived those words, and his picture, sitting over my desk as governor, is a daily reminder to focus on things that will be of great significance over time."

—Gov. Jim Doyle

"Gaylord Nelson was an outstanding man and a devoted public servant. He leaves a tremendous legacy of protecting the environment, but his work touched many other lives, too. He was well-liked and respected, even revered, during the span of his career."

—U.S. Sen. Herb Kohl, D-Wis.

"He was quite simply one of my heroes. He was an environmental champion, a role model and a friend. His many contributions to the preservation of our environment will be remembered every April as we celebrate Senator Nelson's legacy, Earth Day."

—U.S. Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis.

"Anyone who cares about the quality of our air, water and land should be grateful for the life of Gaylord Nelson. ... Gaylord Nelson and Earth Day proved the power of an idea. This simple but compelling idea truly made the world a better place."

—William H. Meadows, president of The Wilderness Society

"He's a great human being, never really driven by ego as so many politicians are, public figures. He had a very human touch and he liked people, of course, which I think in no small measure accounted for his success in terms of his political career."

—Bud Jordahl, who worked with Nelson in various conservation jobs with the state, the federal government and the University of Wisconsin-Madison

The establishment of the Apostle Islands National Seashore "would have never happened without him. It took 10 years to do it. We went through a lot of humps to do it, but he persisted and stuck with it. ... He was one of a kind."

—Martin Hanson of Mellen, a lifelong friend of Nelson's who worked with him to help establish the Apostle Islands National Seashore

Nelson in various conservation jobs with the state, the federal government and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said most people with Nelson's background would have joined a high-paying law firm after his Senate defeat.

"What does he do? He goes to the Wilderness Society, which is not a very high-paying job, I can assure you," Jordahl said Sunday. "That is a remarkable testimony to his convictions about the environment."

William H. Meadows, the group's president, called Nelson the "founding father of the modern environmental community."

Nelson is survived by his wife, Carrie Lee, and Gaylord Jr. and Jeffrey, sons daughter, Tia. Memorial service arrangements were pending.

Stevens Point Journal reporter Kelly McBride contributed to this story.