

National **WILDLIFE**

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THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION'S CONSERVATION HALL OF FAME

Ernest Swift

BY LARRY VAN GOETHEM

WHEN A YOUNG Wisconsin game warden named Ernie Swift followed three fishermen to a secluded stream where fishing was not allowed, he knew he might be killed. The year was 1928, and the lawbreakers were members of a notorious Chicago gang that was vacationing in the North Woods. Sure enough, one of the mobsters pulled a gun as soon as Swift stepped out from the trees. Undaunted, Swift confiscated all of the hoodlums' fishing gear and ordered the three to appear in court the next morning. Two days later, he pushed his luck even further when he arrested the gang leader, Joe Soltis, for poaching. This time, however, it was Swift who leveled his gun.

These encounters were typical of Ernest Fremont Swift. A reformed poacher without a college degree, the rugged conservationist never backed away from a fight in four decades of distinguished public service. When he died in 1968 at the age of 70, he left a remarkable record. Beginning as one of Wisconsin's first official wardens, he eventually acceded to the leadership of the National Wildlife Federation. Thus, Swift's career reflected a momentous shift in wildlife conservation itself, from the time when law enforcement was everything to the full flowering of scientific management.

Hard-driving, impatient and blunt-spoken, Swift was a superb administrator who wanted to get things done. And he did. In the early 1950s, while he was head of the Wisconsin Conservation Department, he was in the vanguard of the fight to preserve the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in Minnesota. Later, as a federal official, he fought oil drilling on U.S. lands. During his six years as Wisconsin's top conservationist, Swift managed to get no less than 79 of 100 bills written by his agency passed into law. Some of those laws were landmark accomplishments, including outstanding measures in forestry protection and the requirement that resource decisions be based on scientific research.

Swift also moved biologists into his department for the first time, a move that brought him into a happy partnership

with the great University of Wisconsin ecologist, Aldo Leopold. Friends and neighbors at Madison, the two had a profound impact on each other. In 1953, Swift became assistant director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, but quit after only 18 months. He was appalled at the bureaucratic trade-offs he saw all around him, and when the opportunity arose to become executive director of the National Wildlife Federation in Washington, he jumped at it. For five years, Swift helped lay the groundwork for the growth of the country's largest environmental organization. He helped convince the Pentagon to follow good conservation practices on military lands. And he worked closely with Congress to help shape the first U.S. Wilderness Act.

A prolific writer, Swift expounded his salty environmental viewpoints in many publications over the years. He also wrote two books, one of which, *A Conservation Saga*, has become a minor classic.

The crusty old campaigner retired to Rice Lake, Wisconsin, with his wife Goldie in 1960. As environmentalism became more and more fashionable in the 1960s, he found many of the movement's new prophets wanting. "They never fought the battle when the going was rough and the pay was poor," he wrote to a friend. "Most of them couldn't heat water for a one-chair barber shop."

Notwithstanding his bluster and bluntness, Ernie Swift was, at times, a man of considerable discretion. Because of his aggressiveness as a game warden back in the early days, he became the target of a Chicago assassination squad. One day, a big black Packard glided to a stop in front of Swift's modest home in Hayward. But the would-be executioners found it empty. Swift had been tipped off in advance and was hiding a safe distance away. Hiding was not Ernie Swift's style — but he knew a good tip when he heard one. ■

Free-lance writer Larry Van Goethem lives in White Lake, Wisconsin, not far from the scenes of Ernie Swift's exploits.

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