

WISCONSIN'S UNSUNG CONSERVATION PIONEER

"There is a day for all things. And in that day they are there."

"Those of The Forest" page 284

Wallace Byron Grange wrote that. He also lived by it. He was an ecologist at a time when such were sorely needed and he left a legacy for all who cherish Wisconsin's wildlife.

For that reason, the members of the Wisconsin Outdoor Communicator's Association, at their 1990 annual meeting in Eagle River, voted unanimously to nominate Grange to the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame.

Grange was, among many things, Wisconsin's first superintendent of game. He was the founder of Sandhill Game Farm near Babcock, now a showplace state wildlife area. He was a respected research biologist and the author of a widely-acclaimed nature book as well as other volumes on grouse studies and game management.

In many ways, his talents and accomplishments were comparable to those of Aldo Leopold. Yet, when Grange died at 81 at his Calio, N. D. home on June 8, 1987, his passing drew little notice. Even as Wisconsin was commemorating the 100th year of Leopold's birth, Grange's name seemed all but forgotten.

Some 150 of those who did remember gathered for a memorial service in the little Wood County community of Babcock. They remembered a sturdy man, 5' 10" tall, with high-topped boots, a purposeful stride and a quizzical smile. They remembered a visionary who had bought worthless, smoldering land and had brought it back to life. They remembered a leader who had made a difference in their lives and countless others as a poet, philosopher and naturalist; a man who had fought long and hard for his dreams and ideals. Then they buried his ashes, brought back from North Dakota by his wife Hazel, in a plot in the local cemetery.

But a much bigger monument to his life will be found just a mile west of Babcock at the state-owned Sandhill Wildlife Demonstration Area, more than 9,000 acres of woodland, marsh and flowages offering prime habitat for every species of wildlife found in central Wisconsin.

Surrounded by more than 16 miles of tall fence, the area provides an ideal outdoor laboratory for wildlife researchers and has been the scene of many enlightening experiments since state acquisition in 1962. Moreover, it provides much public recreation, including hiking, nature tours, and hunting for small game, waterfowl, and deer. That is as Wallace Grange wanted it to be.

It was while Grange was at Sandhill -- 1937-1962 -- that he did much of his most important work, but he was not yet finished. Never dismayed by seemingly overwhelming odds, Grange had fought a delaying action against cancer, determined to complete one more book before his death. (The manuscript remains with Hazel, his wife for 60 years and his editor still).

Grange was born Sept 10, 1905, the fifth of six sons of a minister in Wheaton. Ill. When he was 13, the family moved to a rough farm in the cutover country of Rusk County. It was an ideal setting for a young man who was already a keen student of nature.

The nearest high school was in Ladysmith, 14 miles away. Wallace hiked the railroad tracks to town to enroll. He boarded in town during the school term, hiking back home on weekends and taking nature notes along the way.

At school that first semester, Wallace met two people who were to have great influence on his future. One was the science teacher, E.M. Dahlberg, who had arrived in Ladysmith a couple of years before, in 1917, and who remained as a teacher and principal for 37 years. Dahlberg, who became a prominent conservationist, served on Wisconsin's first conservation commission 1927-33. He offered inspiration and encouragement to students who wanted to choose careers in the field. (Dozens did, including his son Burton, who did landmark deer research for the Wisconsin Conservation Department and was a longtime wildlife manager for the state DNR at Spooner). In young Wallace Grange, the teacher saw a spark to which he added fuel.

Another lifelong flame was lit when Wallace met Hazel St. Germain, also a member of the freshman class. Orphaned, Hazel had just moved to Ladysmith to live with another family. She stayed two years before moving to Milwaukee; then St. Paul. But she and Wallace kept in touch by writing. Wallace, never affluent but always resourceful, somehow managed occasional visits too.

Meanwhile, although still in his teens, Grange had begun an awesome pace of accomplishment. A job on the local newspaper helped him hone writing skills which would later serve him so well. In 1924 he sold an article about ruffed grouse to "Forest and Stream" magazine. The piece was based on daily records of grouse observations which he had

begun in Rusk County in 1920. His findings were later incorporated in a technical bulletin which was published with the assistance of Aldo Leopold. Those were the beginnings of a long list of popular and professional articles Grange authored in his lifetime.

But Grange's curiosity extended far beyond Rusk County's woodlands. He headed west for a summer and worked for the federal forest service in Wyoming. Then he went to Florida and cruised the islands with Arthur H. Howell of the U.S. Biological Survey, who was writing a book on the birds of Florida.

He enrolled at the University of Wisconsin in Madison for a year; then transferred to the University of Michigan. In 1927, while he was still a student there, he and Hazel were wed in Ann Arbor.

Members of the wedding party were the Murie brothers, Adolph and Olaus. Already famed naturalists for their work in Alaska, the Muries were doing their doctoral work at UM at the time. They, among other pioneers in the field of wildlife science, had immediately recognized the talent and commitment of the eager young man from Wisconsin. Lifelong friendships resulted.

In 1928 the newly-organized Wisconsin Conservation Department was seeking candidates for the post of game superintendent. With E.M. Dahlberg on the commission, it was perhaps no coincidence that his star pupil got the nod. Grange started on May 15, 1928 for a salary of \$185 per month. He was 22 years old.

Although he resigned after only two years, he began some lasting programs, including establishment of the first state game farm in Door County.

During that same period that he became well acquainted with Herbert L. Stoddard. Stoddard, who had earlier been a member of the Milwaukee museum staff, conducting quail research for the Biological Survey from 1924 to 1930. His resulting book was hailed as a classic in scientific game management. He then settled on a large plantation near Thomasville, Ga., to practice what he had learned. Quail were the plantation's primary crop.

Stoddard's findings and philosophy excited Grange, who saw the possibilities of producing game for profit on marginal lands, rather than trying to keep cows on the hardscrabble cutover his father had farmed.

In 1930 he took the first bold step by buying 1,000 acres of wasteland in southwestern Wood County. Like much of that central Wisconsin sand country it had been ditched and drained, promoted as farm land; then abandoned to become tax delinquent. The punky peat

soils were still smoldering from recent wild fires when Grange bid for the land. He had little competition. Some snickered.

Then he and Hazel were off to Washington, D.C., where he administered game bird research scholarship programs for the Biological Survey for two years. It was an opportunity to become more widely acquainted in professional circles, and to spend more time studying Stoddard's management techniques. One, seeming almost heretic at the time, was the systematic use of fire to manipulate plant successions. Seeing the results, Grange practiced and preached the gospel of controlled burning for the rest of his life.

In 1932 he was ready to strike out on his own. The Granges bought a farm near Baileys Harbor in Door County and began raising game birds and animals. The venture was succeeding, but Wallace had bigger plans. He had continued to buy derelict lands which bordered his original acquisition and by 1937 he was ready to make his move. He had already acquired 3,500 acres and was negotiating for 9,000 acres more.

The county board, which had sold Grange most of the land, was in favor of the idea. However, area sportsmen were outraged when they heard that the land was to be fenced. At a feverish rally of the Wood County Conservation League a cry was raised to limit the size of game farms, lest private parties monopolize entire hunting areas.

"The time will come when the poor man will have no place to shoot!" one orator declared as petitions bearing thousands of signatures were being circulated.

Grange fought back with characteristic logic and determination. He pointed out that every foot of the disputed land had been chronically tax delinquent for years and declared that he intended to make it productive again. Rather than depriving the sportsmen of hunting opportunities, the plan would benefit them, he said. Wildlife would spill out of the ideal habitat he intended to create.

Grange was literally going for broke. He had already spent \$8,000 for fencing materials and was heavily in debt. However, his vigorous defense of his dream succeeded. Gradually, his critics were persuaded to withdraw their opposition. In subsequent years, Grange became an officer in one of the groups which had opposed him. Former skeptics and critics became friends; even employes, recalls Carl Bowden who hauled wagonloads of post for that first fence. Bowden who still lives on adjoining land, worked for Grange for 17 years and for the state at Sandhill for another 20 before retiring.

"Wallace Grange was the smartest man you'd ever meet," he recalls.

But it took brawn as well as brains to make the dream come true. A staggering amount of work was required to dig, dike, dam, till and plant to put land and waters on a paying basis. Virtually every penny had to be put right back into the operation. The 9 1/2-foot high fence was a major maintenance headache, even without periodic problems with poachers who cut the wires or even pulled sections down.

Still there were rewards. Waterfowl and furbearers were returning to the flowages. Deer were increasing. And some wildlife had even moved into the house. The Grange's, who had no children, became foster parents for a fascinating parade of creatures. There was "Foxy," a red fox who lived in the house and ate from the hand. Another time there was a fawn and a whole circus of clownish skunks, only three of which were deodorized. Nobody could tell which ones were descended, so there were some mishaps.

Perhaps the most memorable though, was Silver, a four-foot-tall female Sandhill crane who was a friend of the two family dogs and who would dance to a fluttering handkerchief. For further amusement, Silver also was an accomplished pickpocket.

As the Granges persevered, wildlife thrived. Grange began to sell deer -- live for restocking in several other states and as venison for the New York market. He also trapped and shipped snowshoe rabbits, ruffed grouse, squirrels and quail. He charged for limited use of a few waterfowl blinds -- the only fee hunting which was conducted on the farm. Minnows seined from the flowages were sold to bait dealers and muskrats provided a good harvest of fur.

Gravel deposits found on the land were still another source of income, but there was never enough money to do all that needed doing.

In September, 1940, Grange took the job as project leader for grouse research for the Wisconsin Conservation Department. Funded under the Pittman-Robertson federal cost-sharing program, the project was aimed at identifying problems in state populations of prairie chickens, sharptailed grouse and ruffed grouse and to recommend possible remedies.

Harold Mathiak now retired in Horicon, began his 31-year career with the department as Grange's assistant on that project:

"He was a good man and a hard worker," Mathiak recalls. "In fact, I think he did well to live as long as he did, the way he worked all hours in any kind of weather."

The grouse studies continued until Dec. 31, 1942 and resulted in

voluminous field notes. However, because Grange felt compelled to do his part in WWII, the report was not published until 1948. He joined the Navy Construction Battalion (Seabees) -- the only branch of the service interested in a 38-year-old enlistee -- and served in the South Pacific.

In "Wisconsin Grouse Problems," contrary to the conclusions of some other authorities, Grange accurately predicted that sharptailed grouse were going the way of the vanishing prairie chicken in Wisconsin.

That book was followed in 1949 by "The Way to Game Abundance," published by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York. The same firm had published Aldo Leopold's landmark text "Game Management" in 1933. With Hazel's help Grange had written and re-written a mountain of data and field notes into what he hoped would be a 350-page guide comprehensible to the interested layman. Although not a best seller, the book did receive critical acclaim from other professionals and was assigned as a text in some college courses.

Nearly four decades after it was written, the book seems remarkably up to date in many respects. It is evident now, that if Grange was out of step with many of his contemporaries it often was because he was a step ahead.

*He advocated extensive use of fire, not only to initiate natural plant succession and increase natural food and cover, but also to control ticks and perhaps destroy eggs and larvae of many internal parasites as well.

*He appreciated the role of predators, declaring that the best way to protect prey species from them was to provide suitable habitat, but he also maintained that some predator controls might be justified at times.

*He advocated felling trees to provide browse for starving deer rather than the then-prevalent practice of hauling in costly and less nourishing hay.

*He warned against environmental hazards in the increasing use of poisons and radioactive substances.

*And always, he called for more understanding of the interwoven patterns of life: "Could all our hunters of game be ecologists, even in spirit, the future of North American game would be safe for all time!" he declared.

Population cycles in such species as snowshoe hares and ruffed grouse held particular fascination for Grange's questing mind. In

"The Way To Game Abundance," he explored several possible factors. A theory connecting the cycles to periods of sunspot activity (which affect weather patterns) attracted particular notice. Data for that theory was supplied by an older brother Roger, then an electrical engineer in Chicago, now retired in Florida.

However it was a story which Wallace wrote for Hazel which won him greatest acclaim as an author. It was the life story of a snowshoe rabbit -- its distant past, its fleeting present and the future its kind. The reader came to know the rabbit and its world in intimate detail, even as Grange did. Nothing escaped his notice and sense of wonder. Grange looked below the surface; beyond the moment. He probed and sifted, perceiving causes and consequences.

"Those Of The Forest," thus became a story within a story within a story. On one level it was a fine natural history narrative in the tradition of Ernest Thompson Seton. On the next it was well-written course in ecology, drawn from the author's encyclopedic knowledge of the natural world. And finally it was a poetic sermon, a celebration of Creation. Just listen to part of his description of the arrival of the first sandhill cranes of spring:

"As the cranes soar on, with an occasional balancing tilt of curved wings, they turn heads slightly one to another, glancing from yellow-iris eyes to their mates and young. Their crimson bare foreheads flash in the sunlight, their long blackish bills gleam, their blue-gray backs and wings reflect the sun's rays like water. They seem a tracery of colorful arrows gliding across time..."

Hazel had wanted Wallace to write such a book. He gave the manuscript to her on their 25th wedding anniversary, but there was little demand for nature books in 1952. Even Aldo Leopold's classic "Sand County Almanac," had gone begging for a publisher after his death in 1949. Hazel was not dismayed. She formed The Flambeau Publishing Company at Babcock; then took the manuscript to the Badger Printing Company in Appleton and boldly ordered 10,000 copies.

The book, illustrated with pen and ink sketches by Olaus Murie, made its debut in 1953 and was promptly heralded as a classic. Mel Ellis, then an outdoor columnist for The Milwaukee Journal, called the book "a masterpiece...scientifically sound but still a crackling adventure." Adolph Murie called it "truly the story of the woods, now and through the ages." E.M. Dahlberg, Wallace's old mentor, said it was "A work of extraordinary skill...It humbles one's thinking."

Plaudits poured in not only from professional colleagues and from the academic world, but also from readers whom Hazel had most wanted to reach -- the general public. Babcock's post office, which had been threatened with closing, got a new lease on life as the orders

flooded in.

In 1955 the Granges were invited to New York where the John Burroughs Association presented an award for "distinguished nature writing," an honor previously conferred on such famous authors as William Beebe, Ernest Thompson Seton and Edwin Way Teale. (The book has been reprinted several times, and currently is available in both hardcover and paperback from Northword Press, Minocqua, WI.)

The press of work at Sandhill precluded doing much more writing during the next few years. While the game farm was become increasing productive, Grange began thinking about moving on. He had proved his point, but the work was ceaselessly demanding and there never was enough money to bring the property up to its real potential.

Throughout his career, Grange was an impassioned writer and orator, often in the forefront of controversies concerning use of land, water and wildlife. He was the leader in the campaigns of the Citizens Natural Resources Foundation (CNRA) during that period.

Grange was again embroiled in controversy 1953 when he and Hazel went to court to stop goose hunting from federal blinds within the Horicon National Wildlife Refuge. He argued that terms of the purchase (with revenues from the then one-dollar federal waterfowl stamps) were that the refuge remain inviolate. The blinds were subsequently abandoned.

Even Grange's detractors were often impressed with his demeanor during such frays. Shouted down at one public hearing, he stood calmly while his critics grew hoarse; then silent.

"I have come here to speak, and speak I will," he continued evenly. And many listened.

Negotiations to sell Sandhill Game Farm to the state began in the mid-1950's. The property reportedly was available for about \$200,000 in 1956, but the Conservation Department had insufficient money for the purchase. That problem was overcome in 1961 when funding became available through the Outdoor Recreation Act Program (ORAP) which imposed a one-cent per pack tax on cigarets.

The final deal for \$231,500 included some provisions which Grange insisted upon including in the deed. Among them, the northern half of the area was to remain as a waterfowl refuge for 50 years. Also, the entire area was to be operated as an experimental outdoor laboratory and demonstration for habitat improvement and controlled management of hunters.

"I think he could have gotten more money from somebody else," said

the late Bill Field, who had become the DNR's chief appraiser by the time the purchase was made.

The Granges first moved to Pine River in Waushara County but it was not until 1967 that they found their true retirement home amid the hills and potholes of northern North Dakota. Calio, about 50 miles north of Devil's Lake and 17 miles south of the Canadian border was virtually a ghost town, but there was something right about it. Perhaps it was that the horizons echoed with the wild calls of geese and cranes. They moved into an old farmhouse there in 1949 and there Wallace worked quietly on his writing and research, slowly slipping from public view and memory as his health began to fail.

In 1988 a bronze memorial marker was dedicated at Sandhill, recognizing Grange's work as "Author, Naturalist and Historian," as well as founder of the area. Its site overlooks a scenic flowage along the 14-mile Trumpeter Trail maintained for visitors.

WALLACE GRANGE BIO

ADDENDUM

Other honors conferred upon Wallace B. Grange during his lifetime:

Honorary life membership in the Tympanuchus cupido (Prairie Chicken) Society.

Honorary life membership in the Wisconsin Society of Ornithology. (Conferred, along with Owen Gromme in 1950).