



**Wakelin McNeel
1884-1958**

**“Statistics are dull. Kids prefer
down-to-earth realism.”**

– Wakelin McNeel

Wakelin McNeel, known as "Ranger Mac" to countless Wisconsin public school children, revolutionized conservation education in Wisconsin. With his "Afield with Ranger Mac" radio program, he educated the state's youths for 21 years about nature and the importance of conserving environmental resources. Although his passion and livelihood was environmental education, McNeel contributed to Wisconsin conservation in an array of ways throughout his lifetime.

By creating and broadcasting his Wisconsin Public Radio Program, McNeel forever changed the way that Wisconsin children learned about the world around them. McNeel's devotion to this cause was driven not only by his own love for nature and focus on education, but by increasing awareness of the importance of conservation, brought on by a series of human-caused "natural" crises in the 1930s, including floods, fires and severe erosion. Aldo Leopold was leading game management efforts in Wisconsin during this time, and under his leadership, conservation policies in Wisconsin became more aggressive and creative. These efforts included a new program for conservation education, its goal being to increase conservation awareness among citizens. The recent disasters had made it clear that every citizen, not just government officials, needed to understand the importance of conservation.

McNeel thus designed Afield with Ranger Mac to fit in with the new guidelines for nature education. But instead of just emphasizing the importance of conservation, and teaching children about the environment, McNeel drew from his own memories of exploring nature as a child to convey a great love for Wisconsin's natural resources. He wove lyrical tales about nature's beauty, and even used nature to illustrate moral lessons. He encouraged children to conserve resources with descriptive, sometimes horrific (though true) accounts of the then-widespread human-caused agricultural crises and their effects on the nature that he had taught the children to cherish.

Afield with Ranger Mac was an enormous success. It was broadcast for 21 years, reaching 700,000 listeners, and received a Peabody Award in 1942 for the outstanding

educational program in the United States. This award for a radio program is like receiving an Oscar for a movie.

But perhaps more significant of what Afield with Ranger Mac accomplished is the profound effect it had on the children who heard the program. In 2002, the Wisconsin State Journal published an article about Ranger Mac, and former listeners wrote in to the paper with their recollections of the lessons McNeel taught them. Author Jerry Apps wrote: "As a Waushara County farm kid attending a one-room county school back in the 1940s, I listened to Ranger Mac's programs each week. We all did. You'd think as country kids we knew about nature and the outdoors; we did to a point. But Ranger Mac added to what we knew in an interesting 'you've got to keep listening' way. He ranks right up there with Aldo Leopold, John Muir, and other Wisconsin environmental heroes."

Karl Gutknecht of Madison wrote "every Monday morning for eight years at the Seaman School, one mile east of Gotham on JJ, Ranger Mac would share his wonderful adventures in the outdoors of Wisconsin with us in the one-room school with two outhouses. What magic came out of that radio! Thanks to his inspiration and 4-H, I planted 20,000 pines by hand on the home farm."

The devotion to the outdoors and conservation that inspired McNeel's career emerged in his youth. He spent his childhood canoeing, fishing, hunting, and camping in his birthplace of Kilbourn, Wisconsin (now the Wisconsin Dells.) McNeel graduated from Lawrence College in 1906 and went to work as a teacher and administrator at Black River Falls High School in Tomah. In 1910, McNeel enrolled in the Biltmore School of Forestry in Michigan, and attended a training program with Dr. Carl Schenck, a famous professor and forester, in the Black Forests of Germany. He then taught science to students in the education curriculum at Whitewater Normal School and was named superintendent of the Fort Atkinson School District in 1912. During the final year of World War I, McNeel went to France and worked with the YMCA to coordinate athletic activities for soldiers.

Upon his return, McNeel was employed by Marathon County 4-H to promote youth nature activities. Later, the University of Wisconsin-Madison hired McNeel as a professor of agriculture and a forestry extension agent. Working in these capacities,

McNeel swiftly began to focus on conservation education, and launched Afield with Ranger Mac in 1933. In a magazine article, quoted in the Autumn 2004 issue of the Wisconsin Magazine of History, McNeel discussed his preference for using non-technical language to teach children about the environment in his radio program, "Statistics are dull. Kids prefer down-to-earth realism. Every creature has some place in the scheme of nature, from the angleworm that buries in the ground to the hawk that swings at anchor in the sky."

McNeel's approach to nature education worked so well not just because of his ability to relate to and therefore inspire children, but also because of his zeal for getting kids to experience nature firsthand. He took children on field trips, and was influential in the establishment of Upham Woods, a 4-H environmental education camp in the Wisconsin Dells. The center was created in 1941, after McNeel secured the Upham family's donation of a 300-acre plot of land. When McNeel retired from 4-H staff, he dedicated himself to the camp's development, and now the nationally acclaimed Camp Upham Woods is attended by 10,000 youth each year.

McNeel's dedication to conservation in Wisconsin earned him numerous accolades throughout his lifetime. Most notably, McNeel was inducted into the Wisconsin Forestry Hall of Fame in 1995 and the National 4-H Hall of Fame in 2002. Upon McNeel's retirement from 4-H, his supervisor, then- Wisconsin 4-H president E.B. Fred said, "To thousands of Wisconsin school children- past and present- Ranger Mac spells conservation in very large letters. In the 17 years he has been regularly broadcasting to the schools throughout the state, tens of thousands of boys and girls have gone afield with him to enjoy nature in its varying moods. Perhaps no one activity or enterprise has surpassed Ranger Mac's broadcasts in their influence upon the conservation movement of the future."

WAKELIN "RANGER MAC" MCNEEL
1884-1958

BIRTH: Feb. 4, 1884, Kilbourn, WI (now Wisconsin Dells).
DEATH: 1958.
EDUCATION: Lawrence College, graduated 1906.
Attended Biltmore School of Forestry, MI, 1910.

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

CAREER

Black River Falls High School, Tomah, Wisconsin, superintendent, teacher, administrator, 1906-1910.

Whitewater Normal School, taught science to teachers, 1911.

Fort Atkinson School District, superintendent, 1912-1914.

Coordinated YMCA athletic activities for American soldiers overseas, France, 1919.

4-H, Marathon County, served in numerous capacities throughout his lifetime, started as Marathon County Secretary, 1919-1947.

College of Agriculture, University of Wisconsin, Madison, professor of agriculture, forestry extension agent, 1922-1950.

ORGANIZATIONS, ACTIVITIES

Originated and broadcast *Afield with Ranger Mac* radio program, 1933-1954.

Chief, Junior Forest Rangers.

Leader, State 4-H Club.

Founder and Superintendent, Camp Upham Woods (donated by the Upham family to 4-H and became a 4-H environmental education center, now educating 10,000 youth per year.), 1927-1958.

Chairman, Junior State (Wisconsin) fair board.

Honorary Member, Future Farmers of America (FFA).

Leader, Boy Scouts of America.

AWARDS, HONORS

George Foster Peabody award for the best educational program in the nation, for *Afield with Ranger Mac* on Wisconsin Public Radio, 1942.

Inducted into the Wisconsin Forestry Hall of Fame, 1995.

National 4-H Hall of Fame, among the first group inducted, 2002.

The Wakelin McNeel Meditation Center and the Ranger Mac Cabin at Camp Upham Woods were named in his honor.

EDITOR'S NOTES

Full notes on sources will be provided as an addendum.

This biography is co-authored by Bill Berry and Evonne R. Berry. The narrative portion of the biography was written by Evonne R. Berry.

Bill Berry
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