

Paul Olson

BIRTH: August 13, 1909 in Mount Horeb, WI  
-Polio at an early age gave him one lame leg, but  
the handicap spurred him on to try harder to  
succeed.

EDUCATION: Mt. Horeb grade and high school  
UW-Madison, Education, graduated in 1931  
UW-Madison, Masters in Education - 1952

MARRIAGE: to Alice Dybdahl on January 1, 1936  
-4 children, 15 grandchildren

CAREER:

1931-49 Taught science at West Junior High School,  
Madison  
-organized archery club  
-organized fly-tying club  
-coached intramural football and softball  
1949-51 Taught in Randall Elementary School  
1951-72 Principal of Midvale Elementary School  
1977-79 elected to and served on the Madison Board of  
Education  
1988-? retired; lives in Madison with his wife Alice

CONSERVATION RELATED PROJECTS:

NOTE: Education was Paul's professional career. His  
involvement in conservation was almost a second job. His  
work was entirely volunteer - from phone calls and  
long-distance car trips to his "free" time in the evenings  
and on weekends.

WORK-LEARN PROJECT:

Paul was approached by someone who wanted him to do  
something with the school kids over summer. That "something"  
was conservation projects. So, in 1953 he began the summer  
"Work-Learn" program for high school students. The Madison  
Board of Education supported this program, along with the  
DNR. The students worked on land that needed conservation  
work done. They worked for 4-6 hours per day in the forests  
and streams, and they received class credit for their  
efforts. The students were supervised by teachers, who in

turn were directed by Paul. The first couple of years were spent doing stream improvement projects (such as bank deflectors and trout stream fencing) and graveling cattle crossings.

Due to Paul's interest and maneuvering, about 300 acres of mostly virgin oak forest was deeded to the Madison Board of Education as a school forest in 1958. In 1960, the students involved in Work-Learn began a timber stand improvement cut, guided by a DNR forester. They were again supervised by their teachers as they cut the trees by hand. Paul arranged for equipment, either volunteered or at low cost, and the students skid and sawed the logs, stacked the lumber, and built a shelter house in the school forest.

In 1961, students made a camp area including a kitchen and mess hall, bunk houses, classroom building, and other necessary outbuildings. This camp can accommodate 60-70 students at one time. The students also constructed trails for guided nature tours to identify natural points of interest. This camp is used twice a week during spring and fall by Madison school teachers and their classes for nature study. In a single year, 10,000 school children have used the forest as a conservation classroom.

Paul's Work-Learn program was one of the first, if not the first, of its kind in the nation. Many other schools have modeled programs of their own from it. The DNR's present Youth Conservation Camps (YCC) are offshoots of this program.

#### PRAIRIE CHICKEN:

"Paul Olson was a key figure in leading the charge to save the prairie chicken from extinction in Wisconsin. His foresight, public relations skill, and dedicated personal effort was instrumental in supporting necessary research, obtaining land, and establishing management practices that provided security for this native grouse species."

-Ray Anderson, UWSP Wildlife Professor

In 1958, Paul went to Portage County to observe the Prairie Chicken mating dance. The birds were on their way to extinction at this time. Paul saw 40 acres for sale and decided that the only way to save the birds was to save their habitat. It took him one year to pay for the first 40 acres. He obtained \$200 from the Dane County Conservation League, of which he was secretary, and raised the rest of the money himself. He found more land for sale, talked a friend into buying a 40, solicited funds on radio, and found a

millionaire who was interested in footing part of the land acquisition bills. After these efforts, the "money just kept rolling in."

Between 1958 and 1984, Paul bought about 5,000 acres out in the Buena Vista area for approximately \$140,000 that he raised by himself. This land has been leased to the DNR to manage for prairie chickens. The DNR is obliged to pay for the yearly taxes as part of the agreement. Presently, the amount of habitat managed for prairie chickens out on the Buena Vista is between 11 and 12,000 acres.

Paul attributes all of his projects' successes to timing; he was in the right places with the right ideas at the right time. He claims it was all "luck."

#### POSITIONS:

- 1955 Chairman of Four Lakes Watershed Alliance (Madison Lakes)
- 1958 named School Forest Manager by the Board of Education
- 1959-82 served on the state Conservation Commission (which is now known as the Dept. of Natural Resources); appointed by Governor Nelson
- 1960-78 one of the founding members of the Wisconsin chapter of the Nature Conservancy
  - elected to be the first president, which he held for 18 years
  - guided Chapter membership to about 2,000
  - raised \$2 million
  - helped the Nature Conservancy acquire choice land spots that have "spectacular personal value to the conservation movement" including Chiwaukee Prairie, Baraboo Hills (Baxter Hollow), Toft Point in Door County, and Ferry's Bluff.
- 1969 elected president of the Wisconsin Natural Resources Foundation
- 1971 appointed to the Citizens Committee on Environment and Natural Resources by Governor Lucy
  - secretary of the Dane County Conservation League for many years
  - president of the Prairie Chicken Foundation for 20 years

#### AWARDS AND RECOGNITIONS:

- 1957 - American Motors Conservation Award. Ten of these awards were given annually nationwide for outstanding

- contributions to conservation.
- 1965 - A large rocky peak was added to the school forest. The Board of Education named it "Paul's Peak on Mt. Olson."
  - 1965 - received the Pacemaker Award in New York City from the National Education Association and Parade Magazine. There was one awarded to each state, and Paul received this award for his Work-Learn program.
  - 1967 - named the "Conservationist of the Year" by the Wisconsin Chapter of the National Wildlife Federation
  - 1982 - DNR Board named 4,000 acres of the Central Wisconsin Wildlife Area the "Paul J. Olson Area"
- "The most potent combination of education and conservation in Wisconsin is found in the person of Paul J. Olson." - the Wis. State Journal's "Know Your Madisonian"