

SIGURD F. OLSON

1899-1982

"...We need to preserve a few places, a few samples of primeval country so that when the pace gets too fast we can look at it, think about it, contemplate it, and somehow restore equanimity to our souls."

Sigurd F. Olson

BIRTH: April 4, 1888, Chicago, IL.

DEATH: January 13, 1982, Ely, MN.

FAMILY: Married Elizabeth Uhrenholdt, 1921.
Children: Sigurd Thorne, Robert.

EDUCATION: Ashland Wisconsin High School, 1916.
Northland College, Ashland, WI,
1916-1918.
University of WI-Madison, 1920
B.S. Geology.
Graduate work in Geology, 1923.
University of Illinois, 1931.
M.S. Plant and Animal Ecology.

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY:

1918 U.S. Army Service.

1922-1935 Head of Biology Department,
Ely, Minnesota Junior College.

1923 Was a back country canoe trip
guide and outfitter.

1935-45 Dean, Ely Junior College.

1945 Zoology Instructor, U.S.
Army University, England.

1946 Lecturer, U.S. Army, Germany,
Italy, France, Austria.

1922-1982 Freelance writer, publishing over
100 articles and nine books.
Lecturer.

PUBLICATIONS: --1920's, numerous articles for
Rod and Gun magazines.
--1956 The Singing Wilderness.
--1958, Listening Point.

--1961, The Lonely Land.
--1963, Runes of the North.
--1969, The Hidden Forest
(with Les Blacklock).
--1969, Open Horizons.
--1972, Wilderness Days.
--1976, Reflections from the
North Country.
--1982, Of Time and Place.
Numerous articles in:
National Geographic.
The Living Wilderness.
Audubon.
Scientific Monthly.
Sierra Club Bulletin.
American Forests.
The Wilson Bulletin.

CONSULTANT/MEMBER
STATUS:

--1947-1982, Izaak Walton League of
America.
--1947, President's Quetico-
Superior Committee.
--1950, National Advisory Board
of Parks, Monuments, Historic Sites.
--1953-1958, President, National
Parks Association.
--1956, Member, Council of
the Wilderness Society.
--1960-1966, Member, Secretary of
Interior's Advisory Committee.
--1962, Consultant to the Director,
National Park Service.
--1963-1968, Vice President,
Wilderness Society.
--1968-1971, President,
Wilderness Society.

HONORS:

--1955, Francis K. Hutchinson Medal,
Garden Club of America.
--1959, Dimrock Award, American
Camping Association.
--1961, Honorary Doctor of Humane
Letters, Hamline University.
--1961, Honorary Doctor of Science,
Northland College.
--1963, Honorary Doctor of Science,
Macalaster College.
--1963, Admitted to Izaak Walton
League Hall of Fame.
--1963, Faculty Award, University of
WI-Green Bay.
--1963, Silver Antelope Award,
Boy Scouts of America.
--1967, John Muir Award, Sierra Club.
--1972, Sigurd Olson Environmental
Institute founded at

Northland College.

--1974, Receptient, Burroughs Medal,
John Burroughs Memorial Association.

--1979, Honorary Doctor of Humane
Letters, University of Minnesota.

--1979, Honorary Doctorate,
Beloit College.

--1981, Dedication of Sigurd Olson
Environmental Institute Building.

--1981, Receptient, Robert Marshall
Award, The Wilderness Society,

Northland College Board of Trustees.

VISIONARIES IN WISCONSIN'S CONSERVATION HISTORY

by

Angela Cannon

A Thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

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MASTER OF SCIENCE

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SIGURD FERDINAND OLSON
(1899 - 1984)

inducted into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame - 1987

"By saving any wilderness, what you are really saving is the human spirit."

"The power of wonder and the unknown are intangibles we must cherish if we are to comprehend our problems." (Open Horizons, 1979 p 223). This was the philosophy of Sigurd Olson, the intangibles he spoke of were the peace and enlightenment wilderness provided. For Olson, the greatest justification for wilderness preservation was its contribution to humankind's spiritual and intellectual growth. The word "wilderness" itself, rolled off the tongue in a breath of mysticism, creating the deep rooted and heart-felt images for which we have no explanations. Wilderness was part of humankind's instinctual history - an understanding and sense based on a millennium of collected knowledge. Through it, came harmony - and moments of pure thinking - a "sunburst" of clarity and connection he spent a lifetime recapturing and eventually writing about.

Olson is probably best remembered as the avid conservationist who led the way in the preservation of what is now known as the Boundary Waters Wilderness Canoe Area in the Quetico-Superior National Forest of northern Minnesota. He is also an internationally acclaimed interpretive writer - the author of The Singing Wilderness, Reflections from the North Country, Open Horizons, and Listening Point, including others. To paddlers of the north country, he is remembered as the

Burgeois, the name given the leader of the voyageur brigade. He was a teacher, wilderness philosopher, ecologist for the Izaak Walton League, and Consultant to the Director of the National Park Service on Wildlife and Wilderness. He served as President of the National Parks Association and President of the Wilderness Society. His titles go on, and proudly so, including "husband and father" he was also an eloquent activist, an explorer, and a wilderness guide.

Son of a Baptist Minister, he was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1899, but raised in the northernmost city of Wisconsin. One of his earliest recollections is of a maple grove on a sunny autumn day with his mother. As the wind blew, a course of colored leaves swirled around them. They ran and ran, until they sank to the earth in laughter and leaves. For Olson, this was a first moment in a boyhood, and a lifetime, filled with childlike wonder and awareness.

Olson spent the first five years of life moving to remote Wisconsin towns, including the Death's Door area of Door County, and eventually settled in Ashland, Wisconsin in 1905 on a small homestead. Those were pioneering days, when wolves and lynx still roamed their territory. Ashland was an active shipping port and railway town and the almost entirely cut-over land was seeing its first generation of poplar and birch regrowth. Thickets of alder and hazel filled the wet areas, and occasionally a forgotten haven of cathedral white pine and hemlock served as the only reminder of the once great old forest.

Sigurd Olson graduated from Ashland High School in 1916 and attended Northland College for two years. He decided on a professional path for himself two

years later. His father stressed that the only three occupations befitting a man were farming, teaching and the ministry. Young Olson wanted to combine his love of the land with teaching, so he headed to the University of Wisconsin-Madison to pursue a degree in teaching and agriculture.

The summer of 1919 was spent in northern Wisconsin with the U.S. Geological Survey. Wilderness life as a field geologist beckoned. On returning to Madison, he completed his studies in geology. His most heartfelt longing was back north. Upon graduation, he secured an agriculture and sciences teaching position in the small, northern Mesabi Iron Range town of Nashwauk, Minnesota.

In Olson's first year of teaching he developed and put to practice his ideas about environmental education, practically abandoning the classroom for the field. He sought to bring to life the geological history of the iron range his students grew up in. Said Olson, "Slides, dissections, and books were vital, but only in reference to the living world," (Open Horizons, p70). It was his belief from the start, that direct observation was just as important as laboratory experiments, and should be taught together. It was also during his first year in Minnesota, that he became obsessively curious about some endless chains of lakes in the remote northern country.

A local trapper named Al Kennedy filled Olson's adventurous mind with tales of the Quetico-Superior, an area of wild lakes and rivers. Here the legendary voyageur's had travelled the highways of water transporting pelts and furs. From the tiny town of Ely, Minn., a person could paddle north all the way to Hudson Bay, or

northwest to Athabasca and the Arctic Coast. In the summer, Olson headed out to explore the un-mapped canoe country with three friends.

The rhythmic dip of the paddles, the endless horizons, the colors of sky and water and dusk left a strong impression upon him. But it was the song and "siren" of the northwoods that enchanted him totally. Olson knew then that he would never return to the Mesabi Range. He was smitten for life.

Another love was filling Olson's heart. He married his Northland College friend's sister, Elizabeth Uhrenholdt, that same summer of 1921. Elizabeth was also a great lover of the outdoors, and for their honeymoon, Sigurd Olson introduced her to the wild canoe country on a three-week paddle in the Quetico-Superior.

Determined to spend his life in the midst of wilderness, Olson pursued graduate work in geology, a subject he thought would help him secure work in the Ely area. Although he found the science of geology fascinating, he soon decided that a career in ore extraction and marketing, although important to the nation's economy, conflicted with his personal values (Open Horizons, 141-142).

With his heart set on Ely, Olson soon secured a position as the head of the Ely Junior College's Biology Department (now known as Vermillion Community College). It was a fortunate blessing for him, for Elizabeth (expecting their first child), and for those who enjoy the Boundary Waters Wilderness Canoe Area today. In 1922 the young couple moved to Ely to stay.

While teaching at the Junior College, Olson continued to pursue his graduate degree and worked as a canoe guide during the summer. He eventually obtained a

masters degree from the University of Illinois in plant and animal ecology. It seems only natural his thesis would be entwined in the wilderness landscape he loved. It was one of the first studies on the northern timber wolf, and resulted in a publication titled A Study in Predatory Relationship With Particular Reference to the Wolf (Scientific Monthly 1938, p 323-326). His work enhanced our understanding of this mysterious creature and led to further studies by wolf expert L. David Mech, on Isle Royale in Michigan (Keller, 1979).

Throughout the 1920s, Olson worked to gain the respect of the local guides, creating his own crude, but workable maps of the endless lakes region. He made many explorations himself, sometimes with Elizabeth or other friends. It was also a time of expanding his personal philosophy and values. He read the works of poets, naturalists, philosophers and explorers. He contemplated the writings of Muir, Thoreau, John Burroughs and Emerson, among many. Said Olson, "contacts with other minds introduced me to a new world, driving a wedge into a rift that would widen and make me think more like the poets and philosophers than a hunter and a woodsman" (Open Horizons, 1979). The strong ties he felt with these great thinkers became more and more evident in his own philosophy.

He himself took up writing to fill a void, and to put the significance of his own experiences into order. He thought to complement his teaching through writing. To search deeper. To see more clearly (Open Horizons, p 178-180). His first pieces came as great effort - scribbles in notebooks recording his trips. But an invitation to write an article in the Milwaukee Journal spurred him on. His early work

appeared in regional publications and small outdoor magazines. Given practice and maturity, his writing came to full flower.

The conservationist and preservationist soul of Olson was also budding. Although he once believed in poisoning foxes to increase small game populations for hunters, like himself, he developed a great understanding of ecology through observation. In The Hidden Forest, he said "Only by looking closely can we begin to understand and appreciate the intimate interrelationships of all living things to one another and to the earth."

Shortly after Olson moved to Ely, the U.S. Forest Service announced plans for a road building program in the Superior National Forest. The local chambers of commerce so supported this effort that they promoted the "Road to Every Lake" slogan for the future of the tourist trade. It was hoped by many that this wilderness region would become a nationally known resort area and mecca for fishermen.

A long battle to protect the lakes country was fought by Sigurd Olson and his guide friends, but their arguments for preservation fell on deaf ears in the local area. Most residents did not understand why anyone wouldn't welcome development, or why anyone would want to leave an area so inaccessible. For hundreds of years, Americans altered the landscape for "civilization" as they settled westward across the continent. With each secured settlement, a pioneering way of life faded out. But somehow, this region had been spared. It basically remained in the same pristine state as when the voyager and Indian paddled the chain of lakes. Those who loved

the wilderness felt strongly about its preservation. Olson took up the fight, gaining support from the many urban-dwellers, and others he had guided in the region.

With pressure mounting, the battle gained increasing drama and attention. It became an international issue because Canada was part of this wilderness lake country. One summer, Olson had the fortunate opportunity to guide Will Dalg, the founder and president of the newly formed Izaak Walton League. With them was a Superior National Forest Ranger. Around a campfire in the wilderness country a pledge was made. The Izaak Walton League would join in the fight for the preservation of this unique wilderness lakes country.

After seven long years, the Forest Service renounced its plan for road development and created the Superior Primitive Area. According to Olson, the political battle created strong friends for wilderness throughout the country. It also offered wilderness supporters the experience they would need in the coming years. Protection for the region evolved issue after issue, and the tireless Olson contested them all.

Before the Superior Primitive Area had even been fully established, another battle emerged. A powerful lumber baron proposed building seven dams - a massive project that would involve flooding streams, islands and beaches on both sides of the border. Olson became a prime leader of an international conservation group that would form the Quetico-Superior Council. When the International Joint Commission conducted hearings on the issue, Sigurd Olson was unanimously selected and funded to attend in behalf of the Council. He was limited to a 10-minute slot

of time. Olson could have approached his speech in many ways, but he chose to simply describe the canoe country, and the trips he'd taken there. As he wove his images and feelings about the region, the audience was so enthralled they allowed him to continue for 45 minutes.

The dam issue was officially ended in 1934 when Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Peace Memorial Forest - known today as the Boundary Waters Wilderness Canoe Area. Olson would continue to wage a battle for the preservation of the region, writing his wilderness messages, speaking before special interest groups and Congress for the next 5 decades.

These battles included airplane use in and over the Primitive Area, taconite and copper mining development, wetland drainage and snowmobile use. Nationally he worked on issues ranging from Alaska lands protection to acid rain. Through all the causes, and all the struggles, his wife Elizabeth claimed that his restraint gained him respect from even those in disagreement. They never had a threatening letter or phone call (Sig O. papers).

Olson did not limit his explorations to the Quetico-Superior lakes. He journeyed wilderness routes from Hudson Bay to the Arctic. He also traveled abroad, an experience which renewed his conviction to the preservation of the pristine. He spoke in defense of the Grand Canyon, publicized threats to the Potomac River and served as a president of the Wilderness Society. His final success came with the passing of the Wilderness Act in 1964. The Peace Memorial Forest

of the Quetico-Superior was reclassified as the first Designated Wilderness Area under this 1964 Act and became the Boundary Waters Wilderness Canoe Area.

Olson left us not only one of the northcountry's last vestiges of pristine land, but his vivid memories and thought-provoking philosophies. His first book, The Singing Wilderness was finally published with the help of friend, Rachel Carson, in 1956. The Singing Wilderness won the National Library Association's One of Ten Best Books award that same year. This success was followed by others, including; Listening Point, The Lonely Land, Runes of the North, Open Horizons, The Hidden Forest, and Reflections from the North Country. His interpretive writings offer readers reflections on wilderness and humankind.

On January 13, 1982, Sigurd Olson went early to his writing shack on Wilson Street near his Ely home. Later that morning he and Elizabeth went out for a snowshoeing hike. Elizabeth returned home early, but Sigurd never did. He died un-expectantly that day. On the typewriter his last words read, "A new adventure is coming up and I know it will be a good one" (Mclean, 1982).

Over the course of his lifetime, Olson received many awards and honors for his conservation contributions. He was inducted into the Izaak Walton League Hall of Fame, received the Horace Albright Medal, honorary Doctorates of Science from Northland College, Hamline College, Carleton College, and Macalester College. The Environmental Institute at Northland College in Ashland, Wisconsin is founded and named for him. Its primary goal is to raise awareness and concern about the

northcountry and Lake Superior region - to save a better place for a diversity of creatures - especially the wilderness soul searchers of tomorrow.

SOURCES:

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Graham Jr., Frank. (1980, November). Leave It to the Bourgeois Sigurd Olson and His Wilderness Quest. Audubon. pp29-36.

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McLean, Malcolm. (1982, January 16). In Praise of Sigurd Olson. Pamphlet. Remarks delivered at the First Presbyterian Church. Ely: Minnesota.

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