

Phil Sander

Carthage College in Kenosha presented Phil Sander the Honorary Doctorate of Public Service in 1995. In so doing, the college noted this about the man: “A conservationist, naturalist, product designer, historian, painter and cartoonist, Phil H. Sander exemplifies a true Renaissance Man.”

A review of Sander’s lifetime activities, compiled in an extensive biography submitted on his behalf by fellow conservationists, bears out those words. Sander’s interests range from archeology and history to community affairs and youth service. He has been honored many times and in many ways by local, state and national groups. His list of community service contributions is rich and varied.

But at the top of his list of interests and accomplishments is conservation.

The Carthage College summary of his accomplishments in this area captures his work well: “For some six decades, Sander has been an ardent proponent of conservation and environmental protection. His noteworthy achievements, indeed, are overwhelming in number. He was among the first activists leading the fight to preserve the Chiwaukee Prairie (in Kenosha County), one of the richest and most diverse flatlands remaining in Wisconsin and the upper Midwest.

“Sander also had an instrumental role in erecting the Passenger Pigeon Monument, the first memorial to an extinct species, located in Wyalusing State Park; and in establishing the Hawthorn Hollow Nature Center.”

His work didn’t go unnoticed by state and national conservation organizations. His accolades include the University of Wisconsin College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Honorary Recognition Award for 60 years of Conservation Service; the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation and National Wildlife Award; and numerous other state commendations for his activities.

Sander’s nomination materials include letters of recommendation from conservation, state government, business and civic leaders. Letter writers included state Sen. Bob Wirch, Pleasant Prairie; state Rep. Jim Kreuser, Kenosha; state Sen. John Steinbrink, Pleasant Prairie; Lon Knoedler, state chair of Ducks Unlimited; Norris Love and Leo Rotelli, on behalf of the Des Plaines Wetlands Conservancy; Thomas Mohrhauser, editor at large, Quail Unlimited Magazine; and numerous others.

The letters all speak warmly of Sander. But the letters also carry another important theme: They address Sander's actions and accomplishments in conservation. As noted, they are many. Sander fits into that category of "citizen conservationists," leaders who work in other professions but whose passion for conservation motivates them to dedicate much of their lives to the cause.

A review of Sander's conservation activities shows that he surely has the passion and has expended a great deal of time and energy to follow the advice that he heeds to "Save all places."

Born in the Kenosha area in 1906, Sander spent many a summer day as a boy exploring forests, Lake Michigan shoreline, wetlands, rivers and inland lakes of Kenosha County.

As an adult, he worked as a draftsman and designer of wood, steel and soft goods for Simmons Company in Kenosha for 37 years. Later, he worked as a plant engineer at American Motors, Kenosha, for 10 years. Then came a major career shift, when he became director of the Kenosha County Historical Museum, a position he held for 18 years.

His conservation activities stretch across most of the last century and into this one. In his lifetime, Sander would watch population pressures, development and pollution deal major blows to the natural world he loved. He did his best to make a positive difference.

Some of Sander's earliest and most intimate outdoors experiences came in the cradle of the Des Plaines River and adjacent wetlands. In 1935, Sander and local friends leased 160 acres of marsh and woods and formed the "Grey Dawn Gun Club." A cabin was built from recycled lumber, and the camp became a center for woodland exploration, informal nature study, waterfowl hunting, trapping and gathering of hickory nuts, hazelnuts and mushrooms. At age 95, Sander narrated a film that uses 8-millimeter clips he shot in the 1930s and 1940s, full of rich images of the club's activities. In the film and written recollections, Sander notes that development pressures have led to excessive sedimentation in the river, narrowing it and, in one year, choking its flow completely.

Sander and others formed the Des Plaines Wetlands Conservancy in 1984 to protect and maintain in perpetuity an area of wetland and adjacent uplands along the

river. The conservancy today consists of several hundred acres of land of mixed habitat and topography. Sander has been a director of the conservancy's board since its inception.

Those who visit and fall in love with Chiwaukee Prairie in Kenosha County have Phil Sander to thank, too. He was one of the key leaders in efforts to preserve and restore the prairie. It is the largest parcel of native wet prairie of its kind in the Midwest, habitat for more than 350 species of wildflowers and grasses. It is now owned by UW-Parkside and The Nature Conservancy, the latter of which Sander has been a longtime member.

The Chicago Wilderness Magazine's Summer 2002 issue drew this picture of the prairie and those who saved it:

"In 1929, Chiwaukee was subdivided for development. However, the Great Depression halted construction until the 1940s, when houses encroached on the large central prairie. Twenty-five years later, local botanists Phil Sander and Al Krampert initiated efforts to protect what land remained. Within a year, The Nature Conservancy purchased scattered lots adding up to 15 acres. By 1996, more than 500 acres had been preserved. Today, The Nature Conservancy owns and manages the 225-acre Chiwaukee South parcel. The remaining acres, surrounded by homes, are protected by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, but the quest to preserve additional land continues."

The prairie is used extensively as an educational resource by the University of Wisconsin System, and staff and students from Carthage College and Northwestern University. It is designated as a state natural area by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

Sander and other concerned sportsmen and conservationists were instrumental in pushing for establishment another key southeast Wisconsin resource, the Bong State Recreation Area. The area encompasses 4,537 acres of rolling grassland, wetlands and scattered woodland with campgrounds and multiple-use trails for outdoor enthusiasts.

It was Sander and a few others who identified the natural value and potential recreational value of the land on and around a former jet fighter base. These efforts helped convince local and state officials to allocate the funds and make the commitment to acquire and convert the base to its current use. Located as it is in the populous

southeast Wisconsin-northeast Illinois area, Bong serves as an island of preservation and a place for thousands to get away from the urban setting.

In the mid-1940s, Sander found himself in the middle of the thorny issue of how to deal with Wisconsin's growing deer herd. As a Kenosha County delegate to the Wisconsin Conservation Congress, he was asked to be a member of a group that was to study serious deer over-browsing problems in northern Wisconsin. The group included Professor Aldo Leopold and representatives of the Wisconsin Department of Conservation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. As a result of their study in the Blue Mounds and Flag deer yards in northern Wisconsin, hunting regulations changed to include a permit system for harvesting a certain number of does each deer season. The group's efforts were met with disdain and disbelief in many quarters, but its scientific findings were solid.

Sander's association with Leopold, fellow UW-Madison professor and Conservation Hall of Fame inductee Joseph Hickey and other key figures in state conservation history are well documented.

His artistic talents were called upon to design the Passenger Pigeon Monument overlooking the Mississippi River in Wyalusing State Park. The monument was memorialized in Leopold's "Sand County Almanac," and Sander worked closely with Leopold and others in efforts to conceive the monument in 1941 at a Wisconsin Society for Ornithology meeting in Racine. The group also included communicator Walter Scott and artist Owen Gromme, both inductees in the Conservation Hall of Fame. The group created the first memorial to an extinct species. The efforts led Sander to carve a passenger pigeon out of wood, which he presented to the Leopold family in the 1940s. They donated it to the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Natural History Museum for an Aldo Leopold Exhibit.

The passenger pigeon isn't the only Sander sculpture at the UW-Stevens Point. "Sand County Almanac" refers to "The Good Oak." At a meeting of the Citizens Natural Resources Board in 1952, Sander, a charter member, was given a piece of the oak by Leopold's widow, Estelle. He carved a gavel out of the wood for the association, which has since been dedicated to the UW-Stevens Point Natural History Museum. The rest of the wood was used as bases for birds Sander carved for Scott, Hickey and Gromme.

Appreciation of big trees has grown over the past several decades in Wisconsin. Sander had a hand in this, too. He and Walter Scott were the state's first big tree hunters, working together on the effort as far back as the 1950s. Today there is a Wisconsin Big Tree Society, and scores of volunteers search out the state's largest and most historic trees.

Sander's wide range of interests also included archeology. He discovered a buried forest along the Lake Michigan shoreline in Kenosha County and wrote an abstract on his findings for the Wisconsin Academy Review. In 1992, two amateur archeologists uncovered the remains of a full-grown adult northern woolly mammoth in Kenosha County. A map drawn by Sander led them to the spot where they found the mammoth, in association with other archeological remains. Sander was awarded the Lapham Medal, presented for distinguished service in archeological research, for his contributions to the project.

The lengthy list of his accomplishments also includes:

- Organizing Arbor Day celebrations and tree planting programs for Kenosha schools, 4-H clubs and Boy Scout troops beginning in 1948 and leading to planting of 250,000 tree seedlings.
- Serving as a Kenosha County conservation warden for the DNR, beginning in 1949.
- Serving as vice president of the Wisconsin Conservation Congress from 1941-47.
- Holding numerous local, regional and state conservation and civic leadership positions.

Indeed, Phil Sander has led the life of a "Renaissance Man." In doing so, he has also embodied the spirit of a true "citizen conservationist."

PHIL H. SANDER
1906-

BIRTH: Sept. 10, 1902, Kenosha County.

OCCUPATIONAL

INFORMATION: Draftsman and designer of wood, steel and soft goods for Simmons Company in Kenosha for 37 years.
Plant Engineer at American Motors, Kenosha, 10 years.
Director, Kenosha County Historical Museum, 18 years.

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

AUTHOR

Sander authored dozens of publications, including newspaper and magazine reports, booklets, historical reviews and nature columns. Several of the reports appeared in the Wisconsin Academy Review.

Some titles include the following:

“Hastings Site,” for Wisconsin Archeologist (1961)

“Kenosha Sand Dunes,” for Wisconsin Academy Review (1969)

“Chiwaukee Prairie – Past and Present,” for the Second Midwest Prairie Conference (1970)

“Pike River Doomed,” booklet and newspaper report in Kenosha News (1971)

“Monument Reflections,” for The Passenger Pigeon, a magazine of The Wisconsin Society for Ornithology, (1977)

“Empty Skies,” for The Passenger Pigeon (1982)

“Petrifying Springs Park” booklet

“Leopold Recollections” booklet (1987)

“Memories of Grey Dawn Club,” for Wisconsin Natural Resources magazine (October 1996)

“Ripples from the Wetlands,” published by the Des Plaines Wetlands Conservancy (Fall 1997)

CONSERVATION AFFILIATIONS

Charter member of local Ducks Unlimited Chapter, 1839.

Helped to organize Kenosha County Conservation Club, 1938.

Compiled field list of Kenosha County birds for Kenosha Public Museum, 1948

Began organizing Arbor Day celebrations and tree planting programs for Kenosha area schools in 1948.

Helped organize tree-planting program for Kenosha 4-H clubs and Boy Scout troops in 1951, resulted in planting of 250,000 tree seedlings.

Led local fund-raising efforts to established coho salmon and lake trout rearing tank in Kenosha's Pennoyer Park, 1977.

Helped organize city of Kenosha's Memorial Arbor Day tree planting ceremonies in 1980.

Treasurer of Grey Dawn Gun Club, 1937-46.

President of Conservation Club of Kenosha County, 1939-40.

Vice President of Wisconsin Conservation Congress, 1941-47.

Kenosha County Conservation Officer, 1940-70.

Executive Director, Southeastern Wisconsin Sportsman's Federation, 1958-88.

Chairman, Kenosha Beautification Council, 1969-70.

Vice-Chairman, Kenosha County Nature Conservancy, 1978-80.

Vice-Chairman, Kenosha County Historical Society, 1979-86.

Member, board of directors, H. Chris Hyslop Foundation, 1975-present.

Member, board of directors, Chiwaukee Prairie Preservation Fund, 1984-present.

Honorary board member, Kenosha (Wisconsin) Landmarks Commission, 1979-present.

Chairman of Salvation Army Advisory Board, 1965-70

Vice-Chairman, Salvation Army Christmas Kettle & Bell Ringers, 1968-70.

Historian, Kenosha's Bradford High School Association.

Member, Archeology Society of Wisconsin, 1930-present

Member, The Nature Conservancy, 1970-present.

AWARDS AND HONORS

Boy Scouts of America Gold Honor Badge for Service to Wildlife in Wisconsin, 1942.

Nash Conservation Award, 1953.

Quill Conservation Alliance Award, 1956.

Wisconsin Wildlife Federation and National Wildlife Award, 1965.

Kenosha Citizens Anti-Pollution Committee Award, 1971.

Boy Scouts of America Silver Beaver Award, 1972.

Kenosha Wisconsin Citation, 1984.

Friends of the Kenosha Public Museum Award, 1986

Chiwaukee Prairie Preservation Fund Certificate of Honor, 1989.

State of Wisconsin Citation, 1989.

Nature Conservancy Chiwaukee Prairie Award, 1993.

Department of Natural Resources Conservation Medal, 1993 and 1994.

Ducks Unlimited Conservation Award, 1994.

Honorary Doctorate of Public Service from Carthage College for contributions to conservation, education and preservation efforts, 1995.

University of Wisconsin-Madison College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Honorary Recognition Award, 1990.

Recognition by Kenosha Chapter of Ducks Unlimited for 60 years of membership and support, 1998.

Honorary Life Member, Des Plaines River Chapter, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation,
1998.

Bill Berry
June 2003