

Carl Schurz

That Carl Schurz merits mention in American history is beyond discussion. A German immigrant, Schurz was a Civil War hero, a reformer and political activist. He was a writer and author, a brilliant orator and a keeper of company like Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Rutherford B. Hayes.

Schurz was a man of many interests and activities. Even when focusing only on his conservation activities, his importance to the cause is hard to summarize.

For instance, Schurz is credited with helping to bring about Civil Service reform. On the surface, this might not seem related to conservation. But the late Steward L. Udall put the two together in his book, "The Quiet Crisis." Udall noted that Schurz's first act as Secretary of the Interior (1877-81), "was to initiate an intensive study of forest depredations, and his first report, in 1877, singled out lumbermen who were 'not merely stealing trees, but whole forests.' "

Udall added that when Schurz set out to regulate these practices, he found trouble within his own agency. "...he soon discovered that his fieldmen in the General Land Office, who were supposed to be looking after the forests, were spoils appointees inclined to wink at trespass and timber theft."

As secretary, Schurz acted quickly to remove politics from everyday forest management. New job candidates and those proposed for promotion were required to take an examination, noted Schurz biographer Joseph Schafer ("Carl Schurz, Militant Liberal," 1930). "All applicants, no matter how politically strong their support might be, found themselves obliged to go through this testing process and to abide its results," Schafer wrote.

His causes were many, but historians give plenty of attention to Schurz's keen interest in conservation and land use. In his day, the duties of Interior Secretary were many, but "his heart was clearly in the two subjects of forestry and Indian affairs," wrote Schafer.

Schurz battled against views still prevalent at that time that saw "forests as an obstacle to civilization, fit only to be slaughtered and burned." Appreciation of forests for conserving soils and governing stream flowage was still absent in America of the 1870s, noted Schafer. The belief that timber resources were inexhaustible still prevailed.

“Schurz, by reason of his knowledge of world conditions, realized the tragic shortsightedness of such views and made it one of his special duties, as the officer charged with the oversight of the forests on public lands, to educate Congress and the people upon that subject,” wrote Schafer.

Schurz sought to end timber thievery, the taking by private operators of government timber. An unsympathetic Congress instead passed a law that all but legalized the practice in some states.

As secretary, Schurz succeeded in passing a measure to penalize those who set fires on forest lands. He exempted timber areas from homestead or preemption claims and regulated the sale of government wood to miners and settlers, who he said had been “denuding the national domain whenever and wherever they saw fit to do so.”

Schurz, like other early conservation figures, was ahead of his time. Historian Henry Clepper wrote “Crusade for Conservation, The Centennial History of the American Forestry Association.” In that history, he referred to Schurz as “the first authentic conservationist to hold cabinet rank.”

He would also be called “The Father of the Forest Reserves” for his efforts to rescue and reinvigorate America’s forests. It was Schurz’s job to educate, so that others would later act. As secretary, Schurz called for establishment of a system of federal forest reserves, initiation of reforestation practices, charges to the users of natural resources, stiff fines for willful setting of forest fires and empowerment of the president to appoint a commission “to study the terribly instructive laws and practices of other countries.” He also called for a campaign of public education on the conservation of forests, trees and soil.

Most of his agenda was squashed or ignored. “Deaf was Congress, and deaf the people seemed to be,” Schurz later wrote.

Secretary Schurz also encouraged the country to adopt land management practices for America’s West, based on the recommendations of Major John Wesley Powell. The Powell Plan was a broad vision for land use in the West, taking into consideration the need for a reservoir system for irrigation and many other land use practices employed today. Congress dallied on his recommendations, but Powell’s ideas were to be vindicated several times in the future. The Reclamation Act was passed in 1902. The

Dust Bowl era of the 1930s finally brought an introduction of many of the practices recommended by Powell.

In a letter to Herbert Welsh in 1899, Schurz reflected on his years as secretary: “What I did with regard to the public forests was simply to arrest devastation, in which I partially succeeded, and for which I was lustily denounced, and to strive from year to year to obtain from congress legislation for the protection of forests, in which I largely failed.”

Schurz continued to lobby the cause after leaving office. He sought to rally support for a national forest policy with the American Forestry Association, and momentum built for reform.

In 1891, Congress empowered the president to withdraw forest reserves from the public lands, creating the Forest Reservation Act. Presidents William Harrison, Grover Cleveland and, especially, Theodore Roosevelt, laid away 132 million acres as National Forests before Congress repealed the Forest Reservation Act in 1907. This is still the major part of the National Forest System.

It was Carl Schurz who first called for establishing federal forest reserves. He lived to see that happen.

Wisconsin is quick to claim Schurz, even though he lived here for but eight or nine years.

Schurz moved to Watertown from his native Germany in 1852 and stayed in the state until 1860. He immersed himself in many causes while in the state. He quickly became part of the anti-slavery movement. He ran unsuccessfully for lieutenant governor in 1857. He set up a law office in Milwaukee. He campaigned for Abraham Lincoln with both natives and foreign-born. He was a Wisconsin delegate to the National Republican Convention in Chicago.

But for a brief return to the state after serving as a general in the Union Army during the Civil War, that fairly well sums up the time Schurz actually spent in Wisconsin.

He was, of course, the first and only Interior Secretary from Wisconsin, and he lives on in the state’s history books. He and his wife, Margarethe, are both listed in the

standard reference, "Wisconsin Biographies." His three-volume "Reminiscences," holds a place in the Wisconsin section of state libraries to this day.

The Schurz home is a historic attraction in Watertown.

Margarethe Schurz is generally recognized as having established the first American kindergarten, in Watertown.

Like many early conservation figures, Schurz' main job would be to educate people about the need for change. By most accounts, the conservation movement wasn't born in America until the mid-19th century. As noted by historian Henry Clepper, Schurz was the first conservationist to be appointed to a cabinet position.

Schurz, like other early conservationists, must by necessity be measured in no small part by the deeds of those who followed. Such is the lot of people with vision and foresight beyond the normal scope.

CARL SCHURZ
1829-1906

BIRTH: March 2, 1829, in Liblar, Germany
DEATH: May 4, 1906, in New York City.
EDUCATION: University of Bonn, 1846-48.

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

Brigadier general, then major general in Union Army, participated in Battle of Gettysburg. Served in 1892-63.

Leader of democratic student union at University of Bonn in Germany.

Escaped from Prussian Army to live as political fugitive in Switzerland. Secretly entered Germany and successfully liberated a close friend from prison; won international acclaim.

Settled in Watertown, Wis., in 1854.

Involved in Wisconsin politics, including running for lieutenant governor (1857). Was elected chair of the Wisconsin delegation to the Republican National Convention in Chicago (1860). Campaigned for Lincoln's re-election in 1864. Was a U.S. Senator from Missouri from 1869-75.

Appointed envoy to Spain in 1860.

Secretary of the Interior from 1877-81. Opposed spoils system, advocated enlightened treatment of Indians, made Civil Service reforms, prosecuted forest/land thievery, proposed federal forest preserves and reforestation practices, enacted penalties for setting forest fires, established fees for natural resource users, proposed using natural resource conservation practices and laws of European countries.

Influenced American Forestry Association and other foresters, helping bring about adoption of 1891 Forest Reservation Act.

Wrote extensively throughout his life. He was an editor of Harper's Weekly from 1892-98, also edited New York Evening Post and The Nation. Published a history of the U.S., "The New South," and a biography of Henry Clay. Also wrote three-volume book of memoirs, "Reminiscences."

The Carl Schurz Society in Germany was founded in 1926 and remains active to this day
A Carl Schurz Memorial Foundation was formed in Chicago in 1930.

A large statute in Oshkosh, Wis., proclaims him to be the foremost German-American.

Was the subject of at least three major biographies.

An Internet search will direct user to several active Carl Schurz sites today.

Encyclopedias devote paragraphs to his life.