

George Wehrwein

George Wehrwein's conservation interests were many, but two stand out. He was a land economist -- an advocate of wise and efficient use of land. He was also concerned about soil conservation, and he deplored the depletion and misuse of this resource.

He spent most of his life in academic circles, primarily at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, but Wehrwein's influence would be felt well beyond the academic world.

He might be described as a collaborator, for many of the projects he worked on involved the combining of several disciplines or working with those from other backgrounds. An example: He collaborated with Aldo Leopold, a professor of wildlife management, political scientist John M. Gaust and other like-minded faculty at Madison to offer a distinctive interdisciplinary program in rural regional planning. He was an early advocate of this multidisciplinary approach.

Wehrwein's friendship and professional relationship with Leopold is fairly well documented. He is credited for helping to balance Leopold's views, given pragmatic realities. But beyond that, Wehrwein's accomplishments stand on their own.

Wehrwein was a Wisconsin native. Save for a few forays outside of the state early in his educational career, he spent the majority of his life here. He did serve as an extension teacher of marketing at the University of Texas for three years (1913-16) and held the same position at Washington State University (1917). He also earned an associated professorship at the State College of Pennsylvania in 1918, but he was to return to Wisconsin to earn his post-graduate degrees within a year. Save for a brief stint at Northwestern University, his life's work was accomplished from its base at UW-Madison.

Here he would focus on the emerging discipline of land economics. He wrote the first textbook on land economics. "Land Economics" was published in 1940. In it, he advanced the theory that land use policy can be used to make wise decisions about the use of natural resources.

He was the nation's leading teacher of land economics in the 1920s, '30s and '40s. It's estimated that more than 1,400 students enrolled in Wehrwein's land economics courses over the years.

Early economic literature often treated all land as if it was the same. Wehrwein's message was that other things must be taken into consideration.

"In other words the supply and demand of land is a function of how land responds when you try to do something with it, such as the difference between trying to grow corn in the northern and in the southern sections of Wisconsin, a fact commonly overlooked by economists," he wrote.

In the same respect, he made the case that land use considerations must be scientific and objective, something that conservationists didn't always consider.

"Whereas agricultural, forest and mineral lands are useful because they yield physical products, urban land is valuable merely because it furnishes space, standing room or extension."

Economics can be dry for the average person, but Wehrwein could at times bring the subject alive. His spin on agriculture and soil conservation: "Indestructible agricultural land is a myth, and the reason why it has been depleted and destroyed must be because it paid the farmer to do so. It is useless to argue that one should maintain and build up the fertility of the soil unless the farmer has a long-term interest in the soil."

"All Flesh Is Grass," A Wisconsin Public Radio series in 1976, devoted one of its programs to Wehrwein. It noted that Wehrwein's influence was felt well beyond university circles. "Despite his enormous contribution to ideas and concepts, Wehrwein was no ivory tower professor. He took an enormous leadership role in Wisconsin's largest land use problem, the cutover northern counties. His work in this area has led some to call Wehrwein the father of land use planning.

As for the northern lands, he had two ideas. They should be reforested whenever possible. "If the population should take a sudden twist upward, it is easy enough to convert any forest land into farms, but it is the work of generations to reverse the process," he wrote. "The second task should be the further development of recreational land... We have in our lakes, the Great Lakes, and our wooded areas an immense and valuable resource."

His interest in these matters led Wehrwein to work with state and local officials for ways to make useful thousands of acres of denuded, tax-delinquent land in the north.

He assisted the Wisconsin Committee on Forest Land Use and Wisconsin State Planning Board from 1935 until his death.

These efforts led to the establishment of county zoning, the first example of rural land use zoning in the nation. Some forested land was shifted to state and national reserves. A county forest program was developed as a way to get tax-delinquent land back into productive use. At the same time, a forest crop taxation program was devised to encourage continued private ownership and management of forests.

Wehrwein also worked on conservation and land use at the national level. He was a consultant to the federal government during the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and contributed to implementing the New Deal land use and conservation program.

His work at the national level included a pioneering article, "The Rural-Urban Fringe," published in the journal "Economic Geography," in 1942. It is credited with providing the theoretical framework for researchers worldwide who continue to this day to address the conflicts between rural land uses and urban expansion.

His colleagues in higher education credit Wehrwein for building a bridge between economics and conservation and another bridge between the pragmatic political world and the academic world.

In a memorial resolution after his death in 1945, his colleagues said this: "Professor Wehrwein was one of the best of teachers, due largely to the fact that wherever he went, whomever he saw, whatever he read contributed to his teaching. To him the world was full of his subject – man's relationship to the land."

GEORGE S. WEHRWEIN
1883-1945

BIRTH: Jan. 31, 1883, Newton, Manitowoc County, son of Adam and Dorothea Stoltenberg Wehrwein.

DEATH: Jan. 10, 1945, Madison.

EDUCATION: Manitowoc High School, Oshkosh Normal School, bachelor's degree from University of Wisconsin-Madison College of Agriculture. Master's Degree (1920) and Ph.D. from University of Wisconsin-Madison (1922).

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

Major interest was land economics. Taught land economics at University of Wisconsin-Madison, Northwestern, Colorado, Cornell and Chicago universities.

He was one of the first advocates of multidisciplinary education at UW-Madison and advocated multi-faced approach in natural resource planning.

Author of "Land Economics," first textbook on this subject in the nation. Wrote numerous articles for various journals, including "Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics," which he guided and brought under University of Wisconsin-Madison auspices.

Authority on land economics of the Bible, historical significance of Great Lakes, development of national land policies and problems of Wisconsin's northern cutover area. College of Agriculture circulars with the theme, "Make the Most of 'x' County Land." This came after zoning changes in 1929 extended county zoning powers to include agricultural, forest and recreational lands.

Assisted Wisconsin Committee on Forest Land Use and Wisconsin State Planning Board from 1935 until his death.

Served on Land Committee of National Resources Committee. Was also consulted to federal government on national land use and conservation programs.

Member of American Society of Planning Officials, of which he was vice president at the time of his death.

Appointed in 1935 by State Superintendent of Public Instruction to committee to develop instruction materials in field of conservation.

Early advocate of preventing settlement on forest lands, in effect, arguing against sprawl.
Also an advocate of using northern lands in Wisconsin for recreational purposes.
Authority in field of soil conservation. Wrote extensively on this subject. Served on
Erosion Subcommittee of Science Inquiry Committee at UW-Madison, 1933-35.

Friend, mentor and colleague of Aldo Leopold.

President of American Farm Economic Association, 1942.