

The Wisconsin Conservation Congress Gets the Gold



Still glitters after 50 years



The Wisconsin Conservation Congress is now 50 years young!

Bill Murphy,
Chairman, Wisconsin Conservation Congress

Certainly those people who first decided to try the theory of citizen involvement wanted to succeed but I suspect they would be surprised to see what we have today.

Congress members come from all corners of the state and every walk of life — business people, factory workers, resort owners, tavern keepers, farmers, students, professors, men and women. Their interests are no longer directed only to fishing and hunting. They spend as much time on environmental issues, clean water, acid rain, and solid waste control as their predecessors did on bag limits. It is not that traditional concerns are ignored but that all areas of life and natural resources today receive equal time from the Conservation Congress.

From the perspective of 25 years as a delegate from Columbia County and 12 years as state chairman I feel that the effort of the people who are elected to the Congress is something that can never be exceeded or ever equalled. Looking at these representatives from all over Wisconsin voicing the interests of their counties and of the plain people living there gives me a very warm feeling. They are not biologists, foresters, scientists, or fish managers but they talk from experience and after 50 years even the professionals listen. These people live on the land and know what they want and how to get it. They need only a vehicle to develop their opinions and voice their concerns and they have found it in the Congress.

Their views on all issues go right to the Board of Natural Resources. When that Board listens and compares the arguments of the people with those of the professionals, conservation is then balanced. Direct communication is thus established and the people have had their day.

One reason Wisconsin has been a leader in resource management is because it has been a leader in people relations through the Congress. When department management listens to the people and then makes regulations the rules are supported. When this isn't done turmoil results and programs are attacked. For the system to work, professional experts must accept the premise that people who live on the land have experienced views that merit discussion. Conservation is not simply a test-tube experiment, but a total combined effort between the experts and the people.

These 50 years have been good ones for Wisconsin and if the Congress continues to be used and listened to, the next 50 can be even better. A chance to continue to protect, nurture and develop our treasury of resources is what the Congress seeks most.

We are dedicated to the work we were assigned 50 years ago and to a similar distinguished effort for another 50 years.



A half century of resource democracy

This year marks 50 years of seat-of-the-pants democracy for the state's outdoor resources as practiced by the Wisconsin Conservation Congress. It has been a fullsome half century for the Congress' 375 elected delegates who have helped make near-revolutionary progress in almost every phase of resource management. They are an advisory body whose advice is usually taken and never lightly given.

The advice is arrived at through study and plain talk discussion that ranges from earthy eloquence to scholarly discourse. Members have an unsettling talent for picking out the foibles of bureaucracy. They have been the despair of resource managers and at the same time their best friend. Often accused of hampering progress, the Congress has made sure that every resource management issue is thoroughly debated. One of its architects, Ernie Swift, late director of the old Conservation Department said "By and large it is very cautious in its recommendations — sometimes overcautious — which in reality is a more commendable fault than that of indifference to the use of the state's great outdoor resources."

It takes time for the Congress to educate the bureaucrats and vice-versa. Because commendable conservatism is slow, year-to-year progress has sometimes seemed to be an incremental molasses. But a half-century perspective is eye-opening.

The big story at every meeting has always been deer. In the 40s and 50s militant buck-only attitudes prevailed in the Congress. But over the years wildlife managers and study committees worked together. Today a whole series of refinements are supported and the only arguments are over how many does should be taken in the various units and what administrative techniques to use. Former hot issues are now routine. Today there is no fox bounty; hunting bear is a trophy sport; lead shot is prohibited to prevent lead poisoning in waterfowl; there is a split season on ducks and a point system to protect certain species. Horicon marsh attracts a quarter of a million geese.

Wisconsin has a system of Public Hunting and Fishing grounds; there are duck, trout and salmon stamps to support trout stream rehabilitation, Great Lakes stocking and waterfowl habitat. The list of what's been accomplished is almost a recitation of current programs. Some came with trauma. Some without. The Congress was in the forefront of the battle to control water pollution and laws on the books today came because members helped sensitize the state.

Despite occasional pulling and hauling with DNR that almost breaks the rope, the Congress is usually there when it counts. In the late 60s when serious attempts were made to relegate resource management to a lesser role, Congress "Red Shirts" helped keep it from happening. Support of license fee increases for hunting and fishing is almost an article of faith. Their chairman, William Murphy, says "This support is in keeping with the Congress' philosophy of sportsmen paying their own way. We are not indebted to anyone."

Historically, first attempts at citizen involvement in the issues grew out of a series of public hearings on wildlife management conducted by the old Conservation Department. Several counties were represented at each session; attendance was large; meeting places were crowded. Many travelled far to listen to long hours of discussion. Many didn't have enough time to fully express themselves on complex issues that remained unresolved.

So, in the early 30s Directing Commissioner Ralph Immell, appointed an advisory committee — University of Wisconsin Professor Aldo Leopold, Chief Warden Harley MacKenzie and Superintendent of Game William F. Grimmer — to take a look at the problem. They proposed that elected county committees work with conservation wardens to make game surveys and recommend seasons.

Using this plan, the Conservation Department at first organized two public meetings in each of Wisconsin's 71 counties, one to elect county game committees and the other to evaluate game rules and make local recommendations.

In 1934 the game committees held nine district meetings to consider the department's game questionnaire. The next year responsibilities for fishing regulations were added and counties elected "fish and game committees." That same year the Congress' first statewide meeting was held.

One participant in the early Congress described matters succinctly, "There is no possibility that any uniform code of fish and game regulations will be entirely satisfactory to every resident of the state, but the aim was to frame the regulations in conformity with majority opinion wherever they fit in with a practical plan of administration."

Early Congress rosters showed diverse conservation interests with farm organizations and garden, hiking, bird watching, rod and gun and many other clubs represented. As early as 1938 the Congress interests were starting to broaden. One of its resolutions that year stated "There now exists a most urgent need for a better understanding by the public of the many phases of conservation of our natural resources and of the preservation and proper utilization of our forests, lakes, streams, lands and wildlife therein."

The tenth anniversary came during WWII, when "the Congress was kept alive largely in name with much reduced activity, since many of the members were occupied elsewhere." By the 25th anniversary, Congress machinery was again well oiled. But that same generation which brought renewed vigor after the war also planted seeds of this generation's key challenge.

In this the 50th year, demands on natural resources are being made by more people than ever before. To represent all wisely and still protect the resource is the job ahead. Chances are the Congress will see that it gets done.



View from the board: an eventful history

Dick Hemp
Secretary, Wisconsin Natural Resources Board

I was first elected to the Wisconsin Conservation Congress in 1943. This, according to historians, was its 10th year.

The chairman that year and several years before and after, was Dr. Hugo O. Schneiders, a Wausau dentist.

No Congress meeting ever had a more partial chairman. Sitting in the chair, he often interjected his own opinions during floor debates and frequently won his points.

When one delegate complained that Roberts' Rules of Order were not being observed, Schneiders' reply was: "Who is this guy Roberts? We're running this meeting according to Schneiders' Rules of Order."

But Hugo had charisma — lots of it. While he came across as forceful and decisive, his warm personality and good sense of humor tempered most of the harsh judgments he expressed against dissenters.

I served on the Congress for 11 years, seven on the Congress' Executive Council, first as secretary and then as chairman.

It was a decade in which we were preoccupied with one overriding, emotional question — how to manage the Wisconsin deer herd.

To some of us it was obvious that the deer herd, expanding rapidly under bucks-only seasons, had to be cropped back; to others, particularly those from the north and central counties, major deer territory at the time, it appeared equally convincing that harvesting does and fawns meant the end of the deer herd.



Dr. H.O. Schneiders

***Hugo Schneiders,
Phil Sander,
Al Walters, 1951***



1948

Deer yard
tour.

Trout
committee.



The fight between the two factions ebbed and flowed. In my first Congress meeting, the group voted to approve an antlerless deer season as recommended by a citizens' committee and the Wisconsin Conservation Department.

What came out of it was a season still remembered for its oddity. Ignoring all previous suggestions and recommendations, the Conservation Commission, forerunner of today's Natural Resources Board, enacted a split season — four days of buck hunting in 44 counties, then four days closed, and finally four days of antlerless deer hunting in 23 counties.

It was the first time in 24 years that does and fawns were legal game, and the 128,000-animal harvest became known as the "blood and guts" season by its deriders of which there were many.

In spite of what seemed like a great slaughter, the deer herd continued to proliferate under the forked-horn-bucks-only seasons that succeeded 1943.

Dr. Schneiders retired from the Congress in 1946. He was succeeded as chairman by Clarence Searles of Wood County. I was elected by my district to succeed Schneiders on the Executive Council.

The Congress study committee concept was introduced in 1948 during Searles' chairmanship with the blessing of Conservation Director Ernie Swift, who appointed Walter Scott as the first Congress liaison person.

Clarenece promptly dropped the hottest potato of the committee assignments in my lap by naming me chairman of what was then known as the "Deer Committee." The black bear, now included as a subject under today's Big Game Committee, in those years was just one level above being bountied, could be taken only during the deer season, and did not reach the status of a major game animal until the enactment of the special bear seasons some years later.

Our first Deer Committee, made up of nine members representative of various areas of the state and different philosophies, resolved, as a main activity, to tour major deer yards. In March of 1948, we spent eight days in northern counties doing just that, starting with Forest County and ending up in Douglas County.

The Committee saw enough of overbrowsed yards, dead deer, and deer weakened by malnutrition to arrive at a unanimous recommendation — a five day, any-deer season with sufficient closed areas to control the kill. It must be remembered that there were no other deer management tools available at the time; party permit and hunters' choice laws came later.

The committee recommendation was the main question on the 1948 questionnaire. It resulted in the most bitter, most emotional debate in Congress' history.

At the annual state Congress meetings in those years, the deer question was usually reserved for the evening session of the first day's agenda.

That year, debate on the deer question raged on for six hours. Numerous roll call votes were taken. No matter what the form of the question, they invariably came out with 36 counties in favor of the Deer Committee recommendation, 33 against, and two counties abstaining. Why did they abstain? On the vote at their county hearings, the question had come out as a tie. When it came to deer, no delegate dared stray from the vote of the folks back home.

While the five-day, any-deer recommendation was also accepted by the Conservation Commission on a split vote, it did not pass Governor Oscar Rennebohm's desk. (Administrative rule overview by legislative committees came later; in those years the governor's approval was required.)

It was an election year. Some of Rennebohm's political advertising asserted that he had "saved" the Wisconsin deer herd. But after the election, which he won handily, Rennebohm, who was really a perceptive, conservation-minded governor, sent out a signal that in 1949 he would be willing to sign an antlerless deer season order.

That is what we got in 1949, followed by two successive any-deer seasons in 1950 and 1951. The three-year harvest in the two-thirds of the state that was open totalled about 450,000 animals.

Some of the giants of an earlier Wisconsin conservation era were still around during my Congress years. I have mentioned Hugo Schneiders, Clarence Searles, and Ernie Swift. Among others, there were also Dr. Jake Riegel, Aldo Leopold, and Bill Aberg, who were serving on the Conservation Commission during that time; and from the Congress, Louis (Curley) Radke, Dodge County, a superb orator and founder of the Horicon Marsh refuge and wildlife area. Even the legendary H. W. MacKenzie, Department Director of an earlier period, came back as a Columbia County delegate during my stint as chairman.

We had our share of colorful individuals. Literally colorful was Henry (Red Shirt) Brandt, Sawyer County, whose brilliantly red wool flannel shirts stood out among the crowd of delegates at the annual Congress meetings. Invariably, these were held in the ballroom of the old Loraine Hotel, Madison, and invariably they brought on the first June hot spell, which Henry's shirt hardly helped cool.

Has the Conservation Congress changed much over the 40 years I have observed the organization? Not at all. Then, as now, I am impressed with the high caliber of individuals who served and are serving on it.

When I came on the Congress, the Sauk County delegation was headed by Vernon Thompson, later to become Wisconsin governor. Dr. Riegel, St. Croix County; John Lynch, Douglas County; Russ Stouffer, Washburn County; Herb Behnke, Shawano County; and John Lawton, Dane County, of my era, were later appointed to the Conservation Commission, or to its successor, the Natural Resources Board. Numerous Congress alumni went on to serve in the state legislature.

But let's not overlook the hundreds of individuals never making the headlines who have toiled in Congress ranks with distinction and honor.

Have the problems changed? Not really. Deer damage to crops is currently an overriding issue, but back in my Congress days we had the apple growers of Bayfield County, Oconto County muck farmers, and Wood County cranberry growers whose descriptions of deer damage influenced the trend toward more liberal deer seasons.

We had beaver-trout debates in those days. Opposing viewpoints were often aired by Dr. Bill Bauer, Rusk County, chairman of the first Trout Committee, and Harry Klemme, Manitowoc County, who headed the first Fur Committee.

We heard, and still hear, the accusation that Congress is interested in nothing but fish and game. But then, as now, there was an environmental awareness that has an outlet in Congress study committees.

After about the second year of study committee experience, the Executive Council in 1949 wanted a Pollution Committee and an Education Committee.

Then, as now, we groused about the Department's poor public relations image, and then, as now, we looked upon education as the tool through which we could lead the public to the promised land of enlightened resource management.

Then, as now, some Department staff people grumbled about the lack of comprehension in the Congress, and some Congress people criticized the lack of public awareness on the part of Department staff personnel.

Then, as now, the Congress rank and file tended to get bogged down on trivia and local questions.

The Wisconsin Conservation Congress represents public participation in resource questions at its most active and organized level. Because of grass roots involvement, Wisconsin has few, if any, equals in the quality of resource management.

In a democratic form of government, such as ours, policies can only become effective after acceptance by an informed public. The Congress experience, from which Congress delegates can learn from professionals, and the professionals can learn from the public, as represented by the Congress, has worked extremely well for fifty years. May it ever continue.



From the Secretary

C.D. Besadny
Secretary, DNR

As DNR's statutory citizen advisory body the Congress has an important role in developing critical conservation policies and programs. Citizen understanding and support are essential to maintain Wisconsin's rich natural heritage. We need the continued involvement of the Congress to both inform the public about issues and to give us advice as professional resource managers.

DNR and the Congress sometimes find themselves on different sides of the fence. That's to be expected. It's a healthy sign that the system works. In those instances, we, as a department, make a special effort to sit down with those most concerned and exchange positions. Frequently, differences are resolved through understanding and compromise. But in some cases the Natural Resources Board or the Legislature must weigh the differences and make a final decision.

On most occasions there is agreement between the Congress and resource management professionals and both help explain issues to other citizens. I personally am gratified to hear Congress members say from time to time that Wisconsin has "the best DNR in the country." I pledge to do all I can to maintain the quality.

On a more personal note, and as someone educated as a wildlife biologist who has spent much of his career involved in the DNR's scientific research effort, I would like to recognize and thank the many, many Congress members with whom I have worked over the years. Your understanding and advice have been gratifying and helpful.

As the secretary of an agency with professionals in numerous environmental, enforcement, conservation and service programs, I would like to thank you on their behalf for your personal interest in conservation. We are continually impressed that Congress members — and others — give so freely of their personal time and so unselfishly of their energies.

Congratulations on 50 years of service and my best wishes to each of you as we chart new and exciting courses for the future.



***"Its history is good.
Its presence is great."***

Vice Chairman Henry "Hank" Liebzeit

The Conservation Congress represents the people of Wisconsin in advising the Natural Resources Board. Our DNR is one of the best in the country because it is the only one that has this kind of citizen cooperation through a Conservation Congress.

The network of citizen cooperation begins at the local level. Spring conservation hearings are held in each county every year on the fourth Monday in April and Congress delegates are elected at these sessions as well. Only county citizens of voting age can become delegates or participate in choosing them.

County delegations consist of three regulars and two alternates — regulars are elected to three year terms, while alternates serve two years. Towns, cities and villages are allowed only one delegate at a time on the county delegation.

About a month after the county meetings, delegates from all 72 counties convene as the Wisconsin Conservation Congress. Delegations break down into 12 districts and each district elects two councillors to a one year term on the Executive Council.

The Council in turn elects a chairman, vice chairman and secretary and these three serve as an executive committee to assign study groups and appoint a councillor to chair each group.

In addition to picking Congress delegates, the April hearings may also pass resolutions or make official county suggestions which are forwarded to the DNR Congress coordinator.

These county recommendations are combined and categorized for review by the Congress rules committee. Recommendations of statewide interest are then assigned to study committees for further investigations in cooperation with DNR.

In January the Executive Council reviews committee findings and votes on recommendations. Those that pass are rewritten as Congress advisory questions.

This list of statewide, Congress-generated, advisory questions is combined with official DNR hearing proposals and sent to the spring hearings in April for action.

If a majority of counties pass Congress advisory questions they may appear as official DNR proposals the following April. DNR-generated proposals are also on the questionnaire for official hearing. When proposals pass, this "advice" is given to the Natural Resources Board. Usually rules and regulations are then changed. If not, there's always another public hearing...



*Ernie Swift
William Grimmer*



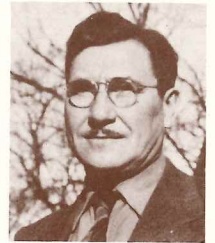
*Harley MacKenzie
Dr. J.A. Riegel*



*Charlie Smith
William Aberg*



*E.J. Vanderwall
Aldo Leopold*



The more things change — a 1944 deer yard tour

"Two years ago, at the Madison Conservation Congress meeting, chairmen from the deer populated counties were called for a special session. We were advised that many of our winter deer yards were severely overbrowsed; that we were headed for trouble unless a drastic herd reduction was made, a reduction of at least 150,000 deer. It was a startling bit of news. Few believed conditions warranted such action, but it was a belief based largely on opinion, as few had visited a deer yard in March. It was decided to let the matter drop for another year, to get more information. (In the meantime) a committee of nine was appointed by the Commission, to check the findings of the survey crew. The public was invited.

"I joined the committee with the many others, when the much publicized Flagg yard was checked. The committee was transported into the yard by team and sleigh. The survey crew had been working in the yard. Dead deer had been hauled to the roadway and grouped in piles. There was no need of leaving the sleigh to see plenty of dead deer. Lectures were given on overbrowsed yards, life sustaining foods, effects of malnutrition and so forth. Post mortems were held, with lectures anent. It was interesting, educational and quite convincing."

From a 1944 letter by Conservation Congress member Vic C. Wallin, Grandview, Bayfield County.



Look for the good results of this organization of and by the people on their Wisconsin landscape which they love so much. It's in the spring song of the cardinal, the dance of the cranes and prairie chickens, the deer among snow-covered pines at sunrise or a flock of canvasbacks over the marsh, and the nesting of trout and bass on clean waters. The future hope for Wisconsin's conservation movement lies in the hearts of its citizens who care enough to do something constructive to assure the future of its wildlife resources.

*the late Walter E. Scott,
former Congress Coordinator*



The Executive Council of the Wisconsin Conservation Congress, 1983-84: Right foreground, Francis "Bill" Murphy, chairman; seated next to him is Roger Britton, secretary and left, foreground, is Henry Liebzeit, vice-chairman. Others are, left to right, Terry Boho, Merlin Lindow, Herb Theisen, Dave Ladd, Will Maines, Pete Hahn, Bill Fisk, Norbert Mullaney, Loren Miller, Clyde Sundberg, John Kriha, Bill Lind, Gerald Lahner, Jim Boyd, Bill Cress, Roy Sebald, Ron Anton, John Ferguson, Harold Vonderheid and Art Matthias. Fred Baertschi is not shown.



*Larry Whiffen
Jack Lynch
Ted Jaeger*



*Ed Morse
John Cross
Elsie Wood*



*Ken Coyle
Wilbur Stites
Russ Neugebauer*

The first meeting ended by spending a good share of one day on the bullhead question. Many delegates went home shaking their heads and saying that such a system was doomed to failure....

Ten years have gone by since that first meeting. Conservation Congress has pretty much gone through the teething and adolescent stage and arrived at a maturity of thought and judgment after a decade.... It is an outstanding example of democracy in shirt sleeves — the old Town Meeting — American to the core.

These men who can be called just ordinary guys have proved they will not abuse their trust. They are dead serious regarding their job. They'll fight for their conservation principles at the drop of a hat. Its success lies in a few simple truths. It signifies the peoples's determination to protect what belongs to them; it signifies the broad interest of the commonwealth — the farmer, the doctor, the laborer, the banker — all meeting on a common ground of equality to help in a common cause. It is a rough and ready democracy. It shows a true love for those intrinsic values of life which money cannot buy. It shows an appreciation for the finest things in creation; it shows the determination of these men to pass on to their children and children's children the elements of life necessary to good living.

Ernie Swift
Wisconsin Conservation Bulletin
August, 1944

The time was ripe

1927

The Wisconsin Legislature creates a Conservation Commission. It is the first in the nation.

A Research Bureau is designated to acquire scientific information.

1929

Game Division of department appoints a state game observer for every county.

Aldo Leopold prepares game survey for Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturer's Institute. Many of the scientists, hunters, fishermen and other conservationists who contribute later become Conservation Congress members.

1931

Legislature assigns commission the authority to designate open seasons on upland game birds.

1933

Commission given further responsibility to regulate seasons, bag and size limits on all game and fish, and power to organize advisory committees.

Commission sponsors first public hearings at Spooner, Rhineland, Wisconsin Rapids and Madison to gather citizen opinion on proposed upland game bird, water fowl, and rabbit and hare regulations.

1934

The Wisconsin Game Committees assemble.

"We have an organization of cooperators unique in the United States and capable of doing much good for conservation," said Bill Grimmer Superintendent of Game.

The early years

1935

Game and Fish Committees hold first statewide meeting in Madison. This Congress is the first to review fishing regulations.

1936

Forerunner of the Executive Council is created when 10 delegates are selected to work with the department on a conservation program for the legislature.

1937

Counties are grouped together into districts.

1938

For the first time, county representatives are elected and public hearings on fish and game regulations are held at the same meeting.

Name "Conservation Committees" is given to county representatives.

1939

Wisconsin Conservation Congress becomes official title.

Executive council established with two representatives from each of the state districts. They elect Dr. H.O. Schneiders chairman.

1940

First constitution and bylaws developed.

C.A. Searles becomes first secretary.

1941

Phil Sander becomes first vice-chairman.

The nation enters WWII.

"The prospect of another Congress session next year was not discussed but it's anybody's guess as to whether the Congress will meet next summer. Much can happen during war time and no one can predict what we may be asked to do within the next 12 months or what the travel restrictions may be a year from now. At any rate, the Congress has been an educational influence. It gave the conservation department an opportunity to see the collected views of the counties on fish and game questions. It showed county delegates the many phases of conservation problems that might have seemed to be quite simple when viewed merely against a local background.

— Wisconsin Conservation Bulletin, "The 1942 Congress"

Modern times

1945

World War II ends.

1946

"Due to travel restrictions only the county meetings were held last year and the county recommendations were sent directly to the Conservation Department. But the need of the ironing out process of the Congress was felt and is therefore being reinstated this year."

1947

First study committees investigate deer, waterfowl, trout, ice fishing, furbearing animals and education.

1948

First Code of Procedure of the Wisconsin Conservation Congress and the Executive Conservation Council approved.

1949

Amendment to Code provides three-year terms for committeemen and two-year terms for alternates.

1951

First Sportmen's Leadership Conference held at Trees for Tomorrow, Eagle River.

1952

First club awards presented.

1961

Council officers designated as Executive Committee of the Council.

1972

Congress receives statutory recognition.

1984

Fiftieth anniversary!



Albert Stelter



Daniel Trainer, Sr.



Al Krzykowski

An early years council



Congress Creed

Let us work together to properly manage and wisely use our natural resources — our land, air, water, forests and wildlife — so that we may live in harmony with the earth and its creatures, now and forevermore.



*Prepared by Kendra Nelson, editorial assistant
Wisconsin Natural Resources Magazine*