

# Gordon A. Bubolz

## A. INTERESTS/ACTIVITIES IN CONSERVATION

Gordon A. Bubolz was a prominent insurance executive in a region where paper manufacturing was king and the Fox River was a convenient way to remove the waste. But another body of water, a small, flooded woodlot near Seymour, Wis., had shaped his outlook as a boy. As a business leader, he used his position to call attention to the need for cleanup of the Fox. During 8½ years in the Wisconsin Senate, he took part in creation of the Department of Natural Resources, championed regional resource planning, fought for a set-aside for acquisition of wild areas and co-authored early water protection legislation. During his career, he is credited with leading or helping land acquisition efforts for 10 natural areas,<sup>(1)</sup> most well after his Senate service working through a nonprofit he established. The acquisitions ranged from public hunting land to High Cliff State Park.<sup>(2)</sup>



Gordon Bubolz was born Sept. 10, 1905, to Julius and Amelia Bubolz, a German immigrant farm family in the Town of Cicero near Seymour, Wis. Julius had founded Farmers Home Mutual Hail, Tornado and Cyclone Insurance Company of Seymour, Wis., five years earlier, after a devastating windstorm killed more than 100 people and injured 500 others in western Wisconsin.<sup>(3)</sup> Gordon's daughter, Milly Rugland of Appleton, remembers him saying that he developed his love of nature by sitting at the edge of a swampy woodlot on the family farm to be alone with his thoughts.

Gordon earned an undergraduate degree at Lawrence College in Appleton. He went on to study at Columbus School of Business in Columbus, Ohio; the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania; and Ohio State University for Insurance Management. He studied law at George Washington University and earned a law degree from the University of Wisconsin.<sup>(4)</sup> He was an accounting instructor at Lawrence from 1937-38 and an economist for the Farm Credit Administration, later joining an Appleton law firm.

Gordon succeeded his father as Home Mutual's top executive. Still a mutual company, the business is now called SECURA, with annual revenue of \$407 million. SECURA's 300,000-square-foot new home office built in 2019 included locally sourced materials, motion-activated lighting and a field of 2,140 solar panels to honor, the company said, its environmental heritage in the person of Gordon Bubolz.<sup>(5)</sup>

## B. TYPES OF CONTRIBUTIONS

As a state senator for District 14 from 1945-53, Bubolz crusaded for welfare reform and making government more efficient, while also pioneering clean air and water legislation. He served on the state Conservation Commission and chaired the advisory council of the Department of Resource Development, bodies that provided oversight for the predecessors of the Department of Natural Resources. He worked for a 1% state sales tax approved for purchase of wilderness lands and river headwaters.<sup>(6)</sup> He served on the Legislature's Joint Water Resource Committee and co-authored legislation to implement in Wisconsin provisions of the federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1948. He

advocated for regional planning commissions to improve planning for water, sewer and transportation services and control sprawl. He was the first to chair what is now the East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission.

### C. IMPACT OF CONSERVATION EFFORTS AT VARIOUS LEVELS

Bubolz did his most enduring work after his Senate tenure. He played a key role in the acquisition of land for 10 natural areas, a record cited in a 1991 Senate Joint Resolution approved following his death. He accomplished most of the conservation work through a nonprofit called Natural Areas Preservation Inc. (NAPI), which he established in 1974 and chaired. Bubolz told Woodland Dunes founding naturalist Bernie Brouchoud that he wanted a nature center in all 72 counties.<sup>(7)</sup> He didn't see that day, but he did more than anyone to get closer to that goal. The 10 areas he is recognized for preserving for public use stretch across northeast Wisconsin. Consequently, he is less known in other areas of the state but still influenced their lives by his legislative work creating regional planning commissions that work in all areas of the state controlling sprawl and the infrastructure costs that come with it. The natural areas that came of his efforts include:

1. **Gordon Bubolz Nature Preserve, Appleton:** This important lowland white cedar forest was purchased by Bubolz's Natural Areas Preservation Inc. (NAPI) nearly 50 years ago — \$33,000 for 488 acres. NAPI's executive committee temporarily removed Bubolz as chair and made him leave the meeting room to force him to accept the nature center being named after him. The preserve now features 775 acres and operates without any government subsidy, as Bubolz preferred.
2. **High Cliff State Park, Sherwood:** Bubolz led a private effort in the mid-1950s, prior to NAPI, to acquire the land on the north shore of Lake Winnebago after a limestone mining operation there closed. When state officials said they didn't have the money to acquire the lakefront land, Bubolz led a grassroots fundraising effort. He successfully argued the future park was part of the Kettle Moraine and therefore eligible to use some of \$4.5 million set aside in a fund for land acquisition for that novel geologic area. High Cliff State Park opened in 1957.
3. **Fallen Timbers Environmental Education Center, Seymour:** The 440-acre nature center between Black Creek and Seymour is owned by six school districts and primarily used by school groups. It was acquired for \$60,000 in 1975, mostly from Fort Howard Paper Co. with assistance from Bubolz.
4. **Woodland Dunes Nature Center and Preserve, Manitowoc/Two Rivers:** Local advocates worked with NAPI to acquire the first 40 acres of this preserve in 1974 at a cost of \$6,000. Bernie Brouchoud, an avid birder, became the nature center's first executive director and served for 28 years with his compensation coming from a position Bubolz created for him at the insurance company.
5. **Waukau Creek Nature Preserve, Omro:** This walleye spawning grounds on Rush Creek connects Rush Lake with the upper Fox River through steep-walled ravines. NAPI bought the land and gave it to Winnebago County, and a 50-acre park was dedicated in 1975, with Bubolz in attendance.
6. **Hobbs Woods Nature Area, Fond du Lac:** In the mid-1970s, NAPI and the Winnebago County Conservation Club raised \$14,000 of the \$55,000 purchase price for 50 acres along Parson's Creek, with Fond du Lac County covering the balance.

7. **Mosquito Hill Nature Center, New London:** The county-owned nature center features a striking hill rising above the otherwise flat area of Outagamie County that was formed by ancient volcanic activity. It includes 430 acres of land along the Wolf River, more than half of which was purchased in 1975 with help from NAPI.
8. **Hayman Falls County Park, Marion:** A 54-acre parcel on the Embarrass River in Shawano County was donated by Wisconsin Electric Power Company, following negotiations facilitated by Bubolz. Local officials were hesitant to accept the land over concerns about a waterfall on the property. Bubolz got WEPCO to kick in extra cash to cover any potential claims.
9. **Mount Morris Hills County Park, Mt. Morris:** At 383 acres, this wooded park accounts for more than half the county park land in Waushara County. It was acquired in the early 1960s through the efforts of a local group known as Mount Morris Hills Inc., aided by Bubolz.
10. **Mukwa Wildlife Area, New London:** This marshy waterfowl hunting area in the Town of Mukwa was created with help from Bubolz. The Wisconsin Conservation Commission acquired it in 1964 to develop a waterfowl impoundment, but prohibitive costs and flood implications for the city of New London prevented the impoundment from moving forward.

#### **D. CONTRIBUTIONS AFFECTING A WIDE RANGE OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND THEIR USE**

Bubolz's contributions were both legislative and philanthropic. He worked for legislation to improve water quality and control sprawl, but also did the practical work of negotiating purchase prices with farmers for special land that would be valued by the public as a recreational resource. Keep in mind, his work both as a state senator and as the president of NAPI came mostly in addition to his duties as the top executive of a growing insurance company.

#### **E. RELATION TO OTHERS**

Liberal Gaylord Nelson, Wisconsin governor, U.S. senator and Earth Day founder, was a friend, despite their party differences. The two would meet often, sometimes with Republican former Gov. Warren Knowles, who also served with Bubolz as a state senator.<sup>(7)</sup>

#### **F. SUMMARY OF MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS TO ADVANCING CONSERVATION**

Even most Fox Valley residents would be surprised to learn the far-reaching and lasting benefit for conservation of public recreation and environmental education lands accomplished by an insurance executive, lawyer and former Republican state senator named Gordon A. Bubolz. Most would associate him with the nature center in the Town of Grand Chute that bears his name, but not realize the essential role he played as the volunteer leader of the nonprofit Natural Areas Preservation Inc. to purchase the land for the Gordon A. Bubolz Nature Preserve and most of nine other outdoor recreation and education properties, including High Cliff State Park, perennially among the top 10 most visited state parks. People who enjoy a hike or attend a seminar at nature centers in Appleton, New London, Seymour or Manitowoc owe him thanks, as do people listening to the roar of waterfalls at Hayman Falls County Park or walking between the soaring cliffs at Waukau Creek Nature Preserve. Duck hunters at the Mukwa Marsh and trout enthusiasts at Hobbs Woods should be tipping their caps to him. Before most of the land acquisitions, Bubolz used the prominence of his position as a top insurance executive to call for

paper companies that formed the base of the local economy to clean up the pollution they caused in the Fox River. That stance brought threats to his family that led to his daughter being taken to school in a police squad car. He took his concern for clean water with him to Madison where he advanced early water quality legislation and helped put in place the groundwork for what became the Department of Natural Resources. His leadership in the creation of regional planning commissions to oversee development of urban infrastructure on a watershed basis earned him board chair honors for 10 years for the first one – the Wolf River Basin Regional Planning Commission, now East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission. Gordon Bubolz’s long career and personal commitment to conserving the best of nature for everyone also brought him these honors and awards:

- Gordon A. Bubolz Nature Preserve near Appleton named in his honor, 1971.
- National Wildlife Federation Conservationist of the Year, 1976, nominated by Gaylord Nelson.
- Wisconsin Wildlife Federation Conservationist of the Year, 1977.
- Special citation by the Wisconsin Legislature for “Outstanding Achievement in the Field of Conservation and Ecology,” 1977.
- Named a “Conservation Pioneer” by the UW Department of Agriculture, 1978.

Gordon Bubolz died Oct. 12, 1990, in Appleton of pneumonia. He was 85. A scholarship was created in his memory at Wisconsin Wildlife Federation and still assists students studying conservation fields.

*“To succeed, a natural resources conservation and development program cannot be just another arm of the government. It must be an instrument for participation and expression of the people’s needs, their wills and their human aspirations.”*

– Gordon A. Bubolz, Wisconsin Academy Review, Summer 1967

#### FOOTNOTES

(1) Senate Joint Resolution #19, 1991.

(2) “Initiating the Administrative Rule Making Process in Wisconsin -- The Conservation Commission,” Donald E. Boles, Marquette Law Review, Spring 1956: “At the May 14, 1954 meeting of the (Conservation) Commission, a group headed by ex-Senator Bubolz appeared to urge the adoption of a rule creating the High Cliff State Forest Park on Lake Winnebago. After listening to a detailed presentation of the merits of this proposal by the senator, the commission unanimously voted to adopt the rule establishing this forest park.”

(3) Insurance Journal, March 25, 2015.

(4) Obituary of Gordon A. Bubolz, The Post-Crescent, Oct. 14, 1990, Page 53.

(5) SECURA.net

(6) “Once upon a time -- Gordon A. Bubolz: His Life and Vision, Christian Layman, Family Man, Businessman, Statesman, Conservationist, 1905-1990,” by Gordon A. Bubolz with Mary Ellen Ducklow, Hardcover – December 31, 1991.

(7) Interview with Bernie Brochoud, “Natural Leader, Natural Champion,” by David Horst, Wisconsin Natural Resources Magazine, Spring 2018.

(8) Interviews with daughter Amelia “Milly” Rugland and son John Bubolz.