

LOCAL

Fox Cities businessman, senator Gordon Bubolz to be inducted into Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame



Jake Prinsen

Appleton Post-Crescent

Published 6:02 a.m. CT March 1, 2022

APPLETON – Milly Rugland remembers watching the Fox River when she was a child as ribbons of colored foam drifted past, green, pink and yellow.

Back then, it was an industrial river traversed by coal barges, polluted by paper mills and farm runoff.

There were no fish, other than resilient carp, and mothers would tell their children not to put even their feet in the water. One industry leader in the 1960s called it nothing more than a high-class sewer.

“Most people don’t realize how polluted the waters were,” Rugland said. “They don’t remember foam and coal barges, dead fish floating in Lake Winnebago, but it was really nasty.”

Rugland’s father, Gordon Bubolz, a prominent businessman in the Fox Cities and conservative state senator, saw value in the state’s natural resources and used his position to help clean up the waters. A conservationist at heart, Bubolz often said he felt the need to preserve the waters and land because “God doesn’t make it anymore.”

“He was in business circles with people who were running the paper mills, but he was very vocal about the fact that the paper mills polluted the Fox River, and something needed to be done,” said Dave Horst, a nature columnist and environmental grant writer for the Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region.

The Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame will posthumously honor Bubolz, who died in 1990, with a virtual induction ceremony for his contributions to restore the river and for

raising funds to preserve more than 4,600 acres of public land across the state. He'll join Alren Christenson and Kathleen Falk as 2022 inductees.

Horst, who wrote the nomination for Bubolz, said he was drawn to research the man because of the opposing forces he represented. He was a businessman and a conservative, and he was known to work with liberal politicians like Sen. Gaylord Nelson, who created Earth Day, and conservative Wisconsin governor Warren Knowles.

"Party positions or party membership didn't matter to him," said his son, John Bubolz. "It was about who people were, what their beliefs were and ideas they had in common."

Bubolz was so outspoken in his desire to restore the Fox River that he had to send his daughter to school with a police escort. Rugland said she wasn't exactly sure what was going on at the time, but she remembers people felt strongly that environmental regulations would be the death knell for the paper industry.

"I was 10, and I remember one morning my parents came to me and said, 'You're going to get a special ride to school today,'" Rugland said. "It was unmarked cars, and it didn't last very long, but there were definitely threats made against our family."

Bubolz was born in 1905 and grew up on a farm in northeast Wisconsin with five brothers and six sisters. His father started an insurance company in 1900 after a devastating windstorm hit the state in 1899.

Bubolz graduated from Lawrence University, studied business and insurance in Ohio and Pennsylvania and earned a law degree from the University of Wisconsin. He would go on to succeed his father as head of the insurance company, which is now called Secura.

John Bubolz said he believes his father's passion for conservation came from his early life on the farm.

"He knew the importance of the land and the need to preserve it," he said. "Especially land that was in jeopardy of being developed."

Bubolz served as a state senator from 1945 to 1953, during which he was on the state Conservation Commission and chaired the advisory council of the Department of Resource Development. It provided oversight for the predecessors of the DNR.

He also served on the Legislature's Joint Water Resource Committee and co-authored legislation to implement in Wisconsin's provisions of the federal Water Pollution Control Act

of 1948. He was the first to chair what is now called the East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission.

Rugland said her father was like a sponge, absorbing information on environmental causes. He believed that living things were interconnected, and he was excited to learn how things affect one another. Rugland remembers her father working with University of Wisconsin scientists to study how wetlands would impact future generations.

“He walked in and said, ‘Do you know what wetlands are? They’re nature’s sponges — do you know what they do?’” Rugland said. “It was like telling a kid they could raid a candy shop. He was so excited, and he was excited about everything he tried to do.”

Following his work in the state Senate, Bubolz started a nonprofit called Natural Areas Preservation Incorporated, or NAPI, which found areas with ecological significance to educate the public about conservation.

In 1990, he was recognized as a key fundraiser and organizer for the state to create four nature centers, three wildlife areas, two county parks and High Cliff State Park.

Bubolz’s son and daughter agree their father wasn’t a man who sought recognition. However, his induction to the conservation hall of fame brings to life a quote that he often referred to.

“That which we do for ourselves dies with us. That which we do for others lives on.”

Bubolz worked to preserve more than 4,600 acres of public land. Below is a list of the properties Bubolz helped establish. The information was compiled by Horst for the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame.

- 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

Contact Jake Prinsen at jprinsen@gannett.com. Follow him on Twitter at [@PrinsenJake](https://twitter.com/PrinsenJake).