

Russell G Lynch

In 1929, The Milwaukee Journal ran a lengthy story exposing questionable practices of commercial fishermen on Lake Michigan. The article documented that while fishing season was supposedly closed during spawning, commercial fishermen were actually making huge hauls of fish.

The article caused an uproar in the commercial fishing community, and put the Milwaukee Journal at odds with state politicians who wanted to look the other way.

The author of the article was Russell G. Lynch, a 30-year-old reporter who had been working city and state news beats. His fearless coverage of this resource issue was a harbinger of things to come. Lynch would become the nation's first full-time natural resources reporter later in his career and would turn out hundreds of stories on an expansive array of topics. He focused on resource issues in Wisconsin and the U.S., and his stories sometimes brought major change and often drew national attention.

Lynch would go on to become the first chairman of the reorganized Wisconsin Natural Resources Board, appointed by Gov. Warren Knowles in 1967. He would earn honors and accolades while speaking forcefully and fearlessly on resources issues.

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel library includes hundreds of examples of his work, including his earliest investigative journalism efforts, which were sure signs of what was to come. Much of the material in this narrative comes from the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel library. Other background information was supplied by Lynch's son, Richard, Lake Tomahawk.

Russell Lynch, a Racine native, had in his pocket a high school diploma and a few years of reporting experience in his hometown and LaPorte, Ind., when the Milwaukee Journal hired him as a rewrite man in 1922. Soon he was on the road, doing tough investigative pieces that packed a punch. He exposed Prohibition-era corruption and vice in Hurley and Green Bay. His piece on Hurley was included in a national crime investigation report to Congress. The expose on Green Bay led to retaliation against The Journal, including the arrests of Journal truck drivers.

His 1928 series of articles on Ku Klux Klan activities in Wisconsin led to the demise of a gubernatorial candidate who had ties to the Klan. His father “gave no quarter” to activities like those of the Klan, recalled his son. “We had a color-blind house. One of his best friends was Joe Wong, who ran a Chinese restaurant up on 48th and North,” Richard Lynch recalled. “They used to go fishing in Mexico. They laughed about an Irishman and a Chinaman going fishing in Mexico.”

The Journal named him Lynch sports editor in 1933, and he settled into more than two decades of sports reporting and editing.

He oversaw the creation of a board of outdoor writers to contribute articles to the sports section. The Milwaukee Journal had a rich history of commitment to conservation, beginning with its founder, Lucius Nieman, who was a conservationist.

The expansion of outdoor writing came in the 1930s, and Lynch oversaw its enactment. That led to the hiring of future Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame inductee Gordon MacQuarrie as the first full-time outdoor writer and Mel Ellis as the second.

Lynch’s work in sports drew its share of attention, too. He was credited with bringing about the move of the National League Boston Braves to Milwaukee in 1953. A series of articles he wrote in 1948 led to the resignation of Harry Stuhldreher as football coach of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

But in 1956, he requested and was granted a job change. He would become what is believed to be the first full-time natural resources reporter on a newspaper in the U.S.

For the next eight years, Lynch was a prolific writer on virtually every natural resources topic imaginable.

His everyday efforts, some of them recounted here, helped to inform and educate a broad readership about natural resources issues and how people were affected by those issues.

Here are some examples of the hundreds of stories he produced, based on records in the Milwaukee Journal library:

Water pollution in Wisconsin, the future of Wisconsin’s state parks, the danger of atomic energy radiation, the growth of nature centers, dam projects, flood control, sea water conversion efforts in California, Great Lakes pollution, soil conservation, wetlands

destruction, threats to the Kettle Moraine State Forest, lamprey eels in Lake Michigan, state recreation needs, watershed improvement, poaching in Wisconsin.

He also wrote about the possibility of boat licensing in the state, Alaskan wolf watching, farms in Wisconsin using the federal Conservation Reserve Program, pond building as a growing and beneficial trend on Wisconsin farms, the advent of legalized trolling on Wisconsin lakes, and the rush to buy up lakefront property in Wisconsin.

Assignments took him to Alaska and Florida, where he reported on resources issues, to the American west, where he reported on water problems and overgrazing, and to the Great Plains, where he covered wetlands issues.

His stories were frequently in-depth pieces that thoroughly explored often complex issues and made them understandable for a general audience.

Lynch penned a series of articles titled “Ditches, Dust and Ducks” in 1960. The stories documented the fact that federal conservation dollars were being used to subsidize drainage in the Dakota wetlands. The articles were circulated nationally, included extensive reprinting and circulation by the National Wildlife Federation. “The series led to a new federal law signed by then President Kennedy to curb drainage subsidies. It was followed by another law giving U.S. duck stamp revenue for wetland purchases,” the Milwaukee Journal reported in a story about Lynch’s career.

Even before taking the fulltime natural resources reporting position, Lynch was the author of a series of articles in 1954, exposing the fact that the Conservation Commission regularly held two types of meetings – one public and one secret – and kept two sets of minutes.

He also wrote series on forest insects (reprinted and distributed by the National Wildlife Federation and National Agrochemical Association), watershed improvement, military land grabs and the impact of the national highway program on the land.

His early coverage of lakefront development and sprawl gave Wisconsin readers their first tastes of issues that would challenge the state in future generations.

He was also the author of a comprehensive analysis of water problems across the United States. The 61-page publication was written for the National Wildlife Federation.

Lynch's work in the area of conservation was rewarded with many awards and commendations, as listed in the accompanying biography. Of note is the 1963 Thomas L. Stokes Award, the highest award presented for conservation writing in America.

A year after winning the Stokes award, Lynch retired from the Milwaukee Journal. That launched him on a second career of sorts. Controversy soon followed.

About the time of his retirement, Wisconsin was reviewing its conservation activities and the duties of its citizens Conservation Commission. The Kellett Committee, appointed to study the matter, proposed reorganization and creation of a single department to oversee what had been separate functions – fish and game management, and environmental protection.

Lynch became an outspoken foe of the plan. Lynch was a member of the Resource Development Board, which oversaw the activities of the Department of Resource Development, charged with environmental protection in the state.

He believed that environmental matters wouldn't receive due attention in the combined department. At one point, he spoke to a group of conservationists at a rally and accused the Kellett Committee of "either ignorance or arrogance" in seeking to abolish the Conservation Commission and merger functions.

This didn't set well with some Legislators who favored the plan, and when Gov. Warren Knowles sought to appoint Lynch to the new Natural Resources Board in 1966, the state Senate held up the confirmation.

Eventually he was confirmed, and when the new Natural Resources Board was created the following year, Lynch was named its first chairman. He served from 1967 to January 1970, leading the board at a key time in the birth of a new agency, the DNR.

He would later be named president of the Wisconsin Age Park and Trail Foundation, a position he held from 1971-74.

Lynch's post-newspaper career was marked by the kind of outspokenness that he displayed in reaction to the Kellett recommendations. The Milwaukee Journal archives tell the story of this colorful chapter of Lynch's life.

When Gov. Patrick Lucey proposed in 1972 going to a cabinet system to oversee the DNR, Lynch erupted. In a guest editorial in the Milwaukee Journal, he wrote: "The citizen board system keeps politics from becoming too dominant, protects agency chiefs

from pressure and orders behind the scenes... What kind of man would take a state cabinet post that he could expect to end with advent of a new governor – or if he stood up, perhaps, against pressure?”

In speeches and in writing, he deplored too much research and planning and not enough activity on resource matters.

“If technology could be permitted to plunge ahead, making mistakes to achieve progress, surely we can risk some mistakes in taking action to remedy the damage and halt the destruction that technology has inflicted upon us.” In one guest editorial, he said he was led to “wonder seriously if our form of government is able to function rapidly enough to cope with environmental problems.” He cited the spending of millions of dollars on waste treatment plants “which are inadequate and actually may be outmoded long before they are worn out.”

He also argued for changes in land use: “Recreation projects should be given the same protection by law that has been given future highway routes – restricting landowners to existing land uses and requiring them, when contemplating sale, to offer their land to the state. But legislators do not like this idea, so we will continue to have subdivisions laid out where public use has been planned.” Further, he argued that “Recreation in its essential meaning is not fun and games; it is refreshing of strength and spirits after toil.”

Speaking to the Sierra Club in 1964, Lynch called town and county powers “the greatest obstacle to proper management and protection of natural resources in Wisconsin.” He added, “Rural people stubbornly defend individual rights even when individual acts will destroy assets of immeasurable value that belong to all of us.”

On a panel about public lands in California in 1963, Lynch told a roomful of livestock ranchers that they had better get used to the idea that the rest of the nation would have a say in the management of public lands in the West. He invited western livestock interests to participate in the process “in a pliant mood, not with stubborn insistence on having their own way.”

When he thought he was right, Lynch was fearless in delivering his message. In 1968, he told a state gathering of real estate brokers and appraisers that they had to be more responsible in Wisconsin’s land and water resource management.

“It is surprising that you have not realized before that it is in your own interest to protect the environment from abuses,” he said. “You are environmental managers of a sort,” he said. Then he told the group that its code of ethics should “include a provision for protecting the public interest in natural resources.”

Richard Lynch recalled that his father often brought home big bundles of letters from the newspaper office. “My mother would say, ‘Oh Russ, none of these people like you.’ He would say, ‘I like to hear the dogs bark.’ ”

His career in newspaper and conservation work show that those weren’t idle words.

RUSSELL G. LYNCH
1899-1979

BIRTH: June 27, 1899, Racine

DEATH: May 11, 1979, Milwaukee

EDUCATION: Racine High School

MILITARY SERVICE: U.S. Navy (served briefly after high school, was discharged because of poor vision).

HONORS:

Winner, Thomas L. Stokes Award, 1963. This is the foremost national award for conservation writing. Lynch also received second-place (1960) and honorable mention (1963 awards in earlier years and received a special commendation in 1959.

Award of Merit, American Association of Conservation Information (1972).

Soil Conservation Society of America Merit Award to Milwaukee Journal based on a series Lynch wrote on public land.

Merit Award, Resource Development Professional Employees Association, Wisconsin Conservation Department (1964).

Gordon MacQuarrie Medallion for conservation writing.

Honored by Milwaukee Chapter, Izaak Walton League (1964).

Wisconsin Water Conservation Award (1967).

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

Sports editor, reporter for newspapers in Racine, Wis., and LaPorte, Ind.

Joined Milwaukee Journal as rewrite man, 1922.

Worked on city and state news, became sports editor in 1933.

Said to have major role in move of National League Braves to Milwaukee in 1953.

Named country's first full-time natural resources reporter, 1956. Covered natural resources until 1964, when he retired.

His articles, "Ditches, Dust and Ducks" and "Our Growing Water Problems," attracted national attention and action after he switched to conservation writing.

Wrote several hundred stories on natural resources issues while working the natural resources beat.

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel library includes more than 300 cross references for articles he wrote on natural resources.

Author: "Our Growing Water Problems," a comprehensive publication written for the National Wildlife Federation."

Author: "The Milwaukee Braves," 1954, with Harold Kaese.

Appointed by Gov. Warren P. Knowles to Wisconsin Natural Resources Development Board, 1966.

Named first chairman of newly reorganized Natural Resources Board, 1967. Served until Jan. 15, 1970.

President, Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation, 1971-74.