

## Some Remembrances of Dr. George C. Becker

by Mike Dombeck

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Standing in the long slow registration line at college, I was a young student fresh out of Hayward High School in 1966. A robust, barrel-chested middle-aged man with a full head of dark hair and neatly dressed in a white shirt and tie said, "Can I help you?" I handed over my registration slip. He glanced at it, and in an energetic voice he said, "Yes, we still have seats left in general zoology." As he handed me a perforated oblong computer punch card, he asked, "By the way, Dombeck, where are you from?"

Classes started nearly a month later. As I walked into my first general zoology lecture, a friendly booming voice yelled, "Hello Mike Dombeck, how are things in Hayward?" I looked up surprised, wondering how he knew who I was. That was my second encounter with George Becker, who would later become my teacher, advisor, mentor, fishing partner, and life-long friend. There were about 60 students in the zoology class. He knew every student's name and had the incredible capacity to remember the names of several thousand students his entire life.

George Becker approached all endeavors with boundless energy and tremendous enthusiasm. He possessed a rare intellect and during his life mastered the arts, letters, and sciences. He mastered the violin as a child and played in the Stevens Point Symphony Orchestra as an adult. He taught English, German, Latin and Greek. And his scientific works were far too many to list here. His seminal work was the monumental 1,052 page *Fishes of Wisconsin*. It remains the definitive work of its kind, the ultimate source of information in the State, written for both the scientist and the angler.

George Becker's skill as a teacher was incredible. His enthusiasm was infectious. After a few weeks in Dr. Becker's class, there was no doubt in my mind what I would study. He had an uncanny ability to motivate students to put forth 100% and love it. He had a flawless command of his subject and expected the same of his students. There were no easy "A's" in his classes. I took general zoology, embryology, marine fishes, and ichthyology and got a master's degree under his instruction. He said teaching embryology was his favorite, even though his most highly refined expertise was the study of fishes.

He loved fishing, whether seining fishes for study or fishing with a fly rod on a small brushy mosquito-infested Wisconsin trout stream or going after brookies, walleyes or muskies on a Canadian lake with loons providing the background music. We were on Eagle Lake in Canada and caught a 26 pound musky the day Richard Nixon resigned the Presidency and caught a 40-pounder the next day. George gobbled down the walleye fillets cooked on a wood fire and beamed with delight as we discussed the week's events.

He was not a Nixon fan and publicly protested the terrible waste of the Vietnam War. He did not shy away from controversy, was a champion for social and environmental issues and worried about human population growth. He was a critic of fish poisoning programs and was concerned about biodiversity before our nation knew how rapidly species were disappearing. We would stop along the roadside and he would rattle off the scientific names of the plants in the ditch and name birds by their calls. He had the Leopoldian habit of keen observation.

In the 1970s, the Beckers bought 40 acres across the road from my parents. Our families became friends. Sylvia and George gardened organically and worked toward an ecologically sustainable life style. George loved visiting, had a great sense of humor and would erupt in uncontrollable laughter at a funny story.

A champion of clean air, water, and rivers, George loved rivers and revered the Wisconsin River and condemned its pollution. He was a dreamer of the way things should be, not accepting of the way things are. The press dubbed one of his proposals "Becker's Pipe Dream". Or in his own words, "From Lac Vieux Desert to Prarie du Chien, this great Wisconsin River must become a model of cleanliness."

As the years ticked by, I had the great honor of serving as head of this country's two largest public land management agencies, the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service. My mantra became the "health of the land." Immersed in Washington, D.C.'s political landscape, I often quietly wondered what George would do. Even in his later years, he kept in touch, cheering me on during conservation wins as did the entire Becker family, and encouraging me when I was down. I was honored to be treated like one of the family.

He was a dedicated husband, father, teacher and friend. The world is a better place because of him.

George, thank you.