

In Memorium

George Charles Becker

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By Charles Long

Toward the end of his life, Charles Darwin surprisingly said that if he had his life to live over, he would devote more time to the humanities. Our noted Wisconsin scientist George C. Becker did study the humanities, and later switched to natural history. One of his famous students, Mike Dombeck, told me that George said he went into science without having his mind cluttered along the way with education on that subject. That droll comment tells us a lot about George Becker. He had a streak of mischief we all appreciated, a “bit o’ the divil” as the Irish say. He was always optimistic and ever youthful. Born and schooled in Milwaukee, and reared by German immigrant parents, he was, of course, steeped in classical music (talented as a violinist) and fluent in both English and German. After receiving a bachelor’s degree in languages with a minor in music at the Milwaukee State Teachers College (now UW-Milwaukee), he earned master’s degrees in German philology and science (zoology and botany) at UW-Madison. In later years he would receive a Ph. D. in ichthyology from Madison. His dissertation was entitled, “Intra-specific Variation in *Rhinichthys c. cataractae* (Valenciennes) and *Rhinichthys atratulus meleagris* (Agassiz) and Anatomical and Ecological Studies of *Rhinichthys c. cataractae*”. Down through the years he taught himself about nature and studied thousands of specimens that he collected to become an expert on fishes of the Upper Middle West and northwestern United States. As a high school teacher he had taught Latin and even Greek. but as a professor of biology, he taught and enjoyed evolution, botany, ornithology, herpetology, comparative anatomy, and especially his beloved embryology. Even though this wonderfully gifted scholar came into science late, he was competent in his subjects, even as diverse as these were. I have heard him teach; he could hold a large class spellbound or inspire an individual to excel.

In 1941, George married Sylvia Klenk, quite talented and scholarly in her own right, and entered the U. S. Army that same year to serve in the South Pacific. He rose to the rank of Master Sergeant and supervised radio stations in New Guinea, Australia, and the Philippines. He told me that while in the Philippines he was influenced by the famous wildlife artist, Richard Philip Grossenheider. After receiving several decorations and his discharge, George began teaching at Port Edwards High School, then became Principal at Clintonville High School for two years, and later taught in Madison at West Division High School. A dramatic change in his interests occurred about this time, and after he began teaching in the Biology Department at the UW-Stevens Point, in 1957, his house was crammed with long-nose dace growing in bubbling aquariums, bottles of pickled and labeled fishes, and, of course, a piano. By then he was teaching heavy course loads in several subjects, and where he learned the technical and careful procedures of a museum curator nobody knows. But, with much help from his family, he collected many thousands of fishes, carefully preserved them with appropriate scientific data, classified them all, and at first kept them in his house. Today this huge quality collection of fishes is known as the *George C. Becker Ichthyology Collection*, and the specimens in it were used to write numerous articles and two huge books about Wisconsin fishes. Before I leave that subject on collecting, please note the awesome extent of waters and wetlands he sampled in this state, with huge rivers such as the Mississippi, Chippewa, Wisconsin, and St. Croix, lakes and ponds beyond counting, streams and bogs everywhere, and two of the Great Lakes.

It was in 1965 that I met George, when I applied for a position to teach taxonomic mammalogy. I had been trained as a scientist and not much as a teacher, and George was the only professor I met who seemed active in research. He told me that no one here would stand in my way in doing it. He showed me his fine fish collection, kept in his own dark basement, the jars wrapped carefully in rags to further cut down light to protect the fish specimens from bleaching. Dr. Frank Cross, an ichthyologist at the University of Kansas Museum of Natural History, told me he had met Becker, they examined some fishes,

and Cross was amazed at how well Becker knew them. Once I brought George a collection of fishes from northwest Wisconsin, and warned him that there were possibly two or even three different species of minnows. "Seven" was what he instantly replied. But he also was an outstanding teacher in a small college, inspiring numerous students to go into graduate and professional work. He was chosen as the outstanding teacher on campus in 1962. He was a power in the Department of Biology, so much respected that when he and the Chair ever agreed on a policy the matter usually was settled. That worked out well; his small group of scientists was chosen by the State Board of Regents as the most outstanding academic department in all the state universities, and George certainly gave full measure in that endeavor. A full professor before I met him, he was my role model.

Not surprisingly, this graduate from the school and times of Aldo Leopold became his disciple. George became a protagonist for the environment, and made his mark in Wisconsin and across America. After Rachel Carson had alerted the nation with her book *Silent Spring*, and Joseph Hickey and D. W. Anderson had shown the impact of DDT on raptor populations, the members of Wisconsin's Citizens Natural Resources Association (George was President of CNRA from 1972 to 1974), including Becker, Frederick Baumgartner, Hickey, Hugh Iltis, Lorre Otto, Fred Ott, Fred and Fran Hamerstrom, Leoni Vrtilk, William Reeder and others participated in that famous pioneer group that eventually got DDT outlawed throughout the nation. George made a few enemies in the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, when he passionately attacked carp poisoning methods (e.g., in one publication he called it "insanity"), and he especially detested a most devastating poison called antimycin. Today the Department no longer uses that poison, and there has been a transformation in some ecological practices. I hope George had a part in that, because he paid a price. George was a strong proponent for population control, and would certainly agree with a recent passage from his friend, our former Senator Gaylord Nelson, that the problem of human overpopulation was and is the greatest danger to nature. George also believed that we should depend more on solar and wind energy, not so much on gasoline and oil, and he "put his money where his mouth was" by constructing a crude solar energy collector for his home and at quite an expense. It was the first in central Wisconsin, where such devices are commonplace today. It may have been the first in the state.

A great believer in natural resources for recreation, his favorite sport was fly fishing for trout, but he also fished for smelt in northern Wisconsin, northern pike in Canada, and sea fishes in the Gulf of Mexico. At various times, he developed interests in nudism, stamp collecting, chamber music (playing in his family's string quartet), bird-watching, and signed wildlife prints.

In 1968, he became Curator of Fishes in the new Museum of Natural History, although he had curated his fish collection years before. He was a loyal member and wrote the first publication in the Museum's *Faunal and Floral Reports*. His photograph of an old angler holding a musky from the Wisconsin River, which fish had been eradicated by pollution, brings up the subject of "pipe dreams." Featured throughout the state in the news, his idea of constructing a huge sewer pipe to carry polluted water along a pristine Wisconsin River and somewhere along that great length to recover and recycle the minerals and water never had a chance. However, the President of the CNRA, "Al" Berkman wrote "certainly municipalities will wish to take a closer look at regionalizing their waste abatement. . . . George's pipe dream may not come true, but something akin to it will." Today anglers can again catch muskies in the River. Perhaps George had an educational role in that, for re-stocking them is a waste of time if the water is rank and foul. Today various agencies have improved the water quality.

Three papers in the *Passenger Pigeon* (1968, 1972) and an *Illustrated Key to the Minnows of Wisconsin* (1970) published in the Department of Biology may be included with the 14 publications cited in his *opus magnum*, the *Fishes of Wisconsin* (Univ. Wisconsin Press, 1983) a richly illustrated book exceeding 1,000 pages. An earlier listing of the fishes in the state that he wrote with Marlin Johnson (1970) was published in the Wisconsin Academy *Transactions*, and I counted 56 valid and 13 provisional species listed at that time. In Becker's classic book, I counted 159 species, with maps and natural history information written in his clear anecdotal style. He told me once that my encouragement for him to write a large book, which seems today almost forgotten, *Inland fishes of the Lake Michigan Drainage Basin*

(237 pp., Argonne Nat. Labs., 1976), gave him confidence to begin the larger book on his life's work. But that effort took more than confidence; it took years of effort, and it was based on 20 years of field work. The book received favorable reviews by such ichthyologists as Clark Hubbs.

Becker wrote the first paper in the series of reports (1972) on wild rivers put out by the Wisconsin Academy *Transactions* (on biological surveys of the Pine, Popple, Wolf, and Pike rivers) and he was the organizer of the project. He even edited a newsletter *Wild River News* to get the project to ensure its success. He and I, with support from the UW-SP Biology Department, co-hosted the papers and a symposium on island phenomena for the *Lake Superior Biological Conference*, held at Pigeon Lake (in 1971), where papers were read by Canadian and American participants, and most were eventually published. George received the first award (1989) given by the *Society of the Sigma Xi* for research at UWSP. He recently was honored by the CNRA for his conservation efforts.

In 1965, Becker served as Vice President for sciences in the prestigious Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters. In 1967-1968, he was President of the Wisconsin Society of Ornithology, for to George birds and fishes all belonged to the same realm. This was evident in his only publication in ornithology, in the *Passenger Pigeon* (1971), about the pugnose shiner and the dodo! He and the editor knew, of course, a shiner is a fish, but the parallel was drawn between the fish and bird, both destined for human-caused extinction. George also served as Vice President of the WSO in 1966-1967, served several years on the Board, and chaired its Conservation Committee in 1964-1966. In 1979, he became a Professor Emeritus in Biology at UW-SP. Just a few weeks ago he asked me to send him my Christmas letter early, including my annual poems (I regularly exchanged letters with his late wife Sylvia, who penned Christmas letters since 1948).

Sorry, but I was too late:

George Becker's inspired work on fishes 1,000 years will stand,

He was wise, could see afar, pointed out some better ways.

Students carry on his work, to secure nature in our land.

Ecology they teach instead, each day some way to reach ahead

So we will care and all may share Wisconsin's golden days.