



Ruth Chickering Clusen
1922-

‘We speak dry words at times, but if one has eyes to see and the mind to perceive that what we are working for is the quality of our environment in this and the next generation, one cannot but feel a quickening of the senses.’

--Ruth Clusen

Ruth Clusen's commitment to the environment is well documented. Perhaps this Wisconsin resident will best be remembered for leading efforts to steer the League of Women Voters (LWV) into the environmental and conservation movements at a time when respected, objective voices were needed.

When groups like the LWV became involved, it was hard for opponents to claim that the environmental movement was populated by radicals.

Clusen led LWV national environmental activities for eight years (1966-74). She then served as president of the National League of Women Voters from 1974-78.

A stint followed as Assistant Secretary of Energy for the Environment in the Department of Energy under President Jimmy Carter. She served from 1978-81.

She was appointed to the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents in 1983 by Gov. Anthony Earl, and served until 1992.

In a recent interview, Clusen noted that her concerns about the environment, especially water pollution, were born at home, in the Green Bay area, where her family has lived for many years. She continues to live there.

The Fox River in Green Bay is lined by paper mills and other dischargers. It's a paper mill town where environmental concerns weren't always voiced, especially in the 1950s and early 1960s, when the local and state LWV were studying water resources.

"My concern about water pollution was first local," she said from her Green Bay home. "All you had to do was look at the Fox River. The more I learned, the more I was annoyed and determined," she said.

Perhaps because of the visible signs of pollution, her local LWV took up the cause of water quality. "The local League was always interested in this area," she said. Occasionally, that interest put Clusen and the LWV at odds with industries. "It was a little touchy around the paper mills," she recalled. But as public opinion began to sway, Clusen noticed a difference in the executive offices at the mills. "Many even gave us money when they saw which way the water was flowing, so to speak."

Later, as president of the national LWV, Clusen spearheaded efforts to assure the passage of the 1974 Safe Drinking Water Act. That act and other clean water measures helped bring rivers like the Fox back to life.

Clusen noted that when the LWV gets involved in an issue, it has done its homework.

“Our first step is we read, read, read. We study, and we don’t start talking until hopefully we know what we’re talking about.”

That activity often leads to local forums and meetings on subjects the League has chosen for public focus.

She believes the League’s involvement on environmental issues came at an important time and gave the movement mainstream acceptance. “I think we made a difference. We did not go back and forth and do radical things,” she said.

Instead, the league worked to educate the public and participate in the political dialogue on issues like the environment and conservation with a nonpartisan voice. Clusen’s voice was among the first to be raised once the reading and studying were done.

Clusen has lived in Wisconsin virtually all of her life. While serving in Washington, her family continued to live in Green Bay.

Born in Bruce, northwest Wisconsin, she earned a bachelor’s degree in secondary education at UW-Eau Claire and taught school at a Blackfoot Indian Reservation in Montana for two years. She taught in the Green Bay area from 1947-58.

She quickly became involved in LWV activities, rising to the position of president of the state League in 1962 and serving in that position until 1966.

In that time, she was already leading efforts to focus on environmental topics.

The state League published a study in 1966 titled “The Future of Natural Resources in Wisconsin.”

Her interest in environmental issues became apparent in the next few years. She was named chairperson for the LWV National Committee on Water Resources in 1966, serving until 1970. She also served as chairperson of the League’s National Committee on Environmental Programs and Projects from 1968-70.

In the early 1970s, she also served as a member of the Council Conservation Foundation and as an Environmental Protection Agency technical advisory group member for Keep America Beautiful. She was also a participant in the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment and as an International Environmental consultant

under a State Department grant. She also served as a consultant to the Management Advisory Group for the EPA from 1973-77.

Her years as president of the National LWV were marked by her ongoing efforts to lead and educate the nation on environmental matters and to use her organization's reputation and strength to see that environmental legislation was passed and implemented.

During her presidency, the LWV also promoted a practical conservation measure: recycling. The group advocated recycling and educated communities about source separation of solid waste.

Clusen's years of leadership were also marked by League activities in other environmental areas, including:

Estuary management, solid waste disposal, eutrophication of lakes, sedimentation from suburban construction, wetland preservation, land use and air quality standards and implementation plans.

Clusen was also responsible for research and writing of numerous pamphlets on the environment for the LWV.

From the top LWV position, Clusen moved to the administration of President Jimmy Carter. She was nominated as Assistant Secretary of Energy for the Environment in the Department of Energy in 1978. Her mission was to develop and implement a strong National Energy Policy.

Was she successful? On the heels of the Arab Oil Embargo of 1973, the U.S. found itself in a vulnerable position, given its vast energy needs and fact that its reliance on foreign energy supplies was growing.

But beginning in 1978 and for several years thereafter, U.S. reliance on foreign energy supplies declined, according to Encarta Encyclopedia. Reliance on energy conservation is credited as the main reason for the decline in demand for foreign energy.

In a 10th anniversary celebration speech to the Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Clusen noted that her office was working on further reducing energy consumption by using synfuel technology and biomass conversion.

In the same speech, she also noted that her office had prime responsibility for overseeing governmental research on topic that would draw increasing attention in future years: global warming caused by increased amounts of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. She provided a detailed description of what was known in 1980.

Her other duties at the Department of Energy included meeting the department's obligations under the National Environmental Policy Act and supervising an array of programs on environmental research and development.

She served three years in that position, then came home to Wisconsin and accepted an appointment to the UW System Board of Regents. She served from 1981-92.

Looking back on her activities with the LWV, Clusen thinks the work of her group was essential at a key time in the effort to clean up the environment.

“If we hadn't brought it to the public's notice, I think things would be going on as they were. You have to have people who are in it for the long haul. Issues will change, but committed people won't.”

Having lived in an industry town for much of her life, Clusen said she often heard the argument that sound economics and environmental protection don't mix. One of the lessons of environmental cleanups and energy conservation efforts in the 1970s, she said is that “a clean environment can exist with business and other parts of the political process.”

Clusen's activities in local, state and national realms came at a time when women were just beginning to move into positions of prominence. As colleagues in the League of Women Voters note, she was ahead of her time. Others noticed, too. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities gave her the group's Distinguished Alumnus Award in 1978. She was the first woman to receive the award.

Ladies Home Journal magazine asked her opinion 1980 about women policymakers in the future decade. She told of her answer when she addressed a conference on women and energy economics held in Waunakee in 1980:

“My answer was there would be more of them. There now are more women in jobs that will lead them – some of them – there. They will not arrive behind their policy desks because they are women. They will make it there for the same reason that men do:

because they are in the right place at the right time – and this is important – because they are prepared.”

In her duties for the League, Clusen gave countless speeches on environmental topics. Here’s a sampler of what she said in speeches in Wisconsin, across the country and around the world:

She challenged state Soil and Water Conservation Districts in a 1969 speech at the 16th annual conference of the Wisconsin Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts. Clusen nudged districts into undertaking more cooperative efforts with group like the League. In doing so, she said, “In my travels throughout the country as the League’s water chairman I hear about many examples of cooperative efforts between us, and I would like to cite just a few because I have the impression this has been less so in Wisconsin than in many other states.”

She added this advice for the soil and water folks: “If SWCD are to be a part of the solution to problems of water quality which affect us as landowners, you are going to need to show greater awareness of the fact that the people, the money and the votes which provide the money are concentrated in urban areas.” She urged Wisconsin conservation districts to develop better relationships with the urban community and involve more non-rural people in their ventures.

In this address, she showed a clear understanding of the conservation district framework, along with its needs and problems.

She credited conservation districts for “your acceptance of stewardship of the soil as a moral cause.” Then she challenged them further: “Is not the maintenance of water quality also a cause which should invoke a sense of higher obligation and duty? I hope you will think so.”

An advocate of good planning, she told a conference on Water Resources in the Lake Erie Basin: “The purpose of today’s comprehensive planning is to devise a pattern for economic and physical development and redevelopment, harmonious and well-balanced in its use of land and water.”

In a 1972 conference on “Agriculture in a Quality Environment” she reminded agriculturists that “Water supplies of nearby towns as well as those downstream may be drastically altered by agricultural runoff.”

Speaking in 1980 at the 10th anniversary celebration of the Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Clusen reflected on her work at the Department of Energy:

“We have done a lot of thinking ahead since 1973. We are thinking ahead now, looking for intermediate energy sources until a time when we can try our hardest to exhaust the inexhaustibles. But until then, we must look and see the world as it is, and try to make it better, safer, healthier.”

During her term as the National League’s chairperson for the National Committee on Water Resources, she spoke often about the subject to the Wisconsin League. She recounted the League’s deep interest in water quality issues stretching back to the 1950s, then added this:

“We speak dry words at times, but if one has eyes to see and the mind to perceive that what we are working for is the quality of our environment in this and the next generation, one cannot but feel a quickening of the senses. A tide of concern is rising in America today over the fact we are not only an affluent society but an effluent society.” She challenged the LWV to build on its water resource efforts of the past, noting the challenges ahead. “It is up to us to ‘lift our sails and catch the winds of destiny.’ Having invested so much in time, in study, in discussion, in action in the not so distant past when only the truly perceptive knew or cared, I have little doubt but what we will do just that.”

RUTH CICKERING CLUSEN

- BIRTH:** June 11, 1922, Bruce, Wis.
- EDUCATION:** Received a bachelor's degree in secondary education from University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire in 1945
- HONORS:** Named "Doer of the Decade" by Wisconsin Chapter of Professional Women in Journalism, 1970.
- Distinguished Alumni of the Year Award, UW-Eau Claire, 1970.
- Distinguished Alumna Award, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 1978. First woman to receive the award.
- Honorary Degrees: Colgate University, New York; Wayne State University, Detroit; St. Mary's College; Northland College, Ashland, Wis.
- "Ladies Home Journal" Woman of the Year, 1977.
- Received first annual Grand Marnier Civic Achievement Award, 1976.
- Listed in Who's Who in America.
- Selected for recognition in Ninth Edition of Notable Americans of 1976-77.
- Award of Honor, Natural Resources Council of America, 1977.
- International Conservationist of the Year, National Wildlife Federation, 1977.
- Honorary Member, Water Pollution Control Federation.
- Honorary Vice President, American Forestry Association, 1978.

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

Educator: Taught school at a Blackfoot Indian Reservation in Montana, 1945-47. Taught in secondary schools in the Green Bay area from 1947-58.

President, Wisconsin League of Women Voters, 1962-66.

Vice President, National League of Women Voters, 1968-70, 1972-74.

Chair, Environmental Quality Committee, National League of Women Voters, 1966-74.

Public Relations Chair, National League of Women Voters, 1973-74.

President, National League of Women Voters, two terms, 1974-78.

Assistant Secretary of Energy for the Environment, U.S. Department of Energy, 1978-81.

Member, University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents, 1983-92.

Member, Wisconsin Council of Environmental Advisors,

Member, U.S. Delegation, World Conference for International Women's Year, Mexico City, 1975.

International Speaker: Sponsored by U.S. State Department to speak in Europe and Middle East on role of women in American politics, 1978. Sponsored by United States Information Agency to lecture in Spain and Italy on role of women in American politics. She also spoke to numerous groups across the United States on environmental and conservation topics, civil rights and women's rights.

Advisory Committee Member, United Nations Conference on Human Settlements.
Member, U.S. Delegation to U.S.-U.S.S.R. Joint Committee on Environmental Protection in Moscow, 1974.

Board Director, Joint Center for Urban Environmental Studies.

Member, Science for Citizens Advisory Committee, National Science Foundation, 1977-78.

Board Member, Keep America Beautiful.

Special Consultant to Pollution Panel, U.S. Chamber of Commerce.