

E.M. DAHLBERG
1882 - 1971



“With the principles of conservation being taught in the public schools it is probable that an ever-increasing number of boys and girls will grow up to be champions and defenders of the persecuted and vanishing species of wild plant and animal life.”

– *E. M. Dahlberg*

Edwin Monroe (E.M.) Dahlberg was an educator, author and conservationist, and his life activities in those areas were intertwined.

As an educator and school administrator at Ladysmith High School in northwest Wisconsin, he made conservation a mainstay in the school curriculum.

He was also a nurseryman and arborist and is credited with planting trees along Rusk County and Ladysmith roads. He also encouraged development of the Ladysmith High School Forest, one of the first of its kind in Wisconsin.

As an author, he developed a conservation textbook, "Conservation of Renewable Resources." The book had four printings and was widely used in high schools across the Lake States region.

In 1926, he was appointed to the then newly constituted Wisconsin Conservation Commission. He was the commission's first secretary and part of a group of leaders who took bold steps to solidify Wisconsin's conservation laws and practices. Dahlberg served from 1927-33. Some of the commission's accomplishments in those years, as listed by the Department of Natural Resources, include creation of the basic Conservation Act, the Forest Crop Law, forest protection areas, a Water Pollution Control Committee, resident rod and reel fishing licenses, school forests and season regulations for upland game birds.

The early commissioners also saw to it that state wardens got appropriate uniforms. They secured general fund appropriations for forest protection, introduced fish and game county hearings and pushed for rural zoning.

All that and more happened in the years Dahlberg served. That he had influence in these matters is obvious from the list of commission accomplishments. School forests, for instance, were a pet project of Dahlberg the educator/conservationist. He dedicated a full chapter to them in his textbook, using the Ladysmith High School Forest as a practical example.

During his years on the commission, several major land acquisitions were secured. They included the Flambeau River State Forest, created in 1931. Dahlberg was an ardent voice for protecting the Flambeau. His recollections include an account of taking Gov. Phil LaFollette on a canoe trip down the Flambeau. His recollections also include an account of the Conservation Commission entertaining President Calvin Coolidge along the Brule River. The president had made his summer headquarters in Superior, so that he could fish for trout on the Brule.

Dahlberg was working on his book of recollections at the time of his death in 1971. The unfinished manuscript was made available to the Ladysmith News. The newspaper published the manuscript, and every copy of the paper sold out.

Editor John Terrill of that paper says Dahlberg is remembered as a very strict teacher, but a fair man, willing to mentor students. His recollections make reference to Wallace and Hazel Grange, students of his at Ladysmith High School. Don Johnson, retired outdoor editor of the Milwaukee Sentinel, noted in an interview that Grange was named Wisconsin's first superintendent of game while Dahlberg served on the Conservation Commission.

Grange is said to have traced his interest in conservation to Dahlberg, Editor Terrill said. Dahlberg wrote an introduction to Grange's book, "Those of the Forest."

"Conservation of Renewable Resources" came about in part due to his dual role as educator and Conservation Commission member, he wrote in his recollections. That role "influenced the Izaak Walton League of Milwaukee to publish my 'Notebook on Conservation Education' Two thousand copies were distributed to teachers attending the 1928 Teachers Convention in Milwaukee."

That "created a demand for literature on conservation education in Wisconsin," he wrote. "This in turn inspired me to prepare an enlarged manuscript. 'Conservation of Renewable Resources' was published in 1929. The four editions were widely distributed in the Lake States area."

His textbook supports Dahlberg's reputation as a demanding educator who held strong opinions. It is a mix of basic conservation information and Dahlberg's opinions on conservation issues. It also includes lists of conservation projects at the end of some chapters and encourages teachers to have students do some of the projects.

Dahlberg argued in the text for restraint in hunting, fishing and trapping. He opposed the bounty system. He wrote of the dangers of introducing exotic species to the United States, making the Persian cat a frequent target, pointing out that cats were major predators of wildlife.

Water pollution and its causes drew his attention, as did the need for fire suppression in northern forests. He devoted several chapters to tree propagation, forestry practices and logging methods. He was an early advocate of recycling, especially of paper. He argued for zoning for conservation purposes and preservation of scenic vistas in the face of expanding road construction.

Dahlberg directed his calls for conservation to all aspects of nature. His textbook attempted to be a complete guide to conservation of all resources, even devoting a chapter to "Conservation of Human Resources." In it, he writes about the evils of tobacco, alcohol and drugs. He points a finger at tobacco and alcohol advertising and the media interests that accepted money for such advertising.

War, too, came under his scrutiny, calling it senseless because it kills the best young men of a country. He wrote: "To kill the best of any species, while the defectives are allowed to survive, is sure to result in the degeneration if not the extermination of the species. This is an infallible law of biology."

In the end, Dahlberg's book argued for sustainability before that word was ever used.

It is written in a stern, authoritative manner, reflecting Dahlberg's teaching style and educational philosophy.

His memoirs are another matter. A sense of humor is evident, along with typical Dahlberg frankness.

Of his selection as secretary of the Conservation Commission, he wrote, "I was designated secretary on the assumption that since I was a school teacher, I should at least know how to spell."

Recalling an October canoe trip down the Flambeau River with a party that included Gov. Phil LaFollette, he wrote of how the governor's canoe flipped over in a rapids, dumping its distinguished passenger. "His hat came riding down toward us, jauntily sitting right side up." There was nothing to do but build a roaring fire and have the governor take off his boots and pants for drying.

LaFollette soon after signed the measure that created the Flambeau State Forest, which Dahlberg had advocated. The original act created a 3,600-acre forest. Today's forest is 90,000 acres.

Writing of his time on the Conservation Commission, Dahlberg mentions personal acquaintances with Alfred Gross, Aldo Leopold, Sigurd Olson, Ernest Swift and Wilhelmine La Budde.

In many ways, Dahlberg's influence on conservation was on a par with those he mentioned. His primary audience was comprised of high school students, those he taught and those who learned from his textbook throughout the lake states. He reached thousands of them, likely providing many with their first introduction to the concept of conserving natural resources.

His audience also included his own son, Burt, who would pursue a career with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and co-author an influential report on managing Wisconsin's deer herd.

E.M. DAHLBERG
1882 - 1971

BIRTH: April 11, 1882, near Curtiss, Clark County, Wis.,
son of Swedish and Danish immigrants

DEATH: November 1971, Ladysmith, Wis.

EDUCATION: Graduate of Beloit College, 1918

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

Teacher and Principal (1918-1959): Ladysmith High School, classroom teacher of biology and physics in addition to administrative duties.

Early advocate of using School Forests as educational tools. Oversaw establishment of Ladysmith High School Forest in 1936.

Teacher and mentor to Wallace and Hazel Grange, Wisconsin conservationists, authors and game farm managers. Wallace Grange was inducted into Conservation Hall of Fame in 1993.

Author of "Note Book on Conservation Education," a manual on teaching conservation in K-12 schools. Izaak Walton League distributed 2,000 copies at 1928 Teachers Convention in Milwaukee, creating a demand for literature on conservation education in Wisconsin.

Author of "Conservation of Renewable Resources," an early high school textbook on conservation. First published in 1939 (C.C. Nelson Publishing Co., Appleton, Wis.). The book had four printings, with updates by the author. Used extensively in Lake States area as conservation text.

Appointed to first Wisconsin Conservation Commission in 1927. First secretary of commission. Served as commissioner and secretary until resigning Feb. 8, 1933.

Charter member, Citizens Natural Resources Association. Served as vice president, secretary and Advisory Committee member.

Protector of Flambeau Wilderness Area, instrumental in establishment of Flambeau River State Forest in 1930.

Son, Burt Dahlberg, co-authored influential book of research findings on Wisconsin whitetail deer population.

Nurseryman in Ladysmith area. Operated commercial nursery on six acres. Managed 350 additional acres of wooded lands.

Ladysmith Park Board chairman.

Champion of tree planting, responsible for extensive planting of trees along Rusk County and city of Ladysmith roads.