



Emily Earley
1916-2011

“If we want to see birds or butterflies, owls or trees, we have to work to make sure we preserve places for them. It’s all about love of the land.”

--Emily Earley

The name Emily Earley is instantly recognizable to many people involved in the cause of conservation in Wisconsin.

Earley has been active with many conservation groups in the state for five decades and has supported the work of many others. Friends and colleagues say she sets an example for citizen conservationists with her spirited “can-do” attitude and infectious enthusiasm. Because of her own generosity, she is able and willing to ask others to financially support the work of many groups.

“Emily gives time and money to land and water conservation. She asks others to give time and money, and she makes sure that her vision and drive for safeguarding our land and water permeates every part of her life and the lives of lucky people around her,” said Mary Jane Huston, state director of The Nature Conservancy.

Of all the groups she has worked with and supported, Earley counts The Nature Conservancy as her favorite. She was involved almost from the inception of the Wisconsin chapter, and played a key role in developing its stewardship program. She remains active to this day.

“The Nature Conservancy was my favorite. I got to go out and work on sites. I wasn’t a scientist, but I knew scientists, and I could get them to help me,” she said.ⁱ

She is partial to The Nature Conservancy, but it’s far from the only group Earley has served. She didn’t become involved in conservation until she had raised three children, but she jumped in with both feet after fulfilling that responsibility and hasn’t let up since.

Born in 1916, Emily Hornblower grew up in New York City and graduated from Bennington College in Vermont. The all-girls school was anxious to have one of its students accepted to a graduate program. “They picked me and rushed me through in three years,” she recalled.ⁱⁱ I missed a lot, but I wrote a massive paper on the coal industry. It was the equivalent of a master’s thesis.”

The University of Wisconsin-Madison was the destination as she sought a master’s degree. She arrived in 1937 to pursue a degree in labor economics. With the exception of a stint at the National Institute of Public Affairs in Washington, D.C., in the 1940s, she would make Madison her home for the rest of her life.

Earley became a conservation activist in the 1960s. She joined the board of trustees of the new Wisconsin chapter of The Nature Conservancy in 1964, and has remained active in various capacities since then. She has held various officer positions, including secretary and president, but perhaps her major contribution was to cause The Conservancy to be more active in managing the lands it acquired. “The Nature Conservancy’s initial direction and guidance for land stewardship – now a well-established and critical program – came from Emily. She realized that without active management, many of the natural values that Nature Conservancy preserves were established to protect could be lost,” said Mary Jean Huston, state director.ⁱⁱⁱ

Earley created and chaired the chapter's Stewardship Committee for 10 years and set up subcommittees for each preserve. "She organized volunteer work parties to get land management done, drove volunteers to work parties in her familiar red convertible, and they worked hard – erecting fences, conducting prescribed fires, harvesting seeds, planting prairies," said Huston.

She also pressed The Nature Conservancy to devote more funds to stewardship, and in 1982 the board voted to raise an amount equal to 25 percent of each land acquisition to fund stewardship for the property.

Realizing that volunteers couldn't sustain all the needed work, Earley lobbied for paid stewardship staff. In 1988, the Wisconsin chapter hired its first director of stewardship. "Today, the program she launched is responsible for management on more than 25,000 acres across Wisconsin," said Huston.

Brent Haglund, The Nature Conservancy's first stewardship director and later state director, underscored the importance of the stewardship program. "The matters and challenges of increasing scope and scale to conservation work were often daunting to mid-20th century Wisconsin preservationists," he said.^{iv} "They had developed and become accustomed to identification and acquisition, but not necessarily management, of scientific areas. Emily Earley saw the value of building from that base and perspective while growing both the funding mechanisms and the broad support for preservation and conservation of watersheds and intact forests. In this regard I watched her make an enormous difference from which we will long benefit."

In 1990, Earley participated in a rugged fact-finding trip to Nicaragua as The Nature Conservancy explored conservation work there. She then chaired the chapter's newly formed Nicaragua Conservation Advisory Committee and played a significant role in establishing a Nature Conservancy program on the ground in Nicaragua. She continues to advocate for The Nature Conservancy's work in Nicaragua and Central America.

Huston noted that Earley's work for The Nature Conservancy in Wisconsin has helped lead to protection of more than 140,000 acres of forests, lakes, wetlands and prairies.

Earley was busy on other fronts, too. In 1971, she went to work at the UW-Madison's newly formed Institute for Environmental Studies as program coordinator and editor of technical publications. She helped to coordinate an array of environmental programs in the institute's formative years, working with students and faculty. "She was also the stickler editor of the institute's technical publications – always interested in assuring that science was shared accurately and clearly,"^v recalled Stephen Born, professor of environmental studies at UW-Madison and himself a conservation activist.

"It was fun, because it was interdisciplinary. You were working with faculty from many different disciplines," Earley recalled. She worked at the institute for 18 years.

She served on the council of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters from 1979-83. During her tenure, the organization established an endowment with an estate gift from

naturalist Lois Almon. Earley successfully encouraged the Wisconsin Academy to use the endowment to initiate a small grants program to fund field research on plants, animals and natural communities. After leaving the council, she served on the committee that awarded the grants.^{vi}

Earley was also a member of the founding board of the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute, the public outreach program of Northland College in Ashland. She served on the board for 13 years and continues on the board as a trustee emeritus.

Her involvement with the Wisconsin Academy and Sigurd Olson Institute allowed Earley to advocate for research and education at natural areas and for environmental education across the spectrum, noted Huston.

Her long list of affiliations also includes serving as a charter member of the Wisconsin Conservation Corps, upon appointment by Gov. Anthony Earl in 1983. WCC was a state agency created to employ young people on conservation projects and other community service activities. Earley served as the board's environmental expert from 1983-89 and consistently promoted policies and projects that balanced public access and enjoyment with the need for resource protection and preservation. She encouraged groups that owned natural areas in the state to utilize WCC crews for projects.

She was also a charter member of the board of 1000 Friends of Wisconsin, a group that promotes wise land use. She also served on the board and as vice president of the Natural Heritage Land Trust, a Dane County organization. She has been a longtime supporter of the University Arboretum and served on the board that oversees the arboretum. She is currently a member of the Wisconsin Women Forward for Environmental Education, an advisory group to the Wisconsin Environmental Education Board.

At this writing, Earley was 92 and still active on a variety of causes. "I meet all these young people on these boards. That's what keeps me going," she said.^{vii} She believes that today's young people will be conservationists if they have opportunities to get into the field. "Young people are much better at it than older people. If you get them out on the trail, they can't help but be interested, especially if you have an enthusiastic leader," she said.

Earley's nomination for consideration by the Conservation Hall of Fame was accompanied by several letters of support from key conservation figures in the state.

Some samples:

"It must be understood that when Emily commits herself to service for an organization the service is never nominal," wrote Jonathan Ela, vice chair of the Wisconsin Natural Resources Board and vice president for political affairs of the Sierra Club. "She has no interest in the prestige of titles or the routines that are associated with going to meetings. When an organization acquires Emily as an asset, it acquires a package: leadership, intellectual stimulus, a prod for getting others to work harder, and a fund-raiser and donor."

“In every one of her many contributions to conservation efforts in Wisconsin, Emily’s efforts have been long-standing, exemplary and entirely voluntary,” wrote Stanley A. Temple, UW-Madison Beers-Bascom Professor Emeritus of Conservation and longtime colleague on The Nature Conservancy Board.

“Ms. Earley has always worked for ways to involve citizens in a wide range of conservation activities. Like Aldo Leopold, she believes that conservation is far too important to be entrusted to a government bureaucracy,” wrote Kathleen Falk, Dane County executive.

“With all her varied experiences and hard work for many organizations, Emily’s basic theme is her caring deeply for the land,” wrote Nina Leopold Bradley.

So the tributes go. As for Earley, she plans to stay active, doing whatever she can to protect land and water resources in Wisconsin. “I enjoy life,” she said.

Emily (Hornblower) Earley
Born June 30, 1916

BIRTH: June 30, 1916, New York City

EDUCATION: Preparatory: The Chapin School, Manhattan, New York
Bachelor’s Degree, Bennington College, Vermont
Master’s Degree, Labor Economics, University of Wisconsin-Madison
National Institute of Public Affairs, Washington, D.C.

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

PROFESSIONAL CAREER

1971-86, Institute for Environmental Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, program coordinator and editor of technical publications

AUTHOR/EDITOR

Edited numerous reports in her position at Institute for Environmental Studies

AWARDS

Gathering Waters Conservancy Harold “Bud” Jordahl Lifetime Achievement Award, 2008

The Nature Conservancy, President’s Award for Stewardship

The Nature Conservancy, President’s Stewardship Award

State University of New York Sol Feinstone Award

Natural Heritage Land Trust Stewardship Award

1000 Friends of Wisconsin Founders Award

Also, numerous awards of formal recognition from organizations she has served

ORGANIZATIONS—MEMBERSHIP/OFFICER OF

The Nature Conservancy Board of Trustees, 1964 through present in numerous roles
Secretary, 1964-74
Chair, 1995-96

John Muir (Wisconsin) Chapter, Sierra Club, late 1960s

Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute, Northland College, Ashland, 13 years on board, still active as trustee emeritus

Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters Council, 1979-83

Wisconsin Conservation Corps Board, 1983-89

Natural Heritage Land Trust Board, 1993-99, including term as vice-president

1000 Friends of Wisconsin Board, charter member starting in 1996

Wisconsin Women Forward for Environmental Education, current member

Footnotes

ⁱ Conservation Hall of Fame interview with Bill Berry, September 2009r

ⁱⁱ Conservation Hall of Fame interview

ⁱⁱⁱ Correspondence, May 23, 2008

^{iv} Correspondence, June 2, 2009

^v Correspondence, May 24, 2009

^{vi} Huston correspondence and correspondence from Jonathan P. Ela, May 2, 2009

^{vii} Conservation Hall of Fame interview

Biography Prepared by Bill Berry, September 2009