

Afield with

A stylized, handwritten signature in a cursive script that reads "Ranger Mac". The signature is written in a light brown or tan color, matching the background of the title box.

Conservation Education and School Radio during the Great Depression

By Story Matkin-Rawn

In the heart of winter during one of the worst years of the Great Depression, classrooms scattered across Wisconsin grew still and hushed as teachers tuned in crackling radios to the University of Wisconsin's station WHA. On a Monday morning in January of 1933, thousands of schoolchildren heard for the first time the whistle of a pipe organ and a cheerful violin refrain followed by the introduction of the announcer: "This is the Wisconsin School of the Air presenting its first broadcast of the week, *Afield with Ranger Mac*. Off for today's hike, here's your leader, Ranger Mac." As he would for the next two decades, Ranger Mac warmly greeted his "Trailhitters" and then launched into a poem or story, delivering a rapid stream of facts in a distinctive, singsong style. "If you didn't take a walk yesterday, you missed out on many things that may not come again," he told





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Ranger Mac started as a naturalist and he became a radio personality, but through it all he was a teacher.

In the early 1930s, the success of shows like Afield with Ranger Mac allowed WHA to increase its transmitter power from 2500 watts to 5000 watts, and extend its reception range to almost every part of the state.

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The Ranger Mac Science Corner in Mrs. Orpha Zajicek's classroom at Stony Point School in Gays Mills, Crawford County.

listeners in a characteristic opening sketch. He described the spectacle of a “myriad of silken threads that stretched from the tops of dead weed stalks and glistened like silver in the sunshine. If one stooped down so that he could look across the tops of the weeds with the sun’s rays reflecting upon them, the whole scene looked as though the fairies were holding a great convention and had decorated the scene with silvery threads.” Such arresting portrayals enticed students to reconsider what was familiar on the journey to school every day: barren winter landscapes, emerging buds, birds, beetles, soil, or trees, all common sights during the different seasons.¹

From its start in 1931 until the mid-1970s, Wisconsin School of the Air (WSA) offered schoolchildren a variety of subjects—art appreciation, poetry, health, literature, music,

history, French, and mental hygiene—through quarter- or half-hour lessons aired each weekday morning and afternoon. WHA, the University of Wisconsin station that was home to the Wisconsin School of the Air, reported that WSA programs reached an estimated eight thousand schoolchildren in the first year. Ten years later, WSA programs, which included literary dramatizations by the local Bartell Theater Company, a nationally imitated art program, and direct broadcasts from the state capitol for high school civics, received over three hundred thousand course registrations and reached countless other students.²

In its early and under-funded years, WSA survived through the generous assistance of volunteer teachers who worked, as advisors and on-air personalities, to ensure that

their passion—be it Nature-study or mental hygiene—would retain its tenuous place in Wisconsin's cash-strapped classrooms. One of the most memorable among these radio schoolteachers was youth forestry worker and radio celebrity Wakelin McNeel, better known as "Ranger Mac." From his microphone at the WHA studio, reading the lyrical lessons that he composed every Sunday afternoon, Ranger Mac taught Nature-study and environmental conservation to more than 1.1 million schoolchildren over his twenty-three-year broadcast career. In his eleventh year of school broadcasting, several years after most WSA shows had been turned over to grant-funded professional scriptwriters and production teams, the forester-turned-radio-personality continued to write and broadcast his own shows, winning the 1942 George Foster Peabody award for the best educational radio program. By the time McNeel retired in 1954, Wisconsin School of the Air received over half a million course enrollments per semester and reached over sixty-seven thousand area classrooms. *Afield with Ranger Mac* was consistently among the station's three most popular programs. WHA estimated that over one half of all Wisconsin schoolchildren met state requirements for conservation education by listening to Ranger Mac's Monday morning broadcast. These requirements included conservation literacy, democratic idealism, self-expression, scientific enlightenment, and use of scientific methods.³

In addition to volunteering for WHA, McNeel worked for the university as a professor of agriculture and an extension agent overseeing 4-H Clubs. These youth agricultural clubs were intended to lead a rural revival through agricultural reform during the farm depression of the 1920s. In 1927 McNeel founded a 4-H school forestry program that quickly became a tremendous success. Wisconsin school children planted between nine hundred thousand and 1.5 million trees each year in the 1930s. Local school districts started over three hundred forest plots, to which thousands of individual Junior Forest Rangers added their own small tracts.⁴

As a child, McNeel had connected deeply with the outdoors. Born in 1884 in Kilbourn (now the Wisconsin Dells), he grew up on a small farm and frequently went camping, fishing, and hunting with his father as well as exploring the land surrounding his boyhood home. Even as an adult, he enjoyed navigating Wisconsin's rivers in his birch bark canoe. After graduating from Appleton's Lawrence College in 1906, McNeel was hired by Black River Falls High School in Tomah where he became a superintendent at the tender age of twenty-two. He worked as a teacher and admin-

istrator in this rural, west-central Wisconsin town until 1910.⁵

During McNeel's first four years of teaching, the prescribed course of study for public schools changed dramatically. Wisconsin's first uniform course of study, published in 1882, provided a simple mandate that teachers cover reading, arithmetic, and geography. The second manual, published in 1889 just as young McNeel himself was entering school, added nature lessons to the common curriculum. In his introduction to the new subject, the State Superintendent of public instruction, James B. Thayer, lamented that students "have been left to believe that the only source of information concerning everything about which they want to know is in the meager text-book they so laboriously strive to master," and suggested that schoolchildren consult the "great book of nature," whose study would strengthen "habits of observation and reflection." Recommended lessons included raising plants from seed, observing tadpoles develop into frogs, and taking trips outside to "search the fields for objects for the next lesson."⁶

In 1906, the year that McNeel was hired to teach in Tomah, yet another set of guidelines redirected the state course of study. Previous manuals focused on improving school buildings and standardizing subject content. By contrast, the 1906 manual, nearly four times the length of its predecessor, reflected increasing interest in pedagogy—how to teach and to what ends. Teachers were advised to keep daily recitations to a minimum and focus instead on asking questions that clarified pupils' understanding of the textbooks: "What does this mean?" "Why?" "Did you ever see anything like this you have just read about?"⁷

Concern about the schools was widespread around the turn of the century; it intensified in proportion to society's increased reliance on formal education as a bulwark against tremendous changes wrought by industrialization, low-wage labor, urbanization, and immigration. Reformers called upon the schools to shape rather than react to these profound transformations. "The problem of the 20th century," economist Frank Tracy Carlton wrote in 1908, "is to make education an engine for social betterment. Hitherto, educational progress has been conditioned by economic and social changes. Have we advanced far enough on the path of civilization to make it, in a measure, a directive agent?" The crises of the Great Depression would renew public sympathy for Carlton's progressive position and his question: Could education not serve to improve a society rather than reproduce it with all its flaws?⁸

By 1910 the Course of Study manual had

In 1942 Afield with Ranger Mac won the Peabody Award for Best Educational Program. This national broadcasting award came just nine years after the program's premiere in 1933, about the time this photo was taken.



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Ranger Mac made school visits and in December 1947, he explained how hornets live to Marlene Couture, Walter Thomsen, Joanne Sauk, Russell Mellend, and Joanne Horde at Marquette School in Madison.



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grown into an exuberant (and for the average teacher surely overwhelming) expression of reformist zeal, and in it policy-makers unveiled new outlines, drawn up by specialists, for nearly every course. A course called Nature-study received an especially enthusiastic promotion. "Nature-study is not a new subject demanding a place," rhapsodized expert Liberty Hyde Bailey, "it is an attitude toward life and expresses itself in a way of teaching. Its spirit will eventually pervade and vitalize all school work." This evangelical approach to the subject had three missions. The first was preparation for future studies in agriculture. The second and third missions of Nature-study, both conspicuous decades later in *Afield with Ranger Mac*, were development of intellect and character and "enrichment of life." Ideally, if students developed an ethos of appreciation, nature would become their "ever present teacher." Romantic poetry figured prominently in Nature-study because it sensitized children to "discern the spiritual" in nature.⁹

The same year this manual was released, McNeel took a year off from teaching in order to enroll in the Biltmore School of Forestry in Michigan. Those "glorious days" included a training period in the Black Forests of Germany with the famed professor and forester Dr. Carl A. Schenck. When McNeel returned stateside, he taught science to

prospective teachers at Whitewater Normal for a year before becoming superintendent of the Fort Atkinson school district in 1912. He remained there until the U.S. entered into World War I. During the final year of the Great War, he temporarily relocated to France as a civilian in order to coordinate YMCA athletic activities for American soldiers overseas.¹⁰

When McNeel returned to Wisconsin after the war's end, he acquired a position through old college connections promoting 4-H activities for rural youth in Marathon County. His enthusiastic, hands-on service as 4-H County Secretary quickly caught the attention of the College of Agriculture in Madison, and in 1922 the University hired him as a professor of agriculture and a forestry extension agent.¹¹ The new professor immediately took up the cause of conservation education and could talk the talk of scientific efficiency when the occasion required, lamenting the absence of a "centralized far reaching [conservation] program" that would "unify hitherto diffuse efforts into new paths with regularly organized methods of study and with a direct and distinct goal of endeavor."¹² But this was language he used sparingly and reserved for memos. "Statistics are dull," he later told one magazine reporter, "kids prefer down-to-earth realism. Every creature has some place in the scheme of nature, from the

angleworm that burrows in the ground to the hawk that swings at anchor in the sky.”¹³

For Wisconsin schoolchildren in the early 1930s, these symbols of a harmonious universe were overshadowed by a spectacular series of natural disasters. On May 9, 1934, after months of dry weather, flash floods, and a week of searing heat, a “black blizzard” swept over Wisconsin. Farmers watched as brown topsoil from as far away as Wyoming and Montana smothered their new crops of soybeans, alfalfa, oats, and peas and crushed young plants under powder piled knee-deep. In Monroe County, trucks stalled in deep drifts of sand that were heaped over the highways. So dense was the “thick, gray-brown pall” in Madison that observers standing atop Bascom Hill were unable to see the state capitol dome just eight blocks away.¹⁴

Remaining indoors provided some relief from choking airborne dirt and sand, but the seeping dust seemed inescapable. “When I woke up the next morning you could see the outline of my body on the bed,” recalled a cooperative extension agent from Stevens Point. Farmers near the Wood-Jackson county line calmly ate their dinner, unaware, due to the impenetrable haze of dirt, that fire was devouring their land. Despite heroic efforts among neighbors, many homes and farms had already been destroyed by the time firefighters and Civilian Conservation Corps workers arrived. Four days passed and fifteen thousand acres burned before volunteers could extinguish the blaze.¹⁵

This dust storm was one notable example in a new crop of “natural” disasters with human origins. Three days later, the storm reached Washington D.C., having transported three hundred million tons of dirt across fifteen hundred miles. The precious topsoil that dusted Franklin D. Roosevelt’s office carpet reinforced his conviction that more nation-wide conservation projects were necessary to avert agricultural disaster.¹⁶

He was not alone. By the 1930s the severity and frequency of floods, fires, and wind erosion had persuaded many conservationists that earlier policies stressing enlightened professional management of public lands were inadequate. Despite increased public forest reserves, deforestation and ensuing soil erosion were accelerating. Wisconsin’s Works Progress Administration director Ralph Immell, who was invited the following year by the CBS radio network to share Wisconsin’s developing conservation program with a national audience, warned that “the threatened loss of our basic agricultural resources forebodes disaster.”¹⁷ “The basic problem is to induce the private landowner to conserve on his own land,” observed Aldo Leopold, the University of Wisconsin’s new chair of Game Management, “and no conceivable millions or billions for public land purchase can alter that fact.”¹⁸ Public education and the new mass medium of radio were two avenues through which environmental activists sought to mold popular opinion and influence individual actions for the cause of conservation.

When the Wisconsin Legislature added conservation education to the state curriculum in 1935, McNeil re-organized the themes of his two-year-old Nature-study show around the new state guidelines for conservation education. The first teacher’s manual of the conservation instruction committee read like a manifesto. “Why should there be conservation instruction?” it asked in the introduction.¹⁹ Citing dust storms, floods, forest fires, wildlife extinction, and the depletion of material resources, the authors predicted a nation-wide decline unless schools stepped in to produce an educated citizenry with a “willingness to do something (even if it sometimes means to do without in the present) to prevent waste and misuse, to restore, and to preserve our natural resources for the sake of our national prosperity, and of the welfare and happiness of future generations.” The mission of conservation instruction—“to maintain the supply and qual-

*Wakelin McNeel,
one of the few
times he posed for
the camera in
something other
than his Ranger
Mac garb of
plaid shirt and
outdoor gear.*



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Do you Remember Ranger Mac?

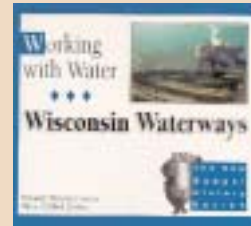
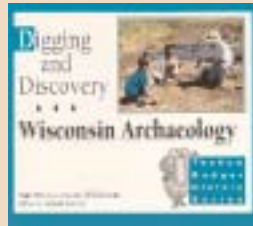
Do you recall listening to Ranger Mac, either at school or at home? We’d like to hear about *your* history with Ranger Mac, and share what we learn with other *Magazine* readers in a later issue. Please contact us at:

Wisconsin Magazine of History
Ranger Mac Memories
816 State Street
Madison, WI 53706
Or e-mail us at wmh@whs.wisc.edu

For Today's Trailhitters



The Wisconsin Historical Society Press continues Ranger Mac's tradition of teaching young adults about the connections between the environment and history by providing educational materials geared toward expanding students' understanding of Wisconsin's past. Several books in the New Badger History Series—designed for fourth-graders experiencing their first encounter with Wisconsin history—address environmental themes. *Digging and Discovery: Wisconsin Archaeology* uses archaeology as a means of investigating remnants of early Indian cultures and the state's early settlement. *Learning from the Land: Wisconsin Land Use* offers a variety of perspectives about land use, including segments on mining, lumbering, and farming, and their impact on Wisconsin. *Working with Water: Wisconsin Waterways* explores the way water resources have shaped the state's history, in both transportation and industry. Each book is accompanied by a teacher's guide, which includes activities that extend and enrich the content of the publications.



Cover designs by Jill Bremigan

Other publications also facilitate inquiry about the environmental past. *Mapping Wisconsin History* provides activities that allow students to visually conceptualize how geography and ecology are intertwined—especially in the chapters on landscapes, mining and shipping, timber, agriculture, and transportation and industry. This fall, the WHS Press will release *Wisconsin History Highlights: Delving into the Past*, as a research guide for middle- and high-school students on topics in Wisconsin history. The chapter on the environment includes several stories, such as “Menominee Tribal Enterprises and Sustained-Yield Forestry” and “Cleaning the Fox River: The Battle over PCB Removal.” The richly illustrated stories provide students with a few primary and secondary resources as a starting point for additional research, and each chapter includes a comprehensive bibliography.

—Erica Schock
Office of School Services

ity of our natural resources”—would be carried out through six major activities: general learning about natural resources; the basic elements of preservation; the substitution of renewable resources (such as water power) for non-renewable resources (such as coal); and the efficient use, renewal, and restoration of forests, wildlife, soil, and water.²⁰

Conservation activists and educators concluded that Progressive Era reforms from the 1910s and 1920s had proved insufficient because they left action to the experts. “We have tried regulation,” explained the committee. “Now we are coming to realize that conservation is not the affair of any special group, or exclusively the function of state or federal or county government, but the concern and business of every citizen.” Conservation advocates counted on schools to reach where government regulation of public lands did not, to succeed where other institutions and traditional politics had fal-



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The Wisconsin School of the Air lasted much longer than radio education programs in other states, due largely to the longevity of Wisconsin's one-room schoolhouses, which relied heavily on radio programming.

tered: “We need a citizenry that has an understanding of the *principles* of conservation of natural resources. To meet this need society has turned to the school to do what the non-school agencies have failed to do fully.”²¹

Due in part to the success of the School of the Air, WHA grew rapidly in the 1930s. WHA won its request to increase its transmitter power from 2500 watts to 5000 watts, thus extending the range of reception to almost every part of the state. In the fall semester of 1935, McNeel bade farewell to the Sterling Hall basement studio and began recording his broadcasts at the new Radio Hall studios behind Science Hall. The pride

of the station was a new pipe organ, the largest of its kind in a midwestern radio station. On the walls, a frieze of petroglyphs inspired by Wisconsin cave paintings depicted the history of communication in Wisconsin. The furnishings were



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From 1933 until 1954, Wakelin McNeel broadcast on Monday mornings to students in classrooms all over the state. Ranger Mac continued after McNeel retired, with Bob Ellerson at the microphone.

handmade by the art department with Navajo wool weaving and tom-tom light shades to complete the effect.²²

From the new studios, information on upcoming courses reached teachers through biennial bulletins published in the *Wisconsin Journal of Education*. Teachers could peruse semester offerings for *Afield with Ranger Mac*: “*Fur and Feather on the Highway*—The sacrifice made by animals and birds to modern speed; *Mexican Bandit*—Across the border into Texas came the boll weevil to raid the cotton fields of Dixie; *Conserve the Soil*—Across the centuries comes the warning that nations rise or fall on their food supply.” The Wisconsin Research Project in School Broadcasting created the first teacher aids and manuals to accompany the Ranger Mac broadcast in 1937. In return for registration and a ten-cent payment, a teacher received a detailed manual complete with suggested activities and follow up questions.²³

Many teachers eagerly responded, turning to “education’s own station” as an aid in teaching the newly added conservation course. In 1938 WSA received registration postcards from 1,442 classrooms. The students who signed up for *Afield with*

Ranger Mac alone numbered 31,109. The second semester WSA bulletin claimed that “compared with a year ago, twice as many teachers now use radio.” By contrast, during its first year, WSA netted a total of 18,844 registered listeners for all programs combined. An estimated 70 percent of registrations came from one-teacher schools. And of the ten courses offered each semester, only music appreciation with “Pop” Gordon regularly drew more listeners than Ranger Mac.²⁴

Standing in the shadows of Wisconsin’s John Muir and in the company of colleague Aldo Leopold, Wakelin McNeel’s primary aim was to impart a lifelong love for the outdoors to his students. His intended audience was growing up with electrical power, mechanized farm equipment, automobiles, and radio, even though their grandparents were most likely immigrant or migrant settlers who had carved farms from the prairies and forests. McNeel assumed that most Wisconsin farm families shared an indifference to their natural surroundings, “something like drug store clerks think of candy—they’ve had too much of it.”²⁵ Children, however, did not share the settlers’ view of the forest as a “menace” that “had to be sub-

In addition to answering students' letters, McNeel also awarded prizes to his "Trailbitters" for displays, field work, and scrapbooks, like those pictured here, c. 1950. These three boys met with Governor Oscar Rennebohm that same day.



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duced.”²⁶ Concerned that “coming late in our organized society, conservation education must adapt and correlate itself to already existing educational agencies,” McNeel concentrated on the schools where “future citizens and leaders may be reached most effectively at their most impressionable time.”²⁷

In 1936 there were still over six thousand one-teacher rural schools in Wisconsin, and the agricultural communities they served were mired in an economic decline decades old.²⁸ Although World War I had interrupted this trend, raising Wisconsin’s agricultural income to \$455 million by 1919, the agricultural depression of the 1920s followed by nationwide economic collapse during the 1930s kept farmers from regaining that level of income until 1942.²⁹ Having known only economic hardship, few students attending rural schools during the Great Depression saw scarcity as anything out of the ordinary.

Photographs of rural schoolhouses from the 1930s reveal simple, one-room wooden structures. A few are unpainted shacks. Others are prim white replicas of rural churches. Annual class pictures show grinning children from grades one through eight, lined up in their Sunday best on hard-packed dirt yards. These schools changed slowly despite decades of complaint by professional educators. Few rural schools had

electricity at the start of the 1930s and virtually none were equipped with running water or indoor toilets. Hand-pumped or windmill-powered wells provided water for drinking and washing. Wood stoves generated heat in the winter and also helped to warm up the “hot lunches” that students brought cold in glass jars or pails.³⁰ On dark days, kerosene lanterns provided students with extra reading light.

The children often traveled several miles to school, some on foot, and others by ski, bicycle, pony, buggy or sleigh. The day’s instruction generally began at 9 a.m. and ended at 4 p.m. Grading was imprecise in these rural schools. Students came forward individually and in groups to recite memorized lessons in reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, and geography. In this context, radio lessons were a respite for instructors in one-teacher schools. These radio lessons also provided lessons in art, music, French, or science—subjects in which few teachers had training. Though one-room schools always enrolled a minority of the total number of students statewide, they comprised over two-thirds of the schools registered for WSA. Thus windmill-charged, battery-powered radios topped the rural school wish list in the 1930s. Students performed plays, held school picnics, and auctioned off lunch

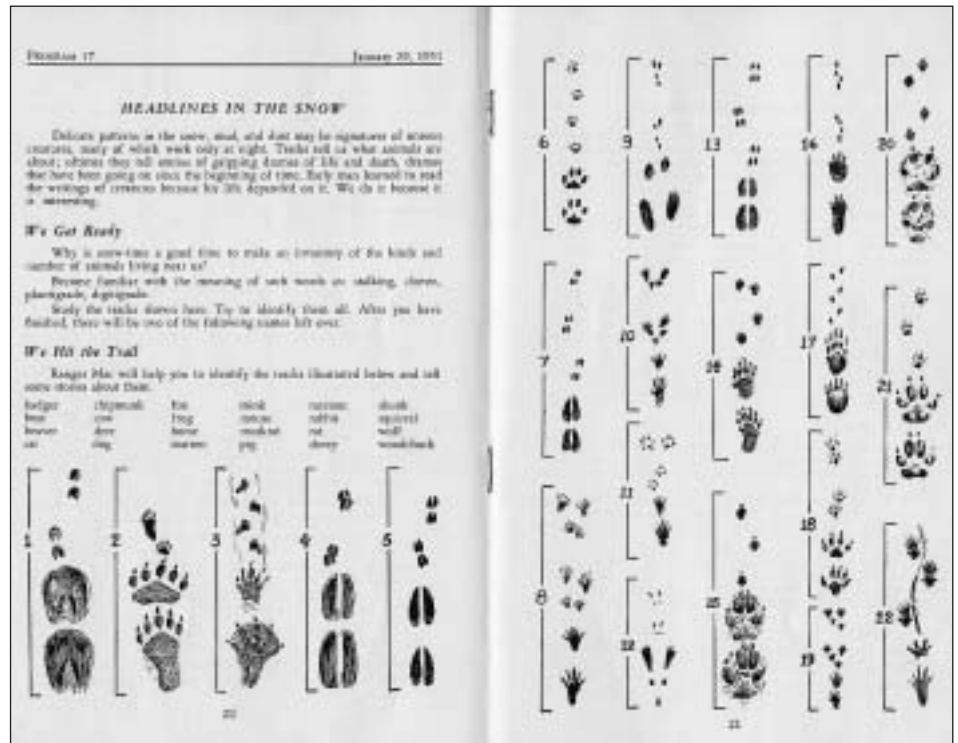
baskets and fine needlework to raise the necessary funds to purchase radios. Classroom radios came in handy for large, urban, graded schools, too. With the central set in the main office and loudspeakers in each classroom, programs could be broadcast into more than one classroom at a time.³¹

Reaching out to fifth through eighth grade pupils in tiny one-room schools, factory communities like West Allis, and graded classrooms in Madison, Ranger Mac delighted listeners of diverse backgrounds with explanations that sounded strangely familiar. Trees, tadpoles, birds, and even spiders, it seemed, behaved and did things that ten-, eleven-, and twelve-year-olds could imagine doing:

In the autumn young spiders and small spiders of many different kinds seem to become restless. They mount the tops of plants and fences and the like; they stand on tiptoe with their heads facing the currents of air and then give forth from their spinnerets fine silken threads which float out on the currents of air and get tangled up in a neighboring plant. When tens of thousands of spiders do this in one field on an autumn day, we have a sight that I saw yesterday. It is interesting to know that when one of these spiders has given off a thread of sufficient length, it springs off for a little balloon ride. Often the currents of air carry the little fellow in his air-plane for great distances.³²

White-faced hornets built their “paper palace,” while other insects were cattle herders, warriors, upholsterers, underground engineers, and weavers. “[T]ree mothers” gave their seed “children” “balloons, wings, and parachutes” for traveling.³³ “Birds are born educated,” and didn’t have to attend school because they “know what kind of nest to build without being taught.”³⁴ The crested flycatcher even dabbled in interior decorating, weaving molted snake skins into its nests. Everywhere one looked, the unity of the universe was apparent.³⁵

Though he related nature, particularly animal activity, to human behavior, McNeel was careful not to caricature the out-of-doors as a series of entertaining animal high jinks. Frost, winter, disease, predation, rot, “a hundred drones are born and reared, all but one to die in vain”—these too were familiar, essential characteristics of nature and of life. “How pitiful the weak flight of the last yellow butterfly of the year,” began Ranger Mac in a late-September broadcast:



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“Headlines in the Snow” was the name of the lesson for January 29, 1951, and the Ranger Mac program guide distributed by WHA included a follow-along lesson for teachers to copy or share with students.

. . . with tattered and battered wings it vainly seeks for a final sip of sweets, only to find the drops of sap have hardened. Little by little the wings weaken, the tiny feet clutch at the dried weed stalk, and the four golden wings drift quietly down among the fallen leaves, soon to become a part of the dark mould beneath. Forever and forever, year after year, century after century, the same tale unfolds. No wonder our hearts harden a bit against nature for the seeming cruelty of it all.³⁶

Birth and death, the passing seasons—McNeel brought out the cyclical patterns in the natural world and the inevitable arrival of death to teach moral lessons, or “high principles of living” as he called them. The “quality of the awareness of beauty,” he told his listeners during the worst year of the Depression, was “as important in life as the bread winning ability.”³⁷

These informal sermons on appreciation of beauty and moral conduct, mixed in with instructions on conservation, garnered *Afield with Ranger Mac* its strongest parent and teacher support. “It is just what is needed to counteract the present day undesirable influences,” remarked a Madison mother. Another mother in Tomah reported that her son said that should he be “tempted to do something wrong and his [Ranger Mac’s] face came to my mind I’d have to do what I knew to be right!”—a story that was much recycled in WSA literature.³⁸ A Madison woman praised the show as a step towards utopia: “You give the children and all who listen such

a natural merging of the spiritual world and the world of nature which it is and which is so needed today. If all of us in the U.S. could carry as real and great a message to as many as you do, I believe our whole world would be changed in a short time.”³⁹

Though McNeel believed that timeless lessons could be drawn from plants’ and animals’ interdependence and cyclical patterns in nature, he also reminded listeners that the world had been irreparably damaged by human activity. Farmers plowed up hillsides, exposing topsoil to rain that carved out deep gullies in the unprotected earth. Abusive agricultural practices exhausted the fertility of the soil. Trade with other countries imported “foreign pests” like Dutch elm disease, gypsy moths, and chestnut blight.⁴⁰ “When man interferes with nature’s plans, throws nature out of balance, then man is sure to suffer.” Each year he returned to an example familiar to many listeners—the dust storms:

*When the wind was blowing such a gale the other day, the air was filled with dust particles. These dust particles came from plowed fields. It is the priceless topsoil. This is called wind erosion. The last few years wind erosion had been especially destructive in the west. Man in his desire to increase the acreage of cropland plowed up the buffalo grass that covered the area and bound the soil. With the grass removed the wind carried the topsoil away, piled it behind fences, houses and even deposited it on the high buildings as far east as New York.*⁴¹

To counter such grim accounts of ecological disaster—daily reality to children in Wisconsin’s stump-studded cutover region to the north and the Central Sands “dustbowl” region of Portage, Adams, Juneau and Wood counties—Ranger Mac offered the “adventure” of conservation work. “What boy or

girl doesn’t love to read the stories of frontier life with its great forest, untouched fish and game life, its dangers and hardships?” he asked. “We like to read these stories because the love of adventure still possesses us . . . but the present days are far more interesting and far more challenging, because it takes a better brain, more patience, and greater vision to restore than it does to destroy.” To those who doubted that such a “great social feat” was possible, he referred to the three million men mobilized for the Great War and compared that number to that “vast school army” of twenty-five million boys and girls.⁴²

The Monday morning broadcast served as the anchor of the radio conservation course, but ideally students participated in an activity-based curriculum that extended far beyond the quarter-hour broadcast. They were expected to discuss questions provided in the teacher’s manual after each show. Participants kept scrapbooks of notes, drawings, leaves, feathers, and other clippings collected on their own walks. At the end of each semester, students were encouraged to submit their scrapbooks to a statewide contest. Participating classrooms also formed “nature clubs” which organized a “nature museum” corner to showcase feathers, snake skins, abandoned bird’s nests and other treasures. Ranger Mac often praised these efforts on air, promising to send pine cones to the first hundred nature clubs that mailed WHA a postcard, or commenting by name on a student’s letter, package, or question. Students reciprocated with a torrent of letters, leaves, valentines, and on one occasion, a dead rat for the Ranger’s expert inspection.⁴³

One exchange included a letter from a young girl in Peshtigo who attended school on South Beebe Avenue:

Dear Ranger Mac:

In our sixth grade science discussion today, one of our boys said that blow snakes are poisonous. Many of us disagreed, but we had no source of proof. Would you write and tell us the answers to these questions?:

- 1. What does a blow snake look like?*
- 2. Is he dangerous?*
- 3. Can he blow poison about?*
- 4. Should we destroy them?*

Thank you very much.

*Sincerely yours,
Rita Brault
Sixth Grade Representative*

Dear Trailhitter:

Your letter recalls how as a boy I used to run away from the hissing adder because I thought it blew poison which if breathed would kill me instantly. How foolish! And how many



Photo by John Nondorf

Radio Hall sits nestled at the foot of Observatory Drive in the heart of the University of Wisconsin campus, and has been serving WHA as a facility for decades.



Rural Route 1
Tornahawk, Wis.
April 1, 1948

Dear Ranger Mac,
We are sending
you this small piece
of rock found in the
vicinity of Tornahawk.
The pupils in our
school were wondering
if it could
valuable ore

Your a
Ei

iron pyrites
called "Fool's Gold"
because we found it had
been mistaken for
gold.



Route 1,
Aniwa, Wisconsin
March 16, 1948

continue removed
find great
improvement
in it

Ranger Mac

We always listen to your broadcasts.
We have collected leaves, cones and specimens of trees
in our locality. We pressed the leaves
once we took the seeds out of the cones,
we painted for the Junior Red Cross. The
we are going to plant when the snow gets off the
and the weather gets warmer.
We have tree products, forest enemies and
information in our science classes. We learned
of many trees, the hardwoods, the softwoods
etc. We learned how to plant a tree and
into the age of a tree by its rings. We
work so -

Strong School
Beloit, Wis.
Nov. 12, 1947

begin
project
in exhibit
ranger mac
with
our forest

Dear Ranger Mac,

We are sending you
picture of the trophy case that
the last year's Sixth Grade Class
bought with some of their
conservation money. It is in
the front of our room now and
is filled with awards won by
this room. We think it is beautiful.
And we do appreciate. Some of the
money was spent on our school yard!
The Halloween season is
past for another year - and we
really had a good one. We proved
that a conservation minded class
- is not destructive.



Letters to Ranger Mac from schoolchildren throughout Wisconsin often included drawings or were written on stationery with nature themes. He answered their queries, jotting his initial notes on the letters themselves, and responding with typed, formal letters.

good times were spoiled by this foolish notion. Don't be afraid of any snake you will find around Peshtigo.

The Puff adder, Hog-nosed snake gets to be our largest snake. It averages 28 inches. It has patches of brown or black on top, smaller on sides, with abdomen yellowish or greenish. This color of the abdomen is the background for the patches, as well.

They are harmless, no doubt beneficial, and we are better off because the Creator saw fit to have them on earth.

Good luck to you and your companions.

*Yours very cordially,
RANGER MAC⁴⁴*

In addition to emphasizing forestry and soil conservation, McNeel encouraged students to refrain from harming animals and to reduce waste. He took students on “field trips” to the Forest Products Lab on the Madison campus; celebrated the birthday of the Civilian Conservation Corps; followed the work of federal soil specialists, foresters, and engineers in his broadcasts; and reviewed the lives of famous naturalists such

as Audubon and Muir. He reminded listeners that they too might ultimately work in the field of natural science. But technology and expertise could not replace the work of private citizens caring for farm woodlots, soil management, and erosion prevention. The future of conservation, emphasized Ranger Mac, remained largely in the hands of the future farmer.⁴⁵

McNeel did not believe that educating children would make the world perfect, but he did believe that it could make it better. Or much worse. “Children are important,” he wrote in a 1943 guest editorial, “just as important in building up a democracy as in building up a dictatorship.” Nazi Germany was “the greatest psychological tragedy with children the world has ever known. Then was demonstrated to the world what could be done in one generation’s time.” His concerns for American children were more vague. He was hopeful that war rationing would provide a chance to build national character. “‘I am an American’ was never intended to be a selfish boast inspired by a sense of security because of abundant natural resources,” he wrote. It was not what the nation possessed, but what citizens did that formed national identity. Children had to learn “a tradition of struggles and the sacrifices that make up our nation’s history.”⁴⁶

Nature's most basic lesson—and perhaps its hardest—is the cycle of life, and Ranger Mac made it understandable to the youngest of listeners.



Wakelin McNeel retired as a professor in 1951, but continued *Afield with Ranger Mac* until 1954 when he turned over the reins to Bob Ellerson, an Aldo Leopold student. McNeel was then able to dedicate himself to Upham Woods, a 4-H camp located near his childhood home in the Wisconsin Dells. In 1958 he died at the age of seventy-four.⁴⁷ Though newspapers, university sources, and the many organizations with which he worked issued statements to mourn his passing, nothing spoke for McNeel with more eloquence than his own words to Wisconsin schoolchildren:

*Now our little journey for today is almost ended. That old clock keeps ticking on and tick by tick the spring of the year turns to summer and summer to fall; and tick by tick babyhood into childhood, childhood into boyhood and girlhood, then to manhood and womanhood followed by old age when the hair turns white and time leaves its trace upon the face. And so it goes generation after generation; and so it will go on with you, my young listeners—the passing of time.*⁴⁸ ■■

Notes

¹*Afield with Ranger Mac*, "Radio Broadcast," 6, file 2, box 9, McCarty papers, Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS). Audiotapes of Ranger Mac broadcasts can be found in series 41/6/25, box 33, WHA papers, UW Division of Archives. Not all broadcasts are identified with individual dates.

²Harold McCarty, "WHA, Wisconsin's Radio Pioneer: Twenty Years of Public Service Broadcasting," in *Wisconsin's Blue Book* (Madison, WI: 1937), 202; WSA: Enrollments 1932–1971, file 14, box 32, WHA papers, UW Division of Archives; Ross Browender, "The School with 150,00 Pupils," *The Nation's Schools* 45, n.4 (1950), 75–78.

³"Ranger Mac," in *Lawrence Alumnus* (Winter 1957), clipping from Wakelin McNeel vertical file, UW Division of Archives; WSA: Enrollments 1932–1971, file 14, box 32, WHA papers, UW Division of Archives; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "Teaching Conservation in Wisconsin Schools," *Curriculum Bulletin* 1, n. 1 (May 1937), 9.

⁴Letter from H.W. Noble, folder 1, McNeel Papers, WHS; Elwood McIntyer, *Fifty Years of Cooperative Extension in Wisconsin, 1912–1962* (Madison, WI: 1962?) 53, 121, 191–193; Walter E. Scott, "Conservation's First Century in Wisconsin," from a paper presented May 6, 1967, University of Wisconsin Library.

⁵Memorial Resolutions of the Faculty of the University of Wisconsin on the Death of Emeritus Professor Wakelin McNeel, McNeel vertical file, UW Division of Archives; "Wakelin McNeel Works To Keep Wisconsin Fertile By Promoting State Conservation as 'Ranger Mac,'" *Daily Cardinal*, February 14, 1942, from the McNeel vertical file, UW Division of Archives.

⁶Jesse B. Thayer, State Superintendent, *Manual of the Elementary Course of Study for the Common Schools of Wisconsin* (Madison, WI: Democrat Printing Company, 1889), 75–77.

⁷C. P. Cary, State Superintendent, *Manual of the Elementary Course of Study for the Common Schools of Wisconsin* (Madison, WI: Democrat Printing Company, 1906), 3.

⁸Frank Tracy Carlton quoted in Lawrence Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876–1975*, (New York: Knopf, 1961), 86; Alan Raucher, "Frank Tracy Carlton on Reform: A Note on Historical Methods," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 57, n. 2 (Winter 1973–1974): 117–122.

⁹C. P. Cary, State Superintendent, *Manual of the Elementary Course of Study for the Common Schools of Wisconsin* (Madison, WI: Democrat Printing Company, 1910), 226–228.

¹⁰"Ranger Mac," in *Lawrence Alumnus* (Winter 1957): 15, clipping from McNeel vertical file, UW Division of Archives.

¹¹Wakelin McNeel, personnel file, McNeel vertical file, UW Division of Archives; "Ranger Mac, 4-H leader, to Retire; Once Headed Fort Atkinson Schools," *Jefferson County Union* May 15, 1950, clipping from McNeel vertical file, UW Division of Archives.

¹²Wakelin McNeel, "Preliminary Proposal for Conservation Education," October 19, 1931, folder 8, McNeel Papers, WHS.

¹³"Do You Know Wisconsin's Ranger Mac?" *Extension Service Review* (August 1943), 117, from McNeel vertical file, UW Division of Archives.

¹⁴"Sand Storm Hampers Travel," *Capital Times*, May 10, 1934, 6.

¹⁵"Housewives Irked; Dirt Coats Homes" *Capital Times*, May 10, 1934, 1; Quote from Michael Goc, "The Wisconsin Dust Bowl," 176.

¹⁶Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford University Press, New York: 1979), 13–16; Michael J. Goc, "The Wisconsin Dust Bowl" *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 73 n. 3 (Spring 1990): 175.

¹⁷Paul Glad, *The History of Wisconsin, 1914–1940* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 492.

¹⁸Aldo Leopold quoted from E. David Cronon and John W. Jenkins, *The University of Wisconsin: A History, 1925–1945* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 781.

¹⁹Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "Teaching Conservation in Wisconsin Schools," *Curriculum Bulletin* 1, n. 1 (May 1937): 9.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 12.

²¹*Ibid.*, 9.

²²Harold Engel, "Wisconsin State Station Complete New Studio" *Education by Radio* 5, n. 12 (September 19, 1935): 45; Engel, "WHA—Wisconsin's Pioneer," in *Education by Radio*, 3.

²³"WSA Bulletin 1938–1939," *Wisconsin State Journal of Education* (September 1939): 27.

²⁴"WSA enrollments" file 14, box 32, WHA papers, UW Division of Archives; "Wisconsin School of the Air Bulletin," *Wisconsin Journal of Education* 71 (January 1939): 230; Browender, "The School with 150,000 Pupils."

²⁵Gordon A. Sabine, "Thousands Hike on Air with Jovial Ranger Mac," *Wisconsin State Journal*, February 21, 1941, McNeel vertical file, UW Division of Archives.

²⁶McNeel, "Forestry Club 4-H Work," January 1936, file 6, McNeel Papers, WHS.

²⁷McNeel, "Preliminary Proposal."

²⁸Frank Lowth "The Activities Program in the Rural School," *Wisconsin Journal of Education* (December 1930): 220.

²⁹McIntyer, *Fifty Years of Cooperative Extension in Wisconsin*, 121.

³⁰For information on rural one-teacher schools, see Citizenship and International Committee of the Jackson County Association of Home and Community Education, *Schools of Yesterday in Jackson County, Wisconsin: a Collection of Memorabilia* (Black River Falls, WI: 1997); Estella Krohn Bryne, *The Early Schools of La Crosse County* (Wisconsin: Block Printing, 1985); Donald Hanson and Joan Paulson, eds., *Rural Schools of Waupaca County* (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 2000); *Good Old Golden Rule Days: A History of Sauk County, Wisconsin* (Chelsea, MI: Bookcrafters, 1994).

³¹Harrison U. Wood "A Year of Radio Experimentation," *Wisconsin State Journal of Education* (December 1931): 178–180.

³²*Afield with Ranger Mac*, "Radio Broadcast," file 2, box 92, McCarty papers, WHS.

³³*Afield with Ranger Mac*, "Trail's End," file 2, box 92, McCarty papers, WHS.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵*Afield with Ranger Mac*, "Birds' Homes," November 9, 1936, p.4, file 2, box 92, McCarty papers, WHS.

³⁶*Afield with Ranger Mac*, "When the Frost" September 30, 1933, file 2, box 92, McCarty papers, WHS.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸Nomination for Nash Conservation Award, "Personnel: McNeel—School of the Air," file 15, box 74, McCarty Papers, WHS.

³⁹"Ranger Mac Fan Mail," file 12, box 22, WHA papers, UW Division of Archives.

⁴⁰*Afield with Ranger Mac*, "Enemies of the Forest," March 13, 1938, Tape 11, WHA papers, UW Division of Archives.

⁴¹*Afield with Ranger Mac*, "Save the Soil," November 30, 1936, file 2, box 92, McCarty Papers, WHS; "Presence of Radios in the Rural Schools of Wisconsin," file 14, box 32, WHA papers, UW Division of Archives.

⁴²*Afield with Ranger Mac*, "Let's Take a Walk," September 27, 1937, file 1, box 78, McCarty Papers, WHS.

⁴³*Afield with Ranger Mac Teacher's Manual*, January 1938, file 10, box 22, WHA papers, UW Division of Archives; *Afield with Ranger Mac*, "Let's Take a Walk."

⁴⁴*Afield with Ranger Mac*, file 2, box 92, McCarty papers, WHS.

⁴⁵*Afield with Ranger Mac*, "The Forest Products Lab," March 22, 1937, file 2, box 92, McCarty papers, WHS; *Afield with Ranger Mac Teacher's Manual*, p. 14.

⁴⁶Wakelin McNeel, "The Hope of the Future," *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 23, 1943.

⁴⁷Memorial Resolutions of the Faculty of the University of Wisconsin on the Death of Emeritus Professor Wakelin McNeel, Document 1340, October 6, 1958, McNeel vertical file, UW Division of Archives.

⁴⁸*Afield with Ranger Mac*, "Leaves," file 2, box 92, McCarty papers, WHS.

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