



**Leo A. Nickasch**  
**1914-1989**

“I think the forest serves the purpose for everything –  
watershed, jobs, wildlife and paper.”

– Leo A. Nickasch

Each spring as Wisconsin elementary school students plant trees to commemorate Arbor Day, they, along with their teachers, parents and communities, have the efforts of Leo Nickasch to thank.

Nickasch is considered by many as the “lead person” in successfully lobbying the state Legislature to pass legislation in 1981 requiring the Department of Natural Resources to give tree seedlings to all fourth grade students who request them for Arbor Day planting. The legislation had stalled in two previous attempts, but Nickasch, boosted by the efforts of the Neenah-Menasha Arbor Day Committee and then state Rep. Michael Ellis, was able to get the bill turned into law.

“I relied on him for advice on conservation-related and labor-related issues,” Ellis wrote in a 1990 letter to Nickasch’s widow, Verna. Ellis was then a state senator. “His input with legislation, such as the 4<sup>th</sup> grader tree seedling bill, will leave a legacy which his family and community can be proud of.”

“Leo Nickasch was a Johnny Appleseed of sorts,” a Neenah/Menasha Arbor Day Committee news release said in 1992, two years after Nickasch’s death. “Besides physically planting trees, Leo also did some planting in (the) figurative sense of the word. In the early 1970’s, he realized the need for greater awareness and involvement in environmental protection in Fox River Valley. Leo set up Arbor Day projects involving students of all ages and organized the Neenah-Menasha Arbor Day Committee. Before long, he was successfully lobbying the Wisconsin Legislature for free tree seedlings for every fourth grade student in the state and served on the Governor’s Arbor Day Committee. Leo’s hard work was prosperous and has spread.”

“Leo’s planting adventures took him to all corners of Wisconsin,” the committee release continued. “The impact of his mission will not be realized for many years because his legacy continues to grow and spread. In twenty years time, the Neenah-Menasha Arbor Day Committee has helped millions of trees to be planted. Thousands of Neenah and Menasha students have participated in a variety of environmental projects. Leo’s vision for change has been far-reaching and impacted many. The Neenah-Menasha Arbor Day Committee continues to work hard to keep Leo’s vision alive.”

Nickasch worked as a maintenance mechanic at the Kimberly-Clark Corporation’s Lakeview Mill from 1938 to 1978. His active involvement in the

conservation movement began in the 1970s when his union, Local 482 of the United Paperworkers International Union, appointed him a representative on the state AFL-CIO Conservation Committee. In 1971, Nickasch formed a committee to plan Arbor Day activities for Neenah-Menasha schools. Kimberly-Clark aided the effort by donating 18,000 seedlings to area school children.

Nickasch was known to schoolchildren in the Neenah-Menasha area as “Mr. Trees” because of his work in promoting Arbor Day in area schools.

“He got his name when children of Lakeview School cried out ‘here comes Mr. Trees’ when he arrived with seedlings to plant,” a story in a 1988 issue of “The Timber Producer” said. “The name stuck because Nickasch stuck to it; it was volunteer work that became a cause.”

Nickasch’s interest in educating children about conservation issues extended beyond the tree planting initiative.

“Education was only part of Leo’s message,” said Nancy Day, Neenah-Menasha Arbor Day Committee member, in an April 1992 article in “Wisconsin Natural Resources” magazine. “He wanted to empower youth to protect the environment and show that tree planting was just one simple way kids could take concrete steps to make their world better.”

The Neenah-Menasha Arbor Day Committee also sponsored two-and-a-half day environmental workshops for sixth-grade students to field stations – first at the Trees for Tomorrow Center in Eagle River and later at the Central Wisconsin Environmental Station near Amherst Junction. In 1980, the committee began sponsoring trips for fifth-through eighth-grade students to the Rat River State Wildlife Area in Winnebago County. By the time of Nickasch’s death, more than 3,000 fifth- and sixth-grade students had attended workshops at the field stations and 5,000 students had participated in field trips to the wildlife area.

“That’s the ideal time to get ‘em,” Nickasch said about conservation education for elementary and middle school students. “Once we get them ... they’re good for the rest of their lives.”

Nickasch, a lifelong outdoors enthusiast, credited his interest in conservation to his experiences as a fourth grader at St. Joseph Catholic School in Appleton when the

church pastor would take groups of boys fishing on the Fox River and “spin the yarns about the woods and the rivers.”

“Father was an Iowa farm boy who loved the outdoors,” Nickasch told the Oshkosh Northwestern newspaper in a 1983 interview. “He was truly a conservationist at heart. Much of what he was rubbed on me.”

Nickasch grew up in the Menasha and Appleton area, where, except for service with the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II in the northern Pacific, he lived all of his life. He moved to Neenah after the war and resumed working for the Kimberly-Clark Corporation.

“I don’t believe in letting a tree grow up and die,” Nickasch said in a newspaper interview. “I believe in harvesting with restraint. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t have homes and you wouldn’t have paper.”

Nickasch also foresaw the increased importance public lands would have in providing outdoor recreation opportunities.

“In addition to the economics down the road to the year 2000 and beyond – I hope we’ve created recreation areas for the working people,” Nickasch told the Twin City News-Record newspaper in a 1984 interview. “I don’t believe anyone needs recreation areas more than the working class.”

Nickasch’s efforts to promote conservation education have drawn praise from many individuals involved in natural resources, including policy makers and agency professionals.

“You know, I look at this man as being a force in the Arbor Day program in Wisconsin, and a man, who for years, led the fight for trees in this state,” Francis W. Murphy, former chairman of the Wisconsin Conservation Congress, wrote in a letter. “To my knowledge, he never wrote any books, he had no fancy degrees. He simply was a working man in the arena of life.”

In 1989, Nickasch was a finalist in the National Arbor Day Awards competition for the Joyce Kilmer Award. Nickasch had been nominated by Gene Francisco, an area forestry supervisor for the DNR working out of Oshkosh and at this writing, Wisconsin’s state forester.

“Leo’s strong feelings towards educating young people about forest conservation are ever present in all of his conservation activities,” Francisco wrote in the nomination.

“ ‘Mr. Trees’ has devoted his life to conservation and has greatly impacted the young people in the Fox River Valley and all of the state of Wisconsin. It is only fitting that Leo receive national recognition for his efforts.”

“His main forte has been with school youngsters getting a sound basis and background for resource management and respect for nature and the out-of-doors,” said Bob Ellingson, a DNR employee who had worked with Nickasch for 20 plus years, in an Appleton Post-Crescent newspaper story from 1988. “He’s not afraid to tackle anything, no matter what the issue is. And I guess you could say he is always looking out for the underprivileged who do not always have the ability to partake in these activities.”

Ellingson noted that while Nickasch was best known for his forestry work, he also was concerned about clean water, clean air and outdoor recreational needs, especially those of children and families.

“He is particularly tenacious on all those activities,” Ellingson said. “And he is always concerned about those aspects when we’re doing any long range planning.”

Ellingson also noted that Nickasch’s influence extended all the way up to the governor’s office.

“You couldn’t have picked a more sincere, dedicated person than Leo,” Ellingson said. “He’s done far more as a volunteer and interested citizen than any professional has.”

**Leo A. Nickasch**  
**1914-1989**

BIRTH: September 20, 1914  
Appleton, Wisconsin.

DEATH: December 6, 1989.

EDUCATION: Educated in Appleton area schools.

MILITARY: Crew leader, U.S. Army Air Corps, Northern Pacific Theater,  
World War II.

EMPLOYMENT: Kimberly-Clark Corporation  
Lakeview Mill maintenance mechanic  
1939-1978.

CONSERVATION-RELATED ACTIVITIES

Chair: AFL-CIO Forest Committee Local 482  
Governor's Wisconsin Arbor Month Commission  
Neenah-Menasha Arbor Day Committee.

Member: Governor's Council for Forest Productivity (1983-1987).  
American Forestry Association.  
Fox Valley Water Quality Planning Agency.  
Wisconsin Woodland Owners Association.  
Wisconsin Farm Progress Days Rural Committee.

Board member: Wisconsin Wildlife Federation.  
MacKenzie Center (Poynette, Wisconsin).  
Trees for Tomorrow (Eagle River, Wisconsin).

Involved: Wisconsin Youth Conservation Corps.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Successfully lobbied for law requiring Wisconsin DNR to provide seedlings to all fourth-grade classes requesting them for Arbor Day.

Pushed for state demonstration forests.

Active in establishing UWSP Central Wisconsin Environmental Station, and encouraging Neenah-Menasha School District to send grade school students to the station.

Helped form Twin City Union Environmental Council.

Organized Arbor Day activities in Neenah-Menasha schools – 18,000 trees planted in 1972.

#### AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

Wisconsin Wildlife Federation – Youth Conservationist of the Year, 1976.

Munsingwear Conservation in Action award recipient.

Kimberly-Clark award for community service, 1983.

International Society of Arboriculture Gold Leaf Award, 1986.

Northeast Chapter Society of American Foresters Award for efforts in forestry education, 1987.

Award from U.S. Forest Service for activities in fire prevention, 1989.