

Haskell Noyes

1886-1948

Haskell Noyes was born to a prominent Milwaukee family that probably expected him to be a leader. His ancestors included one of the founders of Yale University, where Haskell would earn an undergraduate degree in 1908. His father was a lawyer and Superior Court judge in Milwaukee.

“Hack” Noyes would not disappoint his family. He was a successful and prominent member of the business community and its attendant civic circles for most of his adult life. He was an officer in World War I, earning the respect and admiration of a platoon he led.

Author John Gregory, who wrote the “History of Milwaukee Wisconsin” (1931) wrote of Noyes: “He is progressive and up to date in his ideas and methods, stands deservedly high in the business circles of this city and is greatly esteemed by all who know him.”

Today, however, Noyes’ name endures for the things he accomplished as a conservationist. The list of those accomplishments is long and impressive. Noyes was truly a pioneer Wisconsin conservationist, and he kept the company of other pioneers, Aldo Leopold and Curly Radke to name two.

Noyes apparently didn’t write much, at least not for public consumption. What’s known about him now, more than 50 years after his death, has been recorded by others.

Perhaps he’s best known for establishing the Haskell Noyes Conservation Warden Efficiency Award. The award goes annually to the person selected as the top warden in the state. Noyes presented the first award. The award has been presented every year since then, and always by a member of the Noyes family.

The award remains highly prized. Current Chief Warden Thomas Harelson said this in prepared remarks for the 1998 award ceremony: “From the first presentation of the Haskell Noyes Award to Ernie Swift, and through the years, as a succession of outstanding wardens have been honored with this award, receiving ‘the watch’ has come to represent the pinnacle of a field officer’s career.”

Noyes was also memorialized for his work to secure land for the Kettle Moraine State Forest. The Wisconsin Conservation Commission, which he helped establish and served as an early chairman, dedicated the Haskell Noyes Memorial Woods in October 1956. The scientific area was to be preserved in its natural state. A memorial marker in the forest notes that Noyes was instrumental in creation of the Kettle Moraine.

The Noyes Award and Kettle Moraine marker are public reminders of Noyes’ work as a conservationist. There’s more to the story of his conservation efforts.

“Mr. Noyes’ interest in the outdoors was stirred by boyhood vacations along the Brule River, where he fished for trout and tramped the forests,” noted the Wisconsin Conservation Bulletin in February 1949, shortly after Noyes had died. Noyes continued to escape to the Brule throughout his life. As noted in “Wisconsin Biographies, Volume III”:

“He has a summer home on Brule River in Douglas County and there obtains his recreation from the arduous cares of business.”

His father, George, had an interest in the natural world, and was among the leaders of a movement to create a park system along Lake Michigan in Milwaukee County, according to “Wisconsin Biography.”

Haskell Noyes plunged deeply into conservation matters of all kinds upon returning from the war front.

He helped organize the Milwaukee chapter of the Izaak Walton League in the early 1920s. He also helped found the Wisconsin Division of the Izaak Waltons, served as its president and was a lifelong member.

A 1925 account of the Wisconsin Division’s third annual convention at the Northland Hotel in Green Bay quotes Noyes updating the gathering on the group’s accomplishments. “We were able to put back on the books the question of fish – limit of fish. We were able to pass a law closing the deer season every other year, and then advancing it into December, where the chances of the use of the automobile would be slight, and, therefore, the deer would have a better chance.”

It was at this time that Noyes and other conservation leaders in Wisconsin were pushing for a law centralizing Wisconsin conservation activities under a director and six unpaid commissioners. The law was passed in 1926, creating the Wisconsin Conservation Commission. “This change marked the end of Wisconsin’s comparatively feeble pioneer efforts in conservation and opened the modern era of conservation development,” reported the Wisconsin Conservation Bulletin in 1949.

William J.B. Aberg, a prominent Madison attorney and conservationist, commented on Noyes’ work when giving a dedication speech years later in the Kettle Moraine ceremonies:

“In 1925 and 1926, Haskell was in the forefront of a group which formulated a legislative program to remove the control of conservation matters from partisan politics and modernize the administrative set-up in the state.”

A coalition was built through Noyes’ personal contacts and friendships. People like Leopold and Radtke joined in the movement, which “gained such momentum that it became the key issue in the gubernatorial campaign of 1926. It elected Governor Fred Zimmerman that year,” said Aberg.

The commission was created in July 1927. Noyes was named to the body by Gov. Zimmerman a year later.

He served as chairman from 1931 until Feb. 8, 1933, when he resigned, along with fellow commissioner E.M. Dahlberg of Ladysmith.

The early commission was a busy group. Some of the commission's accomplishments in those years, as listed in a Department of Natural Resources timeline of the commission's activities, 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.

Noyes believed that the Conservation Department should hire career professionals and promote efficiency in resource protection and management. He was responsible for seeing that wardens had the resources to do their jobs, including standard uniforms.

He was also a leader in creating new forestry practices. "He was active in promotion of the forestry laws," noted Aberg, "enlisting the aid of leaders and legislators in the enactment of the forest mill tax law in 1929, the forest crop tax laws in 1927 and 1929."

The commission endured until the Conservation Department was reorganized in 1968. Its successor body, the Wisconsin Natural Resources Board, continued to have authority to select the department's secretary until this decade, when the Wisconsin Legislature granted Gov. Tommy Thompson's request and gave authority to appoint the secretary to the governor.

History shows that Noyes' interest and accomplishments in conservation continued after he left the Conservation Commission. He initiated the push for a voluntary sportsmen's license to provide contributions to the conservation fund. It was designed to provide funds for the creation of public hunting areas, for which no money had previously been available.

He was also active on the national scene. Beginning in 1932, he served on the advisory board for administration of the federal migratory bird act. "It was largely through his efforts that bag limits on migratory waterfowl were reduced to check the decline in population," reported the February 1949 Wisconsin Conservation Bulletin.

In his Kettle Moraine speech on an Indian Summer day in October 1956, Aberg, himself a former member of the Conservation Commission (1939-51), described Noyes as "one of God's noblemen."

HASKELL NOYES
1886-1948

- BIRTH:** July 22, 1886, in Milwaukee, son of George Henry Noyes, a Milwaukee attorney and Superior Court judge, and Agnes Allis (Haskell) Noyes.
- DEATH:** Dec. 8, 1948, Milwaukee.
- EDUCATION:** Public schools and Milwaukee Academy. Bachelor's degree, Yale University, 1908. Law degree, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1911. Coached UW-Madison varsity basketball team one year while studying law.

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

Insurance executive from 1914 until his death with Milwaukee insurance underwriting company. He was a partner and president (1933-48) of the firm.

World War I veteran, served with 330th Field Artillery, U.S. Army, 1917-19; overseas in Europe from July 1918-April 1919, discharged with rank of captain in May 1919. Received silver platter from men in his platoon in 1918.

Organizer and life member of Izaak Walton League of America, Wisconsin Division. He was president of state division in 1924-25, elected at the second State Convention, held in Janesville. Was still a director at large at the time of his death.

Appointed to Wisconsin Conservation Commission in 1928. Served as chairman from 1931-33. Resigned Feb. 8, 1933.

Established annual Conservation Warden Efficiency Award in 1930 to honor top game warden in state. Presented the award (gold pocket watch) from 1930 until his death. Family members have continued to present the award every year since his death.

Credited with being originator of Wisconsin sportsman's license (1937).

Instrumental in first purchase of land for Kettle Moraine State Forest. Wisconsin Conservation Commission dedicated "Haskell Noyes Memorial Woods" in 1955. The parcel of natural woodland in Fond du Lac County, Northern Unit of Kettle Moraine, was named for Noyes in recognition of his efforts on behalf of the forest and for his general conservation work.

Member of federal advisory board for administration of national migratory bird act. Credited with bringing about reduction of bag limits on migratory waterfowl to check decline in population.

Established Eagle Scout Camp on Lost Canoe Lake in Vilas County. The camp was initially established as a forestry camp. Active in support of positive causes for boys and girls, he received Silver Beaver Award for his work with Boy Scouts of America.

Member of the Milwaukee County Park Commission. (His father, George Henry Noyes, was active in development of the county park system along Lake Michigan.)

Honored by the Milwaukee County Conservation Alliance in 1948 for more than a quarter-century of outstanding work in conservation.

Member of the River Hills, Wis., Village Board and Police and Fire Commission.

Member of numerous civic and business associations.