

ERNEST FREMONT SWIFT

1897-1968

inducted into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame - 1986

(Much of this biography has been paraphrased from Swift's book, "Conservation Saga," published by the National Wildlife Federation in 1967).

"First teach the child. . .that bread comes from the soil and not from the store; teach him that fat cities do not thrive on a lean country-side."

Ernie Swift was raised with the fading but not forgotten tales of wild frontier and Indian battles; memories of wide open prairie and sky; the last buffalo hunts. He came from the Minnesota prairie as a young boy to homestead on a sandy stump farm in northern Wisconsin.

Swift's conservation career began in the 1920's, an era of lawlessness, ravaged land, and corrupt sportsmanship. He saw the first replanting of the forest, the development of resource management in the state and the country, and a north country business transformation to tourism and recreation. Throughout his warden and Conservation Department career, Swift lived and worked by the new conservation ethic begun by Gifford Pinchot and others.

By the time Swift was 22 years old, he had already served in the U.S. Army in Missouri, North and South Carolina and as a Sergeant with the 48th Infantry Machine Gun Company in Newport News, Virginia. In 1926, at the age of 28, he took a civil service exam and was selected as a conservation warden and forest

ranger in Forest County. Here he began a lifetime of dedication to conservation in Wisconsin.

Being a conservation warden in the late 1920s was often a dangerous and lonely occupation. These were the days of prohibition and subsequent rum-running, a time of illegal trapping and hunting. Swift said in his book, A Conservation Saga, most folks had little appreciation for the warden or the ranger. In the words of one backcountry woodsman, "I'd buy me a tin bill and peck slop before I'd hire out as a game warden" (Swift, 1967, p. 12).

A warden had to be a very knowledgeable woodsman. Swift said "No one knew where I was going, and if I got on the trail of an illegal hunter or trapper, I was never sure myself where I would end up. In the spring there was canoe work for fish spearers and illegal trappers, and in the fall more camping out for trappers and headlighters." Swift believed such an education was vital, and the only form of training at the time. Most important, the lessons of ecology were all around you, if only you took the time to really observe.

Swift knew game wardens lost their lives upholding conservation laws. He was not without some close calls himself. In one of his own stories - while working one day, he followed three fishermen to a secluded stream where fishing was prohibited. There the men were fly-fishing, right in front of a posted sign saying "REFUGE - No Fishing". Swift approached the men, informing them of their violation. During his confrontation, one of them pulled a gun on him. Undaunted, Swift asked to see their fishing permits. Only one, Frank McErlean, a well known

gangster from Chicago, was able to produce a license. Swift confiscated the fish and ordered all three of them to appear in court the following morning. As it turned out, the three men were members of a Chicago gang on vacation in the northwoods. A short time later, Swift arrested one of the "gang" for poaching. The daring Swift made enemies that day and became the target of a Chicago assassination squad, or so the story goes.

On a fateful evening, a black Packard glided to a stop in front of Swift's home in Hayward. The "bump squad" sent to "knock him off", found the house empty. Swift had been tipped off ahead of time and was hiding a safe distance away. This story inspired a television show called "Open Season" hosted by Jack Webb and directed by William Conrad. Actor James Best played the part of Ernie Swift.

In 1928, Swift was made Supervisor of the state's Law Enforcement Program out of Sawyer County. As Supervisor, he handled forest fire cases, game surveys and wildlife damage complaints. He specialized in fur bootleggers in the northern counties. In 1930 he received the first Haskell Noyes Conservation Award for his outstanding service as a Conservation Warden.

Swift moved quickly up the ranks as a conservation officer. In 1935 he was transferred to the main office in Madison as Supervisor of Fur Farms. Besides handling confiscated furs, he conducted surveys on fur-bearing animals in the wild, on licensed fur farms and on shooting preserves. Later that same year, he was made Deputy Conservation Director. Here he drafted all game management and forestry regulations passed by a newly appointed Wisconsin Conservation Commission.

As Assistant Director in 1943, Swift gained the responsibility of supervising state forests, several tree nurseries, and state parks. He began a forest fire protection program on 12,000,000 acres. He promoted the involvement of professional foresters working with farmers, private industry and county forests.

Swift was named Conservation Director in 1947, under a six-member paid Conservation Congress. Because of Swift's leadership, Wisconsin became one of the first states to bring biologists into the Conservation Department. He also began a professional and personal relationship with a well known wildlife ecologist at the University of Wisconsin - Madison, Aldo Leopold. The two made remarkable contributions to the efforts of the Conservation Commission and the conservation movement.

Swift's involvements with resource policy committees and councils grew through the 1950s. He gave his time and talents to the International Association of Game, Fish and Conservation Commissioners, the American Fisheries Society, the Society of American Foresters and the National Waterfowl Council, to name a few. Swift was the recipient of over 20 conservation awards during his life, including the Aldo Leopold Award in 1959.

In 1954, Swift became the Assistant Director to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Washington, D.C. Here he thought he could make great contributions, but after only 18 months, he quit the position out of frustration with the bureaucracy. The following year he became the Executive Director of the National Wildlife Federation - the nation's largest private conservation organization. After resigning

in 1960, he continued to serve the Federation as a conservation advisor and forestry liaison officer until his death.

Swift never even completed a semester of college. He left the University of Minnesota because of illness in 1919. For several years he worked in real estate, wood products and as a guide. Throughout his professional career he educated himself in forestry practice, wildlife research and conservation policy. In the field, nature became his guide and teacher. He thought carefully about conservation, he said, "People become conservationists in relation to their ability to become philosophers." Swift was not just learning a profession, but creating it. According to former State Governor and U.S. Senator, Gaylord Nelson, Ernie Swift "helped to turn conservation into a science."

Sources:

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Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame. 1986. "Ernest Swift." Unpublished biography. Stevens Point, Wisconsin.

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