



Daniel O. Trainer
1926-2007

“If we don’t start conserving pretty soon, we
won’t be sustainable as a culture.”

–Dan Trainer

Daniel Trainer has enjoyed a couple of careers and a wide range of professional and civic activities. He is known as an international expert on animal diseases, and his resume includes a decade of work on the veterinary faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

From there it was on to the position of dean of the College of Natural Resources at UW-Stevens Point. He served in that capacity 1971-87. In that time, the College of Natural Resources enjoyed robust growth, becoming the largest undergraduate natural resources program in the United States.

After retirement, Trainer took on the mantle of community leader, donating countless hours to projects and groups in central Wisconsin. Among his accomplishments in this arena was to serve with a small group of civic leaders who developed a 28-plus-mile Green Circle around the Stevens Point metropolitan area. As a board member of the Plover River Alliance, a local river advocacy group, he also helped to spearhead efforts to successfully derail a plan for a major highway bridge across the Plover, considered to be a near-wilderness jewel in a populated area.

In between all of that, Trainer found time to serve on the Wisconsin Natural Resources Board, the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, the Nature Conservancy and numerous other organizations. As a member of the Natural Resources Foundation Board, he was involved with the hiring of the board's first executive director. He helped start the first Wisconsin Wildlife Society chapter, in Stevens Point, and served as its first president. He was also on the Wisconsin Public Intervenor Steering Committee. He led efforts to change the program's image from "stop the development" to "make it a better kind of development."

In Portage County, Trainer was among the founders and leaders of a citizen's recycling group that established one of the state's most successful voluntary recycling programs, predating the days of mandatory recycling.

Truly, Trainer has enjoyed many activities. The word "enjoy" is appropriate, too. Christine Thomas, a professor and administrator in the UW-Stevens Point College of Natural Resources and founder of the nationally known Becoming an Outdoors Woman program, was hired by Trainer and saw her own career flourish in Trainer's years as dean. "He always said, 'We can have a lot of fun, as long as we get our work done,' " Thomas recalled in a July 2004 interview. "And he also said, 'If you're not having fun, you should find something else to do.' "

Both Trainer and Thomas were named among the top 20 most influential people on conservation in the 20th century by "Wisconsin Outdoor Journal."

The son of a game warden, Trainer grew up in Princeton, loving to hunt and fish and learning people skills from his father. He served in the South Pacific with the U.S. Navy at the close of and immediately after World War II.

After returning home, he attended and graduated from Ripon College, then worked as a medical technologist at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Wood and later as a member of the border patrol in Texas.

Returning to Wisconsin, he earned a master's degree in microbiology at UW-Madison and worked at Fromm Laboratories in Germantown for a couple of years, making small-animal vaccines. He later served as the chief pathologist for the Department of Natural Resources and simultaneously pursued a Ph.D. degree in microbiology and veterinary science at UW-Madison.

He became a faculty member at UW-Madison in 1960 and was one of the principles in creating a graduate program in diseases of wildlife. Disorders of deer were his specialties. He is credited with establishing animal disease as an ecological factor important to wildlife management. Even after coming to Stevens Point, he continued to do research and publishing and in 1973 was the third American to receive the Distinguished Service Award of the Wildlife Disease Association.

Trainer would likely have been fulfilled in his professional life had he stayed at UW-Madison, but a new challenge lured him away. With the environmental movement gaining momentum in the early 1970s, he was attracted to the potential of building the Stevens Point program. Trainer recalled that student involvement was strong and a new chancellor, Lee Sherman Dreyfus, was exercising "enthusiastic leadership."

The new dean came to UW-Stevens Point little more than a year after its conservation department, which had been started in 1946 as the first of its kind in American higher education, became a full-fledged college. There were about 500 students then. When he retired in 1987, there were 1,600 students, including about 75 who were pursuing master's degrees. "It's been a fun job," Trainer said at his retirement, "because of the students. When they're happy, it makes everybody happy."

Then Chancellor Philip Marshall had this to say about Trainer at the time of his retirement. "Dan has made a tremendous difference at this university. He came when the College of Natural Resources was in the embryo stage and his responsibilities were to nurture its development, which has been accomplished with fantastic results."

Reflecting in a 2004 Conservation Hall of Fame interview, Trainer had this to say about his professional life: "I've had two careers, wildlife disease and administrator at a college. Both were different, but nice. I was just as proud of my wildlife disease work as I was with what happened at UW-SP."

For his part, Trainer deferred most of the credit for the growth of UW-SP's program to a strong faculty that he trusted and empowered to reach for new heights. Dreyfus would go on to become governor

of Wisconsin in 1978, but not until the College of Natural Resources was a robust operation. “Dreyfus wanted it to be that when you think of natural resources, you think Stevens Point,” Trainer said.

The university used its influence to lure many statewide conservation groups to meet in Stevens Point, which had university facilities, ample lodging and open arms. Trainer had no small part in that. “He was tireless in reaching out to conservation groups, the hook and bullet crowd and others, and he was able to relate to people from all walks of life,” Thomas said. Those connections strengthened the natural resources program and brought a bountiful load of scholarships for students in the college, she said.

“In many ways, my impact on the environment was through the students. We prepared them to go out and work on the front lines,” he said. “Those students were able to go anywhere, and we took great pride in helping them to get through school. They’re like extended family. I never met one who wasn’t proud to be a Point graduate.”

New programs grew at the college, as Trainer encouraged faculty to explore possibilities. Among majors and/or minors at the college are forestry, paper science, resource management, soils, water and wildlife, camp and youth agency administration and programming, environmental communication, environmental education/interpretation, environmental law enforcement, forest recreation, land use planning and outdoor education. Options like urban forestry and fire science were among the first of their kind the country. Trainer saw to it that the natural resources program had an international dimension, believing that students best learned natural resources issues when they understood the international dimensions of those issues. He also saw to it that the university graduated environmental managers who had been trained with an integrated approach to natural resource management.

Creating a forestry program was a challenge, especially gaining accreditation. “The DNR wouldn’t hire Point graduates, because we weren’t accredited,” he said. He steered successful efforts to gain accreditation for the forestry program. That meant being compared to peer institutions like Michigan and Michigan State.

Development of field stations and research sites also occurred in Trainer’s tenure. Trainer was dean when state-owned Schmeckle Reserve in Stevens Point was created. Located near the university campus, the Reserve serves as an important research area for natural resources students. The Reserve’s Visitors Center also houses the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame. The Reserve was named for conservation professor Fred Schmeckle, a 1990 Conservation Hall of Fame inductee.

Other field stations created under Trainer’s leadership were Treehaven near Tomahawk and the Central Wisconsin Environmental Station near Nelsonville. The first Natural Resources Building on campus was constructed during his tenure, although he points out that it was in the planning stages before he arrived.

The College of Natural Resources also achieved an often illusive goal in higher education. “We took an integrated approach to natural resources. Everything related to everything else,” he said.

Development of a strong outreach program through UW-Extension was also accomplished under Trainer’s leadership. The College of Natural Resources’ forestry program and the Central Wisconsin Groundwater Center at UW-Stevens Point are examples of that outreach function. “We proved that an academic program was about more than just the campus,” he said. That concept is the embodiment of what is known as “The Wisconsin Idea.”

A member of the DNR board from 1980-86, Trainer said he was most interested in land acquisitions for preservation purposes. “They’re not making land anymore,” he said. As chair of the board’s Land Committee, he also oversaw development of a rails to trails program, in which the state gained right of first refusal to railroad rights of way for possible trail development.

Trainer hardly headed for the rocking chair when he left the university in 1987. He dove into community activities in Stevens Point. Green Circle trail development basically amounted to getting commitments from public and private entities to allow for the trail system on their lands. The small group of local leaders included its president, former Stevens Point Journal Publisher and Editor George Rogers. Trainer and Rogers developed a strong bond as the project proceeded. It was a model for other communities, but Trainer noted, “We had no authority for anything.” Without authority and with little money, but with plenty of influence, the group was able to create a network of nature trails circling the Stevens Point metropolitan area, following the Wisconsin and Plover rivers and highlighting diverse ecological areas.

Together with Rogers, who also served as president of the Plover River Alliance, Trainer worked his ample political connections to prevent a Highway 10 bridge crossing over the Plover. “I don’t mind playing politics for good reasons,” he said. In this case, he believed that the good reasons included protecting a relatively pristine river which served as a main recharge for the city of Stevens Point’s well fields.

His community activities didn’t stop at the environment, either. He was president of the Community Foundation of Portage County in the 1990s and oversaw the hiring of the first paid executive director of the group.

Looking back on a distinguished career and related activities, Trainer said, “I’ve always had the best job in the world – natural resources and young people, and all in the state of Wisconsin.” His faith in those young people makes him optimistic about the future, but he said it’s time to get serious about conservation. “If we don’t start conserving pretty soon, we won’t be sustainable as a culture,” he said.

DANIEL O. TRAINER

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BIRTH: July 13, 1926, Princeton, Wisconsin, son of Daniel and Esther.

EDUCATION: Undergraduate degree, Ripon College, biology and general science, 1950.
Master's Degree, UW-Madison, microbiology, 1955.
Ph.D., UW-Madison, microbiology and veterinary science, 1961.

MILITARY SERVICE: Veteran, U.S. Navy, serving in the South Pacific in World War II.

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

1955-56: Research virologist, Fromm Laboratories.
1956-62: Wildlife pathologist, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.
1963-65: Assistant director, Agricultural Experiment Station, University of Wisconsin-Madison.
1962-66: Assistant professor, UW-Madison.
1969-71: Professor, UW-Madison.
1971-87: Dean, UW-Stevens Point College of Natural Resources.

ORGANIZATIONS, ACTIVITIES

Wisconsin Natural Resources Board, 1980-86, board vice chair, 1981-85. Also chaired Land Committee.

Member, Wisconsin Natural Resource Foundation, served as chair and vice chair.

Established first Wildlife Society chapter in Wisconsin, at UW-Stevens Point, and served as first president of the chapter (1972-73).

Member, Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, serves as vice president.

Member, Whitetails Unlimited advisory council.

Member, Wisconsin Sea Grant Program, advisory council.

Member, Treehaven Board of Directors.

Member, Board of Visitors, UW-Stevens Point.

Member, North Central Conservancy Trust.

Member and vice president, Plover River Alliance.

Member, River Alliance of Wisconsin Board of Directors in 1990s.

Member and president, Community Foundation of Portage County in 1990s.

Member, American Institute of Biological Sciences.

Member, Environmental Decade.

Member, Izaak Walton League.

Member, Soil Conservation Society.

Member, Wildlife Disease Association, president, 1968-70.

Member, Audubon Society.

Member, National Environmental Health Association.

Vice-president, Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Lectures, 1973-75.

AUTHOR/EDITOR

Authored more than 120 papers in various journals on wildlife diseases.

Co-editor of three books, including "Infectious Diseases of Wild Animals," published in 1981.

AWARDS, HONORS

Distinguished Service Award, Wildlife Disease Association, 1973.

Distinguished Service Award, Wisconsin Bear Hunters Association, 1995.

Honored by Environmental Council, Wisconsin Soil Conservation Society, Milwaukee Conservation Alliance, Izaak Walton League of Wisconsin and Wisconsin Conservation Congress and other organizations.

Named Dean Emeritus of Natural Resources at UW-Stevens Point, 1997.

Named Emeritus Member, Wildlife Disease Association, 1997.

Commendation, UW-Stevens Point Chapter, Sigma Pi, national scientific research society, 1990.

UW-Stevens Point College of Natural Resources building dedicated to him in 1988.

Winner, first Quality of Life Leadership Award sponsored by St. Michael's Hospital Foundation, Stevens Point.

He was named to The Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel Conservation Hall of Fame in 1998.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Background information for this report came from archived materials at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, including press releases, proclamations and news clippings. A file of about 50 separate documents was made available by the university to the Conservation Hall of Fame. More documents were reviewed but remain physically housed at the university.

An interview with Trainer, conducted for the Hall of Fame in June 2004, is cited several times in the report.

An interview with Christine Thomas was conducted for the Hall of Fame in July 2004.

July 2004, updated February 2005