

By Bill Berry, 2004 Induction of Charles Van Hise

Twenty years of the Wisconsin conservation hall of fame. ..

51 inductees, people from every walk of life. Today's inductees are wonderful examples...citizen activist, conservation professional, university professor/administrator.

Many people, from many walks of life, have played important roles in the composite history of conservation in Wisconsin.

They include many in this room and thank you all for being here. I'd like to ask the members of the conservation hall of fame's executive board to stand, and also members of the board of directors.

I would also like to recognize our president, Earl Spangenberg, who has been involved from the get-go and has presided over these ceremonies with dignity all these years.

Finally, to Bill Horvath, our unpaid and incredibly dedicated executive secretary, a big thanks. Bill is the reason this ceremony has happened every year for the last 20. Many have contributed. Bill has led. Often from behind, and sometimes whether some of us liked it or not. Thanks to Bill Horvath for his tireless efforts on behalf of conservation history in Wisconsin.

And now, a few words on Charles R. Van Hise.

Charles Van Hise was among the earliest voices calling for conservation of natural resources. He knew full well that educating people to be concerned, as he was, would take a good deal of time.

I want to draw attention to a few key points in remarks about Charles R. Van Hise.

They are:

His progressive era roots and connections

His belief that people need to act for the greater good

His understanding of the interlocking nature of resource conservation

And, finally, the impact of his work

First, I must relate details of my recent my conversation with Charles Van Hise. It was about which photograph to use on the handouts many of you hold. There were two options from which to choose. The more common of which is a picture taken while he was president of UW Madison. He appears slightly stooped, serious, in fact, intense, and, up there in years a bit. The other photo showed a strapping, handsome young man, caught by the camera at the prime of life. I was seated in front of my computer, deciding which photo to drop into the layout. I decided to ask Charles which photo to use. I swear he responded, "If it were you, which would you pick?" I used the young man photo.

He may have changed his mind, though, because just as I clicked the computer mouse, there was a power outage. The next day, most of the document was recoverable, but the picture was not there. I decided to overrule other impulses and re-clicked the mouse, returning the young man's picture to the

box on the handout. Later in the day i was preparing this presentation, and what should happen but that as i zeroed in on some points to make, the computer should go dead again. I thought seriously about changing that picture, and bill Horvath will probably make me anyway for the final version, but it stayed as it was. Now, if the lights should go out...

Van Hise had a big impact on education and the conservation movement in America, and didn't really need to leave south central Wisconsin to do it. Oh, he was well known as a field geologist in young years, exploring the bedrock of the upper peninsula and northern Wisconsin. There were other field trips, too, and surely conferences and other professional and academic responsibilities that took him elsewhere. But it's just as true that he grew up in Fulton, rock county, earned his education just one county north, at Madison, and spent most of his adult life on the faculty or as president of the UW-Madison. He was truly a home boy.

He was among the progressive era leaders at the birth of the 20th century, those who rallied around the idea that government could cure some of society's ills. A close look at his pioneering 1910 textbook, 'the conservation of natural resources in the United States,' shows that progressive ideas influenced the work. An example: he questioned whether those of power and stature had unfettered rights to use up natural resources, just because they could buy them.

A product of the progressive era was 'the Wisconsin idea,' which held that the boundaries of the campus extend to the boundaries of the state.' historical researcher Dan Herhaugen adds, put another way, the Wisconsin idea advocates applying the university's best and bright minds to the tasks of finding ways to improve the lives of ordinary people.'

Among his acts as president of UW-Madison from 1903-18 was to convince the legislature to make Wisconsin the first state in the nation to fund extension services. As a result, some of the university's resources were literally offered up in every county of the state.

Some spin master of 100 years ago spun the phrase 'the expert on tap, not on top.'

'The conservation of natural resources in the united states' was published in 1910. Sources such as the library of congress, ecologist David Brower and others called it one of the most influential conservation works of its time.

Remember that this was 1910, and Van Hise was plenty busy as president of UW-Madison. That he would be considered a major voice on conservation at the same time is interesting, if not remarkable.

In short, the book was a general survey of conservation issues of the era. It went on to offer a range of possible management solutions and legislative remedies.

It was insightful: Van Hise cited the possibility of global climate change due to the burning of fossil fuels. He warned decades before the dustbowl that a campaign to prevent soil erosion was necessary. He suggested that consumption of natural resources ranging from soil to metals be controlled by laws.

As noted earlier, van Hise believed that citizens needed to act for the greater good of society.

Van Hise observed in his book that "...the period in which individualism was patriotism in this country has passed by; and the time has come when individualism must become subordinate to responsibility to the many." John Kennedy updated the words in 1960. Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country. I have a feeling that van Hise and the other 50 inductees into the Wisconsin conservation hall of fame lived by those words.

It's worth noting, too, that in Van Hise's case, the Wisconsin idea and his feelings about 'responsibility to the many' merged into a sort of social compact. At once, he believed that great institutions like our universities should benefit all the residents of the state, and that each of those residents owed something back to the many.

I'm quite sure van Hise understood the interlocking nature of those thoughts. In the conservation world, he saw similar continuities.

In today's conservation parlance, there's much talk about working at the ecosystem level to benefit multiple species.

Van Hise put it this way in 1910: it is clear that the problem of the conservation of our natural resources is an interlocking one. If the forests are conserved in the rough lands and mountains, the streams will have an elevation flow, their navigability will be easily maintained, they will give a uniform water-power; the erosion of the soil will be lessened; the bottomlands along the stream will not be flooded." he added: "the conservation of one resource assists in the conservation of all others."

So what is Charles Van Hise's impact today? He was named one of Wisconsin's top 10 historical figures in a Milwaukee journal sentinel poll of independent experts in 2000. My friend Dennis McCann, a journal sentinel columnist, noted in typical wise-guy journalist fashion that he wouldn't have fared so well with the general public.

That's ok, though. It's a high compliment, one would think, to have some of your accomplishments so taken for granted that people have forgotten that they were yours.

Today we have an education system that struggles against its own weight, but that still provides remarkable opportunities to our citizens, young and old.

We have achieved many conservation gains, even as we face more challenges. Wisconsin's progressive era produced some of the gains and set the stage for many more.

The 20th anniversary of the conservation hall of fame is a good time to think about both – gains and challenges. It's also a good time to reflect on how the institution that Charles Van Hise led in the early 20th century produced faculty and students who made a huge difference in conservation. They are faculty members like Aldo Leopold, Joseph Hickey and George Wehrwein, to name a few among our Inductees. They are students like inductees Fran and Fred Hamerstrom, or beloved central Wisconsin tramps, and Laurence Jahn, the brilliant waterfowl biologist being inducted today. John Muir was a UW dropout, but we'll forgive him that.

What is your legacy, Doctor Van Hise? We still trying to work for the greater good. That was your mantra, that is what we strive to do today, against great odds sometimes, but strive we do, nonetheless.