



Aroline Schmitt
1904-1995

‘And every sportsman must come to realize that game management is a byproduct of land management, and must not take precedence in the thinking of the people.’

—Aroline Schmitt

“She wouldn’t back down if she knew she was right.”

That’s how Maxine Roberts described her mother, Aroline Schmitt, in a June 2001 interview.

Schmitt, an ardent conservationist throughout much of her life, “was a strong-willed woman. Very honest,” said Roberts, a resident of Moscow, Idaho. “She wasn’t very well through any of this, but she was a tough lady, and she had a tough mind.”

A small, thin woman who battled illness for much of her life, Schmitt was active in a variety of conservation causes in Wisconsin and the nation. Her direct involvement in Wisconsin occurred in the 1930s to the early 1960s.

Forestry was her main cause. She championed the principles of sustainable yield cutting and grappled with the issue of public versus private ownership. Always, she prodded politicians, conservationists and industrial foresters to adopt good forestry practices.

Schmitt was a battler, and she fought many of her battles from a bed, because illness put her there in 1948. Confined to a bedroom for many years, she developed the prototype home office, with phone, typewriter and files all within reach.

She produced a tremendous collection of correspondence with key conservation figures. The collection also includes speeches and essays that she penned, along with brochures, reports and copies of legislation. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin is in possession of the extensive, well-organized collection. It is a conservation history treasure trove and a virtual who’s who of conservation in Wisconsin from the 1940s through the 1960s.

Her traveling companion for years was Wilhelmine La Budde, a 1990 Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame inductee. She corresponded regularly with conservation icon Aldo Leopold (1985 inductee) and Gifford Pinchot. Pinchot, a well-known conservationist and politician, was a family friend who would play a big part in Schmitt’s life.

Aroline Hines was born to a wealthy family in Jamestown, New York, in 1904. Her family knew well of Wisconsin. A Christian Science Monitor article of Sept. 12, 1947, noted that “Mrs. Schmitt, nee Hiles, is the granddaughter of a Wisconsin lumberman.” Schmitt said in the article that her grandfather “did his share of cleaning

out some of the state's finest timber. But that was at a time when one could plead a belief that timber never would give out. Timberland owners of today know better." Schmitt's father, Aubry Hiles, lived in Milwaukee before moving East. Her father and mother, Winogene, were involved in efforts to acquire and preserve parkland in New York State, according to Roberts.

Schmitt started schooling in a "family compound" in Jamestown, her daughter said. She graduated from high school in Jamestown and then earned a nursing degree at Hamet Hospital in Erie, Pennsylvania.

Wisconsin became her home in the 1920s, when she moved to the Milwaukee area and took a job in a doctor's office. A sister also moved to Wisconsin about the same time. Schmitt's husband, Max, was a blueprint maker.

Little in the picture would indicate what was ahead for Aroline Schmitt.

She had no formal training in forestry, but her mother was instrumental in providing lessons, noted a June 1948 Milwaukee Journal article in the Historical Society collection. "Her mother was a botanist and it is from her that she learned a basic appreciation and love of the fields and forests," the article said, adding: "The extensive forests of Maine became her study halls."

Gifford Pinchot knew this. He would be calling later on.

Son John and daughter Maxine grew up in Wauwatosa. The aforementioned Christian Science Monitor article notes that Aroline Schmitt's earliest conservation efforts involved directing Junior Garden Clubs. That led to a more direct involvement with the Wisconsin Garden Club Federation, which she served in many capacities, including conservation chairman.

In a chapter of her life that doesn't get much attention in the popular press of the day, Schmitt was thrust head-long into the war effort of the 1940s, due to an appeal by Pinchot, the former governor of Pennsylvania, former chief of the U.S. Division of Forestry, and ardent conservationist.

Her daughter recalled the period:

"We went to war in 1941, and either just before, or right afterward, Gifford Pinchot called." Pinchot was doing some work for the U.S. war effort. He wanted Schmitt to go to work for the Forest Service as a timber cruiser. She said yes.

“During the war, she traveled all over the country, and Alaska, and cruised timber. She worked in the woods. It was her job to help set aside forests for the war. She was all over the country, all the time,” said Roberts.

It was tough work, and the Historical Society collection provides evidence that Schmitt would struggle somewhat with the question of whether forestland was better off in private hands, or those of government. (She leaned toward private ownership combined with government regulation.)

Roberts recalled stories of confrontations during those timber cruising days: “A number of times, she would run into people with guns. They weren’t going to let her in. Most of the time, she’d be with one of the forest rangers in that area.”

The travel also took its toll on Schmitt. “She used to travel on troop trains during the war. Only the soldiers could sit down. She would stand up all the way home, a lot of times through the night and into the day,” her daughter said.

She continued to work for the Forest Service in various capacities after the war, Roberts said. Newspaper clippings in the Historical Society collection note that Schmitt was called upon to help set up conservation departments in various states and formulate plans for forest management and control. She was involved in this professional activity even though she had no formal training or degree in forestry.

Her conservation activities also blossomed in this period.

Her expertise was put to use by the state of Michigan Extension Service. She taught correspondence forestry classes on school forestry for the Extension.

Concerned about the nation’s forests, she helped organize and served as executive secretary for the national group, “Forests.” Other directors included LaBudde, Pinchot and William J.P. Aberg (Hall of Fame inductee, 2000). The group was ardent in its efforts to make sustainable yield forestry the national standard.

Newspaper articles also note her connection to the birth of Trees for Tomorrow, the forestry education program in Eagle River. As chair of the Milwaukee County Conservation Alliance, she often led programs at the alliance’s summer camp to share the conservation message. The camp evolved into Trees for Tomorrow.

Schmitt also helped organize the Citizens Natural Resources Association, served as its president and received its coveted Silver Acorn Award in 1961. Other winners that year included Aberg and E.M. Dahlberg (inducted with Aberg in 2001).

Another cause that she delved into involved efforts to assure the rights of the Menominee Indians and the protection of the tribe's forest in northeastern Wisconsin during a high-pitched battle over termination of the tribe's reservation status in the 1950s and 1960s. Her correspondence includes dozens of letters circulated among other advocates for the tribe, and she helped found a group that worked on the cause.

Work with other citizens to preserve natural areas in the Flambeau State Forest also occupied much of her time. Two state agencies, the Conservation Commission and Land Commission, battled over the last big stand of virgin timber in Wisconsin for a decade. The stand was located in the Flambeau State Forest.

A Forest Service Camp at Trout Lake in northern Wisconsin was among her creations. The camp provided educational opportunities for children.

A research forest somewhere in the north was necessary, Schmitt and others argued. In 1946, The U.S. Forest Service created its Northern Forest Research Center in Rhineland.

No cause was too big or too small if it involved forestry. The 1947 Christian Science Monitor article noted her involvement in the following: "Recently swift action was necessary to save a venerable American chestnut tree at Whitewater, Wis." The article noted, "Every day is Arbor Day for Mrs. Max J. Schmitt..."

Her methods of operation changed greatly in April 1948, when she became gravely ill. She was confined to her home for many years. Milwaukee Journal outdoor writer Gordon MacQuarrie (Hall of Fame inductee, 1998) noted in an article that she was "only up and around a few hours of each day." He added, "The Schmitt telephone must be one of the busiest in Milwaukee..."

MacQuarrie captured another part of Schmitt's persona. As her daughter already noted in this biography, Schmitt was a tough lady.

"Mrs. Schmitt is a born fighter," MacQuarrie wrote. "For half her life, she has battled against ill health....There's no telling what an aroused woman, interested in conservation, will do. Mrs. Schmitt has called up senators and representatives and

governors and alternately pleaded, threatened and heckled. They all respect her. They all know she is a citizen who just asks the opportunity to give more to her community than she takes from it. That's why they listen to her."

Her daughter also noted that Aroline Schmitt feared no one. She took the message of sustainable forestry to industrial foresters, a group that didn't see eye-to-eye with her. "She was up against clear-cutting," her daughter said. "They couldn't intimidate her. She was short, but she'd stand there and tell them off. My dad would sweat those out, but he was very proud of her."

A brief article in the Sunday, Oct. 13, 1946, Milwaukee Journal, addressed the same subject.

"It was a man's world but a woman's word at the Saturday session of the American Forest congress in Washington, D.C.," noted the article, headlined "A Woman Tells He-Men What's What in Woods."

Representing the group Forests, Schmitt "told the assemblage of husky loggers, lumbermen and foresters that their program for conservation was getting no place," the article said.

The article quoted her: "Everything that has been suggested here is negative. You should get together and present a program that the American public can understand."

Pinchot, too, felt her needle.

In attempting to convince him to lend his name to the Forests group, she noted that he seemed hesitant to join, based on his concerns about the group's mission. In a 1943 letter, she wrote: "We need men on our National Committee with the Courage of their convictions, if such men exist. I know of your many years battling alone, but your letter gave me a peculiar feeling that you were shying away. As man to man are you?"

Sharp tongue and all, her mother was a beautiful woman, noted Roberts. "I think it helped her. She was always working with men."

Roberts went on to describe her mother's close friendship and travels with Wilhelmine LaBudde:

"They would take off in those beat-up old cars, fly in those little planes. They were good support for each other."

Aroline Schmitt's tireless work on an array of conservation causes in Wisconsin came to an end in the 1960s, when she moved to Colorado. Later she moved to Moscow, Idaho, where her daughter still resides. She died in 1995.

**AROLINE SCHMITT
1904-1995**

BIRTH: Aug. 4, 1904, Jamestown, New York

DEATH: March 28, 1995, Moscow, Idaho

EDUCATION: High school in Jamestown, New York
Nursing degree from Hamet Hospital, Erie Pennsylvania

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

AWARDS

Silver Acorn Award from Citizens Natural Resources Association, 1961.

Namesake of "Aroline Schmitt Conservation Scholarship Fund," established by Wisconsin Garden Club Federation to honor her, 1956.

Honorary Life Member, Wisconsin Garden Club Federation, 1956.

Broughton Award, Izaak Walton League of Wisconsin, 1950.

Quota Club of Milwaukee Award, 1952.

Layne Bryant Citation, 1955.

EDUCATOR

Taught School Forestry correspondence courses for Michigan State Extension.

EMPLOYMENT

U.S. Forest Service employee in various capacities, including timber cruiser during World War II.

AUTHOR

Wrote numerous essays for popular publications. Contained in Wisconsin Historical Society collection.

ORGANIZATIONS

Among organizers of Citizens Natural Resources Association.
President, Citizens Natural Resources Association.

Among organizers of Forests, a national forestry group.
Executive Secretary, Forests.
Member, Milwaukee County Conservation Alliance.
Legislative and Forestry Committee Chair, Citizens Conservation Camp Committee.
(Later developed into Trees for Tomorrow, Eagle River.)
Member, Wisconsin Chapter, Friends of the Land.
Board member, Wisconsin Chapter, Friends of the Land.
Third vice president, Wisconsin Chapter, Friends of the Land.
Member, State Forestry Advisory Committee.
Conservation Chair, Wisconsin Garden Club Federation.
Member, Wauwatosa Garden Club.
Member, Wisconsin Chapter, Izaak Walton League.
Among organizers of Citizens Committee for the Menominees.
Vice-chair, Citizens Committee for the Menominees.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

The quote on the cover page of this biography is from a June 1948 Milwaukee Journal written by Aroline Schmitt and address to the Wisconsin Conservation Congress. It is contained in the extensive Aroline Schmitt collection at the Historical Society of Wisconsin.

Other newspaper articles and correspondence referred to in this biography are also contained in the collection, parts of which are located in the Society's Milwaukee and Madison archives. The collection can be accessed at other area research centers, including the archives at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Instructional Materials Center.

Other portions of the biography include an interview conducted in June 2001, with Maxine Roberts, daughter of Aroline Schmitt. The Conservation Hall of Fame is indebted to Maxine Roberts for her help in creating this biography. Her address at this writing was 2500 Blaine Road, Moscow, Idaho, 83843-7480; phone, 208-882-2481.

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