

# Wisconsin Conservation Hall Of Fame Induction Ceremony: Leslie S. Woerpel, Stevens Point, WI., April 28, 1990

I am honored to have been given a very special privilege by your Chairman, Earl Spangenberg, to give this presentation about Les Woerpel and his contribution as a pioneer in the Wisconsin conservation movement. As his son, I have grown to appreciate the enormity of what he did from my perspective of a 29-year career as a professional in forest management.

In our family, there is a wealth of oral history, told each time we get together. The stories are triggered by browsing through stacks of picture albums and old home movies that go back to 1938. When I was young, and then when my children were growing up, the most fertile story time was the annual gatherings for deer hunting. Hunting and fishing stories are mixed and laced with a four-decade history of the inner working of the lay conservation movement and the people that made change happen in Wisconsin.

This presentation is a result of study of the written records still stored by Les, and the combination of my recollections and the collection of family oral history told so many times that nearly all of the grandchildren and even grandnephews can also tell you many of the same stories.

1929 was not the best of times for the family of a house painter. Grandma's garden and chickens helped keep food on the table. Les was two years out of high school, graduating a year ahead of time with honors. Musical talent seemed to run in the family so he and his older brother mixed playing in a dance band with jobs they could get around Madison, or at home in Sun Prairie. Les had a dream about a career in a newly developing profession of forestry. A friend helped him apply to the University of Montana where he had arranged to earn his way by playing in a band.

It never worked out, as family crisis interfered with his plans to head west. Instead, Les stayed in Wisconsin, finally landing a job with the American Telephone and Telegraph Company.

Hunting and fishing was a love passed through the Woerpel and Sweet families from generation to generation. Stories like how old Uncle Ed liked to use his 10 gauge double barrel for goose hunting, so if it rained, all he had to do was crawl inside; was normal stuff told to every child. There were true stories as well, but a person never could really trust about how many or big the critters were that were bagged.

The telephone job landed him in Minnesota and North Dakota for a time, giving him new perspectives on hunting, fishing and the land uses of the prairies; and a new wife, Lucille, and father-in-law who shared the love for hunting and fishing.

Returning to Wisconsin and Stevens Point in 1941, he became an Isaac Walton member, and began to participate in the Conservation Congress meetings held each year to provide citizen input to setting annual game regulations by the Commission. By 1943, he became personally involved in the controversies of deer management as a member of the conservation congress. Friends and co-workers at the telephone company began active participation with the local warden, Frank Hornburg, in law enforcement and dead deer counts, or projects like planting trees along trout streams as volunteers for the Conservation Department. This was a chance to learn and debate the scientific principles with people in the conservation profession.

Les was a prolific reader and possessed a great capacity to remember the details of what he had read. His ability to sharply define the issue and then bring everything he had read on the subject into heated debate was the strength he gave to the cause of conservation. He was trained in this technique of survival in the Woerpel household, ruled by the

Germanic old country authority of his father, who challenged the children in debate of anything, at nearly every dinner setting. It is a vivid memory of mine, watching grandpa sitting at the head of the table, in front of the hutch, egging on the evening's argument with his sons and daughter.

By 1947, Les convinced the friends that they needed to become more activists if those things they supported were ever to get done. Conservation decisions were too political, and made little sense scientifically. The Governor was dictating game seasons based on his desire to influence votes in the north counties, not on whether deer were starving in piles. The friends were also interested in fish habitat and pheasant habitat improvement, but saw a conservation department promoting fish and pheasant planting and "put and take" policies as being better politics. At the time, the Ikes, an older established organization, didn't have the interest in fighting like these young "turks" had in mind, as managing the club property and shooting interests took up their energies. So the "turks" found a place to meet downtown and formed the Portage County Sportsman's Club, and their outspoken, prolific reader became the first President.

The prolific reader also enjoyed writing. One of the interesting historic documents I ran across was a 1938 first person story written about that year's hunting trip with his father-in-law into northern Minnesota, complete with carefully drawn maps showing all of the deer trails and places of events in the account. So it was natural that from the power base of the Portage County Club, Les's style of networking began through the written word. The Stevens Point Daily Journal both reported on the club's positions and became a vehicle for raising the issues through articles written by Les and re-acted by the editor.

Les also became a prolific letter writer. Linking up with Jack Seville of Sports Afield, they began to plant the seeds for the need of a strong state-wide organization of conservation clubs, dedicated to the education and advocacy for scientific, conservation management. A network of concerned citizens emerged, linking opinion leaders from Portage, Wood, Vilas, and Clark Counties.

The Conservation Commission's setting of the 1948 deer season was described as a political fiasco perpetrated by then Governor Rennebohm. The deer season became a political football passed back and forth all year, until finally the Commission decided in September against all recommendations of the biologists of the Department. That became the last straw.

While anger and indignation were shared by all of the conservation advocates, Les's upbringing meant that he couldn't let it go. He needed action, and it started with letters to the clubs he was now friends with. The Wood County Conservation League, the Portage County Sportsman's Club, the Vilas County Sportsman's Club, and the Land O'Lakes Fish and Game Club became the nucleus of the promotional organization to become known as the Wisconsin Federation of Conservation Clubs. Joyce Larkin, editor of the Vilas County News in Eagle River lent the support of her paper and printed the first promotional materials.

How do you bring together sportsmen who are notorious for disagreeing with everyone about their favorite sport? Forty years later the solution now seems apparent, but up until then it had rarely been tried. You seek common ground, and bind the group together in principles of common concern while preserving the right of the individual or individual club to disagree and to debate the conservation priorities from their own values. Today people who manage National Forests will recognize those principals in the con-



cepts of public involvement under the National Forest Management Act.

The solution acted upon by Les, and agreed upon by the originating group was a conservation pledge, one that stated high principles of conservation stewardship for the generations to come. The idea was to personally agree to the pledge, then work together for the common good to get politics out of resource decision making as much as possible. They encouraged argument of the scientific principles and intended to hold resource managers to a high level of professionalism.

The pledge was the medium by which the clubs would agree to withdraw from political activity designed to dictate conservation decisions based on campaigning for votes. Les wrote then, "We expect to use the pledge to show the department, commission, legislature, and the people of the state of Wisconsin that we will not stand for political meddling in our conservation affairs, that we want those affairs to be regulated and administered according to the department's scientific and biological findings and the commission's honest opinion as to the solution." This statement could also be used today to express the intended purpose of the National Environmental Policy Act, if you understand Les's intent for full disclosure of those decisions based on scientific and social impact analysis and not on politics.

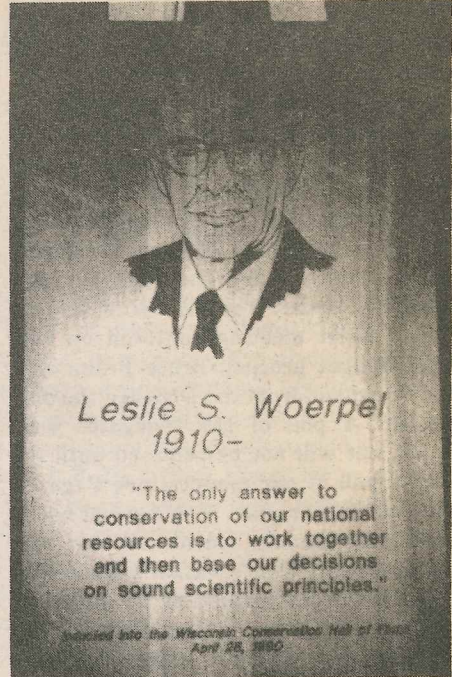
The pledge campaign was a significant breakthrough. Clubs who knew they were on the opposite side of the deer question, took the pledge and expressed interest in joining a state-wide federation for the principles expressed by the founding group. In March, 1949, the organizing meeting of the new Federation, which later was changed to the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, was held in Stevens Point. My job was to hand out name tags and mementos from Weber Fly Company.

Les became the first President, and served until 1951, when he became the Executive Director, serving in that capacity until 1965.

By 1952, he was traveling the state, using his long weekends and vacation time from shift work at the telephone company to try to hold the Federation on a steady course. He had a 12-year-old son with him a lot, and car rides became the quality time to challenge the son in debate, as his dad did him at the dinner table. He invented a communication vehicle called the "News and Views," and published it sometimes more than once a month. (I remember, it was my job to fold the darn things and lick stamps and mailing labels. Later, my younger sister Linda, took on those responsibilities. My then future wife, Donna, even did "News and Views" duty at one time. Mother had the job when we weren't available.)

Les was controversial, challenging laymen and professionals alike, and some thought, pretty downright brash. With a passion, he was playing Herman Woerpel at the head of the conservation dinner table, laden down with a great variety of issues. He insisted that he wasn't along in advocating change, but many of his antagonists believed that only ego drove the man from Stevens Point.

Few knew what it was that went into



Leslie S. Woerpel  
1910-

"The only answer to conservation of our national resources is to work together and then base our decisions on sound scientific principles."

Inducted into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame  
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the growing confidence and knowledge of activist Les Woerpel. Adding to his knowledge besides his ability as a prolific reader, writer, and now club organizer, was a growing network of friends and confidants who were professional leaders in their fields, or were the outstanding lay conservationists of their day. Not only did I grow with them in the field hunting and fishing, but in the research for this report, I read again their letters, personal notes, and references. Some too, like Ernie Swift, and Harley MacKenzie wrote in their fading days of retirement, remembering the warrior days of the 40's and 50's, and felt good about their efforts together.

Les was being fed and nourished by such people as Swift and MacKenzie, Dr. Durwood Alan, Dr. Ira Gabrielson, Sigurd Olson, Dick Hemp, Les Voigt, Russ Neugebauer, Cy Kabot, Bill Grimmer, Staber Reese, Walter Scott, Leo Roethe, Harry Ruhle, Harry Gaines, and Bill Ruth to name a few. Also included were journalists, Tom Guyant, Mel Ellis, Gordon MacQuarrie, Don Johnson, Ruth Hine, Russ Lynch. (Some of whom engaged in a few good fights together, Grandpa Woerpel style.) Some of his correspondents included Gaylord Nelson, Rachel Carlson, Forest Service Chief Ed Cliff, Regional Forester George James, Congressman Henry Reuss, Senator Alex Wiley, and many employees of state and federal conservation agencies, in Wisconsin and throughout the country.

But the inner circle was special. In retrospect, I think they became like brothers. In my view there were four people that affected most of the lay conservation strategies of those days. They were Dick Hemp, the experienced and influential political mind from Mosinee; Bill Ruth, the quiet and steady voice of the native north from Eagle River; Russ Neugebauer, the professional public relations staff from the Conservation Department, and Les Woerpel, the point man, activist, who executed the visible actions of the strategies. They hunted and fished together, argued together, and hung together when things got tough. They took this kid along on a lot of the outings, and I picture them as they were then, often with their dogs, arguing about which got the point first, or laughing, as they sat on a tree stump, about the game that just got away. Their point man is their last survivor.

Some of the issues he affected were strictly Wisconsin's, but many were not. He authored outstanding papers of national interest on pheasant management, pesticides, and water law. He championed the Wilderness Act, the Multiple Use and Sustained Yield Act, and promoted scientific forest management that served well the needs of wildlife and recreation.

In arguing against the proposed Little Eau Pleine River flowage, he forced the Wisconsin Valley Improvement Corpora-

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Duck can be part of the daily bag can result in over-harvest and waste of both species, but principally Hen Mallards in Wisconsin.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation at its annual meeting on April 20, 21, 22, 1990, in Green Bay, Wisconsin, proposes to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the Fish and Wildlife Service that the future regulations using the Conventional Bag Limit allow only one (1) Hen Mallard OR one (1) Black Duck in the daily bag.

**RESOLUTION NO. 13**  
**Decimation Of Forage Base**

WHEREAS: Over the last ten years, the size of chinook and coho salmon has slowly been diminishing; and

WHEREAS: Preliminary mortality studies indicate that one of the stress factors affecting the size of these fish could be the food supply; and

WHEREAS: Recently conducted forage base studies indicate we are harvesting the available alewives to the extent that the population could crash in Lake Michigan; and

WHEREAS: Wisconsin is the only state on any of the five Great Lakes that permits a commercial harvest of alewives; and

WHEREAS: The continued harvest of alewife stock could jeopardize sport fishing.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation at its annual meeting on April 20, 21, 22, 1990, in Green Bay, Wisconsin, URGES the Bureau of Fisheries of the Department of Natural Resources to take the necessary steps to reduce the commercial harvest of ALEWIVES.

**RESOLUTION NO. 14**  
**Remedial Action Plan**

WHEREAS: Some remedial Action plan studies have already been completed such as the one on Green Bay; and

WHEREAS: It has been three years since the Green Bay Remedial Action Plan was completed and other remedial plans for other Wisconsin Harbors have been recently completed or are nearing completion; and

WHEREAS: These remedial action plans are comprehensive and conclusive in their studies of toxic pollution of Wisconsin Waters and the ways and means determined necessary to begin correcting the pollution; and

WHEREAS: These remedial action plans provide a solid plan of action for the removal and prevention of toxins from being returned to Wisconsin waters in the volumes of the past; and

WHEREAS: These remedial action plans cannot resolve the toxic pollution of Wisconsin Waters without the funds necessary to gain this important rehabilitation; and

WHEREAS: The toxic pollution of Wisconsin waters shall continue or at best remain the same without the immediate proper funding of these remedial plans.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation at its annual meeting on April 20, 21, 22, 1990, in Green Bay, Wisconsin, URGES our State and Federal Governmental bodies to provide the necessary funding to bring these remedial action plans to completion in the very near future.

**RESOLUTION NO. 15**

**Wisconsin DNR Severe Budget Shortfall**

WHEREAS: The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources is experiencing a severe budget shortfall; and

WHEREAS: The Department of Natural Resources is considering cutting budgets of its internal departments; and

WHEREAS: All fishing, hunting and environmental projects and goals such as stocking, game and fish management along with enforcement budget cuts are also being considered; and

WHEREAS: Any surviving fish and game management efforts will be severely endangered by reduced enforcement efforts created by department budget cuts; and

WHEREAS: The enforcement arm of the Department of Natural Resources already strained with insufficient funding cannot be expected to be effective in protecting our fish and game from more severe damage from violators.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation at its annual meeting on April 20, 21, 22, 1990, in Green Bay, Wisconsin, URGES the Secretary of the Department of Natural Resources, The Department of Natural Resources Board Legislature, and the Governor of Wisconsin to not allow any cuts in the annual budget of the Enforcement Arm of the Department of Natural Resources.

**RESOLUTION NO. 16**

**Violence During Native American Spearfishing**

WHEREAS: The Wisconsin Council of Sport Fishing organizations (hereafter referred to as the WCSFO) anticipates an increased level of violent confrontation during the spring spearing season, when Native Americans exercise their treaty rights; and

WHEREAS: The WCSFO recognizes that opponents' disagreement with the legality of the Native Americans exercising their rights adds to the possibility of confrontation; and

WHEREAS: The WCSFO recognizes the opportunity for confrontation escalates when ex-

cessive numbers of proponents and opponents are present at spearfishing sites; and

WHEREAS: The WCSFO has observed increased crowd agitation when speared fish are handled at the launch ramps; and

WHEREAS: The WCSFO recognizes the cost of crowd control is overwhelming to the taxpayers and sports person.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation at its annual meeting on April 20, 21, 22, 1990, in Green Bay, Wisconsin, recognizes that action must be taken on these issues. We feel these issues should be resolved through legal channels without the violent confrontations; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, by the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation that while legal proceedings are in progress, we recommend that gatherings of opponents and proponents not be held at boat landings where the Native Americans are exercising their treaty rights; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, by the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation to further diminish the potential of confrontation any measurements or tallies of speared fish be conducted on the water away from the landing site.

**RESOLUTION NO. 17**

**DNR Law-enforcement Policy On Indian Spearfishing**

WHEREAS: The Wisconsin Indian's right to spearfish in Northern Wisconsin has become an issue of intense interest and concern to the non-Indian Sporting public of Wisconsin; and

WHEREAS: It has become increasingly evident that due to the volatile nature of this activity, there has been a substantial increase in DNR involvement, specifically in the enforcement and policing of this activity; and

WHEREAS: There are conclusive facts and figures showing that this has become alarmingly as well as increasingly costly; and

WHEREAS: The most important of these facts and figures are:

(1) The number of wardens used in 1989 = 155

(2) The number of warden used hours in 1989 = 18,600

(3) The cost of this for 1989 = \$324,000

(4) 1989 was the fourth year the DNR has done this and;

WHEREAS: This tremendous cost not only results in ever-increasing license fees to non-Indian sporting public of Wisconsin, but a sub-

stantial decrease of protection and law enforcement by wardens, in other areas of the State during the Indian spearfishing seasons, as well; and

WHEREAS: The objective here is not to question the Indians' Treaty rights to spearfish as they presently do, but to alter the way this activity is now controlled, regulated, enforced, and policed.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation in annual meeting on April 20, 21, 22, 1990, in Green Bay, Wisconsin, goes on record as opposing the use of State Wardens, with the exception of normal area wardens of the areas involved, to control, regulate, enforce and police this activity, as they presently do, and have this revert back to State, County and Township Law-enforcement agencies of these affected areas.

**RESOLUTION NO. 18**

**Exemptions To Trespassing Law**

WHEREAS: Trespassing on private land is against the state law and carries with it a fine if caught violating; and

WHEREAS: This law has caused some concerns for sportsmen retrieving their dogs that wander on private land; and

WHEREAS: Sportsmen have received citations for trespassing on private property in retrieving their dogs during hunting season or training sessions; and

WHEREAS: Retrieving wandering dogs is not meant as a deliberate violation of the trespass law and should be viewed as such; and

WHEREAS: Exemption to the trespassing law should be incorporated into the law to provide for such retrieving action. The following conditions to such an exemption to be strictly adhered to. Person retrieving dog must not have a firearm in his possession; a flashlight, if used, must be pointed to the ground at all times; must be on foot only, no motorized vehicle usages; person shall not remain on the lands beyond a reasonable period which is necessary to retrieve the dog; dog, when retrieved, will be leashed and taken out of posted land.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation at its annual meeting held in Green Bay, Wisconsin, on April 20, 21, 22, 1990, go on record supporting legislation that would permit retrieving of dog without violating the standard trespass law.

**RESOLUTION NO. 19**  
**Restrictive Hunting During Spring Turkey Hunting**

WHEREAS: The DNR has proposed banning any hunting other than spring turkey hunting between the hours of 6 A.M. and 12 Noon on those spring turkey season; and

WHEREAS: Banning all other hunting opportunities during these days now and in the future, gives exclusive rights to a certain class of hunters over others; and

WHEREAS: The purpose the DNR has proposed such a procedure is to try and eliminate any possible poaching during these turkey harvest hours; and

WHEREAS: We feel this type of proposal should be set aside and other means of reducing poaching should be considered.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation at its annual meeting on April 20, 21, 22, 1990, held in Green Bay, Wisconsin, go on record opposing any restrictive hunting opportunities during the spring turkey hunting hours of 6 A.M. to 12 Noon.

**RESOLUTION NO. 20**

**Mandatory Trapper Education For The State Of Wisconsin**

WHEREAS: Currently any resident of the State of Wisconsin may purchase a trapping license; and

WHEREAS: This may lead to many biological and social problems due to inexperienced and or uneducated persons setting traps; and

WHEREAS: Volunteer trapper education classes offered in 1989 were unsuccessful due to low fur prices, high cost of the course, and not mandatory; and

WHEREAS: Many instructors have resigned because of lack of interest; and

WHEREAS: That a mandatory course may mean full attendance at sessions.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation at its annual meeting on April 20, 21, 22, in Green Bay, Wisconsin, go on record as supporting a mandatory trapper education program for first time trappers that could result in more humane harvesting, cooperation with landowners, better use of public lands, and better principles of management; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that exemptions to this program can only be granted thru proof of previous trapping license purchases or the completion of a formal correspondence course developed by the Wisconsin Trappers Association and the Department of Natural Resources.

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tion through what would now be recognized as an Environmental Impact Statement, with full disclosure of findings and analysis. It was a long hotly debated issue, with the Federation taking some heavy shots for ever questioning such an important Corporation's impact on fragile wetlands (called swamps by developers). Once he was taken to task by the Stevens Point Journal for questioning the statements of the company about their legal rights of eminent domain against the townships. Les's position that they had no such authority was confirmed by the State Attorney General in an official opinion. In the end the proposed flowage area on the Little Eau Pleine is now owned by all the people, and known as the George W. Mead Wildlife Area.

Les, like an old soldier, never did quit, even though he retired from his positions in the Federation as his health faded. His last major writing was a 30-year historical account of the Federation, completed in 1978. He wrote some of his last pieces for the Federation newspaper in the early 1980's. His influence in conservation and his writings span six decades.

The "News and Views" was a formidable force in Wisconsin Conservation evolution for 22 years. It represented a number of Les's principle values; learn the facts, debate the issues, make up your own mind, and take action. For some, it offended, for others it was a beacon that helped them find their own way. Celebrated Milwaukee Sentinel outdoor writer, Don Johnson, echoed many other notes from people about the demise of the News and Views in 1974; "The passing of "News and Views" is viewed with sadness here...It was a real labor of love, I know. It was always well read here, both for the information (I often found really significant things there before I saw them anywhere else) and for your

views. I usually agreed with them; always respected them."

There was one other theme that you also find embedded in Les's writings that stayed consistent for those six decades. I call it the Conservationist's Ethic of Legacy. There has to be a reason why a person endures so much personal pain in a labor as rigorous and draining as conservation advocacy, especially for a lay volunteer. That ethic of legacy is best expressed by a poem I rediscovered mixed in with his records. It is one I remembered hearing him use in my High School days, but I had lost track of it. The author is Will Allen Dromgoole.

*"An old man, going a lone highway  
Came, in the evening, cold and gray,  
To a chasm, vast and deep wide,  
Through which was flowing*

*a sullen tide.*

*The old man crossed in the  
twilight dim;  
That sullen stream had no fear for him.  
But he turned when he reached*

*the other side,*

*And built a bridge to span the tide.*

*Old man, said a fellow pilgrim near,  
You are wasting strength in*

*building here.*

*Your journey will end with the*

*ending day,*

*You never again must pass this way.  
You have crossed the chasm,*

*deep and wide;*

*Why build you the bridge at the  
evening tide?*

*The builder lifted his old gray head.  
Good friend, in the path I*

*have come, he said,*

*There followeth after me today,  
A youth whose feet must*

*pass this way;*

*This chasm, that has been  
naught to me  
To that fair-haired youth may  
a pitfall be.  
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;  
Good friend, I am building  
the bridge for him."*

The Hall of Fame's recognition of a lifetime of building bridges by Leslie S. Woerpel, son of Herman and Julia, is a great gift to him and to all the Woerpel family. He has succeeded in building bridges for his grandchildren and his brother's grandchildren, and has contributed, with his peers, to building a conservation legacy for all of the people's grandchildren to come. For those pioneers, the elders of resource conservation, every day was Earth Day.

Thank you.

Loren S. Woerpel  
His Son

