

Jim Klobuchar



A man up north named Sig

A grade-school class examining the lives of great men and women of the 20th century invited me to join its deliberations. The price of admission was to come prepared with my own nominations.

I offered 10. The scholars had no trouble recognizing the Churchills and the Ghandis, but they stumbled over the name of Sigurd Olson.

"Did Sigurd Olson win a war?" a voice close to the philodendron pot inquired.

The question was lodged solemnly. These were young jurors probing the qualifications of nominees ranging from Henry Aaron to Bella Abzug. It was serious stuff. No frivolous candidacies need be considered. The candidate did not have to be as famous as FDR, but the candidate did have to affect the lives of large numbers of people in a special and enduring way. These were the ground rules proposed by the teacher and endorsed by the class, with the exception of another kid near the philodendron who thought that was a little loose and could make J.R. Ewing eligible.

The young man's objection was overruled and the jury resumed its inquiry. No, I said, strictly speaking, Sig Olson had not won a war—if by war you mean bombs and burning cities. He had not discovered a miracle drug, flown to Mars or hit 750 home runs. He is known to thousands of people who share his reverence for quiet a walk with the good earth, and the libraries devote impressive shelf space to his books. But they have not clamored for Sig Olson on the talk shows or put his picture on the cover of Time magazine.

And yet his work and his life have woven themselves into the yearnings and the deepest fulfillments of millions of people across the land who do not know his name.

A warrior, yes. His cause has been that dwindling preserve of stream and pine and mystery that we call the wilderness. His tools have been his eloquence, his conviction and his stubbornness. His antagonists don't have to be identified here. Private interests and local traditions, yes. Some selfish, many of them understandable and forgivable.

From the beginning, from the time more than 50 years ago when the young naturalist first saw the danger in headlong progress dismembering and swallowing something irreplaceable, his most durable adversary has been the indifference of a public he sought to awake.

Sometime in the 1960s it awoke. And today we understand the message and accept the urgency of the Sig Olsons. Preserving what remains of what we call wilderness is not the staking-out of a swatch of swamp and Norway stands for the amusement of the porcupine and nature children and an escape from the board room for environmental elitists.

Sig Olson asked a question.

Shouldn't there be someplace, especially today, whether it is the boundary waters of northern Minnesota or along the great wild rivers of Alaska, where people can go

to reorder themselves spiritually and to explore the wonder of the earth and, therefore, life by seeing it once more as men and women did thousands of years ago when there were no engines or freeways or tumult in the streets?

We had made ourselves rich and mighty and a patron to the world by extracting from the earth, remolding it, putting smokestacks along its lakeshores and carving great taverns in its forests.

He didn't argue with history or with the needs and impulses of the human condition. If wealth is there, discover and use it. If a frontier is there, cross it.

But save a few strands of it for those who come after, so that decades and centuries from now people will still be able to breathe the aroma of the pines at night, to view the streamers of moonlight on the water, and to be engulfed by the silence and the magic.

It is a moment of priceless intimacy, joining the pilgrim with his earth and his God.

There were years when that intimacy was in danger of being squandered, not necessarily by mean-spirited people but simply by people who declined to recognize the obligation we have to another time as well as to our own.

Sigurd Olson made that recognition. And by being obstinate and combative and articulate and wise, he and those like him ultimately brought that recognition to legislators and voters and finally the industries.

And now the wilderness in the Minnesota northwoods and Alaska will be there for those who follow.

He is in his 80s now, failing but still vital, living on the edge of the northern wilderness he struggled to preserve.

He has sought no public testimonials or monuments.

While he is still among us, however, I think we should celebrate Sig Olson. And, yes, he belongs on the list of the earnest young jurors who explore greatness in our time.