

HALL OF FAME INDUCTION

April 18, 2009

Wisconsin is an outdoor paradise....

an abundance of wildlife....15,000 lakes....over 30,000 miles of rivers and streams and the finest state park system in the nation.

It has not always been that way.

One hundred years ago Wisconsin was struggling to recover from abuse of its natural resources.

Lumber barons had devastated the northern forests and uncontrolled fires turned northern Wisconsin into a scorched black landscape..... devoid of flora and fauna.

Industrial and human waste was being discharged into rivers and lakes.

Wetlands...those sponges of nature that gather surface water and purify it while returning it to the aquifer for human consumption.... were drained for cropland and as a result we now find empty and polluted aquifers.

When would this ecological rape of the earth end.... and who would do it?

Political management of Wisconsin's environment obviously was not getting it done.

In the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame are some of the many who would step forward.....with their unique talents and determination to make it happen.

When the US Forest Service transferred Aldo Leopold from New Mexico to Wisconsin in 1924 he immediately recognized the need for leadership change to improve the environment .

He and Izaak Walton League leader Haskell Noyes along with Madison attorney Wm Aberg and a conservation coalition they built, began pushing for a law centralizing Wisconsin conservation activities under a director and six

unpaid commissioners.

This became a key issue in the gubernatorial campaign of 1926....it passed the legislature and was signed into law by Governor Zimmerman creating the Wisconsin Conservation Commission.

Aberg...Noyes and Leopold were appointed to the commission and set the stage for science based management of Wisconsin's natural resources which rebuilt the northern forests...restored wildlife habitat and expanded fisheries programs.

Career employees instead of political appointees became top administrators in Madison and developed long range land use programs.

Outdoor recreation was expanded far beyond hunting and fishing and Wisconsin gained national recognition for its management programs.

Environmental protection of Wisconsin's natural resources became a top priority during this period.

In 1950 Green Bay lawyer and Izaak Walton League leader Virgil Muench brought suit against the Wisconsin Public Service Commission...at issue was a permit issued to the Namakagan Hydro company to construct a dam on the Namakagan river to generate electricity.

The Public Service Commission was following a state law that prohibited it from denying permits that had been approved by a 2/3 vote of a county board.

The Washburn county board vote to approve the dam had been unanimous.

Muench took the lawsuit to the State Supreme Court and argued that the county board law was unconstitutional...

he told the court the state is the trustee of the public trust doctrine and cannot delegate any part of it to local government.

Muench won that lawsuit....the public trust doctrine was preserved and the

Namakagon is still one of Wisconsin's most beautiful free flowing rivers.

Bill Peterburs was a voice crying in the wilderness in the 1970's when he found that lead shot was poisoning thousands of migrating ducks and geese. His get the lead out of waterfowl hunting sermon was preached up and down the Mississippi flyway....today lead shot is banned throughout the United states and Canada.

One man...Bill Peterburs made a difference.

Governors Nelson and Knowles had future generations in mind when they instituted the stewardship program that has preserved Wisconsin's precious gems for all time to come.

Wisconsin resource management became more difficult in 1995 when the DNR secretary became a cabinet appointee of the Governor and no longer responsible to the Natural Resources Board.

When Jim Doyle became Governor six years ago all top administrators were immediately replaced by political appointees.

There has been a noticeable loss in continuity of purpose as career DNR employees are now forced to wait for political approval before implementation of needed programs.

The time has again come for citizen action to get politics out of environmental and resource management.

A number of state legislators agree....State Representative Spencer Black of Madison has introduced Assembly Bill 138 which would return control of the DNR to the Wisconsin Natural Resources Board.

Momentum is building..... the bill has 68 co-signers constituting a majority in both houses of the legislature.....ensuring its passage but still not veto proof.

The Conservation Congress and the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation with

membership in every county are contacting legislators not yet supportive of AB 138.

It has been a real privilege for me.... a country boy from Lena....to participate in Wisconsin's rise to the top of the nation in outdoor recreation.

I had a lot of help and guidance along the way.

Senator Rueben LaFave of Oconto was a powerful voice in Madison and influenced Governor Knowles to appoint me to the Wisconsin Conservation Commission in 1967.

He also supported me in 1968 when the Governor appointed me to the first Wisconsin Natural Resources Board.

Dick Matty opened the door for my appointment by Governor Thompson in 1989.

DNR secretaries Buzz Besadney...George Meyer and Darrell Bazzell were outstanding leadersthey understood and respected their relationship to the Natural Resources Board.

I also have great respect for the DNR professionals that manage the environment and natural resources throughout the state.

The 29 different citizens I served with during my 22 years on the Natural Resources Board were outstanding individuals..... and provided policy direction for the DNR.

And last but definitely not least there was always Lenore at my side.

It is with a great deal of pride and humility that I accept the honor of entering into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame.

Herb Behnke