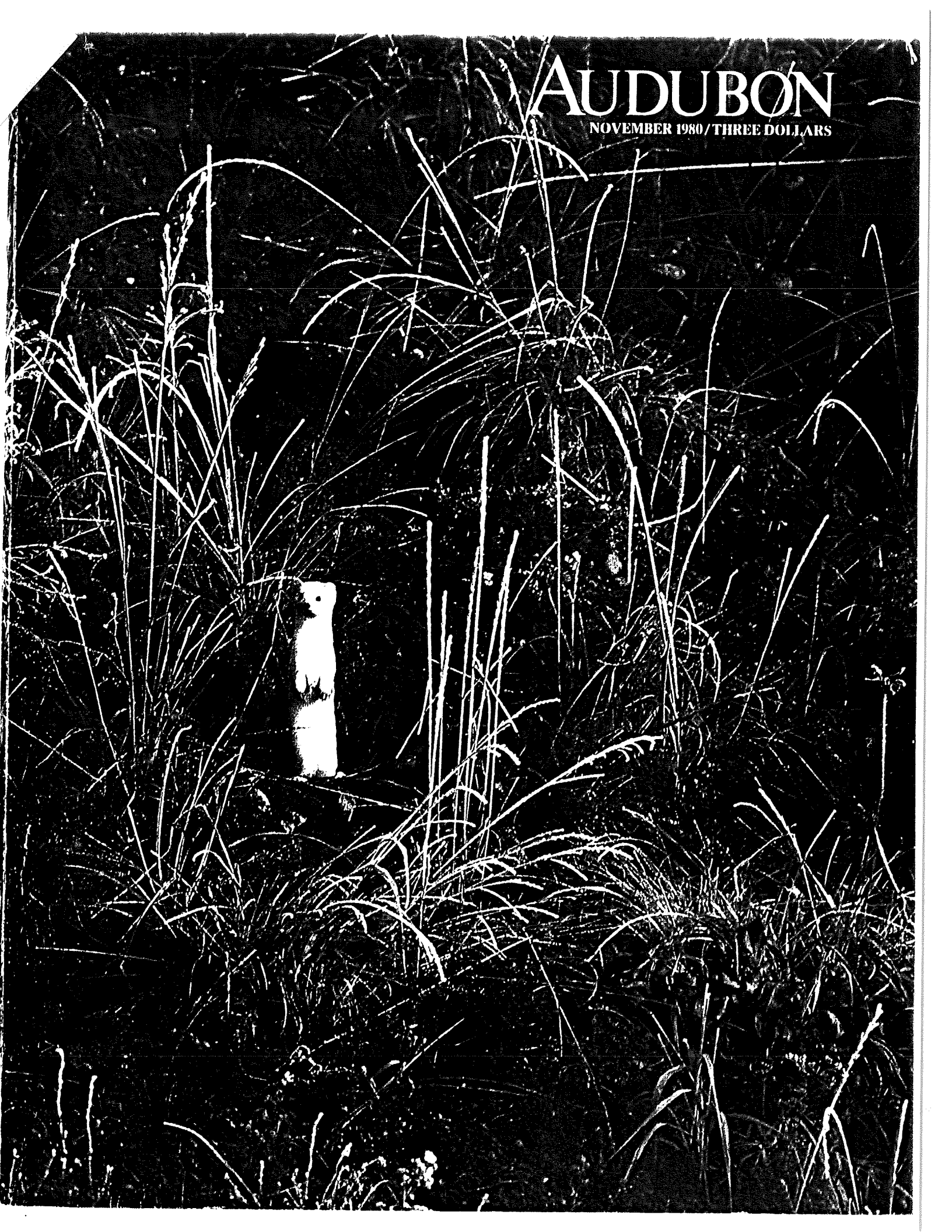


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“Leave It to the Bourgeois”

Sigurd Olson and His Wilderness Quest

article by **FRANK GRAHAM JR.**

photography by **RICHARD FRANK**





ON A LATE SUMMER afternoon in the mid-1950s Sigurd F. Olson, renowned along the Minnesota-Ontario border as a wilderness guide, author, and eloquent conservationist, slipped his canoe through the shallows on the north shore of Lake Superior and picked out a likely camping place. He and his companions swiftly pitched their tents and built a fire.

Ahead of them lay Grand Portage where, for a colorful century and a half, French-Canadian voyageurs had carried their canoes and supplies into the waterways that led to the rich fur country of northwestern Canada. Offshore, the view was toward the rocky points and forested islands about which legends of those pioneer traders still clung. A strong conviction came over Olson and his friends that they were not alone.

"It was the same as the day in 1731 when La Vérendrye and his voyageurs made the terrible nine-mile carry around the rapids of the Pigeon River toward the unknown country beyond for the first time," Olson wrote afterward. "That night those men were with us, and when the haze of our campfire drifted along the beach, it seemed to join with the smoke of long-forgotten fires and lay like a wraith over the canoes, tepees, and tents along the shore."

In a sense, Sig Olson has always been following the glow of those ancient camps. The wilderness for him is redolent of smoke drifting over time from fires kindled on northern waterways centuries ago, the air still raucous with the voices of voyageurs lifted in song. "En roulant ma boule," the voyageurs sang as they paddled through the wilderness. Or, an even greater favorite, "A la claire fontaine," a wistful love song that would seem more appropriate to the languor of a Provençal troubadour than to the tastes of rough boatmen in the Canadian wilds. But for Olson, as for the old voyageurs, those chansons have mingled with the calls of the loon and the timber wolf in bringing the wilderness alive.

Today, at eighty-one, Olson looks back on a life of public service and strenuous adventure that is rare in our time. For more than a quarter of a century he served as a teacher and dean

at Ely Junior College in Minnesota. Using his adopted home town of Ely as a base, he took part in many of the crucial conservation battles of our time, fighting to preserve such diverse areas as the Grand Canyon, the Potomac River, and his beloved Quetico-Superior canoe country. He was an activist president of both the Wilderness Society and the National Parks Association. He carried out some of his most important behind-the-scenes conservation work during his years as a consultant to the Secretary of the Interior, the director of the National Park Service, and the Izaak Walton League of America.

Olson is probably best known to the public as the author of a number of beautifully written books on the Quetico-Superior country and the rugged canoe trails of northern Canada. In *THE SINGING WILDERNESS*, *THE LONELY LAND*, and other books he explored his profound absorption with the old voyageurs and the land they opened up. Time presents no obstacles to his own identification with those long-dead travelers. He cherishes the almost childlike faith that the voyageurs are the phantom companions of his own travels, a conviction intensified because much of the northern canoe country has so far resisted the changes civilization effected elsewhere.

"Such vivid awareness is swiftly lost today," he wrote in *OPEN HORIZONS*, "but if it can be held into adulthood it enriches and colors all we do. How often in the wild country of the north I have been aware of the spirits of the voyageurs, the shadowy forms that once roamed the rivers and lakes. Often at night it seemed I could hear ghostly songs coming across the water, the rhythmic dip of paddles, and the swish of great canoes as they went by."

Although their enormous contributions to the opening up of western North America are often overlooked by historians, the voyageurs captured Olson's imagination in boyhood. Certainly they were among the most versatile and intrepid pioneers during the great age of exploration. In their search for furs they unveiled the northern wilderness. They maneuvered their fragile canoes through explosive rapids, braved high winds and waves on vast lakes, pushed their dogteams through subarc-

tic blizzards. At the frequent portages they carried heavy loads (often 180 pounds or more) over rugged and sometimes slippery rocks almost at a trot.

Yet these rough, unlettered men, who came mostly from the villages along the St. Lawrence River, often displayed the proverbial French diplomacy and gallantry. They got on well with the Indian tribes with whom they traded, and in many cases married Indian women. They were enthusiastic, if not refined, singers and dancers. A woman who traveled with a party escorted by voyageurs into the wilderness recalled that before their meals on the open rocks they invariably laid a bouquet of wild flowers at her place.

The typical voyageur was immensely proud and confident, willing to go to any lengths to show off his prowess. (On a dare, a particularly robust voyageur is said to have piled five ninety-pound loads on his back and, with the aid of a tumpline, carried them over a portage.) Such men were inclined to be argumentative and boastful ("Voyageurs never see little wolves," one of their number said), but they were brave and tenacious in a crisis.

Their mannerisms help bring them alive for us. They painted the blades of their paddles a bright red and in a tangible display of panache liked to set a fleur-de-lis in their caps. They were so firmly addicted to smoking that the length of a canoe trip was measured in "pipes," the brigade of canoes halting at fixed intervals to give the men not a rest but an opportunity to light up their pipes.

Like jockeys', the voyageurs' physical size was restricted by the nature of their profession. "One would expect voyageurs to be men of heroic proportions, but usually they were not," wrote Grace Lee Nute in her book, *THE VOYAGEUR*. "The average voyageur was five feet six inches in height. Few were more than five feet eight inches. Had they been taller, they would have occupied too much of the precious space in a canoe already overcrowded with cargo."

While still a boy, Sig Olson came under the old voyageurs' thrall. The lure at first was chiefly a youthful admiration for their physical skills and endurance, as another boy might wan



COURTESY OF MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

"Return of the Voyageurs" was painted by Francis Lee Jaques, whose drawings decorated many of Sigurd Olson's books.

to emulate a great boxer or ballplayer. Olson felt the primal urge to test himself, in his case to test himself against the northern wilderness to which he had always been drawn. He wanted above everything else to "accept the bush," with all the hazards and discomforts that it held. The challenge demanded an athlete's body as well as his dedication.

"To handle an ax with power and precision, driving it into the same cut time after time, takes an eye and muscular control," Olson wrote. "To paddle without effort comes only after thousands of miles of using the whole body instead of the arms: to slice off a fillet neatly takes far more than a sharp blade—it takes the feel of the knife between the flesh and the skin, something one does not acquire overnight."

For many years Olson met the wilderness in the way the voyageurs had, taking some of the same rapids, paddling into the wind on large lakes without the aid of motors or tows, and carrying more than his share of the burdens on rocky portages. "Without weariness there can be no appreciation of rest, without hunger no enjoyment of food," he wrote in *OPEN HORIZONS*.

"Without the ancient responses to the harsh simplicities of the kind of environment that shaped mankind, a man cannot know the urges within him."

Until his fifties, Olson mainly confined his pursuit of the voyageurs' life to the Quetico-Superior country. He is built on the lines of a voyageur, of medium height, wiry, with a constitution that endures. (He weighs 151 pounds today, exactly what he weighed as a college boy sixty years ago). He became an habitual pipe-smoker, and though he speaks little French, learned the old chansons by heart.

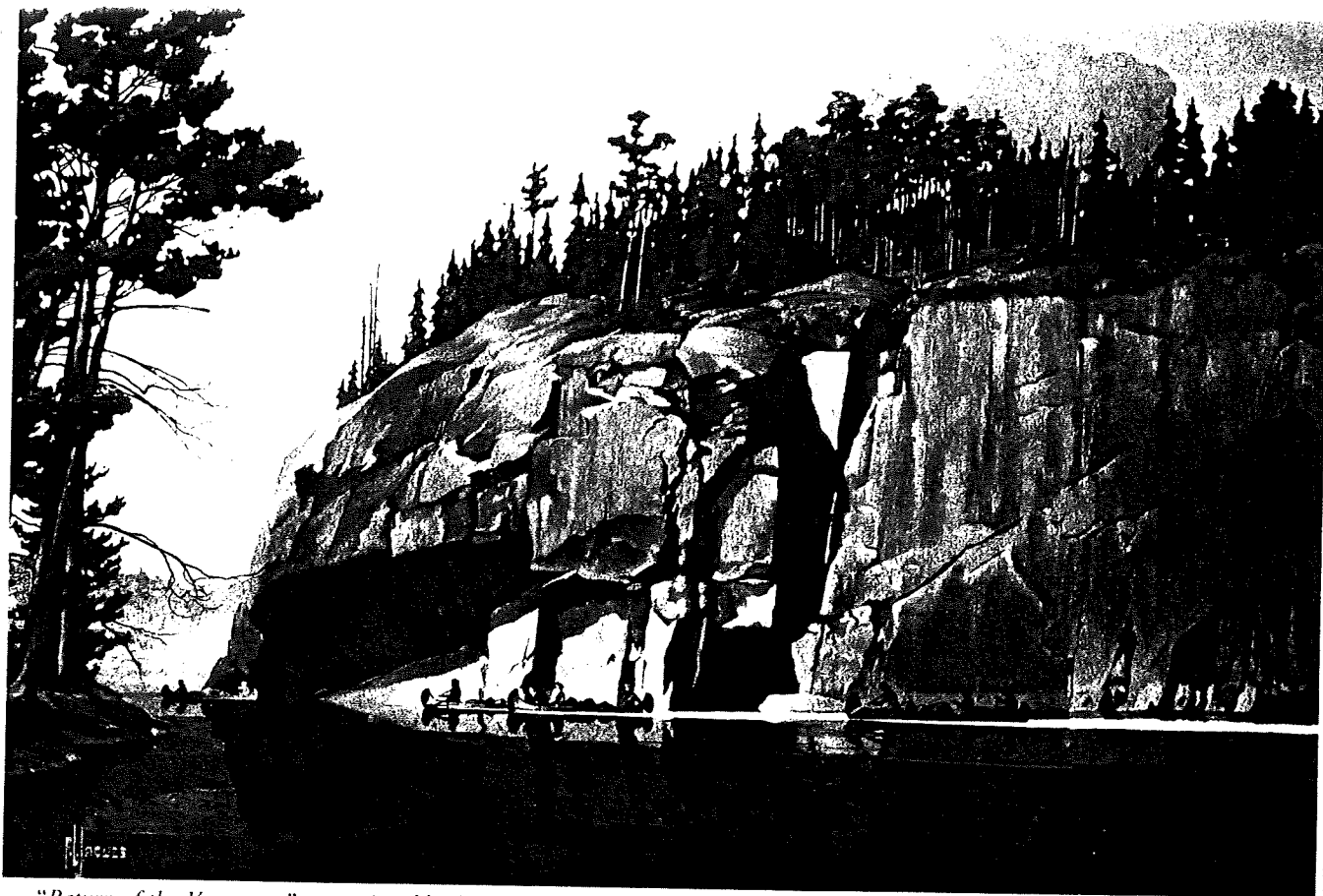
Then a prearranged encounter on a portage expanded his horizons considerably. He became acquainted with a group of Canadians who were enthusiastic canoeists and who shared his affinity for the voyageurs. The Canadians had heard of Olson's knowledge of the country, and they talked with him about the old boatmen's exploits, and of the part they played in taking explorers, merchants, soldiers, and government officials into the least accessible regions of the continent.

The new friends stayed in touch. The following winter Eric Morse, a distinguished historian and executive director

of the Associated Clubs of Canada, wrote to Olson suggesting that he join them on a series of trips that would follow the routes taken by the voyageurs as they penetrated the North Country to the almost legendary lakes—Athabasca, Great Slave, Great Bear—and to Hudson Bay itself. Olson, who had given up teaching some years earlier to pursue his twin passions of writing and wilderness exploration, was free to join the "new voyageurs."

"We immediately recognized Sig Olson as our leader," Tyler Thompson, a former United States ambassador to Finland and the only other American in the group, recalled recently. "We called him 'Bourgeois.' In the old days, the bourgeois was the chief trader and the leader of the expedition. The big difference was that in those days the bourgeois let the voyageurs do the paddling and most of the work. In our case, Sig was the best woodsman, and he did more than anybody else on the trip."

Morse, the historian, made a collection of the diaries kept by the old voyageurs and other early travelers through the regions to be traversed. Each night at the campfire Morse read to his companions those excerpts that dealt with



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the country they had passed through during the day or would confront the next morning. These modern travelers came to see the waterways and forests, unchanged for thousands of years, through the voyageurs' eyes. In their banter they sometimes fell into phrases from the old patois. Stimulated by the traditional ration of rum in the evenings, they broke into energetic renditions of "A la claire fontaine" and other familiar chansons, and sometimes one or more figures could be seen dancing like some ghostly savage on the rim of firelight. What they were after was a glimpse of the spirit of an age that is gone forever.

"We had no idea of emulating the voyageurs or performing their feats," Olson wrote in *THE LONELY LAND*, his account of their voyage on the Churchill River. "We had traveled enough together in the Quetico-Superior and other areas to know our limitations. We considered ourselves experienced on rivers and lakes and portages and knew what we could do as modern voyageurs. Our standard load for instance would seldom be more than a hundred pounds, while they never carried less than one hundred and eighty, and often more. Ours was the best of modern equipment, sixteen-foot Prospector canoes made by Peterborough instead of birchbarks, tents with mosquito netting, insect bombs and repellents, down sleeping bags instead of a shoddy blanket for each, air mattresses, waterproof rain gear and ponchos, the best of dehydrated foods, but more important than all else were our excellent maps."

For more than a decade the modern voyageurs continued their trips. They came to know the northern wilderness as have few other people in our time. They shared in the fun and the hard work (as well as in some perilous moments) and stored up memories for a lifetime. Most important of all, perhaps, was a renewal of individual spirits weighed down by civilization, a transformation succinctly expressed by one of their number after their return from the Churchill River.

"I went along to iron out the wrinkles in my soul," said Omond Solandt.

SIG OLSON might be described as the arch-revisionist of the conservation movement. His whole life seems

to be an attempt, remarkably successful on the whole, to refute the designs of those gods who neglected to set him down in a wilder era. True, they arranged to plant him in the nineteenth century, but as if in a playful mood selected its waning days, with a great city as the scene. Olson was born in Chicago on April 4, 1899. One has the feeling, when Olson admits to the circumstances, that he would like to rewrite history and expunge this sole blemish from a life otherwise dedicated to the wilderness. He looks on his origins among the pavements as dolefully as a recently created baronet might regard his birth in a peasant's hut.

Regardless of his origins, Olson was open almost at once to all the stimuli of a various world. One of his earliest recollections is of a walk with his mother through a grove of maples in fall.

"That day the trees must have been in full color, for the ground was deep in drifting leaves," he wrote in *OPEN HORIZONS*. "As we walked through them we were surrounded with color, and when the wind blew we were drenched with it. The swirling masses of red and yellow filled me with excitement, and when we ran through the grove, ran and ran until we could run no more and sank laughing to the ground, color and beauty became part of my life. So vivid is the memory, I can still hear the rustling of the leaves in my dreams and see the wild, free bursts of exploding color."

The new technology was also a source of wonder to the small boy. When the Olsons had a telephone installed, his mother let him listen in on the first call.

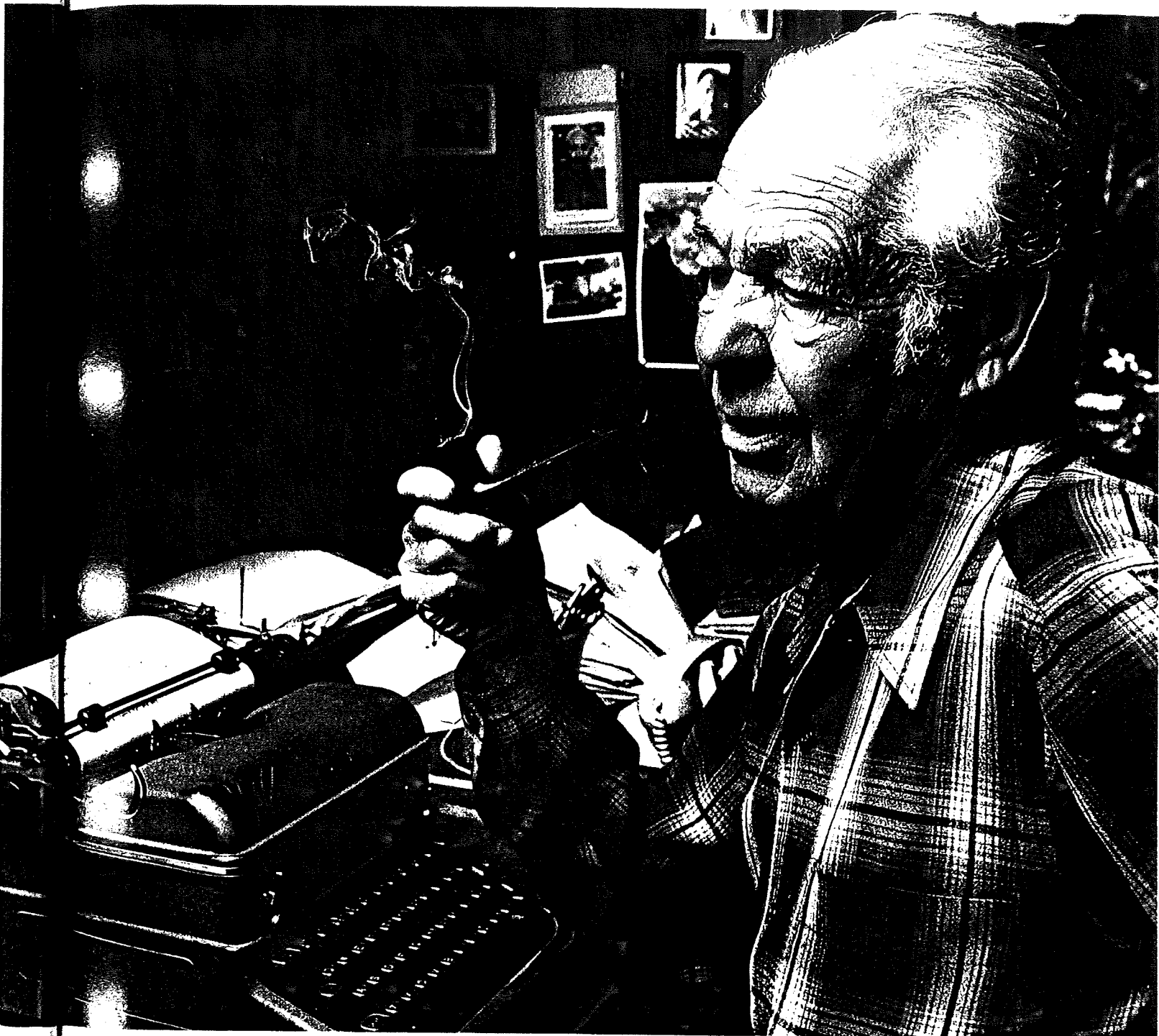
"I don't think I understood the conversation," he said recently. "I just remember having a vision of little girls dancing along the wire."

Olson's father, Lawrence, was a Baptist minister. It was a happy circumstance of that itinerant profession that the call soon came from churches outside the city, and as a result, Olson spent the rest of his boyhood in small towns among the sandy, glaciated ridges of northern Wisconsin. The first of his father's new churches was in Sister Bay just south of Porte des Morts, or Death's Door, a channel at the end of the Door Peninsula noted for its many shipwrecks. There Sig Olson began his lifelong romance with place names. He also found there his first "wilderness." As often as he could he walked to a nearby



pier on Lake Michigan, where he sat for hours in contented solitude, watching the perch swim by in the green water as the gulls hovered overhead.

Outwardly, he shared experiences with the other small-town children. Twice a week the stagecoach from Sturgeon Bay swept into town, the driver putting on a show for the bug-eyed youngsters as he whipped his horses into a final effort and rolled down the

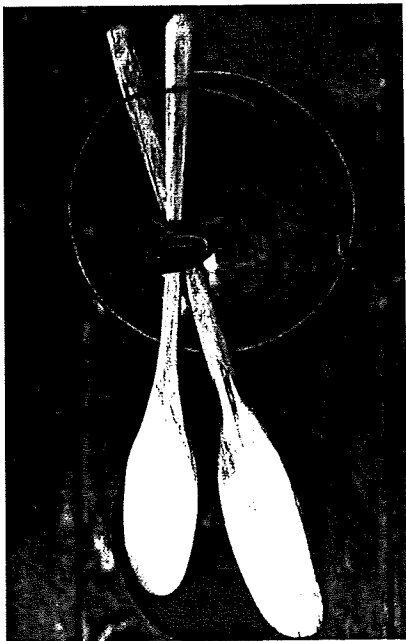


hill in a cloud of dust. Then, as his audience gathered round, he stepped grandly down from the stagecoach and handed each child a piece of candy.

"For many years I boasted that I always hiked three miles to school," Olson has said. "Then one day my wife, Elizabeth, and I clocked it, and I found to my chagrin that it was only a quarter of a mile!"

True to his future attachments, this embryonic voyageur never saw little wolves. Pursuing his own dreams, he saw only golden possibilities and open horizons, and never the restrictive aspects of his father's faith. When they drove through town together, his father always asked him to avert his eyes as they passed the Catholic church, desiring that no son of his be tainted by popish notions. Still, some of the fa-

"Today, at 81, Sigurd Olson looks back on a life of public service and strenuous adventure that is rare in our time. He is probably best known as the author of a number of beautifully written books on the Quetico Superior country and the rugged canoe trails of northern Canada."



ther's spiritual values rubbed off on the growing boy.

"My father believed there was no question of what a young man should do with his life," Sig Olson wrote later. "It must be dedicated to the welfare of mankind or tilling the soil, never in mundane pursuits having to do with material things. There were only three choices, the ministry, teaching, or farming, and all others were unessential. Though he never urged his sons to go into one or the other, it was always understood."

A further and determining influence came from his father's library.

"Most people in the towns where we lived didn't have any books except for the Bible and the Sears, Roebuck catalog," Olson has said. "But my father had a real library—books of history and travel, novels, poetry. I found my new world there. I read about Africa and the American Indians. I was fascinated by people like Daniel Boone. A craving for the frontier—for wilderness—took hold of me. In most people this dream dies out after a while, but in me it went on burning as fiercely as ever."

These literary excursions brought young Olson into the first stage of development that has been followed by so

many of our eminent naturalists. The wilderness became for him an arena in which to act out manly deeds. He needed to conquer, to possess it. Even before he was able to handle a gun, he roamed the woods with snare and slingshot. Like his heroes, he killed partly for utilitarian motives, boiling or roasting squirrels, fish, and rabbits with a pinch of salt. His first wilderness meal was a scrawny Canada jay he knocked from its perch with a slingshot.

Because everything about nature interested him, Olson headed into the sciences, taking all of the courses open to him in zoology, botany, and geology when he attended Ashland High School and later went on to Northland College. At Northland he struck up a friendship with Andrew Uhrenholdt, a farmer's son from Seeley, Wisconsin. Olson noticed a photograph of a young woman on his new friend's desk and learned that she was his sister. A meeting was soon arranged, and Olson found in Elizabeth Uhrenholdt someone who shared his interests in the outdoors. They were married in 1921.

Even after Olson transferred to the University of Wisconsin he was unsure of where his interests would take him. The north woods still appealed to him,

and he was fascinated by stories of northern Minnesota. He accepted a teaching job in a mining town in the Mesabi Iron Range, and his woodland explorations eventually brought him deep into the Quetico-Superior canoe country. He was caught for life.

"It was a rugged land, a veritable labyrinth of lakes, rivers, and forests," he wrote afterward. "Logging and mining country, with only a few small clearings between the ridges, most of it was still wild and undeveloped. The pines grew on rocky ledges without any soil, some so twisted and contorted it was hard to tell what they were. The lakes had granite shores, high cliffs rising straight from the water's edge, and rocky shelves smooth as floors, ready for our tents beneath the pines. It was a hauntingly beautiful land, and from the moment we started paddling, I realized I would never return to the Mesabi."

Olson, a practical young man, knew that he could remain in this land only by finding a way to earn a living there. He returned to the University of Wisconsin for graduate work in biology and geology, studies that fitted him for both college teaching and survey work with the mining industry. He then accepted a post at the new Ely Junior College, where he taught biology and geology.

Everything Olson turned his hand to brought him closer to the wilderness. As a teacher, he was a great believer in field trips and conducted most of his classes outdoors. Only direct contact with the natural world—plants, animals, the shape and substance of the land—he believed, could bring his students fully alive to the complexity of their subjects. He made long canoe trips to remote lakes on weekends and summer vacations. Elizabeth shared some of these experiences, having been introduced to canoeing on a three-week voyage through wild, unmapped country during their honeymoon.

Olson soon became so familiar with the Quetico-Superior country that he took out a guide's license in both Minnesota and Ontario to lead sportsmen and canoeists into the wilderness.

"In those days most of that country was unmapped," he said recently. "No one knew exactly where many of the smaller lakes were. I would take out a party, climb a hill, see a spot of blue through the trees, and cut a portage through to it. Then I'd climb another



hill to find the next lake. I made some rough maps for my own use. They're odd to look at now in the light of our precise modern maps."

Despite the demands of teaching and guiding, Sig Olson's interests kept expanding. He returned to school, this time to the University of Illinois, for his master's degree, and for his thesis compiled a pioneer study on the predator-prey relationships of the timber wolf. Following and living with the wild packs, he began finally "to think like a wolf."

He was also a constant reader. He read the great poets, and discovered one

Sigurd Olson and his wife, Elizabeth, stand "on the steps of the old cabin that he bought in the countryside near Ely and moved, silvery-gray log by log, to Listening Point. Tucked back in the pines, it seems by its age and weathered hue to be a part of the forest itself. The great stones that compose the chimney are, in fact, part of Listening Point, having been hauled from the shore by Sig and Elizabeth."

by one, each time with a new rush of delight, the contemplative nature writers—Thoreau, John Muir, John Burroughs, and W. H. Hudson.

"While those early years seemed dominated by the importance of doing," he wrote in *OPEN HORIZONS*, "contacts with other minds introduced me to a new world, driving a wedge into a rift that would widen and make me think more like the poets and philosophers than a hunter and a woodsman. This did not come easily, and there were years when the outcome of the ancient battle between the primitive and the dawning hint of cultural understanding was in doubt; it seemed as though all that was important was what I did and saw. Had the poets not been with me, I might have gone the other way, taken the well-worn trail I already knew."

A new dimension was added to Olson's wilderness experience. He felt compelled to put his experiences and sensations into some order, to give them a significance beyond the moment. And so Sigurd F. Olson the writer was born.

Few successful writers in our time have served as long an apprenticeship as did Olson before his work became nationally known. Writing did not come easily at first. Beginning in the 1920s, he tried to write every morning and night that he was not in the forest. He tried to absorb the rhythms of Thoreau, and later Hudson and Aldo Leopold, before he forged a style of his own. His determination was so great that he became a skillful typist almost overnight.

"I bought one of those books that promises to teach you to type in three easy lessons," he said recently, laughing at the memory. "I put aside three days and worked almost twenty hours a day, and at the end of that time I became pretty good at it."

For years his chief markets were small regional publications and the rod-and-gun magazines. Yet even when he wrote for the latter, he was true to himself: There were no slaving grizzlies, no shooting of polar bears from low-flying aircraft, no slaughter of predators. He constructed his articles around his ordinary woodland experiences and the wisdom he had culled from them. His earnings were meager, but they formed an important supplement to the low salary he earned at Ely Junior College. He received twenty-five dollars for the first article he sold, but

that sum paid for the delivery of their first son, Sigurd T. Olson.

Olson was inclined toward revisionism even in his writing career. "I never liked the name Olson," he said. "Too ordinary. For a while I adopted the maiden name of Elizabeth's mother and signed my articles Sigurd Thorne. Isn't that a beautiful name? I finally dropped it, but we gave the name to young Sig."

OLSON QUICKLY LEARNED that he stood with his feet in two worlds. His passion for wild things implied a responsibility to defend them. The Quetico-Superior country that had seemed so remote to him when he first came into it across the Vermilion Iron Range lay vulnerable to human exploitation. To his horror, and that of the other veteran guides, there were plans by local boosters to riddle the Superior National Forest with an extensive network of roads. This was the heart of the wilderness, which chambers of commerce planned to make accessible to tourists with "a road to every lake." Olson was a leader in the struggle that during the 1920s led the U.S. Forest Service to establish the Superior Primitive Area and halt the building of roads into the finest wild country.

An even more threatening development was already on the horizon. A prominent Minnesota lumberman named Edward Backus put forth a proposal to build seven large dams and reservoirs in the canoe country, flooding out the streams, islands, and beaches on both sides of the U.S.-Canadian border. Again, Olson became a leader in the struggle to save the region, joining with a number of American and Canadian conservationists to form the Quetico-Superior Council. The proposal, after a nine-year controversy, was rejected by the International Joint Commission in 1934.

Sig Olson, since those early days, has never been off the firing line. Once a battle was won, another threat arose—logging close to scenic lakes, heavy traffic into the wilderness by float planes, the use of high-powered motorboats in areas best suited to quiet canoe travel. Olson himself has recounted these battles in books and articles (see *Audubon*, July 1970). The history of the decade-long struggle to save the region, and Olson's part in its preservation,

have been exhaustively documented by R. Newell Searle in his book *SAVING QUETICO-SUPERIOR: A LAND SET APART*.

"Like Aldo Leopold with whom he had worked," Searle wrote, "Olson turned increasingly to philosophical reflections about the relationship of wilderness to human values. He was a warm, open, enthusiastic man whose resonant voice and measured sentences captivated those who heard his wilderness lectures."

Olson's affiliations with the Wilderness Society and the Izaak Walton League brought him into the great post-war conservation battles all over the country. He testified before congressional committees in defense of the Grand Canyon and hiked the Potomac's towpath with Justice William O. Douglas to publicize the threats to "the nation's river." The lessons learned by Olson and other conservation leaders in defending the Quetico-Superior country proved invaluable in the successful effort to pass the Wilderness Act of 1964.

Olson credits Elizabeth with much of his eventual success, both as a conservationist and as a writer. In the evenings, before an important meeting or after a discouraging day at the typewriter, he talked over his problems with her. "She not only told me what I was doing right," he said, "but what I was doing *wrong*, too, which was just as helpful." She also supported a critical decision he made in 1947. He finally made up his mind to resign as dean of Ely Junior College and devote all of his time to writing and conservation work.

"I was scared stiff to make the break," he admitted. "But I just couldn't stand to have walls around me anymore."

It was to be another decade before the name Sigurd Olson became widely known beyond professional conservation circles. For thirty years his instructive and contemplative articles had continued to appear in sportsmen's and conservation magazines, bringing him much personal satisfaction but little of either fame or fortune. One day in the early 1950s he talked to his friend Rachel Carson about the craft of writing. Carson was already internationally known as the author of *THE SEA AROUND US*. She told Olson of the help she had received in placing her writings from Marie Rodell, a literary agent, and suggested that Olson get in

touch with her.

Rodell, one of the most respected agents in the business, tried to find a publisher for a collection of Olson's essays in book form. She sent the manuscript to eight publishers, all of whom admired the prose but did not believe the public would buy the sort of understated wilderness experiences that characterized his work. Even Rodell encouraged him to infuse the essays with a little more "action." But Olson remained uncomfortable with the notion, and his estimate of the manuscript's value was finally justified.

Marie Rodell finally sent the manuscript to Alfred Knopf, who saw its possibilities, and the book was published in 1956 under the title *THE SINGING WILDERNESS*. It was an immediate critical and commercial success. Sigurd Olson became the poetic voice of the modern wilderness movement.

As teacher, administrator, author, and conservation leader, he never lost his sense of kinship with the voyageur. The years had only deepened his understanding of the voyageurs' significance. He came to believe that our real heritage from them is a knowledge of the land and those who once lived upon it.

"What I learned in the land of the voyageurs taught me what to look for everywhere," he wrote in *OPEN HORIZONS*, "convinced me that history means the warmth of human associations, that while great events may find their place in books and museums, it is the people themselves who really counted. No longer did a country provide only opportunities for fishing, hunting, and camping places. I had found something more important. When one followed the trails of the past, no matter who the legendary figures were, voyageurs, conquistadors, or gold seekers, somehow their feelings came through, and when they did, the land glowed with warmth and light."

Olson continued to follow those ancient trails into the Far North with his band of modern voyageurs. The conservation work he had done in the Quetico-Superior country on both sides of the border strengthened his ties with his Canadian companions. The glow from those long-extinct campfires drew him on, as did the haunting names of the places that his ghostly predecessors had found and designated.

"I like names like Conjuror Bay," he

wrote in *RUNES OF THE NORTH*. "The very sound of them speaks of romance, mystery, and challenge. Far places with names like that are goals worth striving for and, when achieved, glow in one's memories. There are many: Compulsion Bay at the lower end of Wollaston, Fort Reliance on Great Slave, Artillery Lake just west of the headwaters of the Thelon, Trafalgar Bay on Northern Light, and Coronation Gulf where the Coppermine flows into the Arctic Sea; names that have color, power, and meaning. When, after fighting gales, running unknown rapids, and feeling the breath of the Arctic itself, you finally come to a place like Conjuror Bay, it enters your spirit and gives you a sense of identity with the men whose imaginations bestowed such a heroic title."

The path to romance, however, was often beset with sweat, chills, and ferocious insects.

"They were very rugged trips," recalled Tyler Thompson, who served as Olson's bowman on several of them. "Each one lasted about three weeks and covered about five hundred miles. Just before I joined the group there was one man who almost didn't make it. The canoeing and the carrying were so arduous that he was sure he was going to die before they got him out."

The other men left every vital decision to Olson, their Bourgeois. When-

ever storms came up on the lakes or thunderous rapids confronted them on the rivers, he looked over their prospects and decided whether to go on or head for the shore. "Leave it to the Bourgeois" was their common sentiment.

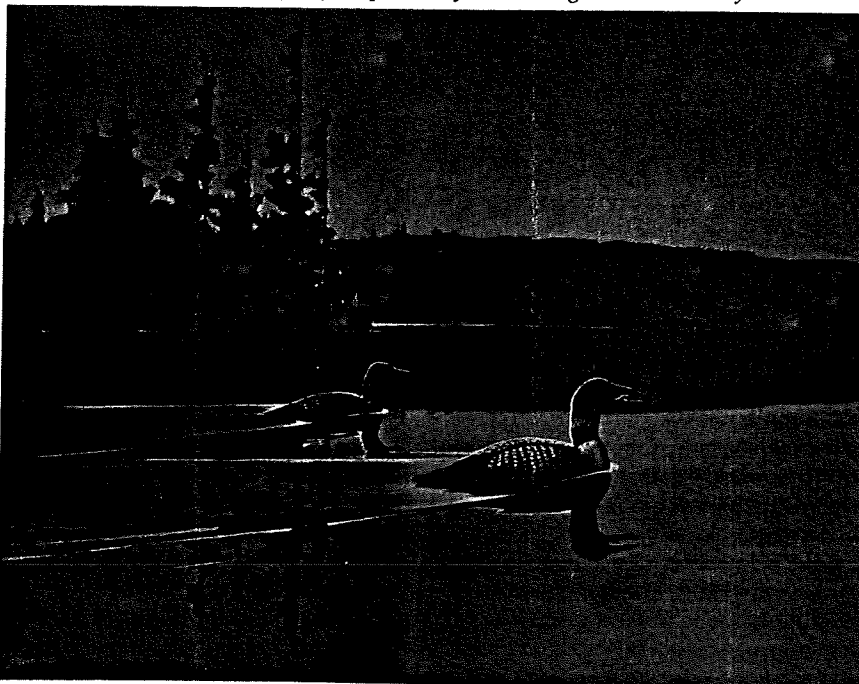
Olson also served as cook on each expedition. During a trip down the Hayes River on the way to York Factory at Hudson Bay, one of the canoes was swamped in the rapids, and the expedition's food and cooking utensils were swept away.

"I did a lot of improvising," Olson recalled. "I whittled spoons and forks from chunks of aspen, and I converted some old tin cans into cooking pots. We ate whatever fish we could catch, and I extended the meals with moldy flour. I lost fifteen pounds in two weeks."

There were more serious mishaps. Olson's canoe upset on one trip, flinging him against a rock and smashing three of the canoe's ribs. Another time he slipped on a portage and badly gashed his mouth, but a fortunate encounter with a Japanese dentist at Fort Churchill resulted in a patch-up job and the pegging of his two front teeth.

The group's sole tragedy occurred when Olson was not on the trip. While the Canadian contingent was canoeing north of Toronto, a canoe upset in bad rapids, and Blair Fraser, the editor of *Maclean's* magazine, was drowned.

"Loons in Canoe Country" by Jaques; he first met Sigurd Olson at Ely in 1942.



COURTESY OF ARNOLD J. BOLZ

A RECENT VISITOR to Ely found Sig and Elizabeth Olson at their cabin on a lake about a dozen miles from town. It was their fifty-ninth wedding anniversary, and they had come with a picnic lunch to this retreat which Olson commemorated in one of his most popular books, *LISTENING POINT*. Ill health and major surgery had restricted his activities in the last year or two, but he looked tan and fit once more.

"I think what bothered me most was a foot injury," he told his visitor. "I fell out of a tree that I was trying to prune. For three years I was in a lot of pain, and I could hardly walk. Then I found a doctor in Duluth who solved the problem by surgery on the metatarsal bones. That was only a month ago, but now I am walking better than I have for years."

He stood on the steps of the old cabin that he had bought in the countryside near Ely years before and moved, silvery-gray log by log, to Listening Point. Tucked back in the pines out of sight from the lake, it seemed by its age and weathered hue to be a part of the forest itself. The great stones that compose the chimney are, in fact, part of Listening Point, having been hauled from the shore by Sig and Elizabeth. A loon called repeatedly from the lake, which was only a blue-gold gleam through the intervening trees.

"You should have been here a couple of days ago, because there was a wolf calling off in the distance," Olson said, and then he broke into the remembered howl: "*Woof, woof, woof, whooooo!*"

Olson had chosen this place by sight, coming upon it from the water after a long paddle up the lake. The fine landing place, with a potential campsite on the bearberry ledge high and dry above it, with its view all around of the lake and the horizon beyond, convinced him that it was a composite of all the best campsites he had ever found in the wilderness. He wanted to possess it, to use it as a window through which to behold the forest and the water and recapture the sense of the wild places he had known from Lake Superior north to the Arctic.

But it was not the view but the sounds that he craved most, and this was why, after he had bought the coveted strip of shoreline, he called it Listening Point. First of all, he used the point to listen to

what he has called "the all-engulfing silence of wilderness." He believes that one of the calamities of modern life is that in the endless clangor we have lost the silences that are the counterpoint to nature's vibrant flow.

Inside the cabin, he spoke of what Listening Point has meant to him. Around him on the walls were hung mementos of long-ago trips: a set of snowshoes given him by an Indian woman, the model of a caribou-skin boat which an Eskimo told him to take back to his cabin, a pair of cross-country skis from Finland, a scarred paddle whose blade is tipped in scarlet. Bright red blankets covered the bunks, one of the blankets broadly patched to repair the damage done by a red squirrel that nested in the cabin one year.

"I told the woman from whom I bought the point that I was going to write when I was here," he said. "But I have never written at Listening Point. There are too many other interesting things to do."

He has been too busy there listening to the sounds of the wilderness and thinking over what they tell him. It is an indication of his growth as a man that even the intrusive noises of civilization have helped him to make peace with his existence. He finally came to accept the strident whistle of a distant train.

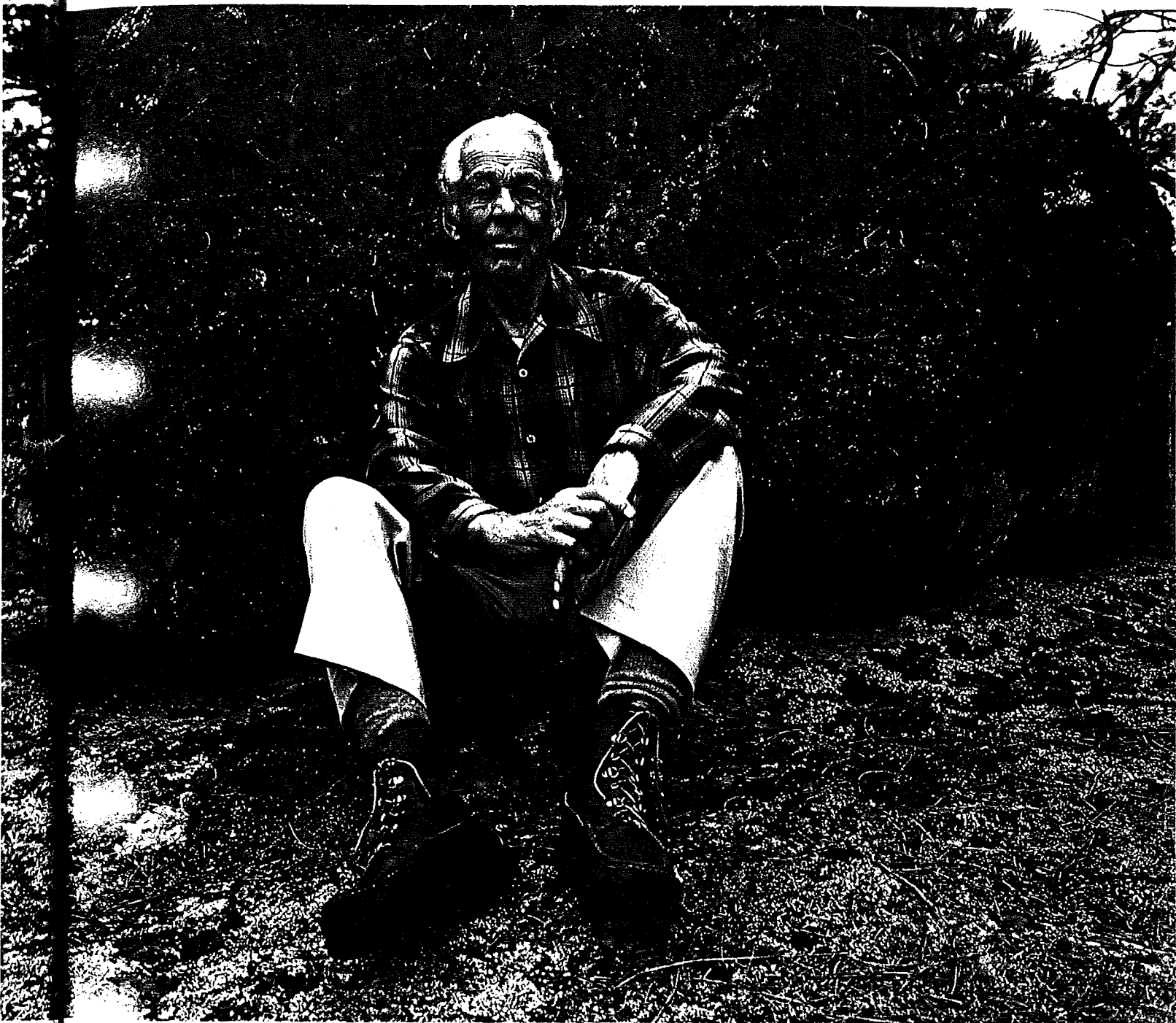
"I would listen now with understanding, knowing what it really meant," he wrote in *LISTENING POINT*. "Without the lonesome wail and the culture that had produced it, many things would not be mine—recordings of the world's finest music, books holding the philosophy, dreams, and hopes of all mankind, a car that took me swiftly to the point whenever I felt the need. The very presence of the railroad and highway over the ridges to the south gave new significance to wilderness, to solitude and the entire concept of Listening Point."

Sig Olson's life has been one of great achievement and satisfaction. Honors and awards have flooded in on him. The scope of his work in environmental education can be estimated by the fact that both an elementary school in Golden Valley, Minnesota (a Minneapolis suburb), and the recently established Environmental Institute at Northland College are named in his honor. A new collection of his essays, *OF TIME AND PLACE*, will be published



next spring by Alfred A. Knopf.

In his private life there have been many satisfactions, too. He and Elizabeth are now great-grandparents. Their two sons have recently retired after rewarding careers of their own, Sigurd from the U.S. Forest Service and Robert from the State Department. His old comrades on the canoe trails look forward to their reunions with the Bourgeois, who vigorously competes with them in bellowing out the familiar



chansons and telling "outrageous tales" of great exploits.

Ultimately, the factual details of Olson's life—his degrees, his offices, his publication dates—are insignificant to him. His past and present melt into a tableau of timelessness. "I've been happier, but I can't remember where," his friend Frank Masland said on a canoe trip years ago, and that has been Olson's refrain ever since. The delight in wilderness experience is the connecting

thread of his life. He bends to examine the twinflowers spread around his cabin at Listening Point, and lifts his head to find himself gazing into the glaciated mountains that rise from Conjuror Bay at the entrance to Great Bear Lake.

"When there are no longer any beckoning mirages ahead, a man dies," Sig Olson wrote years ago, in the adventurous spirit that still grips him. "With an open horizon constantly before him, life can be an eternal challenge." ☼

"It was not the view but the sounds that he craved most, and this was why, after he had bought the coveted strip of shoreline, he called it Listening Point. First of all, he used the point to listen to what he has called 'the all-engulfing silence of wilderness.'"