

## SIG OLSON'S WISCONSIN LEGACY

*by Michael Frome*

**S**IGURD OLSON died at the age of 82 in 1982 the way he might well have wished, while snowshoeing near his home in Ely, Minnesota. He left a considerable legacy and is not likely soon to be forgotten. Among those who love wild nature, particularly in the North Country, his name and work are sheer inspiration.

So I found myself thinking while attending an impressive ceremony recently at Stevens Point, Wisconsin, marking the induction of Sigurd Olson into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame. He was the fifth honoree, joining the distinguished company of John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Ernest Swift and Gaylord Nelson, Wisconsinites all. At the time of the ceremony I was nearing the completion of an academic year at the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute on the campus of Northland College at Ashland, on the Wisconsin shore of Lake Superior, and thus felt a special connection with Sig. I also had known him in years past as a friend and a guiding light in wilderness writing.

I remember Sig as a personality of poise and presence who had faith in himself, in the natural environment and in the ability of people to respond to a message of consequence. He didn't become a serious writer until he was 50. He'd been a guide, a teacher and dean of a community college. He persevered in the face of adversity, insisting that his writing must be purposeful and elevating, which explains why his nine books are still widely read and quoted.

Sig was not only a writer but a participant, an activist in the crusade for a better world, or perhaps I should say for an enlightened human attitude derived from the heart and spirit. He was a prominent champion of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area against many threats down through the years and was instrumental in the establishment of Voyageurs National Park. Doubtless he would have been in the

van of opposition to the current National Park Service proposal for a snowmobile trail across the Kabetogama Peninsula, the core of Voyageurs' wildness. His influence was felt widely. Recently his old friend, Stewart Brandborg, who served for years as executive director of the Wilderness Society, recalled in a conversation how Sig had been a driving force within the councils of the society to press on, against powerful political opposition, for passage of the Wilderness Act until its realization in 1964. I hadn't known this, but it didn't surprise me.

Before he died, the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute was established at Ashland, where he lived in his youth. Sig appreciated the tribute but was reluctant to have the institute named for him. After all, the most fitting memorial to such a man is not something built but nature preserved. Still, he would have been pleased by the institute's efforts to spread the gospel, showing the people of the North Country the values of unspoiled wildlands and how best to protect them.

For example, Mark Peterson, the institute's director, recently conducted a conference of 50 leading United States and Canadian conservationists on the ecosystem of Lake Superior—the largest, cleanest and perhaps most endangered of the Great Lakes—and ways to coordinate citizen efforts to protect it. The conferees agreed to develop a Lake Superior plan and program to improve water quality and protect shorelines, islands, rivers, parks and wildlife, and to improve communication among concerned citizens and resource managers through an ongoing coalition.

On another front, Dr. Paul Strong, the institute's staff biologist, initiated a workshop on biological diversity attended by 150 state and federal natural resource managers and other interested individuals from Wiscon-

sin, Minnesota and upper Michigan. As Dr. Strong explains, the definition of biological diversity may be simple, but the ecological concepts are neither well understood nor applied by many resource managers.

In Minneapolis in May the Minnesota Loon Preservation Project, a unit of the Olson Institute, unveiled a traveling exhibit, "LoonTalk," which a month later moved to Boston to begin a journey to museums, libraries and nature centers across the country. The exhibit, funded by a grant from REI, the recreation equipment cooperative, is designed to heighten public understanding of the loon, the symbol of the northern water wilderness, and of the factors affecting its well-being. It is a teaching aid, giving viewers a chance to hear and feel as well as see, and showing how to preserve the bird and its habitat.

It's fun to be a loon fancier in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Sigurd Olson was among the best, a companion and chronicler of loons. The loons in both states are reasonably numerous and secure. Michigan loon lovers, however, are worried about a declining population recently listed by the Department of Natural Resources as threatened. Dr. Strong, one of the nation's leading loon authorities, has been working closely with Michigan agencies and individuals in rallying support for the loon.

During my year at the institute, it seemed fitting to help conduct a wilderness lecture series as a tribute to Sig Olson. Virtually all of the nine speakers, including nationally prominent environmentalists, related some personal experience with him. Mack Prichard, Tennessee conservation educator and naturalist, recalled how when only 16 in his home town of Memphis he was handed a conservation award by Sig. Dr. M. Rupert Cutler spoke of being introduced by his close friend Sig as a speaker at the institute while serving as Assistant

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Secretary of Agriculture. Brock Evans of the National Audubon Society referred to Sig's encouragement of his wilderness preservation work in the Northwest. Joyce Kelly of Defenders of Wildlife, though she had not met Sig, knew him well through his writings and pathways she had followed in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

Others spoke in similar vein: Paul C. Pritchard of the National Parks and Conservation Association, Jack Lorenz of the Izaak Walton League, Dave Foreman, founder and spark-plug of the Earth First! environmental movement, and Floyd J. Marita, regional forester of the U.S. Forest Service, who described the wide range of wilderness in eastern national forests, from the mountains of New Hampshire and Vermont to the Boundary Waters of Minnesota, and the potential for additional wilderness designations.

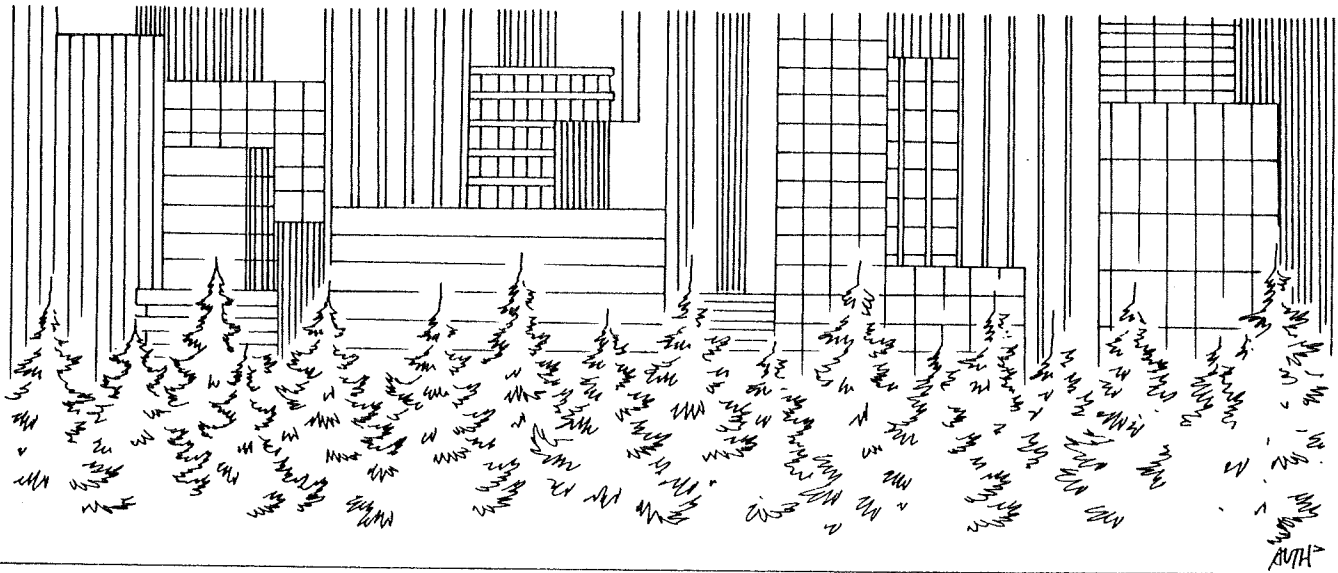
Then there was Lynn C. Kinter,

director of Friends of Wild Wyoming Deserts. In her early 20s, she was by all odds the youngest of the speakers, a recent graduate of the University of Idaho who sparked the organizing of a citizens' group to save a rare, unsung wilderness, the Wyoming high desert. Lynn concluded her lecture with a Sigurd Olson quotation: "The hope for the world is in you; you are the new generation. You have to carry on the battle to preserve. The battle goes on endlessly. The whole world depends on you."

While that was a fitting message to a college audience, I see a different lesson in the life of Sigurd Olson. After all, one generation can always presume to pass the torch to the next, but in our time it's getting to be a matter of passing the burden. We need more exemplars for the here and now, risk-takers willing to challenge themselves and the society around them. Sig Olson was that kind of model. He both described and

defended the North Country with wisdom and love. There is still much to be done: in behalf of wolves, which still survive in Wisconsin, though in slender numbers; and of forests, public and private, which deserve other uses than as a source of pulp and paper; and of lakes and rivers, which ought to be freed of toxic contaminants and liberated from industrial blight, for the benefit of loons, eagles, fish and humans.

John Muir wrote of "the great memorable day" when the first flock of passenger pigeons arrived at the family farm. The beautiful wanderers flew like the winds in flocks of millions, flowing over the horizon in an almost continuous stream all day long, like a mighty river in the sky. We can never relive such a day, but John Muir and Sigurd Olson showed how to safeguard the best of Wisconsin, or whatever special place one calls home, and by so doing to make the whole world better. □



Drawn for DEFENDERS by Tony Auth