

# Sigurd Olson — Environmentalist

ROBERT B. OETTING\*

In Sigurd Olson's book, "Listening Point" is a curious bit of prose. Sig is recalling when he and his geologist friend, C. K. Leith sat in the Cosmos Club in downtown Washington, D. C., talking about the old days, the days in the bush.

"He was eighty-two when I talked to him last, but still as straight and energetic as ever," Sig relates. "Suddenly he was quiet, a faraway look came into his eyes as he sat watching the rain spatter down into the courtyard."

"He smiled and I knew he was cruising the back country of the Canadian Shield, down its brawling rivers, across its stormy lakes, knowing again the feeling of distance and space, the sense of the old wilderness."

Curious. What was a noted outdoor writer and wilderness stalwart like Sig Olson doing in an exclusive private club in the wilderness-bereft, crowded, jangling Nation's capitol? Well, Washington, D. C. is where wilderness is despoiled or saved. And he was there to save it.

Sig Olson is 82 years old. At least 60 of those years have been consumed in a monumental struggle to save wilderness: as Wilderness Ecologist for the Izaak Walton League of America; as Consultant to the President's Quetic-Superior Committee; as Advisor to the Secretary of Interior; as Consultant to the Director of the National Park Service; as Member of the Scientific Research Committee for the Department of Interior and National Park Service; as President of the National Parks Association; as President of the Wilderness Society; as Advisor to The Nature Conservancy and as Member of the Natural Resources Council of America. Sig's exploits in these positions are not noted in his wilderness books. Could the poet who sang the lilting arias of "Listening Point" and the others be hard-fisted enough to make waves in the lobby-laden halls of Congress and the gritty meeting rooms of small towns? Could and did, according to those who were there.

**Former Minnesota Governor Elmer L. Andersen remembers:**

"About 30 years ago Minnesota asked Congress to lift the airplane ban over the wilderness area of northern Minnesota that President Truman had imposed. Sig was tireless in appearing before committees of the State Legislature and

took insults in the process. It was the only time that I have known him to get really angry. He and those working with him prevailed in getting the proposed resolution killed "

"In 1970, toward the end of the 10-year effort to get Voyageurs National Park in Minnesota authorized and established, we were working on the U. S. Senate side to get the bill passed after having had it approved by the House. The task in the Senate proved unexpectedly difficult. Sig and I met with Senator Henry Jackson and his staff and eventually convinced him and others that the project was fully mature and should be enacted."

"Sig never missed an opportunity to speak up, to write letters, to be counted, to appear before committees, tirelessly for many years. Sig conveyed a religious fervor and a depth of conviction that no one else I know succeeded in generating. Others could win adherence; he produced disciples."

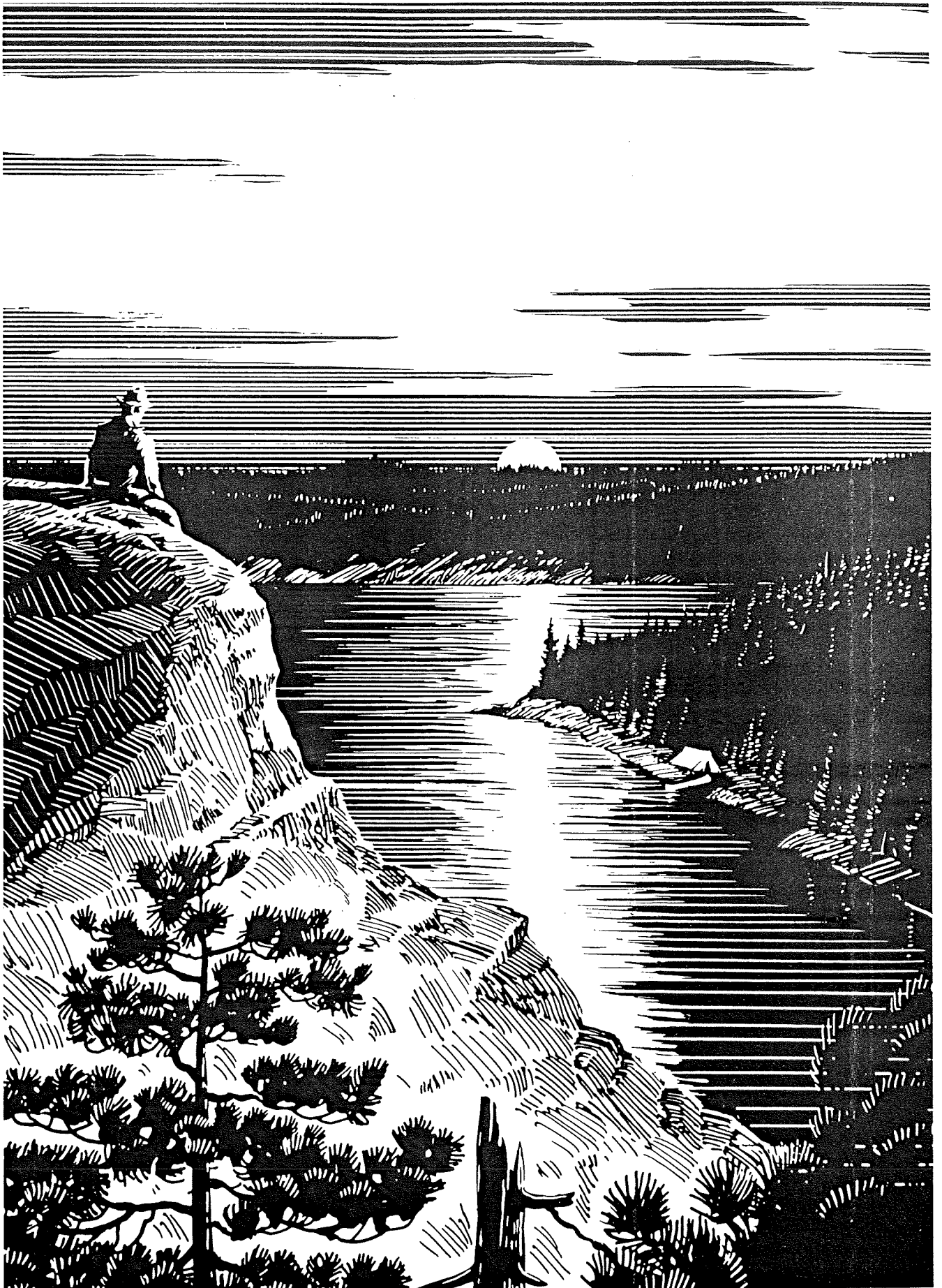
**Robert L. Herbst, Executive Director of Trout Unlimited and former Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks also remembers:**

"Over the years Sig and I worked on many issues ranging from the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, to Alaska lands, to various wilderness issues including taconite mining and acid rain. He has been a credible source of advice on these matters; much of this value can be attributed to his service in writing and his testimony in court."

**Dr. Myron (Bud) Heinselman recalls Sig's efforts to protect the Boundary Waters Canoe Area of Minnesota:**

"Sig worked mightily with the Selke Committee to protect the Boundary Waters area. He took a strong lead as President of the Izaak Walton League, calling for full wilderness status. Because of his efforts, the Committee recommended a larger closure on logging and stronger restrictions on motorboats and snowmobiles. He was so effective, he was hung in effigy at the hearing of the House Committee of Interior and Insular Affairs."

"That wasn't the only time Sig was effective by the effigy standard, according to Michael Link, Director of the Northwoods Audubon Center in Sandstone, Minnesota:



"Solitude—life is a constant search for such moments"  
Scratch board by Les Kouba from "North Country"

"In the Ely hearing for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area bill, I had the opportunity to share the testimony table with Sigurd Olson and Fern Arpi. Outside the auditorium hung an effigy of Sig and inside was a brooding hostility that often focused on Sig and his reputation. Sig said to me, 'Today is a good day to die'. Then he spoke to Representatives Fraser and Oberstar and to the hearing officials with the clarity and resolve of a man with a mission and a purpose, and the derision from his tormentors in the audience was drowned out by the softness of his voice."

Environmental struggles in giant melting pots like the Nation's capital or hot spots like Ely, Minnesota, exact a physical as well as emotional toll from totally immersed combatants. Sig was no exception, according to M. Rupert Cutler, Senior Vice President of the National Audubon Society and former Assistant Secretary of Agriculture: "Sig suffered a heart attack at Sanibel Island, Florida, in 1968. He was attending an annual meeting of The Wilderness Society governing council at the time. We were having dinner at a resort motel: Sig suddenly stiffened and passed out, falling on the floor of the dining room. A rescue squad was called to move him to Ft. Myers where he stayed for several weeks before he could return to Minnesota."

"During Sig's struggle to obtain the airspace reservation over the Boundary Waters Canoe Area during the Truman administration, when he was working night and day in Washington, D. C. to win this executive order, the facial tic so familiar to all of us in later years came on him literally overnight."

"Surviving the heart attack and other stress-related ailments hasn't softened his mettle, as he frets today about acid rain and renewed efforts to mine his beloved northern Minnesota canoe area. "There will be no mining in wilderness areas around here," he flatly predicts.

Environmentalists must cope with the unpredictable quirks of politics, too. When the events which make strange bedfellows coalesce, fancy footwork, smooth moves and dogged tenacity are needed to win the day.

Cutler relates that when Sig was working with Ted Schwem of the National Park Service to develop proposals for expanded park units in Alaska during the Johnson administration, things went decently until President Lyndon B. Johnson refused Interior Secretary Stewart Udall's enthusiastic support for the project. As the story goes, LBJ was miffed because Udall had renamed D. C. Stadium the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Stadium without his consent. The sacrificial lamb became the Olson-Schwem proposal for Alaska park lands. Of course, since that time, the Alaska Lands Act has protected far more park system acreage than was envisioned at that time. Well, it doesn't take long for the Washington environmentalist to learn that you win some and you lose some; by inches and miles.

But mostly environmentalists can never be sure of success in the long run, due to the eternal nature of project authorizations. Some say they can't win; the best they can do is not lose, and even that joy is ephemeral, since projects that would destroy wilderness values go on forever, carrying with them ever new generations of proponents. "For us, there is only the trying," in T. S. Eliot's words.

An outstanding example of his phenomenon is Sig's own work to preserve the Boundary Waters Canoe Area wilderness. Sig's efforts began in the 1920's when he fought plans to divide and flood the lake country with roads and dams. That was in Early Ely, nearly 50 years before Earth Day, 1970, which spawned many of today's noted environmentalists. And it drove him to later Washington, where he took his fight as leader of various national organizations.

Today, after 60 years of concern and effort to maintain the wilderness integrity of the Boundary Waters region, the battle rages on, destined, obviously, to out-live its most renowned champion. Does this spell a new dimension in environmentalism, where projects which would despoil wilderness or wetlands outlive their champions? Sigurd Olson thinks so. He looks to youth to save the wilderness. "You have to toss the torch to a younger generation and they will keep fighting for your ideas," he predicts. "In the young is the hope of the future."

Beyond his dedication and efforts, Sig's wife of 60 years, Elizabeth, explained a side of Sig which helped him achieve his environmental goals. "Sig has never been vindictive, never waged vendettas against others, never engaged in name-calling. Perhaps his nature is such that he never even considered such tactics. In any event, his restraint gained him the respect of others and while there were many who disagreed with him, I can think of none who didn't respect him."

"Probably that is also why, through all the hassles and struggles, we've never had an insulting or threatening letter or telephone call."

Sig's response to all this was typically straightforward: "If you're not roundly hated by developers now and then, you aren't an effective environmentalist."

Today Sig Olson is robust for his years and his broad sense of humor is alive and well. Trips to Listening Point have become shorter because of the difficulty of carrying in supplies for long stays, but Sig had little trouble trekking to the famous cabin near the point. "My doctor says I'm as good as ever," he said. "My eyesight is 20-20; isn't that amazing?"

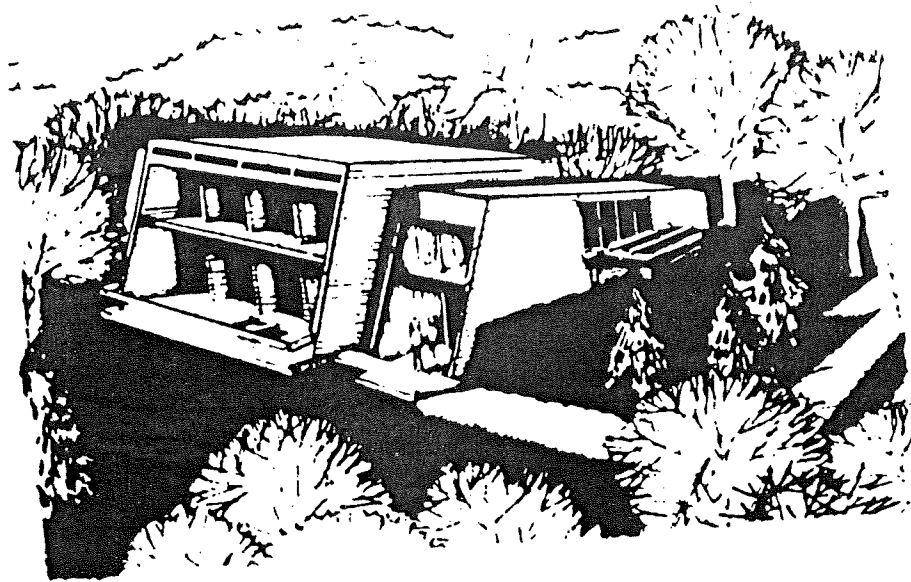
Our visit to Listening Point provided great background for Sig's views on the acid rain problem. "Acid rain is our most serious environmental problem," he noted. "It's not just Atikokan (Ontario) or Ely, it is world wide, from Sweden and Norway to the northeastern states and provinces and even to the northern Great Plains."

A simple tribute to Sigurd Olson's tireless efforts as an environmentalist is provided by Bob Cary of the Ely (Minnesota) Echo: "While his views on management of such areas as the Boundary Waters Canoe Area have generated violent opposition as well as enthusiastic support, no one, friend or foe alike, could ever challenge his love for the wilderness. Through good times and bad, bouquets and brickbats, uphill or down, Sig has always been a man apart and while we have had our philosophical disagreements, I am richer in experience for having known him."

Aren't we all.

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*\*Robert B. Oetting, Ph. D. is a senior staff member of the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service at Fort Snelling, Minnesota.*



### *Dedication Program*

Welcome, Edward Wagner  
Mayor of Ashland

Introduction, Malcolm McLean  
President, Northland College

The Institute Program, Bruce Blackburn  
Chairman, Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute Advisory Board

Richard St. Germaine, Special Guest  
Lac Courte Oreilles Tribal Education Director

Les Blacklock, Special Guest  
Nature Photographer

### *Keynote Address*

Gaylord Nelson  
Chairman, The Wilderness Society

### *Dedication Ceremony*

*Open House*