

The Conservation Commission's 30th Anniversary

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In 1927 Wisconsin pioneered with a law providing for a non-salaried, six-member commission. The form of organization remains unchanged and has been widely imitated.

In August of this year the Wisconsin Conservation Commission will complete its 30th year of operation. What is most significant about this occasion is the fact that the basic conservation act has remained unchanged since its enactment in 1927. This is a credit to the original planners for not only did the commission weather a number of investigations by the Legislature, but the Conservation Department's program expanded tremendously in that time.

BACK IN OCTOBER 1926 the late Aldo Leopold, then a forester with the U. S. Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, suggested organization of the Conservation Commission with several non-paid commissioners instead of one salaried commissioner. He was assisted in planning this proposal by such men as Attorney W. J. P. Aberg and Assemblyman Frank N. Graass. The original draft of the conservation act which they prepared is reported to be preserved and it is one of the fundamental documents of the Wisconsin conservation movement. Vision far into the future was needed to declare its general purpose "to provide an adequate and flexible system for the protection, development and use of forests, fish and game, lakes, streams, plant life, flowers and other outdoor resources in the state of Wisconsin".

According to the biennial report for the first commission, "The new type of management of conservation work in this state has been acclaimed throughout the United States as being probably the most efficient and far-reaching form of organization yet effected by any state." The

report declares that other states copied all or parts of this "Wisconsin idea" and there were many inquiries asking for details as to the commission's functions. The six-man commission was credited with giving all subjects a "breadth of viewpoint" considering the business, legal, sentimental, practical and sportsmen's standpoints.

The first chairman of the Wisconsin Conservation Commission was William Mauthe of Fond du Lac. In one of their first releases to the newspapers he was credited with saying: "To really justify itself, conservation must mean restoration of our marshes and the creation of conditions under which forests will grow and can be grown." He also was quoted as saying that, "As Wisconsin accepts the term, conservation means more than just propagating and planting pheasants and fish to satisfy the predatory instincts of hunters and fishermen."

WE HAVE COME a long way since that time, and it might be observed that both the Hungarian partridge and the pheasant were successfully stocked by this early commission so the first open season was possible in 1932. When it is realized that before 1927 there were only three separate departments—forests and parks, fisheries and law enforcement—under a single commissioner, the change to today's 10 divisions in the Conservation Department is considerable. From the very first, two new branches of activity were started in game management and education and publications. Of interest is the fact that the expenditure for game work was only \$413.89 in 1927-28 and

\$20,069.68 in its first full year of operation in 1928-29. A progress report covering the years 1930 and 1931 by the late William F. Grimmer briefly states, "Due to entire lack of funds there has been no action on the proposed purchase or lease of public hunting grounds."

It is no wonder the conservation program did not progress more rapidly with a lack of revenue these early years, for the first small income from a one-twentieth mill tax levy on property for forestry purposes did not become available until 1930 and there was no revenue from even a general fishing license.

Some of the commission's accomplishments in the past 30 years include:

- Horicon marsh (and other similar projects)
- Kettle Moraine state forest (and several others)
- State game farm at Poynette
- Public hunting and fishing grounds
- Forest crop law and county forests
- State parks like Copper Falls, Pota-watomi and Terry Andrae
- Forest protection organization
- Enabling act for national forest in Wisconsin
- Griffith nursery (and several others)

IT WOULD be easy to continue this list, for almost all of our present-day program and installations except some early fish hatcheries date since 1927. At that time the Legislature still set the fish and game seasons and there was a great lack of knowledge about our wildlife. For this reason, the first Conservation Commission established a research bureau which promptly began investigations specializing on the prairie chicken. Also, an Advisory Committee of citizen observers was started and this eventually developed into the present Conservation Congress. After five years of proving itself worthy the new commission was given power to regulate the opening of the hunting and fishing seasons as well as related management controls. Growth of the Conservation Department more than 10-fold is reflected in the budget of

1927-28 which was less than a million dollars for all activities.

Wisconsin has reason to be proud of its Conservation Commission. Recognition should be given to the pioneering work of such men as its first secretary, E. M. Dahlberg of Ladysmith, and many others who have served faithfully on this group over the years. Although there is need for improvement in some aspects of the commission's work, essentially it has been an "adequate and flexible system" for administering a wide range of complex and often conflicting interests in the use and preservation of the state's natural resources.

In looking back on these 30 years of accomplishments, let us also vow to face the future with the courage and optimism of the first commissioners who stated in their 1926-28 biennial report to the Governor: "With efficiency as the goal and common sense business methods as the means, the new State Conservation Commission of Wisconsin has worked out an organization in its short year of existence that is capable of handling all of the multitudinous problems of conservation work in this state. But the commission has not been satisfied with merely effecting an organization. It has formulated and acted upon policies and has already started many worthy conservation projects down the road toward an early and successful culmination."

Suffice it to say that many of these policies are still sound and in use today—and many of these projects are realities and in use by the citizens of the state today.



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