

"Reflections on Sigurd F. Olson"

Given by Les Blacklock at the dedication of the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute, May 9, 1981

FRAN AND I HAVE BEEN FORTUNATE IN KNOWING Sig and Elizabeth Olson for many years. We saw each other quite often when Sig and I collaborated on the book, *THE HIDDEN FOREST*, and during the rounds of publicity after publication. My good fortune of having Sig as a teammate was dramatically demonstrated at the autograph party at the Dayton store in Minneapolis. Dayton's told us that the number who came was second only to the record number who came for Eddie Rickenbacker's autographing. Being at Sig's elbow, I saw and heard the heartfelt adoration that a very loyal following has for him. *THE HIDDEN FOREST* set some publishing records for studio-size books, and I know why. It was because Sig Olson's name was on the cover.

Every get-together we've had with Sig and Elizabeth has been very special to us (who wouldn't enjoy being with the Olsons!). But three times stand out as highlights in our lives. I'd like to share them with you.

The first is the dedication of the Sigurd F. Olson Elementary School in Golden Valley, Minnesota. Naming the school for Sig was the brainchild of Gary Joslyn, who was on the school board. The school building was the very latest in open planning, and ecology was to be stressed in all possible studies.

Because Gary had always admired Sig, knowing him through his books, and through his many battles to save the Boundary Waters, the school board insisted that Gary introduce Sig at the dedication program.

Gary accepted with pleasure, and because he had never met Sig, he called to see if it would be all right to come to Ely for a short visit to get personally acquainted. The Olsons, pretty thrilled themselves at having a school named for Sig, said come ahead.

Gary, of course, found out that Sig is as he writes — a beautiful person, and that Elizabeth is just as lovely and gracious as she looks. He came home elated, and wrote his introduction while he was still flushed with the realization that he had actually visited the Olsons in their home.

Wondering if he had written it as best he could, Gary decided to try his introduction out on his wife, Yleen.

He couldn't get through it. He was so emotionally full that the words couldn't get by the lump in his throat.

Came dedication day. The art director from Viking Press came from New York with large framed prints from *THE HIDDEN FOREST*, and they were hanging on many walls. Everywhere Sig went he was surrounded by adoring children.

During the program I happened to be sitting behind Elizabeth. After the preliminary speeches, it was time for Gary to introduce Sig. His words came out strong and clear, and right and good. At a particularly moving point, Elizabeth reached back a hand. I grabbed it, and my hand was squeezed as it hasn't been before or since.

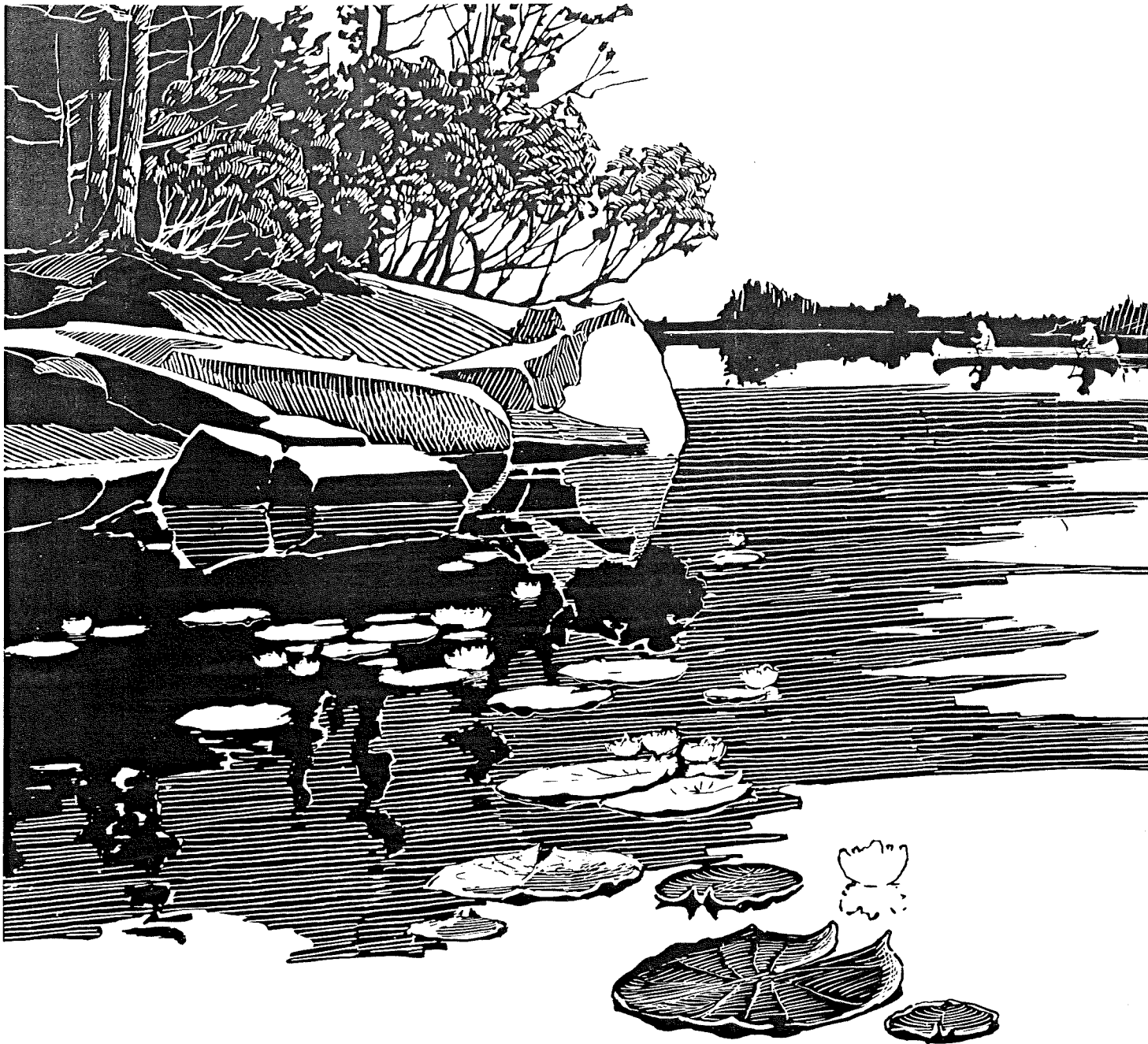
How Sig could get up and talk after such an outpouring of starry-eyed emotion from that entire crowd, I don't know.

But he did. And it came out pure poetry. That rich, soft-edged baritone voice floated easily across the audience, and that room was full of love for that man.

The second event with Sig and Elizabeth I would like to share with you took place right in the lion's den. You know what they say about a prophet in his home town. Well, this event was in Ely. And some folks up there have been known to disagree with Sig on wilderness matters.

But the University Women of Ely decided it was time to recognize that Sigurd Olson is an internationally famous author, lecturer and advisor to the government, and that he has done more to put Ely and canoe country on the map than any other person.

Every summer the U Women sponsor a weekly program called Northwoods Nights at the college where Sig taught and was dean. Let's have a Sig Olson Night, they decided. Being brave (as many woman's organizations are), they publicized the event widely and sent invitations to people who have been closely associated with Sig.



"Canoe Country" Scratch board by Francis Lee Jaques

This illustration was done specifically for an article called Little Savages by Florence Page Jaques. The article was on Wild Flowers of the Canoe Country. It was part of the Issue "Alluring Border Country," of Autumn 1958. Sig's article "Winning a Wilderness" was lead article.



The afternoon of the program, Elizabeth was fidgety. She feared that there would be just a few friends in the auditorium, and that outside the doors, people would be pacing back and forth carrying hostile placards.

But Elizabeth was wrong. The auditorium was jammed with people from all over the north woods and many distant places. Speaker after speaker stepped up and told some mighty nice things about Sig. There was an outpouring of warmth the likes of which one is seldom witness to in a lifetime. Then Sig, in a short response, as only he can speak, demonstrated why he is admired and loved by so many.

The third event I'd like to share with you took place in our home in the woods near Moose Lake, Minnesota. We had built many ecological pluses into our new house, but tried to keep north woods charm with hand-hewn log walls from an old barn, a fireplace, and a beautiful old woodstove. We wanted Sig and Elizabeth to come visit us after Christmas, to share our Shangri-la while our tree was still up.

Getting our calendars to mesh was a problem. "Keep the tree up, we're coming!" they said. We did, and finally a couple of days worked out near the *end* of January.

I ran a Christmas tree business when I was a boy, promising each customer a perfect tree, and doing pretty well at keeping that promise. So nostalgia keeps me warm as I search each year for a super 12-foot balsam. And I do a

good job in trimming. 353 tiny lights, dozens of balls and old-fashioned trimmings, and hundreds of strands of lead tinsel, saved each year. So I wasn't about to take the tree down with Sig and Elizabeth coming.

They came. We had an enjoyable dinner with soft music in the background, then sat in the living room with just the light from the flickering fire and the glowing tree.

The tree hadn't dropped a needle. To demonstrate why, I tapped one of the branches. A cloud of gold pollen floated across the room. The tree was growing! Inch-long new cones were among the decorations at the top of the tree. Sig and Elizabeth were amazed, but I kept a little secret. In my mind's eye I could see Mother Nature smiling. Sig had performed miracles time and again in saving natural areas for us all. Next to that, keeping a balsam green for this beautiful night was no trick at all.

There was little need for conversation. Sig or I would get up and poke at the fire or add a log, and once Sig stirred around in the kitchen to find a bowl and cornflakes for a snack. But mostly we just held hands with our sweethearts and enjoyed good friends and coziness that winter night.

And now, here we all are, sharing another beautiful occasion with the Olsons. The dedication of the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute is a banner day for all of us. The building with this name, in this setting, is, in toto, an atmosphere conducive to intelligent brainstorming, searching for answers to environmental problems that are threatening to make our planet unlivable.

To me, it is well within reasonable expectation that some of the answers that will help keep our marvelous world green and growing will come from here.

Sigurd Olson moves people. Not just emotionally, but he moves them to *move*. Not to move mountains, of course, but to *save* mountains, and deserts, and swamps, and forests and prairies and seashores, and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

The name Sigurd Olson on this building and its programs will move us all to try to provide a clean, pure, beautiful habitat on Earth for all its creatures, including man.