

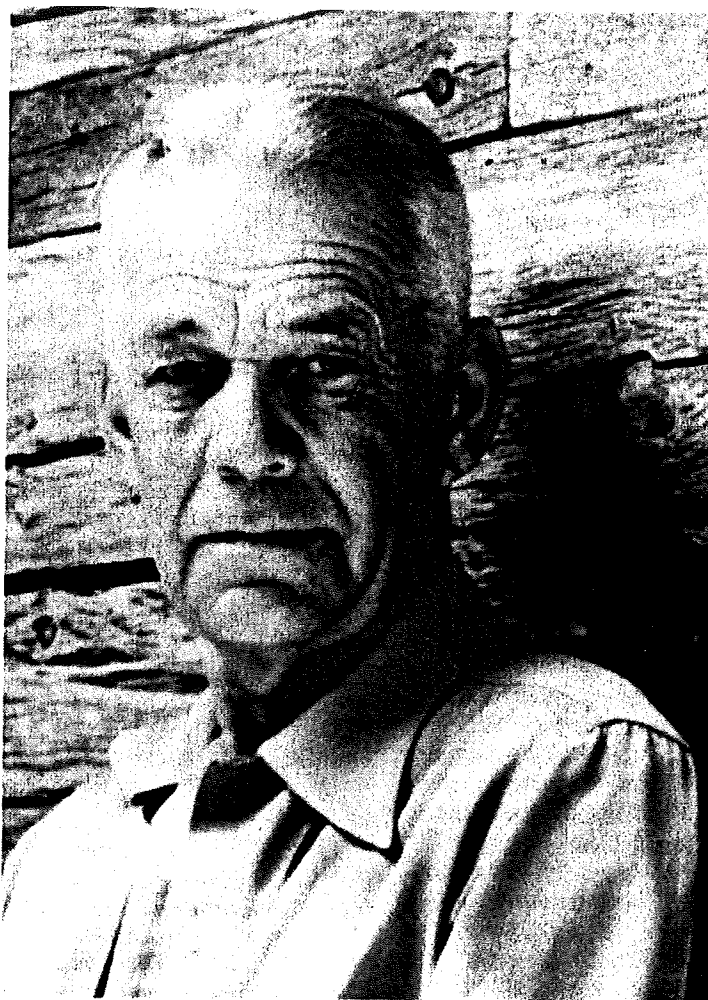


Written before his death in 1982

BWCA Wilderness News

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“ . . . we need to preserve a few places, a few samples of primeval country so that when the pace gets too fast we can look at it, think about it, contemplate it, and somehow restore equanimity to our souls.” —Sigurd Olson



The Sigurd Olson Story

by Herb Johnson

What an opportunity! To do a story on Sigurd and Elizabeth Olson. It will be almost impossible to do them justice. I'm going to try anyway. After all, who reads this piece but Friends — and friends are forgiving. Right? I hope so. Here goes.

Sigurd Olson differs from most environmentalists in that he has spent a big chunk of his life writing about wilderness. He's done it from a philosophical base. If you've read any of Sig's books, you can't help but know a lot about Sig. If that isn't enough, he's written a book about himself. It's titled "Open Horizons". Perhaps his finest exposition of his wilderness philosophy is contained in his first book, "The Singing Wilderness". If you haven't read these books, you've missed a lot. For just pure fun read "The Lonely Land". Sig has written so much good stuff (10 books if I have it right) that it seems wrong to single out just these. However, none of them details Sig's many battles to preserve his beloved wilderness. I hope to do that along with some personal details.

Sigurd Olson was born on April 4, 1899 in Chicago. He spent his early years on a farm in northern Wisconsin on the edge of what was then wilderness. He attended Northland College and then the University of Wisconsin. After graduating, he accepted a position in the high school in Nashwauk on the Mesabi. Here he received his first real taste of wilderness. Here he first heard of the canoe country wilderness and then first put down his canoe in Fall Lake. (It was a lot different then.) After going on for his masters degree, he accepted a post as head of the Biology Department at Ely Junior College in 1922. Perhaps more than anything else, that shaped his life. That, and marrying Elizabeth.

Next is his decision to guide in the canoe country. On June 23, 1923 he performed his first guide job at age 24. That year his commitment to wilderness preservation began when he guided Will Dilg, founder of the Izaak Walton League. (Later noted as the IWLA.)

The same year he became involved in his first preservationist battle: to block the building of roads throughout the area that was to become the BWCAW with such men as Riis and Selover. "A road to every lake in the North" and "The Nation's Playground" were the developer's slogans.

In 1926, after three years of controversy, Ag. Secretary Jardine issued his policy statement on road building saying there would be no roads in three areas: The Superior, the Little Indian Sioux and the Caribou. A thousand square miles of the best wilderness, he said. (The Forest Service reneged but that's another story.)

Well before that issue had been resolved, another surfaced. Edward Wellington Backus had a plan to turn the entire border lakes into a series of hydro-electric dams. It would have devastated the entire area. By 1925 hearings were being held on his plan by the International Joint Commission. The battle lasted until 1934. Sig was a participant in the I.J.C. working with such giants as Ernest Oberholtzer, Fred Winston and Charles Kelly of the IWLA. A key victory in that battle was passage of the Shipstead-Newton-Nolan Act of 1930 that forbid altering of shorelines. Again, it wasn't settled until several years had passed.

"You have to toss the torch to a younger generation and they will keep fighting for your ideas."

Meanwhile, the problem of privately owned lands within the primitive area was becoming more troublesome. As early as 1938, Sig Olson, along with others, was speaking on the need to eliminate private ownership and to establish the area as a pure wilderness. This battle rolled on to a climax in 1948 with the passage of the Thye-Blatnik Act. More years went by before its aim was accomplished. Over \$8 million was spent to buy up inholdings then. More since. Sig, along with Paul Clement and others in the IWLA made it happen.

A major turning point in Sig's life occurred in 1947. He left his job as then Dean of Ely Junior College to follow a new career of writer and wilderness preservationist. Now 48 years of age he was hired by the IWLA as its wilderness ecologist and by the Wilderness Society as a consultant.

Before the Thye-Blatnik Act was signed, another battle surfaced over air access to primitive area lakes. Resorters owning property in the interior were compromising the wilderness environment with fly-in establishment. Sig was one of the major opponents along with Bill Magie and others in the "Friends of the Wilderness" and the IWLA. On December 17, 1949, President Truman signed an air ban largely because of the efforts of these "vital few". (The issue wasn't finally resolved until 1953 when the Justice Department moved in.)

Meanwhile, Sig is touring the wilderness as far as Hudson Bay, visiting wilderness areas in Alaska, the Carribeau and other remote places. And starting to write as a serious author. One of his first, "Wilderness Canoe Trip" is printed in the MILWAUKEE JOURNAL. Many stories follow. Finally, in 1953 "The Singing Wilderness" is printed by Alfred Knoph, Inc., a major publisher. It's a success and is followed by several others: "Listening Point" in 1958, "The Lonely Land" in 1961 and "Runes of the North" in 1963 to name a few.

In the late 1950s the battle for the wilderness begins heating up again. Logging is intensifying. Motor use is increasing and mining interests moving in. Pressures upon the wilderness were such that preservationists, including Sig, were using every means in their power to bring these wilderness intrusions to public view so they could be stopped. He wrote dozens of articles and delivered countless lectures on the value of wilderness along with others such as Clayton Rudd, of the Natural History Society.

By early 1964, a Wilderness Act initiated in Congress back in 1956 is finally

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being seriously considered. The Forest Service is feeling the pressure too. Orville Freeman, Secretary of Agriculture, establishes the Selke Committee to recommend how the wilderness area should be managed. A number of infringements upon the wilderness area including the "Finn Lake Incident" create such a turmoil that Congress acts to pass the Wilderness Act in 1964 and includes the future BWCA as part of it. A major victory for Sigurd and fellow preservationists in the "Wilderness Committee" of the IWLA. With the signing of the Wilderness Act and the acting upon several of the Selke Committee recommendations by the Forest Service, a temporary lull occurs. Sig, however, keeps on writing and speaking.

He is now over 65 years old and still in the forefront of the wilderness conflict. And still writing: "Open Horizons" in 1969.

Already in the late 1960s, it becomes apparent that more action is needed. The Forest Service is selling virgin timber in the BWCA. It is permitting snowmobile use in the area in violation of the language of the Wilderness Act. Mining is again being explored. Three lawsuits are initiated to stop these activities. One succeeds.

In 1972, "Wilderness Days", one of his best, is published. (It's now in its fourth printing.)

Then, in 1975, Congressman Oberstar introduces a bill in the national congress to shrink the BWCA by 40 percent. The battle is joined again and again Sig, now 76, is in the middle of it. As you know, that battle was resolved in 1978 by the congress with a thrice compromised bill that barely squeaked through.

I asked Sig what was his major victory? He said, "Carter's signing of the 1978 Act."

Today, at age 81, one might think Sig would have retired from active battle. Not so. Despite ill health, he's into the legal battle to overturn the 1978 law.

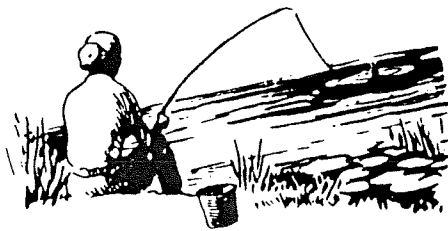
He's into the acid rain problem, the copper-nickle mining problem, and surely a lot more I don't know about.

Today, he is an active member of the FRIENDS, the Wilderness Society, the Izaak Walton League, the Voyageurs National Park Association, the National Parks Association, the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, and the Algonquin Wildlands League, to name a few. He is an active or honorary director of most of them and many more. He has received no less than seven honorary doctorates and more honors than anybody could count. An Ecology college (The Sigurd Olson Institute) is a functioning part of Northland College. He's been burned in effigy twice along with the Sierra Club, Friends of the Wilderness, etc. (In my book, the greatest honor of all!) He is certainly one of the most revered and respected spokespersons for wilderness who ever lived.

I've asked Sig what was his major victory? He said, "Carter's signing of the 1978 Act". Quite a statement for a guy who fought in every major BWCA battle. Incidentally, he also said "We've had to win every battle or there wouldn't be anything left to fight over now." We have! Thanks to Sig and others.

I asked him what he would like to share regarding the BWCAW with the following generations. He said "I would say the education of the younger generation. In short, we old timers now toss the torch to them. They will carry the job we started. It has been heart warming to watch them flock to the colors. So I have hope for the future."

How about that, you young tigers? An old tiger has spoken. Listen. Take hold and carry forward. The hundred year war isn't over yet!



By Tim Kneeland

Today we are faced with yet another challenge in our efforts to protect the Boundary Waters and other wildlands in the United States: the mounting recreational impact of the users. With an increased amount of leisure time, discretionary income, and interest in "getting into" the out-of-doors, canoeists, backpackers and other enthusiastic, well-intentioned people are inadvertently leaving their mark upon our natural environments. The traces of many users avalanche into a pattern of abuse. Many are also suffering needless hardship because of their lack of knowledge on preparing for a trip that should be comfortable, safe, and accomplished in a highly ethical manner. Little consolation is found in the fact that most of this damage is not malicious but rather is being done by many who fought hard for preservation. Much of people's conduct and wilderness camping techniques are rooted in outdated attitudes and practices. The spirit of the pioneer is important, and indeed necessary but must be modified by a little less "conquering" of our wildlands.

We must not just talk of the new ethic; we must embrace it and learn how to travel through an area and leave it in as natural a state as possible. We must be willing to forgo many of the things we used to feel were part of our wilderness experience — large fires (in many lands fires can't be tolerated at all), ditching around tents, using axes and saws for the sake of using them, using natural living vegetation for any purpose, scattering our wastes, burying our garbage, singing in hard-to-reach lands, and washing freely in clear cool waters. We must be willing to enjoy a different kind of wilderness travel and camping — a fireless night, soft conversation, smaller groups, and the challenge of maintaining a minimum impact, self-sufficient posture regardless of the varying conditions that may beset us in a wildland environment.

The following test is submitted for your enjoyment, alone or in a group. In fact, it might be more beneficial to discuss the questions as a group and come up with the best collective and creative