

STATEMENT OF SIGURD F. OLSON

Quetico-Superior Institute—1964

I appreciate the opportunity to discuss again the matter of wilderness preservation in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. We know the Quetico-Superior Country of which it is a part is an unusual wilderness region, that there is no place on this continent with its particular type of terrain, lakes, rivers, and forests. While there is much beautiful country all over the north, no-where is there quite the combination of clean glaciated rocks, crystal clear waters, and ecological communities as in the strip of country between Rainy Lake and Lake Superior. The country without question is unique and the fact you are all here representing many citizens groups as well as branches of government recognizes this fact as well as the wide public interest.

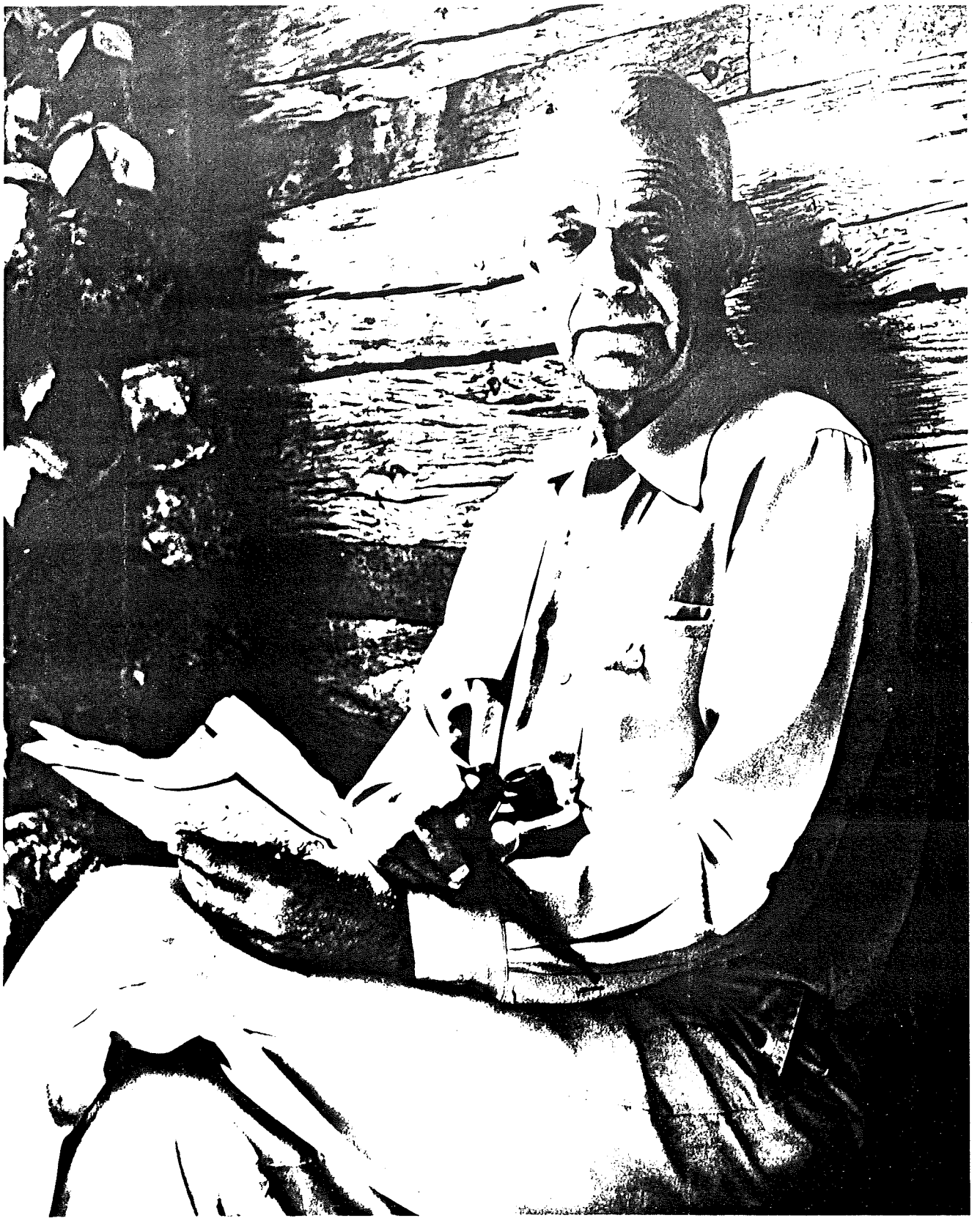
Some of the talks this morning outlined the history of the area. I doubt whether there is any section between the Atlantic and the Pacific that has been so argued over, so fought over, as the area under discussion. I think I can say with assurance that in the process more conservation ideas have been born, hammered out, put to trial, used and discarded than anywhere else. The Boundary Waters Canoe Area, roughly a third of the Superior National Forest has been a proving ground for the management of wild country in many places and the day will come when historians of these various movements throughout the United States will point to this border country and say, this idea started there.

When I look back over the conservation issues and many of you in this room have taken part in all of them

since the 1920s, I see familiar faces before me, Don Winston and I think of his late departed brother Fred, Ernest Oberholtzer, Charles S. Kelly and others. Why did they wage battle over forty years ago? For the simple reason they were impressed by this country and loved it. They were willing to sacrifice, spend their money, their efforts and energies to preserve it.

I think of the threats that were faced then, of a great road system which would have ruined the idea of wilderness at the very beginning, the dams which would have put lakes, islands, and portages under as much as eighty feet of water and created sloughs and stagnant backwaters all along the border, the shoreline logging and the raising of water levels south of the border, the commercial exploitation by airplanes, the magnificent program of the Forest Service in acquiring private lands. If any one of these threats had succeeded we would not be here today for the old wilderness as we have known it would be gone. As Charles Kelly, Chairman of the President's Quetico-Superior Committee, said this morning at the conclusion of his talk, "Amazingly enough, in spite of all that has happened, the canoe country is still there."

I shall not elaborate on any of the conservation policies which have been discussed here, argue them one way or the other. I merely want to say that all that has gone on during the last fifty years and before that can be summed up in one oft quoted statement, "The Past is Prologue." We do have the past to work on, can use it to guide us in the future. If we fail to use that experience, then we are closing our minds to the



"Sig" Olson Pondering his destination in a remote area.
Photo by Alfred Eisenstadt

real issues and what is best not only for this generation but for generations to come.

As I listened to the talks this morning, there seemed to be one basic reference of agreement, the protection of the wilderness character of the area. One group feels that this can be accomplished by preserving a shoreline strip of timber and harvesting trees back of a certain line. The other group believes that only by stopping all road building and timber utilization can this be accomplished. As one reads the proceedings of the efforts, controversies, and battles of the last forty years, that same dominant refrain goes through it all, the protection of the wilderness character of this Quetico-Superior Country.

I speak as a canoe man. I have travelled with hundreds of them from all over the country and have talked to thousands more and know how they feel. This country of the Quetico-Superior breeds strong loyalties and no man who has ever taken a canoe trip forgets his experience or those who have been with him. These men whose convictions were welded together on the portages, the rivers and lakes of this area are for wilderness status and the protection of those qualities that give it meaning and significance.

A previous speaker called wilderness proponents, unreasonable zealots. Once out in San Francisco, I was introduced as belonging to the daffodil wing of conservation. Sometime after that I had a hike down the Olympic Coast to demonstrate that there should be no highway along this last strip of wild seashore. We had hiked for several days and when we reached the end of the trail, here was a big sign "Bird Watchers Go Home." I do not resent such connotations if they represent those who are interested in the aesthetic, humanitarian, and cultural values of wilderness. Such values are all important to American and will become increasingly so in the years to come.

The night before last, I talked at a banquet in the west. The chairman had given me an impossible assignment to tell in five minutes how I felt about wilderness and why it should be preserved. There were a number of speakers and they all had the same limitation. As the time approached, all I could think of was the statement of Albert Einstein shortly before he died.

"One of the greatest experiences of mankind is to know the sensation of awe and wonder at the mystery of the universe."

The more I thought about that, the more it seemed to sum up the meaning of wilderness, the awe and wonderment people experience when in undisturbed natural country, realizing that wilderness holds within itself all the mystery of the universe, the story of evolution, of growth and change and beauty from the beginnings of time. Wilderness is more than lakes, rivers, and timber along the shores, more than fishing

or just camping. It is the sense of the primeval, of space, solitude, silence, and the eternal mystery. It is a fragile quality and is destroyed by man and his machines.

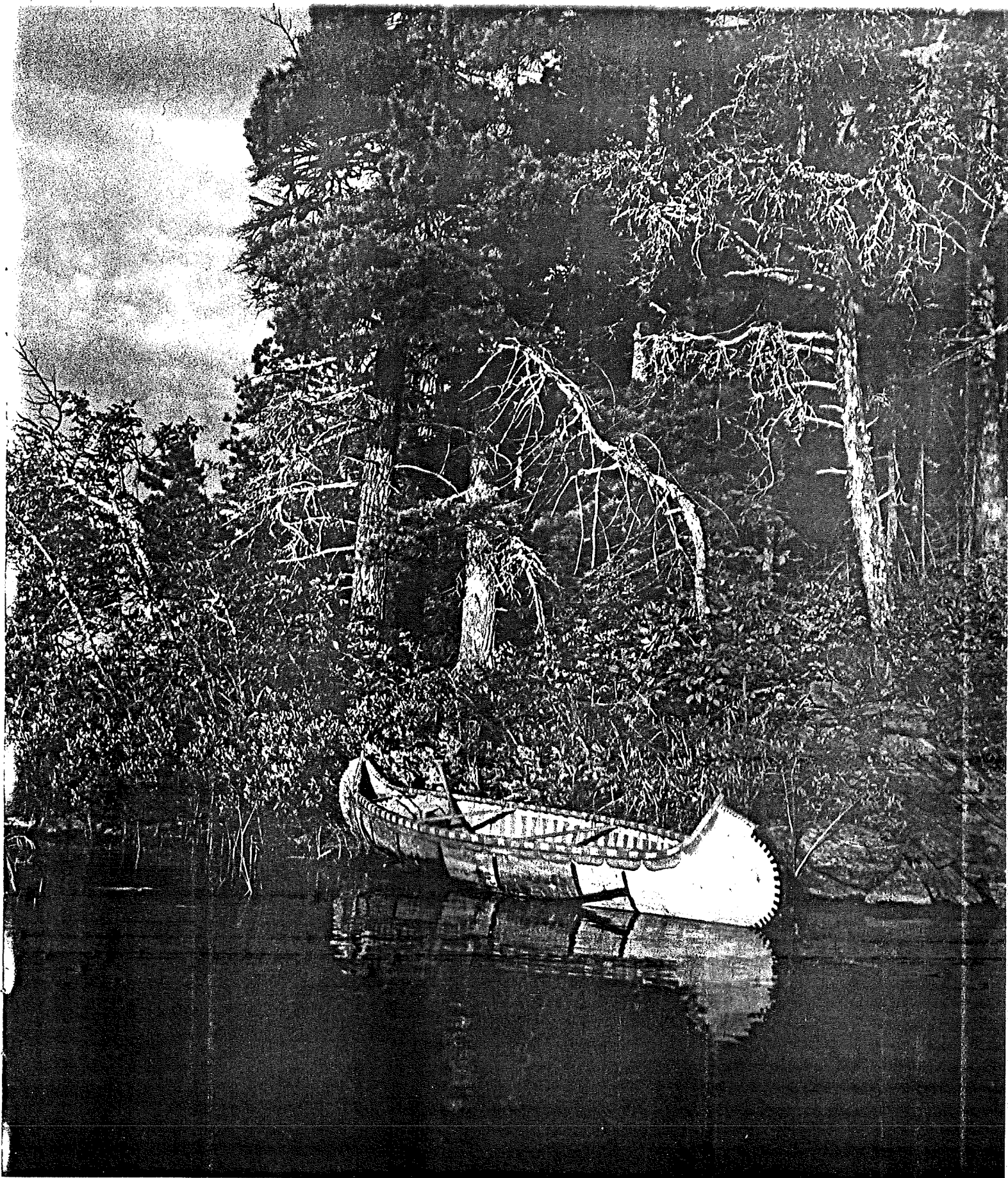
When I think of wilderness, I am constantly aware of the fact that all we shall ever have is about 2% of the United States land mass, 98% being subject to non-wilderness, use. I think of our growing population and an estimated 350 to 400 million shortly after the turn of the century and as one speaker mentioned this morning, a possible visitation in the not too distant future of a million people to the Quetico-Superior. These projections give us pause. We are not living in the same era when the first controversies arose over this area. Trees do not mean the same. They have different values when they are part of an ancient ecology of great social value. The people of the future with wild country rapidly disappearing everywhere will be looking not for a partial or managed wilderness, but for the real thing. We should plan therefore not for the immediate future but with a long range point of view taking in the year 2000 or 3000, hoping that what we do will be for the best interests of the American people for all time.

Before Lyle Watts died, shortly after his retirement as Chief Forester of the U.S. Forest Service, we had a long talk about the Quetico-Superior and this is what he said:

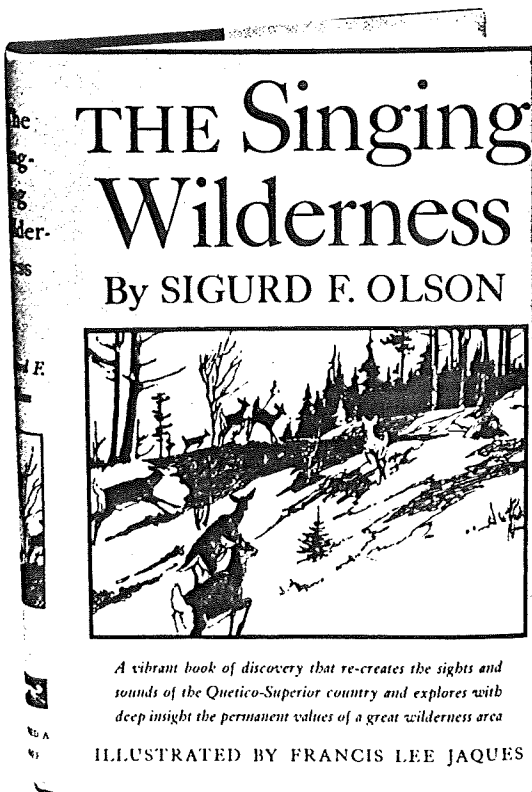
"The more I see this country, the more I am impressed, and like most of the foresters who have been in on its management, I have developed a strong love and loyalty to it. I believe the predominant use here is wilderness recreation and that logging should be discontinued."

I asked if I could quote him and he said, "Go ahead, that's the way I feel. I've been a good forester all my life and much logging has gone on there under my direction, but things have changed and now it should stop."

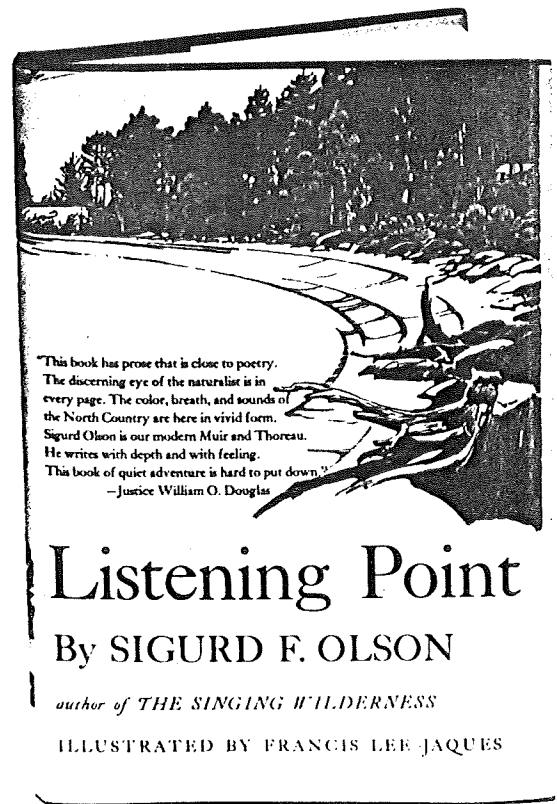
Thinking about what Lyle Watts Believed, I wonder about the idea of multiple use and its strict application to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. I am confident it does not mean all uses on every acre, but rather a broad principle covering the forest as a whole in which zoning accomplishes the ultimate objective. If logging were discontinued in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area it would still be an integral part of the overall multiple use program for the Superior National Forest. One use would be eliminated in order to preserve the wilderness character of a part of it. If Wilderness Area Status is the best way to do this, then it must be seriously considered. Perhaps a gradual phasing out process of timber utilization in this one third of the forest is the best approach with the substitution of timber stands outside the areas borders.



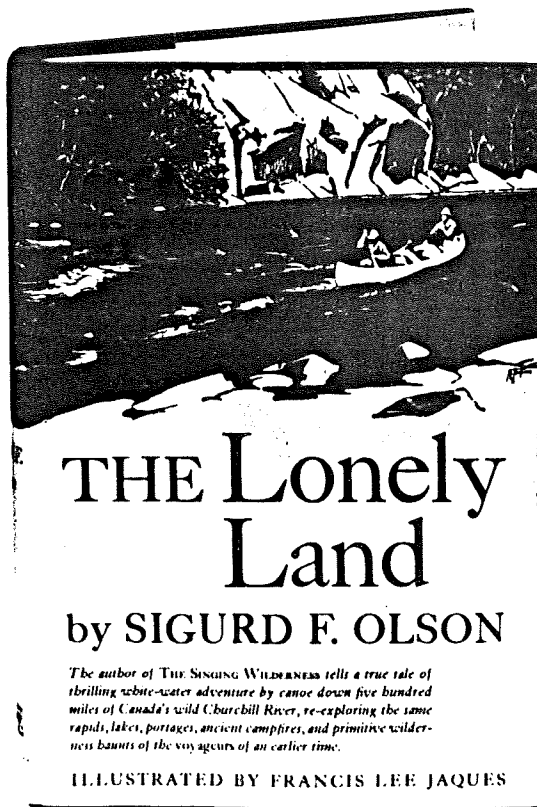
Early Native Americans devised a special device to travel our inland waterways. We benefit from their ingenuity in our modern canoes and enjoy our unique Canoe Country. This is a "Birch Bark Canoe".
Ektachrome © J. Arnold Bolz



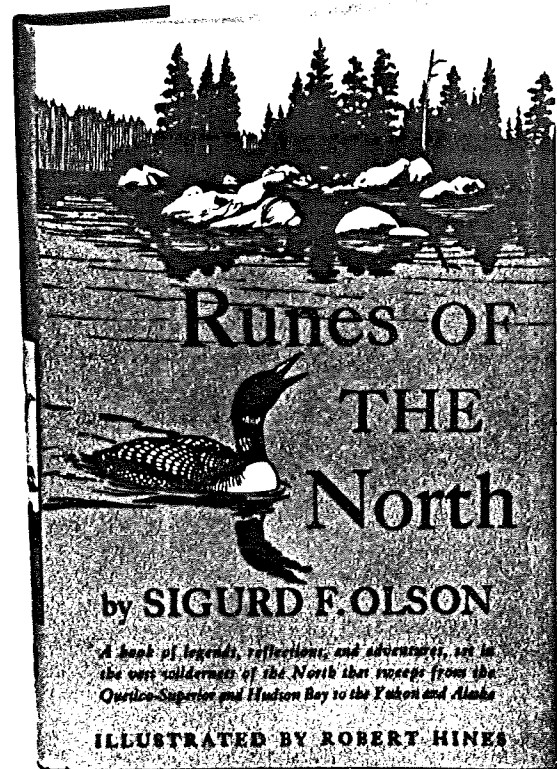
1956 "I have heard the singing in many places, but I hear it best in the Quetico-Superior."



1958 "I named my cabin listening point because only when one comes to listen, only when one is aware and still can things be seen and heard."



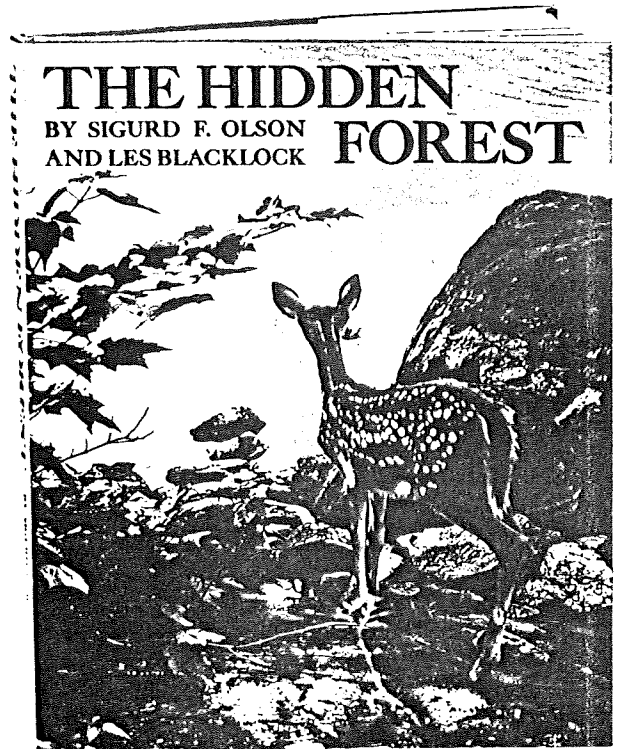
1961 "If a man can carry a heavy load across a portage, do whatever he must without complaint, it becomes a shining challenge and an adventure of the spirit."



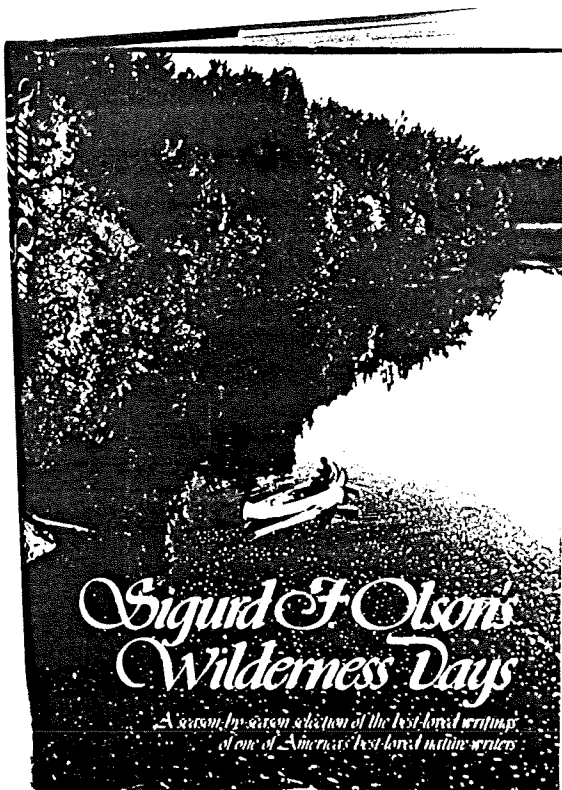
1963 "I have listened to the rapids of rivers, to the waves of many lakes, have known mountains and forests, and gathered runes wherever I have gone."



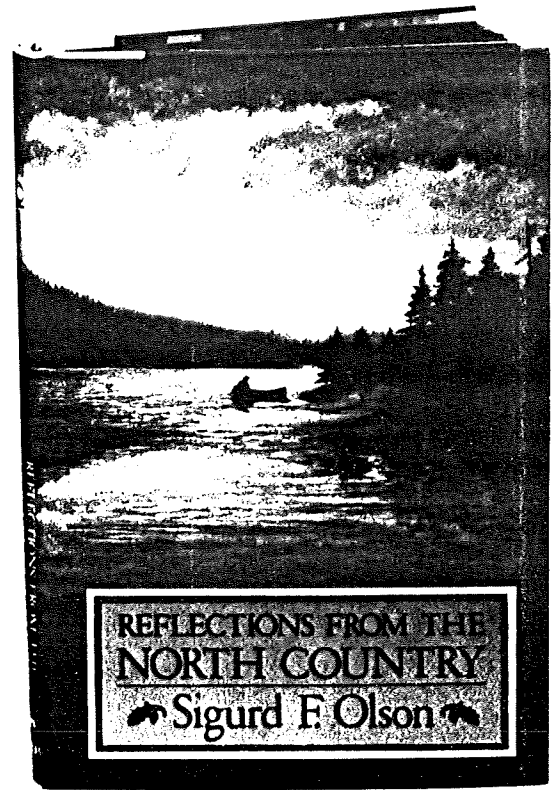
1969 "No two voyageurs enter open horizons, but all have in common a certain evolution of vision and perspective . . . and what a man finally becomes is a composite of all the horizons he has explored"



1969 "Only by looking closely can we begin to understand and appreciate the intimate interrelationship of all living things"



1972 "This book is a vignette of experience or a highlight many have known, but also the feelings of those who had actually shared these adventures with me"



1976 "As I go through the process of remembering and trying to invest my recollections with meaning what really matters is a broad perspective woven through the fabric of them all"

SIGURD F. OLSON

At 82, The Vision Continues

RICHARD W. SAPP*

The Books of the Hearth

Sigurd Olson lives in Ely, Minnesota. The town is one of those isolated north woods corporations that hunkers down and covers up in October, and emerges half a year later gaunt and bewhiskered.

Still, the Olson home in Ely is a comfortable, two-story place. The lawn is well-trimmed and very green in July; it will hold a lot of snow when winter comes. Just outside the east-facing picture window, about a red plastic feeder filled with sugar-water, hover ruby-throated hummingbirds, minute, precise and darting.

Inside the house, Sig will speak of the writing that has made him famous in North American conservation circles. In this setting, writing seems important to him but not particularly vital. And although he would rather reminisce, he will discuss the future.

In March, 1982, Alfred A. Knopf will publish Sig's ninth book, called *Of Time and Place*. Les Kouba, a well-known Minnesota artist who has worked with Sig on previous projects is the illustrator. This book allowed Sig to ramble back through his travels; it includes chapters on the Soviet Union and the post-World War II trials for Nazi war criminals in Nuernberg, Germany. It is the reflection of a man who has seen much, thought long and felt deeply.

Beyond the immediate future, Sig is contemplating a pocket-sized book — *Packsack Adventures* — a miniature Olson to toss in the canoe as you shove off for the Quetico-Superior wilderness. *Adventures* will be a collection of Sig's most popular writings, condensed in size, as right for the campfire as *Wilderness Days*, another collection of Olson favorites, is right for the fireplace.

Sig does not compose in the house; there are too many interruptions, too much correspondence to answer, too many interviews and requests for this patient man's time. Consequently, twenty-five yards from the house, he has built a writing shack. Inside it, on a wooden teacher's desk of the vintage I remember in public classrooms many years ago, sits his manual typewriter, a gunmetal gray Royal. When Sigurd sits down at this desk to work, he is eyeball to eyeball with the Canadian wind and the wilderness that he has done so much to save from commercial pillage and the tasteless "development" for which we Americans are so famous.

Runes of the North and *Reflections from the North Country* were written in his shack. In *Reflections*, a quiet and contemplative book, Sig spoke out about the eternal values sustaining our civilization: harmony, freedom and the rest.

"We are at last beginning to understand what is at stake [in the conservation struggle]. It is more than wilderness, beauty, or peace of mind; it is the survival of man and his cultural."

This is a succinct statement of the central thesis of Sig's life work, and it translates that work to international importance.

Looking about the shack, you can tell that Sig spends time there. The north wall is cluttered with pictures around the window — tacked up, glued, shoved in cracks — friends and acquaintances, the famous and the obscure, pictures of himself as a rugged young north woods guide. Around the shack, Sig will discuss *The Hidden Forest*, the only book he did not publish with Knopf. But this was photographer Les Blacklock's book, too, and Viking was Blacklock's publisher. It is a picture book, an oversized coffee table book. Ordinarily, this kind of publication is breezy in appearance and light in style, but because Sigurd Olson wrote the copy for *Forest*, there are lessons in it.

"Only by looking closely can we begin to understand and appreciate the intimate interrelationships of all living things to one another and to the earth."

"Look closely," he says. Sig's way of finding the whole world in a raindrop. I like that.

I asked Sig about a theme that occurs over and over in his material. "Do you want your work to sing, Sig? As you write, do you think of your work in songs and ballads?"

"I've never thought of it exactly that way," he said. "I write from my unconscious. I let it flow. Then I begin cutting out, cutting out, cutting out."

"A long time ago, a perceptive editor from a national outdoors magazine was reviewing a manuscript of mine. He said, 'Sig, this passage sings. Its got rhythm. If you can make it all sing, you're on your way to becoming a good writer.' I'll never forget that. Good writing comes unconsciously. It flows."

By mid-afternoon the shack was growing dull with our literary talk. "I'd love to see your cabin at Listening Point, Sig."

"He loves to go out to the cabin," Elizabeth, his wife, suggested.



"To those who know and love that rugged wilderness of rivers and lakes and forests of our Canoe Country." Sig Olson
Scratch board by F. L. Jacques from the "Singing Wilderness."

The Books of the Wilderness

Listening Point is a small peninsula which juts into Burnt-side Lake near Ely. From its shoreline, an observer has an unobstructed view of sunsets and a sweeping vista of water and islands. Listening Point is a remote plot of forest in which Sig and Elizabeth built a cabin; it is also the title of Sigurd's book about that forest, his cabin and the out-buildings which nestle unobtrusively therein.

I've been to Listening Point quite a few times, now. Most of my visits are tricks of my imagination and the meticulous brush strokes of Sig's writing. Only once have I actually followed the older philosopher himself over rugged dirt roads and along the narrow paths of the forest. You just can't find Listening Point without a guide but that's Sig's whole approach, isn't it?

When I walked the forest with Sig, I realized that his earlier work — *The Singing Wilderness*, *Listening Point*, *The Lonely Land* and *Open Horizons* — would carry his message into the twenty-first century. These books are close to the wilderness experience; in them you can hear the dip and gurgle of canoe paddles. These are the books the wilderness composed. Sigurd sings in these books. Here is his permanent memorial.

"What made you want to take up the craft of writing, Sig?" [I realized that] there must be something more than watching ducks, deer, or wolves on my trips into the bush, surely some reason beyond experience or the accumulation of further knowledge, some aim that would give me purpose to what I had seen, learned, and thought about. *Open Horizons* Occasionally when I did no writing at all, my spirits fell and everything seemed without meaning or purpose.

The only cure was to begin again *Open Horizons*

"Do you aim for any particular effect when you are writing, any particular literary style or affectation?"

All I want to do is give the reader some feel of this land as we saw it and to share with him some of its rewards and the sense of fulfillment that comes to men traveling the bush together. If he can catch in addition, something of the great silences to be found in the *Lonely Land*, the heightened awareness that comes with a certain amount of danger, and the sense of wilderness as a counterbalance to the tensions and pressures of our age, then I shall be happy indeed. *The Lonely Land*

"What are some of the themes that you are trying to express in your work, Sig?"

I think the loss of quiet in our lives is one of the great tragedies of civilization, and to have known even for a moment the silence of the wilderness is one of our most precious memories. *Open Horizons*

Civilization has robbed us of much of our sensitivity to smells, has lulled our original powers of perception by too much living indoors. *The*

Singing Wilderness Should we actually glimpse the ancient glory or hear the singing wilderness, cities and their confusion become places of quiet, speed and turmoil are slowed to the pace of the seasons, and tensions are replaced with calm. *The Singing Wilderness*

The walls of Sig's cabin are decorated with mementos of great canoe trips, from the Pacific Ocean to Hudson Bay, from Minnesota to the Arctic. "Tell me about your cabin."

It must be as natural as a shelter back in the bush, like an overhanging ledge or a lean-to, or a cabin on some trapper's route. We would carry water from the lake, cut our firewood, do all the things we would have done in the wilds, and when we went to sleep at night we wanted the feeling we were still close to the out-of-doors and that the cabin was not merely an extension of our house in town.

We wanted the partridge to walk around it, to come out in the dusk and sit there in the twilight unafraid. We wanted red squirrels spiraling down the trunks of the pines and vaulting onto the roof as though it were part of the trees themselves. Even the deer mice would be welcome to build their nests in some dark corner under the rafters. The chickadees would be part of it, and the soft warbling notes of the whiskey-jacks, and the calling of the loons on the open lake. The wind and the waves and all the sounds of the night would be there. It must be only one room, just large enough for a couple of bunks, a fireplace and a table, as close to the primitive as we could keep it and in harmony with *Listening Point*.

Listening Point

As I looked up from the bench beside the cabin, the red squirrels abruptly ceased their chatter and scamper. A moment of stillness passed through the whistling pines, for just above the tree tops a red-tailed hawk glided by in utter silence.

"And what of the future, Sig?"

No writer is ever satisfied, but my urge now is to make full use of what I have found and known, to keep blowing upon the coals and ashes of old fires to make them blaze again. This is an open horizon entered long ago, and while headlands, islands, and vistas have shown themselves over the years, as I look ahead there seems to be no end to the mirage of water and sky extending on and on into the distance. *Open Horizons* are ahead for me and for all who believe in the wilderness experience.

*Richard W. Sapp is a Staff Member of the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service at Fort Snelling, Minnesota.
