



Preserving the endangered principle

A speech in tribute to Sigurd Olson on his 1987 induction into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame

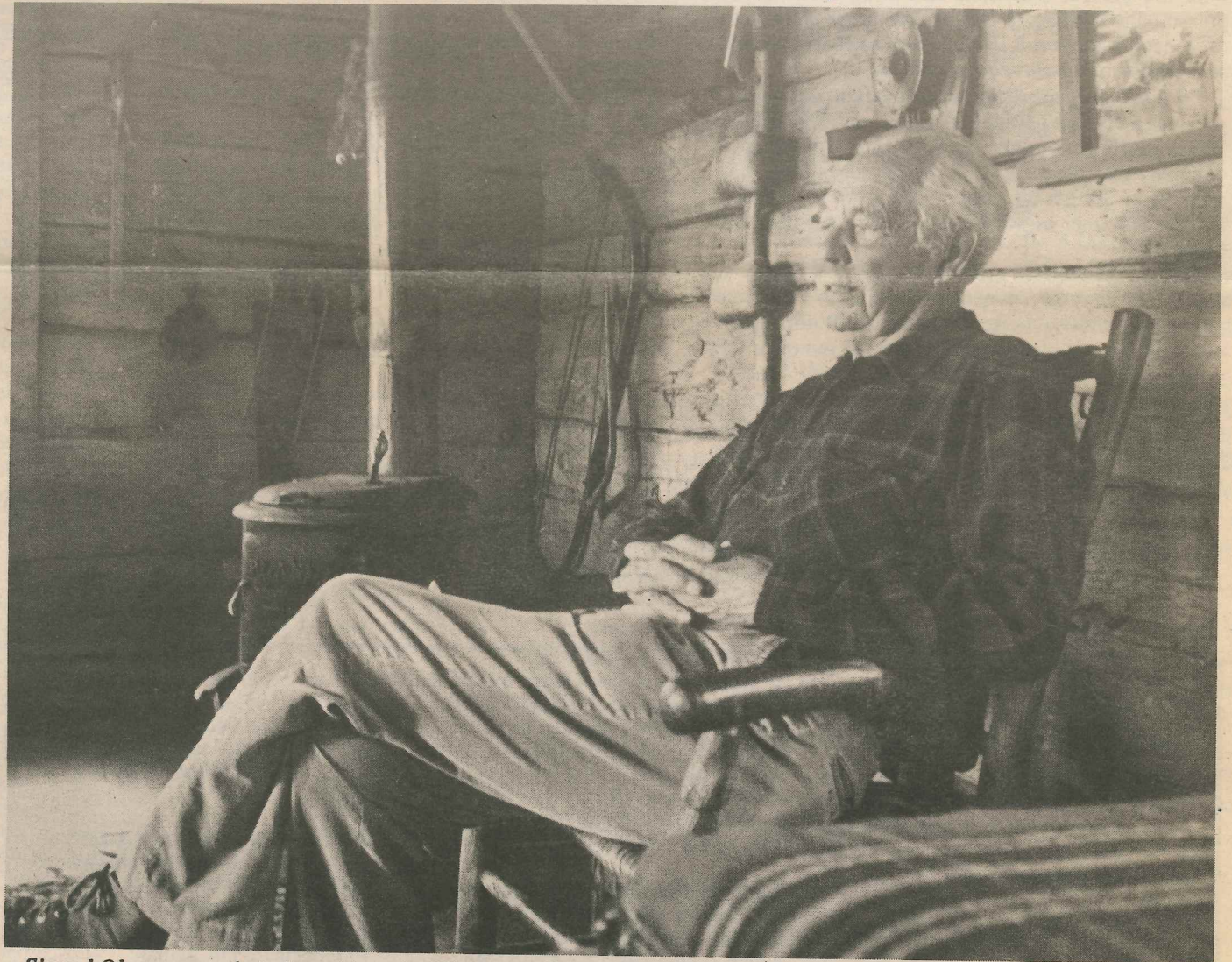
By Michael Frome

If you offer the people excellence, they will find it out and respond to it. I wish I could claim credit for that saying as original with me. Actually I learned it years ago at Cooperstown, N.Y., the hometown of James Fenimore Cooper, one of our earliest environmental writers who, through his celebrated fictional character, the Deerslayer, decried the destruction of the forests and the exploitation of the Native American Indian. In more recent times Cooperstown has become the "Village of Museums" -- the Farmers Museum, Folk Art Museum and Baseball Hall of Fame -- and it was the benefactor of the entire complex, Stephen C. Clark, who defined his policy as being "If you offer the people excellence, they will find it out and respond to it."

That idea binds together all of those whose work has earned their places in the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame at Stevens Point. It offers to us as well a particular challenge for life in our times, an age when excellence -- or the effort to attain excellence -- is critical, but hard to come by; an age characterized more by conformity; an age, despite all of our industrial and technological advances is threatened by intellectual, cultural and spiritual mediocrity.

The state of things today makes it difficult to pursue a course based on offering excellence. And yet the only hope for the future is in doing so.

The honorees in the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame demonstrate that the quest for excellence can and will prevail in the American scheme of things. John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Ernest Swift, Gaylord Nelson and Sigurd Olson all rose above the norm and by so doing they succeeded in raising the norm with them. That is the message they bring to us, and the challenge they convey.



Sigurd Olson, recently inducted into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame

I say this especially of Sigurd Olson, on the occasion of his induction. It isn't enough to say, "Aren't they all wonderful" and to glorify Sigurd. It's not what any of them would want. Rather in their spirit it behooves us to pursue their ideals and to come away from here with a new determination to rise above our time and thus to make it better.

Sigurd Olson exemplifies determination and faith -- faith in himself, faith in the natural environment, faith in the ability of people to respond to the call for excellence. He didn't become a serious writer until he was 50; he persevered in the face of adversity, insisting that his writing must be purposeful and elevating. He wasn't a writer only, but a participant, an activist in the crusade for a better world. There are many things we don't know about

him. Just last week his old friend Stewart Brandborg, the executive director of the Wilderness Society, recalled for me how Sigurd was a driving force in the councils of the Society to press on for passage of the Wilderness Act. I hadn't known previously of this role he played, but it doesn't surprise me.

I need to summarize with specific thoughts to match the moment.

First, let us take the spirit of the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame into our lives and encourage it in others. Let us not compromise with excellence.

Let us honor all those Wisconsinites who place principle above expediency in the great crusade for a better environment for this state and nation. I feel privileged to have known Sigurd Olson. But I would also like to mention Henry S. Reuss, an environmental

leader in Congress for two decades; Charles Stoddard, who helped draft the first conservation message of President John F. Kennedy, and then sparked the fight to protect the quality of Lake Superior; Hugh Iltis, the botanist, who shows the potential of biotic diversity in the administration of public forests; and Richard Thiel, the biologist, who has made us conscious of the wonder of wolves in our world -- not in some remote somewhere else, but right here in Wisconsin.

Let us help. Take the message to the people. With hope and confidence, they will respond. Let us prove the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame is more than a place; it's a purpose. Let us show that the spirit of Sigurd Olson is with us.

Let us leave a record for the future that ours was a generation that cared.