“Great nature lovers,” H. S. Salt once remarked, “have the faculty of stamping the impress of their own character on whole regions of country, so that there are certain places which belong by supreme and indisputable right to certain persons who have made them peculiarly and perpetually their own.”

This is true of wilderness writer and preservationist Sigurd F. Olson and the Quetico-Superior canoe country of northeastern Minnesota and adjacent Ontario: in short, the Boundary Waters. Not that Olson made the area his own in a possessive sense, but beginning in the 1920s he expressed and defended its spirit to the point that his life became inseparable from the region.

Olson, born in Chicago on April 4, 1899, and reared on a farm in northern Wisconsin, began his affair with the Quetico-Superior in 1923 when he became head of the Ely Junior College biology department. Olson lived in Ely, on the southern edge of the Canadian Shield, for the rest of his life: weaving the joys and challenges of being a professor, guide, outfitter, dean, family man (he married Elizabeth Uhrenholdt in 1921, and had two sons), ecologist, conservationist and writer.

Perhaps it is as a writer that Olson was, and remains, best known. Besides publishing over 100 articles in various magazines, he wrote nine books, the sequence of their publications reflecting his growth as naturalist, writer and conservationist:

The Singing Wilderness (1956) contains seasonally arranged essays interpreting natural things and personal experiences which have to do “with the calling of the loons, northern lights, and the great silences of a land lying northwest of Lake Superior.” Listening Point (1956) describes a piece of remote lakeshore on which Olson built a cabin (where, although Olson had a home in Ely, the following interview/conversation took place). The Lonely Land (1961) describes a canoe expedition Olson and a group of Canadians took down Canada’s Churchill River, one of the best books about canoeing adventure by anyone, anywhere. Runes of the North (1963) tells more about his backcountry experiences in the Quetico-Superior, the Yukon, other Canadian wilderness and Alaska.

Open Horizons (1969) is Olson’s autobiography, while The Hidden Forest, published almost simultaneously in collaboration with photographer Less Blacklock, gives a seasonally arranged description of Quetico-Superior forest life. In 1974 Olson’s Wilderness Days (an anthology of chapters from previous books) received the Burroughs Medal from the John Burroughs Memorial Association.

Olson’s most successful book, Reflections From the North Country, was published in 1976 and took “the long view of a naturalist and wanderer through wild country and all he has written and thought about over the years.” Chapter subjects ranged from “Intuition” and “The Emergent God” to “The Evolution of Mind.” Of Time and Place came out in 1982; its 36 chapters were anecdotal memoirs: autobiographical chinking in the literary cabin his other eight books had built.

Along the way, Olson was remarkably active in American conservation. He fought throughout his life for preservation of a motorless Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. He fought to preserve wilderness values in California’s Point Reyes National Seashore, Florida’s Everglades, Washington’s Olympic Coast, northern Minnesota’s Voyageur National Park and elsewhere.

He was president of the National Parks Association for five years in the 1950s; was a consultant to the President’s Quetico-Superior Committee from 1947-1965; served as a member of the Secretary of the Interior’s Advisory Committee from 1960-1966; was president of The Wilderness Society from 1968-1971; and at the time of our visit was active with the Sierra Club, the Izask Walton League of America and other national conservation organizations.

Among Olson’s friends were wilderness advocate Bob Marshall, Chief Justice William O. Douglas, Ernest Oberholtzer, Rachel Carson, voyageur historian Grace Lee Nute and wildlife biologist Olaus Murie.

I interviewed Sigurd at Listening Point on Burntside Lake in late July, 1979, and while walking from sauna to cabin we heard blue jays in the distance.

“When the blue jays call,” Sigurd said, “it is one of the earliest signs of fall.”

And I realized Sigurd wasn’t a young buck anymore, that it had been over a half century since he first dipped a paddle in the Boundary Waters. A blue jay was indeed calling (Olson would die in January, 1982), and I could see right there, right then, that when Sigurd spoke he was harvesting some of the wild insights of his years.

JHV: In your autobiography, Open Spaces, it appears World War II was a turning point in your life. At least the 1940s were. Prior to World War II, few of your articles touched on conservation and philosophical subjects. You said this was partly due to the editorial whims of your time. But after the war, you resigned work with Ely Junior College (now Vermilion Community College).
the spiritual and timeless perspective you work from?

Olson: I can’t think of anyone else.

Doctor (Miron) Heinselman received a big award in Minneapolis recently. I called him yesterday. He wrote uncounted articles and press releases about the need to preserve wilderness qualities in the BWCAW. He spent months in Washington without pay, for the cause of the 1978 bill.

(And Heinselman, in 1996, published the acclaimed The Boundary Waters Wilderness Ecosystem.)

JHV: Does Heinselman have a spiritual personality like you?

Olson: He doesn’t mention it. But I know how he feels. He has a real feeling for the outdoors. No one deals with wilderness without appreciation of it. Appreciation and preservation, in the last analysis, is all that counts.

JHV: Your own appreciation of wilderness has resulted in eight books. Which book was most successful and why?


JHV: You are writing a new book, Of Time and Place. What is it about?

Olson: It will be similar to Reflections, but on different philosophical subjects; never on the same ones. The major theme is, as the title suggests, that everything has its time and place. Things come together causing change, giving meaning.

JHV: Have you an outline?

Olson: I’m much further than an outline. I’ve already written twenty-eight chapters, each three or four times. A local friend, Ann—to whom I dedicated Reflections—is typing it now. I see her about every four days. When I get the chapters back, I’ll rewrite them another three or four times. Then I’ll send Of Time and Place to my publisher, and it will take another year or longer to be printed.

JHV: Sigurd, you have lived a long and rich life, filled with the spirit of Oneness with the Quetico-Superior and beyond. You have often written about timelessness and man’s need to get a feel for his remote past. What about our remote future? Do you believe in an afterlife?

Olson: It is impossible to predict the remote future. As far as an afterlife, I don’t believe I’ll be playing a harp surrounded by angels beyond the pearly gates. I do believe, as Einstein said, that no one can understand the cosmos without first being convinced there is a power behind all things.

There is an energy, a thought spectrum, like a Van Allen Belt, in which all ideas and spiritual beliefs surround the earth like the belt of matter surrounding the earth. We in our consciousness flow with this mythical thought.

JHV: Have you a definition of God?

Olson: Christ himself said: “The Kingdom of God is within you.” Its meaning? That God is in everyone. Part of this is the general recognition that earth and all its beauty “Consider the lilies, how they grow,” respect, love for wilderness and nature, and becoming part of it—is the important part of our lives. Knowing this is, to paraphrase another of Einstein’s most beautiful thoughts, the mystic realization of spirit.

That to me is worth dying for.

Note: Jim Dale Huot-Vickery is the author of Wilderness Visionaries, Open Spaces and Winter Sign.
latest (1978) BWCAW bill expanded the area’s boundaries which has meant acquisition of private property. Some Americans feel this is an infringement of their constitutional rights. They fear more acquisition of private lands. Do you feel property boundaries should remain where they are now? If not, what changes should be made?

Olson: Locals resent government interference. They resent bureaucratic dictatorship from Washington. All they ask is to be left alone and let them take care of the country. But many don’t have the long view of the land. They feel they can use the land any way they want. They don’t realize that if they abuse solitude and wilderness, they will be destroying things that bring people here, killing the goose which lays golden eggs.

As far as acquisition is concerned, the government is bending over backward, paying more money than the property is worth.

JHV: What about claims local business is suffering because of less motors in the BWCAW?

Olson: Some Ely businessmen tell me the city has never been so prosperous. Outfitters and resorts are slowly making the change to canoe-oriented recreation. Perhaps some businesses are hurt.

JHV: What direction should future management of the BWCAW take?

Olson: That’s hard to answer, but I think management of the area should be continued until it is pure wilderness—no motorboats or snowmobiles. The Forest Service will have to disperse people better so there is no crowding. They may also have to limit the number of people in here like parks in the West. Perhaps Americans will have to use Quetico Park (Canadian side) more.

Incidentally, Quetico Park as of last May (1979) banned all motorboats and snowmobiles. It’s a good example for us.

JHV: Are there any conservation activities in your past you regret?

Olson: No. None at all. And I’m proud of it.

JHV: Who are some of the great conservationists of today?

Olson: Barry Commoner comes to mind. He is, or at least was, associated with St. Louis University. He’s always involved with many conservation issues. Recently he had been criticizing the government for the pollution that is going to be caused by coal combustion if its use is intensified to offset the oil shortage. He has also spoken out on the dangers of nuclear energy.

Ralph Nader is also important. He jumps into the breech every so often and is a hard-headed writer and speaker. Congress listens to him. They fear Nader because he’s nationally known.

Ian McCarg is also influential in conservation circles. A Scotsman, he was originally with the University of British Columbia and did a lot writing in the past.

JHV: What about writers like Edward Abbey?

Olson: I never met Abbey, but his writing and message is very good. He’s done a great job in the Southwest. He feels very strongly about the preservation of arid ecosystems.

JHV: Do you know of any nature writers who approach the subject of wilderness preservation from
and plunged head-over-paddle
into articles about wilderness
preservation and a spiritual
appreciation of the outdoors.
Was this change simply a matter
of your ideas and impulses com-
ing together at the right time and
place, or did war have something
to do with your transformation?

Olson: It was a matter of time
and place, although the war
experience was an unsettling one.
I saw there was nothing more
important than developing myself
to care for conservation and
wilderness. I’d been writing long
before that, but none of it was very
good. Yet I learned a lot. It gave
me a facility with the use of
language. I always had a philo-
sophical bent; editors wanted
more blood and guts. But my
philosophy came out while the
world was becoming aware of
conservation for the first time,
right after the war. Before, no one
heard of ecology. The world
became “ecology conscious.” It
was the maturing of national
consciousness of preserving our
wild heritage.

JHV: While preserving our wild
heritage, it has become necessary
to manage wilderness with hiking
and canoeing permits, camping
regulations, reservations, add
infinitum. As an advocate of
wilderness experiences, what is
your response to the idea that
wilderness management is a
contradiction in terms?

Olson: It is a necessary contra-
diction. It is brought on by the
multitudes of people. There has
been an explosion in backpacking,
canoeing and other outdoor
activities, partly because of the
increased efficiency of camping
equipment. Nothing can be done
about it.

I do know in my younger days I
could take off any time. Now, I’d
have to get a permit like everyone
else. It just couldn’t be the same.

JHV: If wilderness management
is necessary, how do you suggest
the issue of commercial versus
private use of American water-
ways, like the Grand Canyon, be
resolved fairly, if that’s possible?

Olson: The Forest Service will
have to work out plans for the fair
allocation of permits, so private
dividuals, like yourself, have as
good of a chance to get a permit
as an outfitter. But it is not merely a
fifty-fifty proposition; rather, a fair
distribution that will not destroy
wilderness atmosphere by over-
crowding. I can understand and
appreciate outfitters, though. They
save the Forest Service loads of
trouble by issuing permits. A
study must be made of the permit
problem. It’ll take years to work
out all the kinks.

JHV: What are the major conser-
vation challenges of the future?

Olson: Alaska, of course, is the
biggest challenge of the moment. It
has more wilderness possibilities
than all of the rest of the United
States, or of any other country I
can think of. I fought the pipeline
for eight years. Now we are
fighting the expansion of roads.
The stakes are high.

RARE II (an inventory of
roadless areas in national forests)
is also very important, although it
is objected to by all exploitative
interests. They don’t want the
Forest Service to declare wilder-
ness on any more lands. The
Forest Service is caught in the
middle.

JHV: We are in an energy
 crunch. Oil prices are forcing us
to find and develop new future
energy sources. Is nuclear energy
the answer?

Olson: I don’t think so. Presi-
dent Carter (1979) has announced
a program to devote $40-50 billion
to develop solar energy, thermal
energy, etc. I always said America
never moves until its back is
against the wall. In World War II,
for example, we spent billions for
bombs—the atom—to end the war.
We can do the same now if we put
our energy together to achieve
what we need. We can pass
appropriations and bills to come
to grips with the energy crisis. We
can embark on a crash program
to do it. We have inventive genius—
the greatest technological ingenu-
ity on earth.

JHV: It has been said that when
conservationists in our cities begin
paying inflated prices for paper
products, house-hold goods,
lumber and metals, they will relax
their staunch conservation values
and begin coaxing Congress to
open wilderness areas for multiple
use.

Do you think this is true?

Olson: As the crunch comes,
and hurts people, you begin to
wonder. Die-hards like myself
won’t change; if we do, there will
be no wilderness for future genera-
tions. My critics will scream to
high heaven, but by and large
people are not dedicated conserva-
tionists. Many scream, “Open it
up!”

In the future, conservation
groups simply will have to do the
best they can to stem the tide.

JHV: What about the tide in
northeastern Minnesota?

Most residents of Ely and
surrounding communities appear
to be against a motorless canoe
wilderness—the goal you and
many conservation groups aspire
to. You have stemmed the tide
of development in your own back-
yard. You have been damned and
hung in effigy. How do you deal
with what appears to be in general
a hostile community to wilderness
ideals?

Olson: Here is the point. This
has been going on since I was in
my twenties. It has been one battle
after another. In each battle I was
cursed and damned. Being hung
in effigy pleased me. You join a
very exclusive club. It was an
honor as far as I was concerned.
Local damners, however, learned
long ago to accept me with
my firm beliefs, to respect my
stand. They know they can’t
change me. Today, some of my
worst enemies will throw an arm
around me on the street, and say,
“It’s good to see you, Sig!” I
haven’t suffered any. We all have
rights to believe what we want,
which is one of the reasons our
country is so great.

JHV: Have you or your property
ever been threatened with vio-
lence or injury?

Olson: Someone stole a blanket
or two from the cabin and rugs
from the sauna. But you’d think if
someone was really serious they
would throw a bottle of gas
ground and burn the
place down. Listening Point has
been banned below 4,000 feet.
Resorts on Basswood and Crooked
Lakes were removed. Now, the

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