



A Conversation With Sigurd F. Olson

□ by Jim Dale Huot-Vickery

“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* (1958) 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 Izaak Walton League of America and other national conservation organizations.

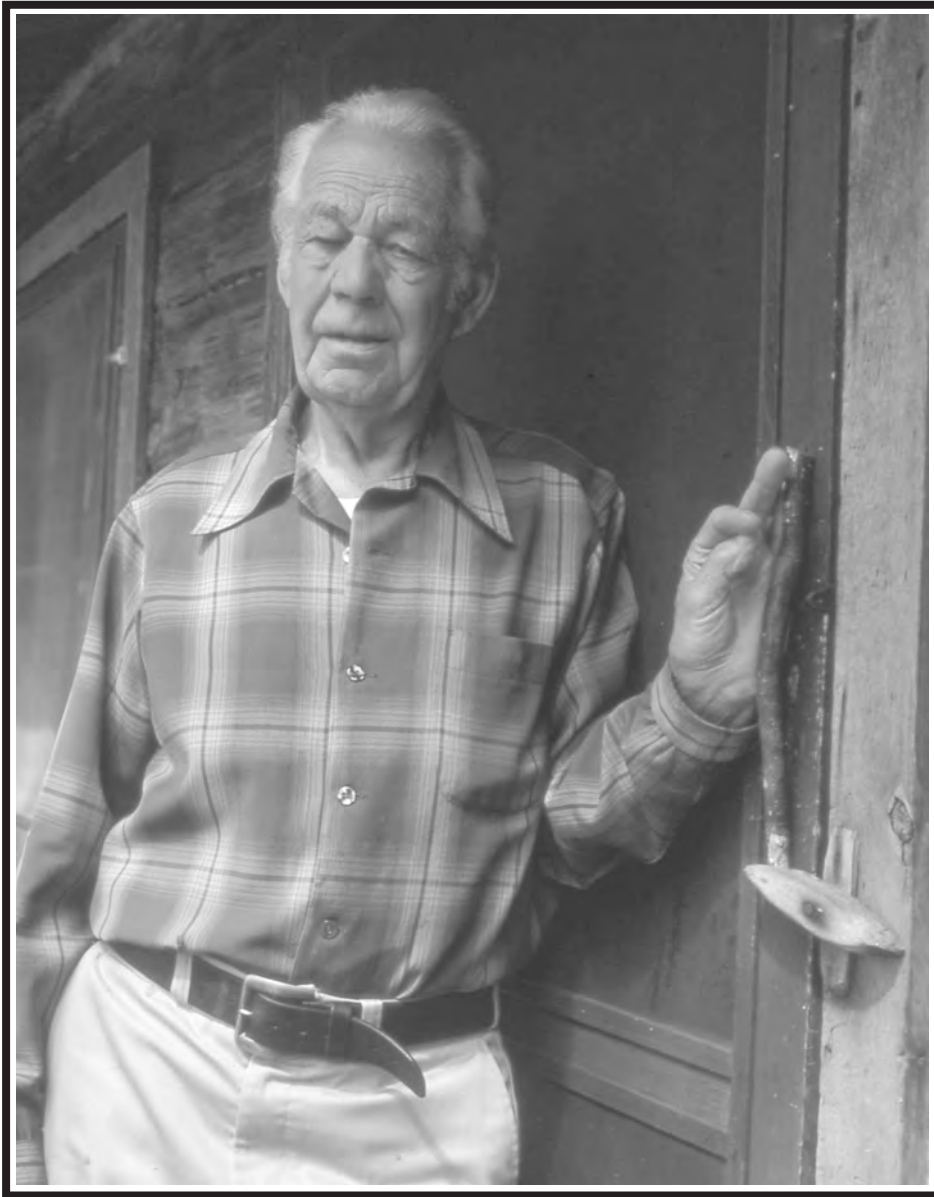
Among Olson’s friends were wilderness advocate Bob Marshall, Chief Justice William O. Douglas, Ernest Oberholtzer, Rachel Carson, voyageur historian Grace Lee Nute and wildlife biologist Olaus Murie.

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)



JIM DALE HUOT-VICKERY

Sigurd Olson at Listening Point on Burntside Lake in 1979.

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?

Olson: My last book, I think, *Reflections From the North Country*. Probably because of its more universal appeal.

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 breach 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

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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 coming 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 philosophical 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 contradiction. 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 waterways, 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 individuals, 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 conservation 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 wilderness 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. President 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 ingenuity 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 generations. My critics will scream to high heaven, but by and large people are not dedicated conservationists. 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 backyard. 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 damnners, 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 violence 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 through the window and burn the place down. Listening Point has such significance, I don't think anyone will harm it.

JHV: Returning to the subject of BWCAW management, Paul Smith, forestry technician in Ely, recently told me the U.S. Forest Service is "recreating wilderness" in the BWCAW. This has been going on for decades. Planes have been banned below 4,000 feet. Resorts on Basswood and Crooked Lakes were removed. Now, the