

January 2009

Driftless Days . . .

Sigurd F. Olson (1899-1982), the great environmentalist and conservation activist, often wrote of Wisconsin's Namekagon River and its surrounding landscape. Olson spent his early formative years in Wisconsin and was educated there before moving to northern Minnesota as a young married man. He eventually ended up in Ely, Minnesota, often thought of as the gateway to the Quetico-Superior Boundary Waters canoeing area, and spent his adult years there, fashioning careers in guiding, extensive writing and conservation activism. The University of Minnesota Press has kept seven of his nine books in print; they have also published a collection of his many articles and speeches, The Meaning Of Wilderness, along with a superb biography of Olson, The Life Of Sigurd F. Olson by David Backes. All of these books are readily available through numerous channels and are often seen on the shelves of bookstores, particularly in Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota.

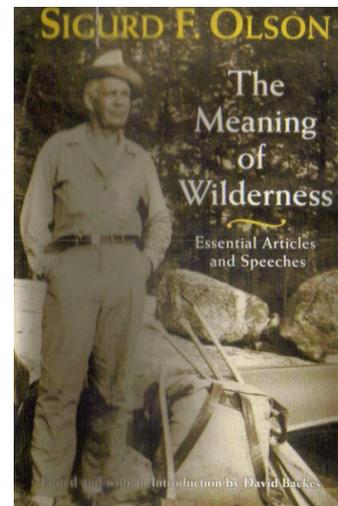
Olson's environmental and conservation theories are subject to debate. He was a proponent of the "chaos theory", which essentially states that certain sections of landscape should be protected presently and for the future by sealing them off entirely from virtually any active management interference by man, the idea being to let nature "take its course". The Boundary Waters canoeing area, to cite one example, is managed in this fashion, both in its United States and Canadian sections. Modern conservation theory generally calls for a more aggressively "proactive" approach, particularly in heavily industrialized or farmed areas, an example of this being our own Trout Unlimited Iowa Driftless Chapter's local stream restoration efforts, where continued intensive farming practices call for very active plans to reduce silt loads in area streams and to control flooding as well as possible. In some western states, it has been discovered that limited and controlled rotational grazing of livestock can be more beneficial to certain arid lands than keeping them free of livestock; this approach more closely resembles the state of the land when buffalo roamed freely and amongst other things aerated the ground by their movements. It is probably wise to consider both theories when trying to decide what might be best for preserving certain landscapes and waterways.

Regardless of specific conservation practices and theories, Sigurd Olson wrote movingly and knowledgeably about all landscapes with which he was familiar, and his great body of work has enriched the lives of countless readers. In the chapter "The Hemlocks" from Of Time And Place, Olson writes of walking the wooded hills along the Namekagon with his grandson near his wife's family farm in search of hemlock trees, which even in the early 1980's were becoming

quite rare. They found five on their walks. In perhaps Olson's most famous book, The Singing Wilderness, he writes in "Grandmother's Trout" of catching brook trout as a very young boy and bringing them home to his Grandmother for a simple but memorable evening meal. Though primarily an outdoorsman and secondarily a fly fisherman, Olson wrote interestingly about many of his fishing experiences throughout his life, whether they be on rivers, streams or lakes.

So some years ago when I first had the opportunity to fish the Namekagon, it was somewhat of a pilgrimage for me to be on the river. I fished above Hayward near the town of Cable. The Namekagon is difficult to wade in that particular stretch; in some places, it's almost impossible. Prior to the two or three years I went there, the stream had experienced drought conditions and above-average water temperatures, and local fishermen told me they thought the river had had a higher trout mortality than generally thought. Most of the local fly fishermen fished the river very early in the morning or late in the evening, starting in the evening when it was almost too dark to see. They would move to the top of a chosen riffle stretch while there was still enough light to negotiate wading, and then fish the stretch from one location with large streamers in search of lunker brown trout. I myself fished the river traditionally during the daytime, and caught my trout on dry flies. The locals thought this interesting and rather amusing, though they were respectful. I didn't catch many trout and they weren't very big, but each fish was a treasure to me and I was very happy fishing there regardless of my catch. The heavily wooded pine forests along the river give it a slightly acidic aspect, and the water has a reddish tint to it common in that circumstance.

One local fisherman I had the opportunity to visit with on two or three occasions had a most interesting fishing life, as interesting in a fashion as anyone I'd heard of or spoken to before. He was thirty-eight years of age at the time and taught highschool history in a town about ninety miles from Cable. He had a tall, angular, rather chiseled look about him and a quiet, confident demeanor; obviously a good fisherman. He said he had been married for some years and that he and his wife had no children "by choice". His wife didn't work because "she didn't have to." Fair enough.



Their summer home was on the Namekagon River and could not be seen from the water or the road to the driveway, and the home had recently been secured electronically. He said they'd never had any prowlers around the house, but thought it wouldn't be a bad idea to install some security as they were never there during the winter months. The summer home was a "year-round" house however, apparently as comfortable as their regular home, according to my friend.

Every year since they'd acquired their summer home, they had a tradition of leaving for the house on the Namekagon on the last day of the school year. The pickup was loaded up and ready for the trip, and his wife picked him up after school on that last day of the teaching year. He didn't even stop at the house in town on the way out. They stayed at the summer home all summer long, and went back "home" on the day before he had to begin his next teaching year. He told me that on that last day on the river, he usually fished until dark before leaving, and

when he got back to the river home, his wife had everything packed up and ready to go. I asked him how he was able to start school without having to go in a week or so earlier, like most teachers. He replied that some years back he'd requested a special dispensation to do so from the local school board, and that they had approved his request. In the spring, in addition to his regular teaching duties, he worked nights and weekends to prepare for the fall school term, and when he walked into his classroom that first autumn morning, everything was entirely prepared, including three weeks of study plans, text books, classroom student name lists and "sharpened pencils". The school board opened up his program request to all employees interested, and the first year three other teachers followed suit. The second year only one teacher repeated the option, and after the third year he was the only employee to continue the program. For most people, the extra workload required in the spring and the stress of beginning so abruptly in the fall wasn't worth the effort. But at the time we spoke, he'd been doing it himself for twelve years.

During the summer, he fished *every day*, generally on the Namekagon, which he knew very well, though on occasion he fished other area rivers and streams. His wife was a great reader and enjoyed that wonderful pastime during the summer months on the river. She did most of the grocery shopping and errand running, and my friend rarely left the cabin except to fish. His wife had overnight guests quite often and liked to entertain. About every two weeks she'd go home for a night or two to check on their house, the mail or perhaps attend a summer event with family or friends. But he thought mainly she just liked to get away from the cabin now and then for a refresher. He enjoyed their summer home guests as well as she did, but he'd established a few interesting ground rules concerning company. First of all, he would not teach anyone to fish. Friends were welcome to go along with him on his outings, but they had to go when he was ready to go, leave when he was ready to leave, go where he wanted to go, and fish under their own auspices with their own tackle. He said he was a teacher nine months of the year and preferred to teach absolutely nothing over the summer. If their guests did not include fishermen, which I took to generally be the case, he came and went as the spirit moved him. He said he rarely made it back in time for evening barbeques or things of that nature, and usually fended for himself when he returned from the river.



He also said that he tied all of his trout flies during the summer and kept all of his fishing tackle at the summer residence, hence the recent security measures. He always had enough flies tied by the time they left at summer's end to get started fishing again the following season. Then he tied flies all summer long as needed, sometimes when it rained or at times simply whenever he felt like it. Once they returned home in the fall, he did absolutely nothing concerning fishing and had no tackle there to do it with, even if he wanted to. That was the plan they had established as a married couple, and he said it had worked for them thus far.

During the school year, they lived what might be called a more "normal" existence. He said they were involved in a number of school and community activities and enjoyed them a great deal. Many of their community activities involved working with children, perhaps because they had none of their own. These activities were in addition to his teaching duties. It was almost as

though he had a dual existence of sorts, nine months of the year being spent in one fashion and three months in another.

I asked him how it was that first day back at school teaching after a whole summer of daily fishing. He replied that it was incredibly difficult, almost beyond description. All he could see was water. The initial fishing deprivation was hard to manage and the worst of that lasted about a week. The second week was better, however, and by the third week he said that generally the river had worked itself out of his system and he was comfortably back to his new routine. During that first three weeks of work he mentioned that if he actually had fishing tackle at home, he'd probably not be able to stand it and would go out fishing again, as the fall fishing season was still open. That's why he kept everything at the summer home.



Sigurd Olson had an unusual drive for long canoe trips into wilderness areas, some of which lasted for many weeks. Zane Grey, another great traveler and author, had that same craving for long, extended fishing trips world-wide. My friend from the Namekagon seemed to have struck a compromise of sorts which was working out well enough for him.

So wherever we fish, we have wonderful memories of the actual fishing, the landscapes surrounding the water we fish, our traveling adventures en route or of friends we meet along the way, all of which embellish the waters and add to our total experience. Such is the nature of the Namekagon River for me. I like to think my acquaintance is on the Namekagon River at this very moment, taking care of important business there.

*“Old willow
taps the river
with his cane.”*

*“How lucky in one life to see
the sun lift a cloud from a pool!”*

From Braided Creek, by Jim Harrison and Ted Kooser

Be Vigilant!

“Red” Canoe

*Trout Unlimited
Iowa Driftless Chapter*

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