

Wilderness News

FROM THE QUETICO SUPERIOR FOUNDATION SPRING 2004



The Quetico Superior Foundation, established in 1946, encourages and supports the protection of the ecological, cultural and historical resources of the Quetico Superior region.

"The movement of a canoe is like a reed in the wind. Silence is part of it, and the sounds of lapping water, bird songs, and the wind in the trees. It is part of the medium through which it floats, the sky, the water, the shores...When a man is part of his canoe, he is part of all that canoes have ever known."

— Sigurd F. Olson, *The Singing Wilderness*



Wilderness News

Published by the Quetico Superior Foundation
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Special Feature Part II:

THE HISTORIC LODGES OF THE BOUNDARY WATERS

By Kari Finkler, *Wilderness News Contributor*

[Part I of this story appeared in the Fall 2003 issue of *Wilderness News*]

The Big Resorts – Basswood Lake, Crooked Lake

Throughout the 1930s, tourism spread rapidly into the roadless areas in the east from Grand Marais, and in the west from Ely, where Basswood Lake became a primary destination. It was reachable by seaplane, boat, or by a combination of rough roads and motorized portage. Basswood offered easy access to fishing on both sides of the Canada/MN border, and a network of islands and secluded bays. By the late 1950s there were more than 20 resorts on Basswood alone, and at least two successful resorts thrived on nearby Crooked Lake, overlooking the spectacular Curtain Falls. The Curtain Falls Fishing Camp was reached only by seaplane, and is rumored to have had a slot machine and a popular bar in the main lodge.

One of the largest resorts of the era was the Basswood Lodge & Wilderness Outfitters. Begun in 1921 as a rustic fishing camp, not only did the lodge provide complete outfitting, it boasted one of the most majestic hand-crafted log lodges, accommodations for over 100 guests, and two seaplane flights daily into Ely. To further appeal to tourists, a few lodge owners installed motorized portages between lakes, facilitating larger groups and fishing boats, including 4-Mile Portage, connecting Ely to Basswood.

Other popular destinations on Basswood Lake included the Pipestone Falls Lodge, Skidway Borderline Lodge, Pinecliff Lodge, the Johnson Bros. Fishing Camp, and Evergreen Lodge.



Wegen's Wilderness Camp, 1931. Photo courtesy Doris Wegen Patton

They ranged from single-cabin establishments to multi-cabin resorts. In addition to numerous private cabins and resorts, several 'corporate retreats' were built as well. The lake bustled with activity from June to September, both on shore and on the water.

Remembering the Lodges

Doris Wegen Patton grew up exploring the Boundary Waters during summers spent at 'Wegen's Wilderness Camp' on Newton Lake; begun by her parents in 1924. She remembers entertaining visitors from across the country and cherishes memories of living without telephones or running water, making ice cream with ice stored in sawdust from the previous winter, waiting eagerly for the boats full of guests, mail, library books, and supplies, and trading with Native Americans arriving by birch-bark canoe. The family eventually sold the camp and built a private home on Basswood, joining a close-knit community on the lake.

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A cabin at Skidway Resort on Basswood Lake, 1940. Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society



Fishermen getting into a motor launch on Basswood Lake, 1938. Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

EVENT:

Sixth Annual Sigurd F. Olson Birthday Anniversary Luncheon
Saturday April 24, 2004; 11:00 am at the Town and Country Club of St. Paul at 2279 Marshall Avenue. Tickets are \$25.00, please reserve by April 19. For more information, call Paul O. Monson (952-929-5029)

Ted Hall

Incomparable journalist came home to Rainy Lake, joined Ober's wilderness crusade

by Diane Rose, Wilderness News Contributor



Photo courtesy Rosalie Hall

I didn't know Ted Hall. But I really wish I had. I have always thought that if I could spend some time with a departed historical figure, it would be Mark Twain – to revel in his unique humor, adventurous spirit and tell-it-like-it-is approach to religion, politics and every other topic under the sun. Ted Hall had all of that, plus a dedication to preserving the natural magic of the boundary waters area surrounding his favorite place in the world: Ranier, Minn., and Rainy Lake.

Edward (Ted) Hall, who died Sept. 23 at age 82, is known for several things. He was an honest, tenacious and gifted reporter and writer who grew up in Frontenac, MN, near Red Wing but quickly moved up to journalism's big leagues. He worked on a series of New Jersey newspapers, covering stories such as the Attica prison riots in 1969, until he refused an order to kill a story involving a key figure in a sensational murder trial. He was fired, and two days later was hired by *Time* magazine as a political editor. He also worked as a consultant to NBC Television News. In the early 1970s, tired of the East Coast rat race, he purchased a lobster boat in Boston and sailed with his son Thomas to Duluth, then trucked the boat to Ranier, where he had spent his boyhood summers starting at age 9. In a 1979 interview with the *Bergen (NJ) Evening Record*, he explained: "It was always in the back of my mind. I wanted to get back to this part of the country, my country."

"Rainy Lake is more than granite and trees and tall blue sky. It is a mood. It'll get you – if you're worth getting."

– Ted Hall

Life in Ranier inspired Hall's most famous creation, a boisterous weekly newspaper called *The Rainy Lake Chronicle*, of which he was "editor et cetera" from 1974 through 1980, when he stepped down to write books. The paper, which was published until May 1982, covered local politics in an energetic, detailed, unflinching style that ruffled many feathers and got local citizens interested in public affairs. His philosophy: no story was too small to be an important story. Stories about and passion for the Northwoods wilderness often filled Hall's "Drumbeat" column. *The Chronicle* soon had a circulation of 1,700 people (with total readership estimated at 10,000) that included readers from across the United States in addition to the 255 residents of Ranier. Photos from his *Chronicle* days invariably show Hall peering out from under his thick shock of hair, wearing a flannel shirt and puffing on a pipe. His salary was \$5,000 a year.

Hall also is known as a close friend of conservationist Ernest Oberholtzer, whom he met while growing up in Frontenac. Oberholtzer, who was instrumental in the movement to preserve the Boundary Waters wilderness, hired young Hall to work at Mallard Islands in Rainy Lake during the summers. Although he never took credit for it, Hall later worked to fight commercial development and helped bring the islands under the protection of the Oberholtzer Foundation. They are now known as Ober's Islands, and Hall loved to spend time there in the summers. He recently was named an emeritus member of the Oberholtzer Foundation board.

In 1983, Hall wrote the following in a commentary piece for the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune* about Oberholtzer: "Let us simply note that through all that long battle, Ernest Oberholtzer's Mallard Island in Rainy Lake was the real headquarters – the touchstone – for the battle, and upon his death in 1977 at the age of 93, friends steered his island home into the foundation he had set up a dozen years earlier to carry on his quiet work as a teacher, friend of wilderness and Indian, friend of art and literature and music and, above all, friend of all people."

Hall's sister, Sila Flueger of Red Wing, said her brother's love of the wilderness stemmed from his friendship with Ober. *The Rainy Lake Chronicle* made people all over the United States aware of the Boundary Waters area and encouraged many of them to visit, she said. Flueger said Hall often talked about moving to the city but he always felt compelled to return to Rainy Lake. In the mid-1980s Hall and his second wife, Rosalie "Rody" Hall of Minneapolis,

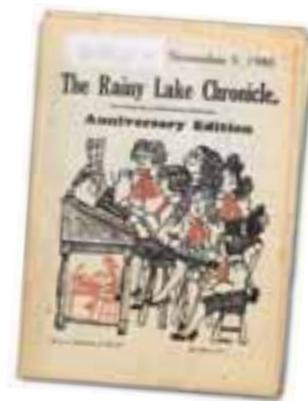
sailed the lobster boat down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, where they sold the battered old craft. In 1992, Hall published a book recalling his childhood in Frontenac, titled "Growing With the Grass." In 1993, while he was living in Minneapolis next to Lake of the Isles, Hall was interviewed by the *Rochester Post-Bulletin* and said of his home: "It's partly country. There is some space around."

In May 1979, Hall wrote an article for *Mpls.-St. Paul Magazine* called "The Granite, Trees, Blue Sky and Mood of Rainy Lake." He includes a scathing critique of International Falls, which is "keen on hockey, women's softball, curling, afternoon girlie shows and both social drinking and unsocial drinking. The approaches to the city from the outer world are adequately stocked with brand-named motels and junk food stands." He then moves on to a travelogue that covers the town of Ranier, Rainy Lake itself and even Voyageur's National Park. Hall concludes: "These are the things worth seeing and doing – the bait. All the while, Rainy Lake is working that spell that will bring the visitor back – maybe for good. To repeat the warning: Rainy Lake is more than granite and trees and tall blue sky. It is a mood. It'll get you – if you're worth getting."

Flueger, reminiscing about their childhood, said she and her brother used to go up to Oberholtzer's place at Rainy Lake the day school was out. "Ted took a lot of canoe trips with Ober," she said. "That was his favorite time – when he was out on Rainy Lake and could keep an eye on everything that was going on."

Flueger also recalled how newspapering was in their family's blood right from the start. Their father had been in the newspaper business and she worked as a society editor at the Red Wing newspaper at one time. "Ted started a little tiny magazine (it was called *Old Man River*) when he was 7 years old," she said, laughing. "He made me the printer's devil; I was only 2 at the time. He was a terrible tease."

I wish I'd had the chance to spend a day with Ted Hall. □



The Rainy Lake Chronicle

A Canoe of Wood

From the deep north words I come.

From the tall cedars and spruce old as time my ribs are bent.

From the peaceful land of Hiawatha I come.

Where the timber wolf and the great beaver roam free.

Where the wind whispers through the willows and her breath dances across the needles of the pines, and the sound of the loon in the morning mist is nature's own voice to honor and behold, the wilderness.

To glide upon the waters I come.

As the gentle leaf which falls upon the stream.

The curved wood of my planks skimmers across the blue waters, within my bark beats a heart.

From the white cedar bark I come.

By way of the sun and stars, under the shadow of the moon, across the clear waters, beyond the distant shore.

I embrace those who travel with me, as the otter protects her own.

Great and many things have I known.

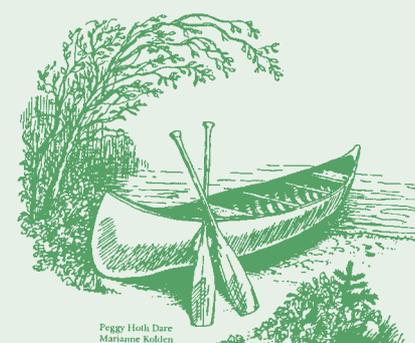
For I am the canoe of wood and the forest lives in me.

A beating drum will sound my twilight when the last purple sunset falls upon me.

The voice of "Keewaydin," the great northwind, will blow across the cool waters and call to me, and thunder in the mountain peaks will echo the spirit of "O'jibwa," who will come for me under the reflection of the moon and the light of the twinkling stars, to guide my proud wooden frame home, to lie down in the deep north woods from which I come.

– Dennis Gantt

First published in *Wooden Canoe*,
Issue 73, February 1996



Peggy Heath Dare
Marianne Kolden

Keeper of the Wild, the Life of Ernest Oberholtzer

by Joe Paddock

Published by the Minnesota Historical Society Press

(2001, 341 pages, \$27.95 Hardcover)

1-800-647-7827

Imagine that a doctor gives you only one more year of life. Would you head for the wilderness for one last trip? Only a few years out of college, that is precisely what Ernest Oberholtzer did in 1909 and his health "improved with every stroke of the paddle". Taking strength from the wilderness, Ober, as he was known to all, lived on to 1977, when he died at the age of 93. In that summer of 1909, Ober paddled most of the lakes and portages of the Rainy Lake watershed. This includes most if not all of Quetico Provincial Park, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and Voyageurs National Park. But Ober did not just use the wilderness for his personal renewal. To our great benefit, he made it his life's mission to preserve the Rainy Lake watershed as a public resource to be kept in its original wild state.

Before that mission seized Ober's life, he took a mythical journey through even wilder lakes and rivers of Canada in 1915. With his Ojibwe companion, Billy Magee, he paddled an amazing loop from Manitoba, to remote and unmapped Nueltin Lake in the Northwest Territories, to Hudson Bay and back. The places visited ring with the romance of exploration and are often mentioned in the "dream trips" of today's paddlers.

This book is a thoughtful and tightly woven narrative of a man's life. Joe Paddock tells the story in a seamless blend of commentary interspersed with quotes from Ober's papers and oral history interviews. Ober's work and spirit are transmitted through his own words. The book follows Ober from his childhood in Iowa, through his Harvard years, and into his life as a wilderness figure and conservation activist. Late in life, honors came for his long, successful service in the cause of wilderness. His health failed in his last years and Ober died in a nursing home in International Falls.

Ober's works are not found in books with poetic titles. His major work (and gift to us) was the massive job of managing public and private efforts to keep the northern lakes in their natural state. He was a founder of the Wilderness Society and worked with the Isaak Walton League throughout the long efforts to protect the lake country. He led the Quetico-Superior Council for twenty years as its first president. Yet this is not a dry story of legislation, lobbying, and legalities. Through narrative and extensive quotes, we see the human drama of the struggles. Millionaire E.W. Backus would have dammed and developed the entire watershed. Opposed were Ober and his allies, who sought to keep it wild. At times, Ober had to scramble financially while managing one of the most important conservation efforts in our nation's history.

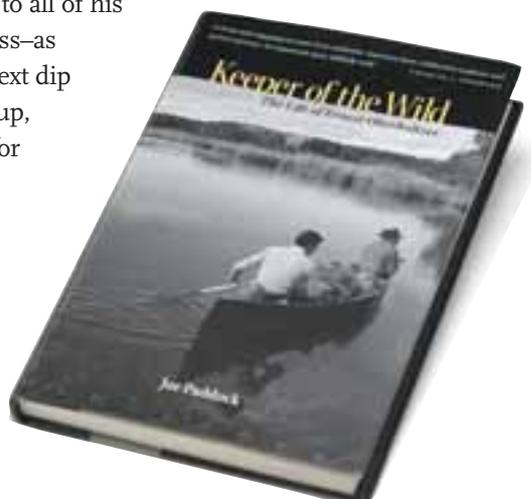
Ober was complex, talented and adventurous. He was gifted in the making of friends, yet never married, an accomplished musician, yet made the wilderness his home. As a storyteller, he could hold listeners spellbound, yet he never published a complete account of his journey through Nueltin. At his home on The Mallard, a small island in Rainy Lake, he lodged his visitors in a set of rustic and eccentric buildings; all filled with books. Here, his visitors entertained each other and were imbued with the magic of the wild north. In terms of friends, Ober was surely one of the wealthiest men on the planet. The biography contains many heartwarming stories and anecdotes quoted from these friends and Ober's correspondence.

Ober held a deep appreciation for the life and culture of the Ojibwe who lived in the Rainy Lake region. Billy Magee and others were often his companions on wilderness trips. Ober collected extensive notes on the language and the stories of the people. He would question the elders for the old legends or myths that were called Atisokan. Eventually, and with respect, the people came to call Ober himself, Atisokan.

There exists a wealth of information about Oberholtzer and his times. Joe Paddock is a poet of some reputation in our region. He has spent much time at Ober's Mallard Island home, where the spirit of Atisokan seeps into one's bones. Paddock's narrative is well-researched and written with great thought, sensitivity and organization. It contains excellent endnotes and a useful index. It contains the essence of Ober and will be a guide for others who wish to know more of his wilderness travels or of the great conservation struggles. It illuminates the lives of Ober's friends and of the Ojibwe.

Ober's long wilderness journeys lent strength to all of his endeavors as a promoter and defender of wilderness—as "Keeper of the Wild". Read this book. When you next dip a paddle into water pure enough to drink straight up, you will know the man to whom you owe thanks for that splendid experience.

Reviewed by Joe Conrad, former president of the Minnesota Canoe Association, Inc.



Dear Editor,

I would like to bring up an error in your *Wilderness News* Fall 2003 newsletter. You mention in the otherwise excellent article about Joe Seliga, that YMCA Camp Widjiwagan "...is the only camp today that maintains the tradition of using wooden canoes as an integral part of the wilderness experience." Though Widji has an excellent program, and is larger in size than ours, this statement is flat out wrong.

YMCA Camp Menogyn, on the Gunflint Trail side of the BWCAW has been using these boats since 1922 in providing transformational experiences to young people in a wilderness setting. Our campers, aged 12-18, help restore, paddle and portage these boats through the many canoe trails of the BWCA and Quetico each summer. We have 9 of Joe's canoes, each painted different colors and all fully restored to working shape with new ribs, keels, planking and one with a new stem.

We have other brands of Wood Canvas canoes as well including Chestnuts, Old Town 16' and 18' Guides and a Penn Yan totaling 20 boats.

I would appreciate a mention of this in your next newsletter.

– Paul Danicic, *Director*
YMCA Camp Menogyn

Editor's Reply:

Yes, there are many camps using wood canvas canoes. For the details; visit the Ottertooth web site: http://www.ottertooth.com/Canoe_pages/canoe_fleets.htm. Brian Back has compiled a listing of the world's largest wood-canvas canoe fleets there. Thanks to everyone who called or e-mailed us their feedback.

Dear Editors:

Please add my name to your mailing list. A friend passed on her copy of the Fall 2003 Newsletter and I'm thoroughly enjoying it.

I was on one of the early women's trips at Camp Widjiwagan in 1949 and a kitchen worker in 1950 when I was also allowed to be a job counselor on the girls' summer trip. Although rather short (5'3" at the time) I learned to "throw" and carry Seligas over long portages. The area which later became the Boundary Waters was not nearly so well-known or (in my view) overused as it has become but my experiences there did indeed change the rest of my life. People with whom I'm maintained contact from those days seem to have had the same results. I'm hopeful that today's youngsters can have similar experiences.

Sincerely,
Pat Smith

Add your name to our Mailing List

Write us:

Quetico Superior Foundation

Attn: *Wilderness News* Editors

50 South Sixth Street, Suite 1500

Minneapolis, MN 55402-1498

or email the editor: teaton@EandA.com

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Spring 2004

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The fireplace at Clearwater Lodge on Clearwater Lake, 1940s.
Photo courtesy Clearwater Lodge

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Closing 'The Nation's Playground'

After WWII, with a growing interest in preservation, conservationists put increased pressure on Congress to protect certain wilderness areas—stressing that without intervention, the northwoods would be decimated by logging and commercial establishments. The conservationists emphasized preserving the natural state of the area, its land, waters, animal life, and solitude—which meant eliminating roads, airplanes, and eventually, motorized travel of all kinds.

Congress passed the Thye-Blatnik Act in 1948, appropriating funds to buy resorts and private lands within the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. The Act was extended and funded two more times, in 1956 and 1961. The executive order, signed by President Truman in 1949, prohibited airplane landings within the BWCA. This order was enforced by U.S. Marshalls, thus closing all seaplane operations that served the lodges. The Izaak Walton League established private endowment funds to acquire 14 strategic properties, enlarging the properties already protected by the government. Further appropriations would follow, and in 1964, with the passage of the Wilderness Act, the area was declared free of roads, logging, motorized travel, and commercial businesses. As a result, all resorts and private cabins within the Act's boundaries were purchased, condemned, or closed by the government. By the late 1960s, over 40 resorts and over 90 private homes had been purchased. The newly defined region would be officially designated as the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness later in 1978.

What Remains Today

As plans were drawn for the new wilderness area, the boundaries determined which resorts would close. Lodges that were on major roads or close to the towns of Ely, Winton, and Grand Marais were not within the new wilderness area, and spared from removal. One of the oldest, the Burntside Lodge, built in 1913, is still entertaining guests today, as are several other resorts from this period along the Echo Trail, Gunflint Trail, and Fernberg Corridor, including the Clearwater Lodge, the Nor'Wester Lodge, and the Gunflint Lodge.

Basswood Lake saw the greatest change. Over 20 resorts and numerous summer residences were closed or removed. The prominent main building at Basswood Lodge was purchased by the government in 1964, dismantled, and sold to a local entrepreneur. He hauled the pieces across the ice, making it the centerpiece of a new resort, Snowbank Lodge. Then, in 1978, with the official designation of the BWCAW, part of Snowbank Lake was declared within the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. The government purchased the same lodge for a second time, and planned to destroy it. In 1985, it was purchased for \$1.00 by Burnett County, removed, and rebuilt. The building is now the visitor center at Forts Folle Avoine Historical Park, in Danbury, Wisconsin.

Other remnants live on as well. The original Wilderness Outfitters that began at Basswood Lodge still operates today out of Ely, and some of the dislocated businesses moved to Lac La Croix, Crane Lake, and other lakes just outside of the BWCAW.

Of those buildings that were sold, portions of the Pinecliff Lodge and the Evergreen Lodge were purchased by Wilderness Canoe Base (then run by the Plymouth Youth Center in Minneapolis) and moved to their camp on the Seagull Lake chain. Though one of the main buildings was later destroyed by fire, many of the cabins are still in use, sheltering campers amidst the wilderness experience.

The resorts on Crooked Lake and other remote lakes were made inaccessible by the seaplane ban, and either removed or destroyed. Former residents recall hauling cabins out onto the ice and burning them down on cold winter nights.

Today, as you paddle the old route from Basswood to Curtain Falls, few would guess what a busy resort area this once was—nature has quickly reclaimed its shores, canoes have replaced fishing excursions, and an old stone foundation, a few postcards, and many fond memories are all that remain. □



At left: A brochure from the Snowbank Lodge in the 1970s describes moving the main lodge 35 miles from Basswood Lake to Snowbank Lake.

Above: The former Basswood Lodge/Snowbank Lodge is now the visitor center at Folle Avoine Historical Park in Danbury, Wisconsin. *Photo courtesy Burnett County Historical Society, Wisconsin*