

Forty years on: Sigurd Olson and the Wilderness Act

by [Bob Kelleher](#), Minnesota Public Radio
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Chuck Wick knew Sigurd Olson and now owns Olson's Ely home and writing shack. Olson's old Royal typewriter, his pipes, photos, duck decoys and rock collection are still in the shack, where they were left after Olson died more than 20 years ago. (MPR Photo/Bob Kelleher)

America's Wilderness areas celebrate a birthday Friday. Forty years ago, President Lyndon Johnson signed The Wilderness Act - creating the nation's system of federally protected wilderness. Minnesota's Boundary Waters Canoe Area was one of the first. Several Minnesotans played prominent roles, including then U.S. Sen. Hubert Humphrey, and a junior college administrator from Ely, named Sigurd Olson.

Ely, Minn. — People say Sigurd Olson was more a listener than a talker. He was a man of the written word. But when he talked about the wilderness he loved, everybody listened.

Olson spoke at a banquet of the Northern Environmental Council in the spring of 1974. His words were measured -- delivered slowly, and forcefully in a deep baritone.



"How are you going to explain love of the land?" he asked. "How are you going to explain the value of a sunset, or a lookout point? How can you explain any of the things which motivate our actions? How can we explain why we're here tonight? We're all fighting for the same thing."

Eight years later, Olson died while snowshoeing. But his legacy lives on - - through nine books and countless articles, all written in the tiny building behind his Ely, Minnesota, home.

[Sigurd Olson's house](#)

It's just a small shack, really an old garage -- a drab olive green with a pair of windows on each side, tucked under a few shade trees in the corner of the yard.

When you enter, you hear the spring of a weathered, wooden screen door, and the slap when it closes behind.

Inside, it's mustiness and old pine. The faded Royal typewriter still waits on a broad oak desk. Olson's pipes are in the shallow bowl to the right.



From this typewriter, and this shack, Sigurd Olson captured in words the spirit of wilderness. Olson's poetic writing has been compared to Henry David Thoreau's, or John Muir's. Chuck Wick owns the shack now.

"There's all kinds of stuff here," Wick says, fumbling a metal axe head pulled from a wooden drawer. "This piece here -- this is an interesting one here. This is a trader's axe that's back from the voyageurs era."

[Olson's pipes](#)

As he worked in his shack, Olson worried that 20th century America was fast gobbling up the nation's last wild places.

For decades, you might find any of the nation's leading wilderness advocates in this shack -- debating ideas, developing strategy, or scribbling drafts of what would become landmark federal law. It might be Howard Zahniser, considered the father of the Wilderness Act, or northern Minnesota activist Ernest Oberholtzer, or even a fast-rising politician named Hubert Humphrey.



"If these walls could talk, you know," says Wick. "If they would have had a tape recorder, I'm sure it would have been a very interesting discussion."

Olson met Humphrey in 1949, just after Humphrey was newly elected to the U.S. Senate. Olson was becoming a nationally known conservationist.

[Listening Point](#)

"This was the peak of the fight to ban airplanes from what's now the Boundary Waters Canoe Area," says David Backes, an Olson biographer. "Sig was the leading spokesperson in that fight. And Humphrey was a

brand new senator."

Olson wrote a friend about meeting Humphrey, saying the senator could be useful. Backes reads from the letter.



"He says, 'Later on we can use him to good advantage. He is a climber and wants national publicity, and fast.' That's what Sig said on May 2, 1949."

The opportunity came in 1956. The Wilderness Society's Howard Zahniser presented Humphrey the first draft of The Federal Wilderness Preservation System bill. It would create a national system of areas protected by Congress from development.

[Sigurd Olson's cabin](#)

Meanwhile, Sigurd Olson had just published his first book, "The Singing Wilderness." It quickly went to a second printing. Humphrey may not have been aware that Olson helped write the wilderness bill when he turned to his friend from Ely for advice. Olson told him to go for it. Humphrey did, and according to Backes, the fight was on.

"And what was so important in that first year -- probably for Humphrey's continued support, as well as for the ultimate passage of the bill -- was creating the bill in such a way that the Boundary Waters would be taken care of in an acceptable fashion," Backes says. "That it would protect it, and yet wouldn't create so much of a fight in northern Minnesota that Humphrey would have to back down."

Humphrey couldn't alienate his Democratic base in Minnesota, and few regions were more loyal than the state's northeast corner. Humphrey sought a balance for Minnesota's Boundary

Waters Canoe Area, between total wilderness protection, and long established uses like motor boats and logging. At first, it seemed to please no one.

When hearings opened in 1957, the Ely press eviscerated Humphrey. Conservationists like Ernest Oberholzer worried about backlash. Backes says Sigurd Olson was getting it from both sides.

"From a number of local people who feared for their whole economy. And then you had wilderness activists on the other hand, who were afraid that he might give in too much," says Backes.

But Olson stood firm. In meetings, and in his writing, he explained over and again he wasn't trying to change the Boundary Waters, but was trying to preserve what was there.

The Boundary Waters debate finally quieted. It was eight long years of rewrites, hearings, and debates before the Wilderness Act passed Congress in 1964. Only one wilderness area is specifically named in the bill -- the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. And Olson biographer David Backes says it's there for the unique exceptions given that single federal wilderness.



"But they made it happen," Backes says. "And thank God because it's an awesome wilderness system that we have in the country right now."

Olson's wilderness writings were at their peak of popularity throughout the debate. Ely's Chuck Wick says Olson provided the wilderness movement heart.

[Chuck Wick and Don Johnson](#)

"I think his involvement was more as a spiritual leader of the whole movement," says Wick. "He was one of the three or four leaders of the whole idea. And so that, I think, was more important than him sitting down and writing the language of it."

Olson's memory is preserved in Ely by the Listening Point Foundation -- named for Olson's log cabin property on Burntside Lake. Foundation President Don Johnson says Olson wrote what he experienced.

"That's what's critical about Sig, is he's one of these people that got out there a lot. Got out in the bush a lot, out in the woods a lot. And loved it, and instilled that love. That really became kind of manifest in his actions later, to preserve what he loved," says Johnson.

Created on Sept. 3, 1964, The wilderness system now encompasses more than 100 million acres, where, according to the act, "The earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."