

50 years later, Olson still fights for BWCA

ELY, Minn. — Here in the gateway to the million-acre Boundary Waters Canoe Area, the American portion of the world-famous Quetico-Superior country, a classic environmental battle is shaping up which will determine, perhaps forever, the future of this unique, wild country, the largest of its kind in all America.

The conflict over the BWCA has polarized in two bills introduced this year in the House of Representatives by two Minnesota congressmen:

H.R. 2820 introduced by Rep. Donald Fraser (D-Minneapolis) would preserve as a wilderness all of the present BWCA. It would stop all logging. It would also stop all motorboat and snowmobile use, except for a few hardship cases. And it would ban mining except in a national emergency.

H.R. 5968 introduced by Rep. James Oberstar (D-Duluth), who represents this district, would transfer 400,000 acres from the Wilderness Preservation System to a National Recreation Area, and would permit motor use and logging within this area. The remaining 600,000 acres would be administered as wilderness.

The famed naturalist-writer, Sigurd F. Olson, has long been a respected tribal elder and "spearpoint" in the great environmental battles which have raged across this nation, indeed across this earth. The Capital Times outdoor writer George Vukelich interviewed Olson a few days ago at his home in Ely. In this first installment, he recalls the historical events which have led up to the present confrontation.

Q: The current battle for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area is only the latest in a long series of struggles for this north country. As an eyewitness who has taken part in them all, when did they first begin?

A: The first effort, as far as I'm concerned, began in the 1920's when I was a young guide in this country. This is the end of the road and as a guide I came to know many people who went out on canoe trips. There were photographers and there were senators and congressmen, editors and writers and quite a wide variety of people.

The first threat to this country was in the 1920's. There was a plan to build roads to all of these lakes and the chambers of commerce all around the area trumpeted that this was the "playground of the nation." That's what they had in mind.

The Forest Service had an appropriation of \$57,000, peanuts by today's standards, but it was big money back then because it was all cheap hand labor, a man and scoop shovel and a horse, picks and shovels and axes, that sort of thing. So it was big money then.

The men who were with me were shocked. They were sold on the idea of wilderness. They had got used to the sense of silence, the lack of pressure in the wilderness and they were shocked by the plan to build roads up here.

Well, as a young guide, I had no political experience. I didn't have the slightest idea of what to do, but these men did. I remember there was a writer, Don Hoff, who wrote for the Saturday Evening Post. There was Will Dilg who organized the Izaak Walton League of America. And a number of excellent photographers, one by the name of Brown from Twin Cities. And others.

And they said we know what to do: We'll just spread this all over the United States and we'll make a national issue out of it. Which they did. And pretty soon there were hearings and inside of 4 or 5 years, the Forest Service had set aside a Primitive Area, a good chunk of what is now the BWCA.

That was the first battle. That battle was no sooner won than we ran into the threat of power dams: A plan to build seven enormous power dams along the border that would raise the levels of some of the lakes eighty feet, destroying all of the rapids, the waterfalls, the islands, the campsites and all vestiges of what was known as the Voyageur Highway — which the border country was — making a great big slough, or swamp, out of hundreds of thousands of acres. It would have practically destroyed what we now call the Boundary Waters Country.

That battle went on for nine years before the International Joint Commission. This Commission had to conduct the hearings because the dams



Sigurd Olson

would affect border waters belonging to both Canada and the United States. I had no money but people saw that to it that I got to the hearings.

Here and up along the border, St. Paul and Washington, I did more traveling then than I had ever done in my life. And how well I remember when the Canadian Chief of the International Joint Commission called me to the stand at a hearing.

We were limited to ten minutes and you can't say much in ten minutes. But he started talking about canoe trips he had taken, and about canoe trips I had taken on the Canadian side and way up.

Well. We talked about Sioux Lookout and the Albany and God's Lake and the Hays route and so on. He kept me on that stand for forty-five minutes and all we did was visit about canoe routes. I knew we had a real champion on our side.

The International Joint Commission advised both governments that the country was far too beautiful to destroy by building a series of power dams. Years later, the Ontario Hydro Commission, after an investigation, decided that there wasn't enough power potential there anyway to make the cost of the dams feasible.

That ended in 1934, and because of all the international action and furor that had been created, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, established the Quetico-Superior Committee, as he called it, by executive order — a committee that was supposed to work with the Canadians to establish what we then thought would be a Peace Memorial Forest. A Forest dedicated to the dead of World War I and all the other conflicts we had been in and signifying that here were two countries with a border over 3,000 miles long and it had no bayonets, no gun emplacements, no restrictions to travel and so on. If we had lost that battle, that would have been the end of all this, but we won it. That was just the beginning.

Then the government had to buy up all this land because a lot of it was private land under the Minnesota Homestead or the Federal Homestead Act. During the logging days, the old system of the logging companies was to get people to go into the bush, declare a homestead, presumably build a shack on it and live there for a year or so. They got control of vast acreages that way.

So, the effort began to buy up enormous properties that were out of government hands because people began to realize that only by government ownership could they control and preserve the wilderness character of the area.

The next great threat was after World War II when the returning pilots from the Air Force, Army and Navy discovered this country and that all these lakes were perfect landing fields for pontoon planes. We had to figure out some way to stop them, because the pilots were advertising: Fly-in fishing! Weekend limits guaranteed!

The fishermen flocked in. From Chicago. And St. Louis. And Madison. From Milwaukee. Detroit. Cleveland. The Twin Cities. Even from as far away as Florida. And this became a regular mecca for the fliers. Then, because there was still a lot of private land in the interior, the private land owners began building airplane resorts all through this area.

There were several dozen pilots involved and they were flying all over. Some of them became good friends of mine and they all admitted that if we didn't stop this thing we wouldn't have any lakes left with fish in them, the country would be destroyed and the wilderness would be absolutely gone.

Some of them are still around here. One of them is flying for the Forest Service now. Some went up to Canada. Some up to Alaska.

We spent a lot of time in Washington trying to figure out what to do. By that time I was working with the Quetico-Superior Committee that FDR had set up. And I worked with the Department of Justice too but there seemed to be no way to stop the airplane traffic. We went through the Airplane Law of 1926, trying to find a loophole, and we finally found one.

There was a paragraph that said the president has the right to establish airspace reservations over military installations, government buildings, post offices, hospitals, defense installations and "for other governmental purposes." That was the key. By this time, I was working with the Department of Justice, the Department of Commerce, with other agencies and we were doing research on the original act and other acts too.

We decided that the president could create, by executive order, an airspace reservation over the area because a "governmental purpose" was:

- A purpose the government had spent money on.
- A purpose that had wide, popular acclaim throughout the United States.
- A purpose that worked for the general good, the public interest, etc.

As the Congress had already spent money buying up lands in the area in the public interest and there was popular acclaim for that action, we became convinced that this was probably the answer.

So, the Department of Interior and the Department of Agriculture too, drafted an executive order, and after further research, President Harry S. Truman signed it.

And then, of course, the airplane operators violated immediately, appealed to the District Court, then to the Circuit Court of Appeals and finally to the United States Supreme Court and all of them upheld the president's executive order. Canada immediately followed suit and declared an airspace on their side over the Quetico.

But that was a big battle and after the executive order was established by the Supreme Court, we had another struggle to buy out the private landowners. That meant getting a tremendous amount of money out of Congress to buy out these isolated resorts.

But it was eventually done and now, I think, the federal government owns 95 to 97 per cent of all the land in the area. The state of Minnesota has "school" sections scattered around, totaling another 100,000 acres.

Q: And today, in June of 1977, there's a brand new battle brewing over the BWCA, isn't there? A whole new issue?

A: Yes. And it's an issue which may fragment and destroy the Boundary Waters Canoe Area.

NEXT: The Brand New Battle