

**EDITOR'S NOTE** — Famed naturalist-writer Sigurd Olson has long been a respected tribal elder and "spearpoint" in this nation's environmental battles. In this second installment of an interview conducted by *Capital Times* outdoor writer George Vukelich at Olson's Ely, Minn. home, Olson discusses the current situation in the Boundary Waters Canoe area.

Part 2 of a series

By **GEORGE VUKELICH**  
Of The Capital Times Staff

**Q:** As you know, and as we're finding out, many local people, people within a 50-mile radius of Ely, are angry with you because of your support of the Fraser bill. How do you respond to that?

**A:** Some people are angry, yes. But an amazing thing is happening. More local people are saying they hope the Fraser bill passes. They are not the vociferous ones, but they feel deeply that the long effort to preserve this country is worthwhile, and the only way to save it and make it administratively possible for the Forest Service, is to pass the Fraser bill.

Congressman Oberstar, himself, admits that he's torn. He sees this growing wave of sentiment in his own district here. He says, in substance, "here my own people are against me. Some are for me. I don't know which way to turn."

And when a congressman has his own constituents unsure about him, he is unhappy. My feeling is that Oberstar now thinks he doesn't have a chance — but he'll try. And, if Fraser wins, Oberstar can at least say to his constituents: "I tried. But you can never tell what Congress will do." So, Oberstar is in a dilemma.

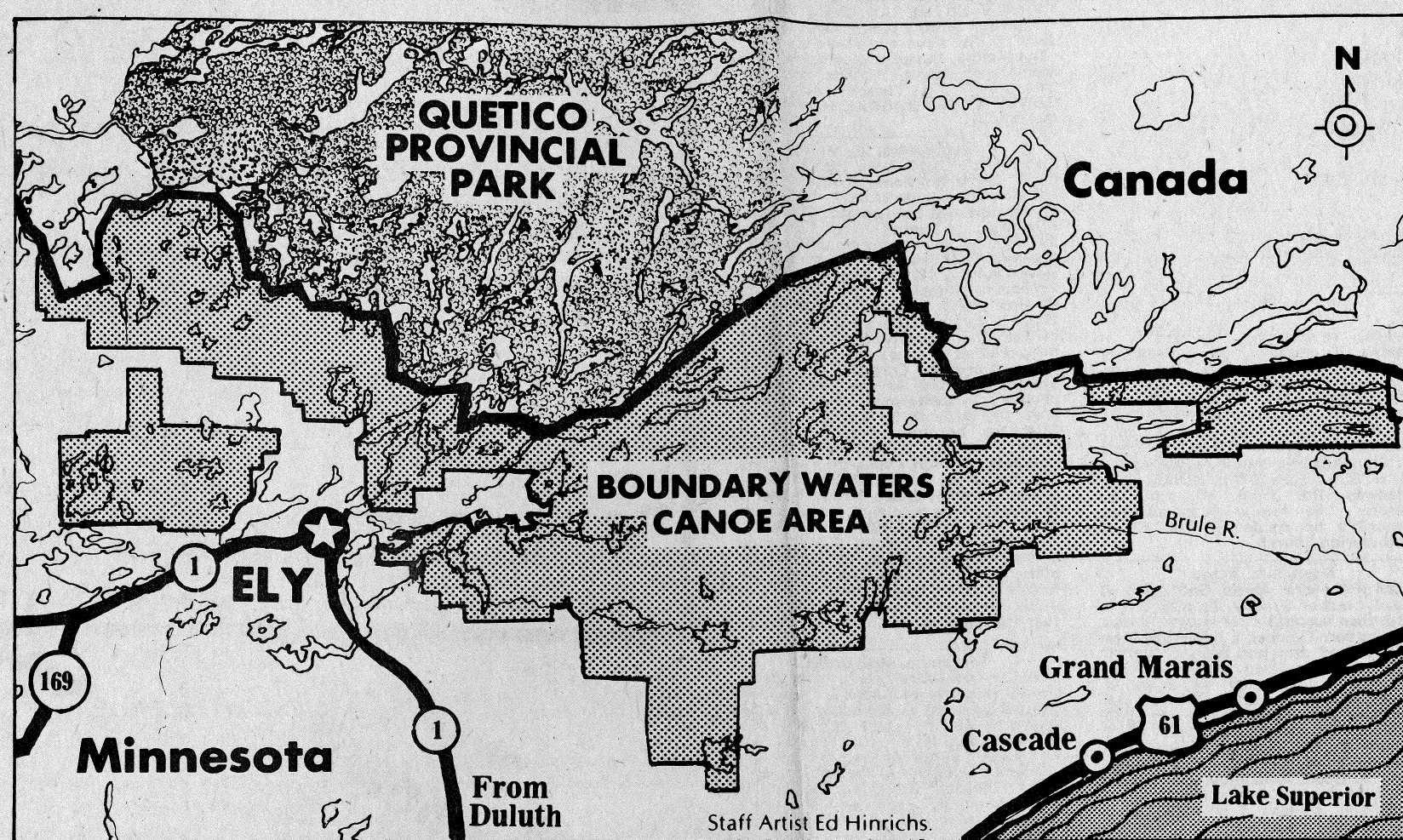
And another thing: there's been wide support for the Fraser bill — well, The Capital Times has stirred up a lot of it down in your country — there's wide support in Wisconsin, in Iowa, in western Minnesota and all across the nation. People are realizing that this is a National Forest. It doesn't belong to the local groups; it belongs to everybody.

People come here from everywhere: From California. From New Jersey. From literally everywhere. And this is their country. If you paddle a canoe, you have a right to expect a wilderness experience.

If you don't like motorboats or snowmobiles, that's your right; you have a right to speak up. And Oberstar realizes that the nationwide flood of interest makes this issue an historic one.

I think Oberstar also realizes now that he could go down in history as the man who destroyed our beloved BWCA — our beloved wilderness canoe country.

You see, the people who oppose this most recent effort to preserve the



area don't have the vision, the long point of view.

To those of us who support the Fraser bill, the preservation of wilderness is more than fishing. Or hunting. Or trapping. Or taking pictures. Or seeing how many miles you can cover. It's a rejuvenation of the human spirit in a time of worldwide stress and uncertainty.

People are looking for something, and that something can only be found in wilderness. So, the stakes are great.

**Q:** Do you feel that the young people living in this area today, the young packers who aspire to be professional guides, even as you were a professional guide here, share your philosophy and your dreams for this country?

**A:** Some of them do and some of them don't. I think, at heart, they do. But they've been so satiated with all the problems of this country and so infiltrated with the sentiment of some of the local people you talked to, that they're not quite sure.

There have been such innumerable changes and regulations, regulations and changes, over the last years that people are kind of confused.

They oftentimes wish wilderness would just go away — and government go away too. Let them live their lives! Let them use the country as they want to! That's what they oftentimes seem to be saying. But what they don't realize is that, if that happens, they'll soon lose the very thing that gives them a

living now.

**Q:** In listening to the local people, you hear over and over the same objection to the Fraser bill: "In the wintertime here, the tourists are gone, and the local people are sort of handcuffed. We can't go back in the bush, using snow machines on the lakes, and there's no environmental impact there. It seems like we're being penalized for just living here." Can you appreciate their position?

**A:** Yes, I can. But I would also call their attention to the fact that what we're asking for is the preservation of only a fourth of the Superior National Forest. And the Superior National Forest is almost 4 million acres of land and water.

They've got three quarters of this whole National Forest to play around in. All kinds of lakes. All kinds of snowmobile trails. And the Forest Service plans on building more snowmobile trails back into the bush.

But some people want to go back into the last little corner of wilderness with their snowmobiles, which they say do no harm, but which do have an impact on wildlife and vegetation, let alone the spreading of beer cans in the bush.

The local people have come to feel

that this is their playground and they can do anything they want with it. I am so familiar with this attitude. I've lived in this pioneer community most of my life. I've also lived in the West. I've spent time in Alaska.

And wherever you have a pioneer community removed from the metropolitan, megapolitan areas, you have people who feel the land is their own and who will fight every effort to control it. Especially by these damnable bureaucrats from Washington, who "don't know anything about the country."

I remember the fight for the Tetons. The cowboys had a big parade through town one day, led by a famous movie star with a rifle across his saddle pommel, carrying a huge sign that read: THEY SHALL NOT TAKE AWAY OUR LAND!

Go there today. Now the people of Teton Village are so proud of what they've done. Look what they saved! And they are the very ones who fought

against wilderness to the end.

The time is going to come when people here in the Ely area will say the same thing: **Look what we've done. We saved this beautiful country.**

They'll forget about the oldtimers. They'll forget about me. And they'll forget about a thousand others, who fought over a long, long period of time, to save this wilderness. It always happens.

**Q:** What kind of economic impact would there be on this area if the Fraser bill passed? Would the motorized fishermen stop coming here?

**A:** There would be some economic impact, but not much. The motorized fishermen don't bring in that much

revenue. If the resort capabilities were properly developed along the periphery of the area, which they haven't been, you would probably get more motorized fishermen than ever. There are lots of lakes outside the BWCA open to motors.

**Q:** How do you respond to people who say that for one reason or another: age, infirmity, physical condition, they need motors to get back into wild country?

**A:** If we're talking wild country in the BWCA, my own personal response to people my age is: You had the same chance to get into the wilderness that I had, without motors and if you didn't do it then, that's too bad.

Incidentally, my response to young people who claim they need motors in the BWCA is just this: If you are young and tough and love it enough, you'll go in with canoes and snowshoes and skis. Let them go in. But let them go in the hard way.

A lot of people, even young people, have gotten lazy. They don't want to exert themselves. But I think the time is coming when they'll accept the fact that those who want to enjoy the wilderness will have to work for the privilege of getting in.

The joy of going into wilderness under your own power should not be discounted. Wilderness is always a challenge. It's putting yourself against the primeval. And there's no greater satisfaction than to be able to do it.

I have a steady stream of young people coming through here. And nine tenths of them, fortunately, are on my side; I talk their language, and they talk mine.

There are so many young people today who are getting to feel that the wilderness is more than just rocks and trees, waters and portages. There's something intangible out there, something worth going in to find. And the young people who go in are finding it.

NEXT: The final installment —  
What They Find