

Robert M. Linn, 1926–2004:

A Remembrance of the GWS Co-Founder

THIS ISSUE OF *THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM* IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF BOB LINN, the co-founder of the George Wright Society. Bob's death on October 10 of this year marked the end of an era in the history of the GWS, for to him must go the lion's share of credit—credit he never would have sought—for the success of this organization over the course of its first 25 years.

Robert Maurice Linn was born May 12, 1926, in Cleveland, Ohio. As a youth he was active in the Boy Scouts of America, attaining the highest possible rank, that of Eagle Scout. After serving in the Army in World War II, Bob enrolled at nearby Kent State University, majoring in biology. At the same time he became a Scout Leader and also joined the Explorer Scouts, where he again reached the highest rank, that of Explorer Ranger.

It was while leading a scout camping trip to Isle Royale that Bob began a lifelong association with the national park, the place he loved more than any other in the world. His devotion to this island wilderness was nothing short of remarkable. No matter where he was stationed, Bob managed to make at least one trip to the island each year. As anyone who has visited the park can tell you, this is no easy thing to do, since it lies at the far end of Lake Superior, a six-hour ferry ride from Michigan's Upper Peninsula, which itself is roughly nine hours north of anyplace you've ever heard of. In all, he visited Isle Royale for 58 consecutive years, making his last trip in July 2004.

After getting his Bachelor's degree, he continued at Kent State, earning a Master's in plant ecology by doing botanical and ecological research at Isle Royale. He then went on to receive a Ph.D. in plant ecology from Duke University, studying under the eminent ecologist Henry J. Oosting, who authored the classic text *The Study of Plant Communities*.

Bob's dissertation, on Isle Royale forest succession, was very much in this tradition.

Following completion of his studies at Duke, Bob joined the National Park Service at Isle Royale, where he became chief park naturalist, serving in that position from 1958 to 1963. During this period he also participated in some of the first winter research sessions of the park's world-renowned moose-wolf study, working closely with that study's founder, Durward Allen.

Bob left Isle Royale in 1963 to work at NPS headquarters in Washington. He made the move with great reluctance, commenting that "a week's enough; a month in Washington would be unbearable." As it turned out, he would spend the heart of his NPS career in the Washington Office. At the time he arrived in the capital, the climate was auspicious for science in NPS. The seminal Leopold and National Academy reports had just come out. Their reviews—and, in the case of the National Academy report, barbed criticism—of NPS science and natural resource management shook the agency out of a 25-year torpor that had descended upon it in the years following the death of George Wright back in 1936. So, just as Bob arrived in Washington, and for the first time in a generation, science seemed poised to become a major factor in NPS decision-making.

The reality proved to be different. As recounted by Richard West Sellars in *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A*

History, during the 1960s and early 1970s attempts to revive and build scientific management in NPS ran headlong into deeply entrenched agency traditions, such as the indifference of most park superintendents. The bureaucratic tangles that Bob knew lay waiting for him were all too real. Bob worked first with George Sprugel during his tenure as chief scientist from 1964 to 1966. After Sprugel's resignation, Bob was acting chief scientist for a short time until he became deputy to Starker Leopold, who had himself been lured to Washington from the University of California by NPS Director George Hartzog to become chief scientist. Leopold came to Washington even more reluctantly than did Bob, however, and left after just a year to return to Berkeley. Bob then suc-

ceeded him as chief scientist, a post he held until 1973, when he was succeeded (under a different title) by Theodore W. Sudia.

Although agency reorganization undercut the high profile that science had briefly achieved while Leopold was with the NPS, and frustrated many of Bob's efforts as chief scientist, he was successful in bringing into the Park Service a cadre of young scientists

who formed the core of the agency's research capacity from the late 1960s into the 1980s. Bob's tenure as chief scientist became, in essence, a long-term exercise in scientific capacity-building. This sort of work requires a person of persistence, and, perhaps even more, of vision. That was a quality Bob had in abundance, but it was often hidden to all but his closest associates because of his natural



Bob Linn on the water at Isle Royale National Park: 1956 and 2004.
(top photo courtesy of Milt Stenlund; bottom, Candy & Rolf Peterson)

Escape from Washington: When Bob returned to Michigan in 1973, he received this cartoon as a going-away gift from colleagues at the University of Virginia. The original art was rendered in watercolor and pen-and-ink. (reproduced courtesy of Bruce, Chris, and Holley Linn and families)



reticence and great personal modesty. As it turned out, he would have to wait until his retirement from NPS to give full rein to that vision.

After departing from Washington, Bob finished his NPS career by returning to the Keweenaw Peninsula and helping to create a Cooperative Parks Studies Unit at Michigan Technological University in Houghton, the mainland headquarters of Isle Royale National Park. That CPSU eventually was moved to the campus of the University of Minnesota, where it is now part of the Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Units Network.

Shortly after his retirement, Bob co-founded the George Wright Society in 1980 along with Ted Sudia, and established its headquarters in Hancock, just across the Keweenaw Waterway from Houghton. (There you have the answer to the question we've been asked innumerable times: "Where is Hancock, Michigan, and why is the GWS headquartered there?") The necessity for an organization such as the GWS was deeply felt by Bob and Ted, and, as Bob explained in the first issue of *The George Wright Forum*, "the aims and goals of the Society grew out of intensive discussions":

The George Wright Society grew out of a need that became apparent during the first and second conferences on Scientific Research in the National Parks [1976 in New Orleans and 1979 in San Francisco]. The need: an instrument of continuing duration, dedicated to the exchange of information within the community of researchers, managers and other professionals, to give continuity to the broad range of topics having to do with cultural and natural park and reserve management

and preservation.... The emphasis is on multidisciplinary synthesis and the aim is to promulgate and disseminate integrated information in a form useful to the goal of improved park and reserve management. Existing scientific, cultural and conservation organizations tend to be subject-oriented and do not address such process-oriented issues except peripherally. Existing organizations fill other very important needs.

An initial membership drive targeted registrants at the 1976 and 1979 science conferences; NPS science and technology professionals; NPS historians, archeologists, and anthropologists; and NPS headquarters areas. However, as Bob went on to note, "the Society is designed to include much more" than just NPS employees: "state and provincial park personnel, local area park and reserve system personnel, as well as national park and reserve system personnel worldwide."

Thus the Society was launched with a set of inclusive ideals of global reach. But the basic reality of starting up an organization is more mundane, more local: somebody has to show up every day to do the mailings, write the letters, ask for the donations, and perform all the other thankless tasks that are necessary to get a nonprofit off the ground. For the first ten years of the GWS, Bob was that someone. To be sure, he had strong support from the early Boards of Directors, and many other people contributed to the effort. But Bob was the linchpin. The organization was run from his home on Elevation Street, and—in the tradition of George Wright himself—many of the expenses were paid out of Bob's own pocket.

During the earliest years of the GWS, his house was crammed with the cumbersome machinery that was the do-it-yourself publish-

er's stock in trade before the advent of computer-based desktop publishing. Things like paper-cutting guillotines and collating machines vied for space in his living room with more personal objects, such as a splendid marimba (Bob was an accomplished player of that instrument). Once the personal computer came of age in the mid-1980s, Bob dove right in to the world of digital out-putting, becoming a fierce Macintosh parti-

(one of George Wright's daughters) and her husband Dick enabled the GWS to open an executive office. Bob became the Society's first executive director, a position he held until 1998. Characteristically, he declined to be paid, using the money instead to bring me aboard as his assistant. As the years passed, the organization developed to the level that exists today. Bob was instrumental in all parts of that development: building up the biennial



After the GWS opened an executive office in 1990, the Board of Directors began meeting yearly at different locations around the country. Pictured here are most of the members of the Board, ca. 1991 (left to right): George Minnucci, Steve Veirs, Kheryn Klubnikin, Stephanie Toothman, Melody Webb, Gary Davis, Jonathan Bayless, Lloyd Loope, and executive director Bob Linn. (photo courtesy of Dave Harmon)

san. The earliest issues of *The George Wright Forum* had been produced by him on an IBM Selectric typewriter; these gave way to the wonderful world of Macs, with such unheard-of luxuries as an 8-inch black-and-white screen and a whopping 128k of memory. It was, in its own way, a revolution, but still the work had to be done, and it was Bob who was there to do it on a day-today basis.

That was the situation until 1990, when a generous gift from Sherry Wright Brichetto

conferences, expanding the size and quality of the *Forum*, and extending the influence of the GWS by networking with other groups. After he stepped down from the executive director's position, Bob continued to work daily for the GWS until August of this year, handling membership matters, laying out the *Forum* and other GWS

publications, processing payments, coordinating mailings, doing whatever he was asked.

People today throw around superlatives like "incredible" as if they were so much loose change. What Bob Linn did for the George Wright Society was, quite literally, incredible. All his work for the George Wright Society—24 years of full-time labor—was done entirely on a volunteer basis. He could have had a salary any time he chose; he never asked, and when offered, he refused. His devotion to the

organization and its principles never wavered, no matter what the ups and downs of the moment. He testified before Congress, edited conference proceedings, provided guidance and leadership on all kinds of park matters—and took out the office trash every week because nobody else wanted to do it. He baked legendary chocolate chip cookies and kept the office cookie jar full for years; anybody who walked through the door was welcome to them (and there were people who dropped in just to have a cookie or two). He never complained when things went sour, and never looked to take a bow—not once.

Those who knew Bob solely through his Park Service and GWS careers will not be aware of how important he was to local and regional community groups in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. While working at Isle Royale in the 1950s, he was a founding member of the park's cooperating association, the Isle Royale Natural History Association (IRNHA). Bob was responsible for starting IRNHA's publications program, which has gone on to become nationally recognized for its excellence. IRNHA remains a vibrant, independent park cooperating association today. On top of this, Bob also was instrumental in creating the Upper Peninsula Environmental Coalition (UPEC) in 1975. UPEC remains the only advocacy organization focused exclusively on the environment of Upper Michigan. Bob had a Ben Franklin-like

affinity for the printing profession, and over the years supplied letters, brochures, placards, placemats, and other information for such local groups as Kiwanis, the Barbara Kettle Gundlach Women's Shelter Home, Little Brothers-Friends of the Elderly, the League of Women Voters, and more.

In recognition of his many accomplishments in the local community, Bob was honored in 2002 with the Heart and Hands Award, which is given each year to a person who works for peace, justice, and the environment in the Keweenaw region. Bob also received—but only after a lot of persuasion—the GWS's highest honor, The George Melendez Wright Award for Excellence, in 2001, sharing it with Ted Sudia.

Bob richly deserved these honors, but he did not seek them. A man of great personal integrity and humility, he was truly happiest when working quietly in the background, and was always content to let others take the credit. Bob let his actions speak for him. What he said with his life was this: National parks and other protected places deserve the best research and resource management we can muster; if we give them that much, then the public will understand them better and will always support them. Simple enough on paper, but difficult to achieve on the ground. That is why there is a continuing need for organizations like the George Wright Society, and for people like Bob Linn.

— Dave Harmon

Bob is survived by his former wife, Holley Linn, and by two sons, Chris and Bruce, and their families, all of Hancock, Michigan.