NPS Form 10-900
(Rev. Aug 2002)

OMB No. 1024-0018
(Expires: 1-31-2009)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1316

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name: Listening Point

other names/site number:

2. Location

street & number: 3128 Listening Point Road ☐ not for publication N/A

city or town: Morse Township Ely ☒ vicinity

state: Minnesota code: MN county: St. Louis code: 137 zip code: 55731

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☒ nationally ☐ statewide ☐ locally. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Britta L. Bloomberg 11/2/07

Signature of certifying official Date

Britta L. Bloomberg, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer

State or Federal agency and bureau: Minnesota Historical Society

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

☑ entered in the National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet.

Signature of the Keeper: Patrick Andrus

Date of Action: 12/26/2007

☐ determined eligible for the National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.

☐ removed from the National Register.

☐ other, (explain): _____

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)
- ☒ private
- ☐ public-local
- ☐ public-State
- ☐ public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)
- ☐ building(s)
- ☒ district
- ☐ site
- ☐ structure
- ☐ object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
3	1	buildings
		sites
2		structure
		objects
5	1	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.
N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register
-0-

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/camp
LANDSCAPE/conservation area

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/museum
LANDSCAPE/conservation area
EDUCATION

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)
No Style

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)
foundation STONE
walls WOOD/log
WOOD/weatherboard
roof WOOD/shingle
other ASPHALT/shingle

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- ☐ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☒ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☐ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ B removed from its original location.
- ☐ C a birthplace or a grave.
- ☐ D a cemetery.
- ☐ E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ F a commemorative property.
- ☒ G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Conservation

Literature

Period of Significance

1956 - 1982

Significant Dates

1957

1959

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Olson, Sigurd F.

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

unknown

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #_____
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #_____

Primary location of additional data:

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☒ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other

Name of repository:
Minnesota Historical Society

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property approx. 20

Crab Lake, Minn.
1956, Photorevised 1986

UTM References
(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing
1.	15	573357	5305907
2.	15	574059	5305922
3.	15	574059	5305488
4.	15	573362	5305471

☐ See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description
(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification
(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title	David C. Anderson				
organization				date	
street and number	169 Lundy Bridge Drive			telephone	563-382-3079
city or town	Waukon	state	Iowa	zip code	52172

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items
(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name					
street & number				telephone	
city or town		state		zip code	

DESCRIPTION

Listening Point is a historic district of approximately 20 acres located on the east shore (south arm) of Burntside Lake, about 9 miles west of Ely in northern St. Louis County, Minnesota. The nominated property comprises 12 ¼ lots in the Sha-Wa-Nok Beach subdivision of Morse Township and includes three contributing buildings and two contributing structures. (1) These are a cabin, sauna, outhouse, platform/dock, and a system of trails (or footpaths). Also on the property is a canvas covered, wood frame yurt which is non-contributing and two woodsheds.

Natural Landscape Features

The property is in northern Minnesota within the Superior National Forest that includes the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW). Burntside Lake is located just outside the BWCAW to the south and east. It is irregular in shape and covers 11 square miles with 53 miles of shoreline and 180 islands set in hilly, tree covered terrain.

A ledgerock point of land is a distinctive landscape feature in the district. It extends into the lake to the southwest and creates a small cove with a sandy bottom. This exposed bedrock dates to the early Precambrian Age, roughly 2.5 to 3 billion years ago, and is classed among the oldest rock in the world. Here at the point, the rock surface is enlivened by quartz veins that contrast with the predominantly darker shades of the surrounding Ely greenstone.

Scratches on the bedrock from glacial ice are visible at the water's edge. These striations were formed during the Wisconsin glaciation (ca. 75,000-12,000 years ago). The numerous hills, lakes and swamps of the regional landscape are the legacy of this relatively recent geological history, with thin acidic soils formed on the bedrock or glacial drift.

At Listening Point there are numerous large lichen covered boulders (glacial erratics) along with grasses, wild flowers and red and white pine, especially on the point but also a mixture of aspen, birch, balsam fir and spruce further inland. The terrain is fairly flat on the property rising to the northwest with a marshy area in the southeast corner.

Buildings and Other Introduced Features

These include a road, trail system, three buildings, two sheds, a dock and a bed of fleur-de-lis, an iris native to Asia that was planted by the Olsons for its beauty but also to commemorate the French voyageurs who travelled through the area in the fur trade era. The fleur-de-lis is an insignia of the French monarchy.

Olson purchased the property in 1956 and built a single lane access road on the northeast corner off County Road No. 404 (also known as Van Vac Road). This runs about 1,500 feet to a circular parking lot about 370 feet from the cabin which is reached via one of the several foot paths built on the property. These lead from the cabin to the point and to the dock as well as to the sauna, from which they also lead to the parking lot, and east into the parcel's interior. They are narrow and conform to existing landscape features, and are built up with gravel only to the extent necessary to achieve a reasonably level surface above the rocky ground.

The two principal buildings are the cabin and sauna, both moved to the property in pieces and reassembled and/

or rebuilt as necessary on site. A few logs were replaced due to rot, but these have since acquired the same dark, silver grey weathered surface as the originals. New roofs were placed on both buildings when they were moved to the property in 1957.

The cabin was originally built by Finnish immigrants on a homestead south of Ely in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. It is a single room horizontal log building measuring 16 by 24 feet resting on a foundation of cobble-stones and rubble rock picked up on the beach or elsewhere on the property and set in mortar. The pine logs are hewn flat on four sides and joined at the corners with an unusual form of corner notch, the "hook notched"or locking dovetail. (2) The term refers to a vertical notch at the inside of each joint. The low pitch roof, with relatively deep projections at both cornice and gable ends, is clad in wood shingles, replaced in 2001.

It is not known to what extent the current cabin resembles the original in terms of window and door placement. One distinguishing feature of the building not included in the original is the cobblestone fireplace built from stones found at the site by stonemason Tauno Maki. In this method of construction the stones are mostly left in their original rounded form and set into a bed of mortar. The fireplace is in the center of the east wall where there are no windows.

There is a set of double four-light hinged windows on the west side facing the point and identical windows on either side of the entrance (south wall) and in the center of the north wall.

The logs are exposed throughout in both the interior and exterior as are the locally milled jackpine roof boards laid vertically on log purlins.

The furniture in the west end of the cabin was made to Olson's specifications by a local woodworker, Otto Tjader. This includes a table and benches below the west window and two single beds. At the east end there are two rocking chairs and a small table made by the Old Hickory Company in the 1930s and originally located at the Peterson Fishing Camp (lodge) on Basswood Lake. They were obtained by the Olsons when the lodge was purchased by the Forest Service in 1955 and dismantled.

The fireplace projects into the cabin sufficiently to allow for a mantel above the opening. Above the mantel there is a shelf that runs around the interior on all four walls just above the window level. This contains photos, books, kerosene lamps and mementoes and artifacts acquired by the Olsons over the years including a caribou skin model boat (Umiak), snowshoes, and canoe paddles.

A small cooking area including a propane refrigerator and a two-burner hot plate is located in the southeast corner. There is no electricity, telephone, or running water to the cabin, so artificial light is provided by candles and kerosene lamps and water is carried up from the lake. There is a freestanding wood burning heating stove in the northwest corner. A traditional cedar strip and canvas canoe rests overhead supported by the south wall plate and a transverse wooden beam.

A wood frame outhouse is located north of the cabin. Two small, open woodsheds (one modern) are located on the property. The location of a well has not been identified.

The other log building on the property is the sauna, a 13 foot square, two- room structure moved to the site from the Embarrass, Minnesota area where numerous Finnish-American farmsteads are located. Reportedly dating from the 1920s, this is similar in materials and construction to the cabin except that the corner notching is the

full dovetail type. This building is an example of the typical Finnish-American sauna (steam bath) and it was not altered in any way from its original condition. One enters the sauna into the cold room (or dressing room) located next to the hot (or steam) room in the center of which stands the sauna stove---a 30 gallon barrel with a steel box welded to the top that is filled with cobblestones. A series of benches rise against one wall and a narrow window is placed in the wall opposite. The sauna was repaired in 2000, including a new pine floor and roof. Some of the logs were replaced and a new stove of the same type as the original was installed. The sauna is located about 150 feet up from the lake and 400 feet from the cabin. An 8- by- 12 foot woodshed storing firewood for the sauna is located nearby.

The second contributing structure is a 1970s swimming dock or platform. With dimensions of 10-by-20 feet it is large enough to serve as the floor of a building. Originally this was a swimming dock as there is no sandy beach, even though the lake bottom is sandy a short distance from shore. In later years it has also served as a convenient level platform for small gatherings of visitors, either to enjoy the scenery or participate in educational programs.

The platform/dock is oriented with its long side parallel to the shore next to the water's edge. It is constructed of red cedar 4-by-4 inch joists supporting 2-by-10 inch cedar decking. It rests on both stones and 4-by-4 inch posts. The deck was replaced in 2005 with the same material as the original. The fleur-de-lis mentioned above is next to the trail a short distance from the platform.

As late as about 1980 there was a 4-by-12 foot dock off the point into the bay, but this was removed by the Olsons due to its deteriorating condition by the time Sigurd Olson died in 1982.

In 2000 the Wicks built a 14-foot diameter wood frame yurt on a wood platform on the parcel they purchased in 1999. This serves as a family retreat but also as a gathering place for groups of visitors to Listening Point.

In 1998 the Listening Point Foundation was organized to preserve the historic and natural integrity of the property as it was during Sigurd Olson's lifetime. The site is maintained and managed as an open air museum with public access limited so as to minimize the impact on both the contributing resources and the landscape. The Foundation also sponsors wilderness education programs that include field trips to and small gatherings at the site.

Notes

(1) The initial purchase in 1956 includes part of Lot 5 and Lots 6 -12 of Block 3. All the contributing resources are on this parcel. Lots 13-16 south of the original parcel were added in 1958. In 1999 part of Lot 5 and Lots 6 and 7 were sold to Chuck and Marty Wick and are included in the nominated property.

(2) "Hook notched" is the term used by Terry Jordan in his *American Log Buildings* (Chapel Hill, 1985), pp. 132-134 and Fig. 3-22. It is also known locally as a "locking dovetail," or "dog-neck corner."

SIGNIFICANCE

Listening Point is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion B in the areas of Conservation and Literature for its association with Sigurd F. Olson, who is nationally important for the wide range, national scope and success of his many activities devoted to wilderness conservation. The period of significance is 1956-1982. Olson lived in the Ely, Minnesota area from 1923 until his death in 1982. His work in conservation began with the movement to protect the Quetico-Superior wilderness from commercial power projects and efforts to extend roads into the area in the 1920s and culminated in the passage of the federal Wilderness Acts of 1964 and 1978. Sigurd Olson was also an important nature writer and interpretive naturalist, writing many essays and nine books with the goal of building public support for wilderness preservation. He was an educator, public speaker, lobbyist and consultant/advisor to the U. S. Department of the Interior, the National Park Service and national conservation organizations including the Wilderness Society and National Parks Association, serving both as president. Listening Point is of exceptional importance nationally as a representation of Olson's land ethic and the importance of natural and human history and aesthetics in his philosophical outlook. He selected this 20 acre parcel for its potential as a living expression of personal values and as a place to go for inspiration and solitude as well as for its geological features, relatively unspoiled wilderness character and location. He minimized his impact on the land by selecting and locating buildings and erecting structures with materials and methods of construction that are in harmony with the property's natural features and reflect important aspects of the history of the area that includes the nearby Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW). In the words of his son Robert K. Olson, Listening Point was "the touchstone of his intellectual and spiritual growth and existence." (1)

There is one other property associated with Sigurd Olson, namely the family home in Ely. This includes a house and writing studio, or "shack" and if found to possess historic integrity it would also be eligible for listing under Criterion B. The shack is where Olson did most of his writing after 1937 when it was built.

General

Sigurd F. Olson was born in Chicago in 1899 and his family moved to Wisconsin in 1906, initially to Sister Bay in Door County but eventually settling in Ashland on the shore of Lake Superior. Sigurd attended Northland College there and later moved on to the University of Wisconsin in Madison where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree with a major in agriculture in 1920. He was drawn to teaching and got a job in the high schools at Nashwauk and Keewatin in northern Minnesota teaching animal husbandry and related science courses including botany and geology. During this two year stint, in June 1921 he took his first canoe trip into what eventually became the BWCAW (hereafter referred to as the boundary waters) and had his first piece of writing published a month later, an account of this trip. In August he married Elizabeth Uhrenholdt, whom he had known since his college days in Ashland. The Olsons briefly returned to Madison so Sigurd could enroll at the University of Wisconsin Graduate School to study geology. Elizabeth took a teaching job to help support them financially. She was pregnant with their first child when they moved to Ely in February 1923 where Sigurd got a job teaching biology at the local high school. He also worked as a canoe trip guide during the summer months, and by the time their second son was born in 1925, all the major directions in Olson's life were more or less set: family man, educator, writer and wilderness advocate.

The successful pursuit of these endeavors depended as much on the collaboration and support of his wife as on Sigurd himself. She was always the first person to critically review his writings and she provided the necessary reassurance that enabled him to become the writer he had wanted to be from the time of his first encounter with wilderness. She was also the family's mainstay when Sigurd was off on speaking tours and doing administrative work and lobbying Congress in Washington, D.C. (2)

Sigurd taught at the Ely high school until 1931 when he took a year off to pursue a Master's Degree in animal ecology at the University of Illinois at Champaign, a major that included courses in animal biology and human physiology. After his return he taught full time at the Ely Junior College and became dean in 1936, a position he left in 1947 to devote all his time to writing and wilderness advocacy. (3)

Available documentation of his methods and effectiveness as a teacher reveal that when possible he took his classes out of doors. In this regard his thinking is similar to other well-known naturalist/educators including Louis Agassiz and John Burroughs. The goal was to teach students to "read nature" by helping them gain scientific understanding and esthetic appreciation. (4) According to several reports, Olson was both popular and effective as a teacher, and his speaking ability was also noted by many who met him including the New York publisher Alfred Knopf. (5)

As for his wilderness advocacy, the story of Olson's move in that direction is much the same as that of many major figures in the history of wilderness conservation; Sigurd fell in love with the northern wilderness just as serious threats to its integrity were developing that would have to be confronted. (6) In his case it was a major U. S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service (Forest Service) initiative to open up the boundary waters with a series of roads. Among other things, Olson and a few others in Ely realized this would have serious consequences for local canoe outfitters and guides, whose clientele were keen on experiencing untrammeled primitive areas accessible only by canoe. Another developing threat to the area was a proposal by lumberman Edward Backus to build a series of power dams in the Rainy River drainage system, a project that would have drastically changed the water levels on many lakes and streams. It was at about this time (1924) that Olson guided Will Dilg into the border lakes. Dilg had organized a national wilderness and wildlife conservation organization, The Izaak Walton League, in 1922 and he assured Olson that the League would join the battle to halt these proposals. (7) Olson organized a local chapter of the League shortly thereafter.

The controversy over how to manage the American boundary waters and the larger area of which it is a part, the Quetico-Superior region that includes a segment in Ontario, was national in scope because the land is mostly owned by the federal government. While many issues were settled, and the boundary waters were granted wilderness status in 1978, its complex boundaries and valuable mineral deposits mean that the controversy will continue. Sigurd Olson remained engaged in this struggle to his final days knowing better perhaps than most how fragile the wilderness character of the area was and would remain. (8)

American Wilderness Conservation and the Quetico-Superior Country

Wilderness conservation in the modern sense began in the late nineteenth century and became an important issue during the Progressive Era. As the well-known conservationist John Muir, whose boyhood home in Wisconsin is a National Landmark, emphasized, "it started with trees." And according to wilderness conservation historian Stephen Fox, "Real forest protection . . . began among dedicated amateurs outside government." (9)

The contest in the beginning was between environmental activists (amateurs with no economic stake) and interests that did have a stake in exploiting resources in wilderness areas. Civil servants in the departments of agriculture and the interior were often of decisive importance in establishing and administering policy and writing legislation.

Landmarks in the early history of conservation include the organization of the American Forestry Association in 1875 and the creation of the forestry division of the Department of Agriculture a year later. Gifford Pinchot was the first chief of the forestry division and the first professional American forester and he became a leading spokesman for conservation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With Pinchot, however, conservation meant eliminating wasteful use of timber and other resources in wilderness, not preservation of it for its own sake or for purely aesthetic values. There was also the issue of the recreational use of timber lands and other resources in wilderness, which did not conflict with its preservation until the advent of automobiles. But it was only in the Wilderness Act of 1964 that the modern idea of wilderness was spelled out officially, that is by legal statute:

> A wilderness . . . is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are left untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. (Section 2 (c))

The purpose of the legislation was to establish a "National Wilderness Preservation System" to be composed of federally owned lands designated by Congress as 'wilderness areas,' to be administered "in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness." (10)

The BWCAW, also known as the "boundary waters," is a 1,680 square mile wilderness within a larger territory called the Quetico-Superior region encompassing some 14,500 square miles along the United States-Ontario border from the Grand Portage Indian Reservation on Lake Superior to the Voyageurs National Park near International Falls. It is in the northern part of Minnesota's "Arrowhead," a portion of the state that includes the three northeasternmost counties : Cook, Lake and St. Louis. The Ontario portion of this territory is within the larger Quetico-Ontario Provincial Park and in Minnesota the Superior National Forest. (11) Both were created in 1909.

Quetico-Superior's principal feature is water---thousands of lakes and rivers, many interconnected with relatively short overland portages providing routes of communication and trade established by many generations of Native Americans. Later, Europeans and Euro-Americans entered the territory using many of the same routes, initially during the fur trade but also in search of precious minerals, land and timber. There is no other wilderness in the United States including Alaska and Maine that is quite the same as Quetico-Superior. It is still best traversed by canoe.

The first initiative to protect the boundary waters in the United States came in 1902 from Minnesota State Forestry Commissioner Christopher C. Andrews, who persuaded the federal government to withdraw half a million acres from public sale to create a forest reserve. An additional 114,000 acres were set aside in 1905. Unlike on the Canadian side where the land is almost entirely in public ownership, the American boundary waters has always been a mixture of federal, state, county and private holdings, a major problem in the effort to maintain its wilderness character.

Following the fur trade, logging and iron mining have been the major economic pursuits in the Arrowhead region. Logging for lumber was essentially finished by 1910, but cutting trees for pulp and paper still occurs on the boundary waters periphery. Mining has always been a much more important industry but with localized impact unlike logging which affected a much larger area within the region. So far mining has been limited to zones outside the wilderness although the first commercial shipment of iron ore from Minnesota came from the Vermillion Range just west of Ely in 1884. The potential of recreational tourism was recognized early on but until the mid-twentieth century it remained secondary to the others, being contingent on roads and automobiles, which succeeded horses and railroads as the preferred means of transportation for people. Outdoor recreation in the United States had been growing since at least the last quarter of the nineteenth century but was limited to locations served by railroads and watercraft; otherwise it was accessed on horseback or on foot. The advent of the automobile of course changed everything. In places like the Arrowhead of Minnesota there was a clamor for roads by the end of World War I, and the national good roads movement (formed in 1913) had become a powerful force in all sections of the country. Since the recreational possibilities of the automobile were recognized from the first, there was strong public interest in having roads extended into national parks and other scenic areas.

In 1922 the Forest Service had developed a proposal to build several roads within the Superior National Forest where none had previously existed, linking up with existing roads and accessing some of the most remote parts of the boundary waters. While the new roads proposal was a Forest Service initiative, regional commercial interests became enthusiastic supporters. "A Road to Every Lake" would make the Superior National Forest "the Playground of the Nation," according to the boosters' slogans. (12)

Intense controversy developed and some were concerned that the integrity of the wilderness areas was at stake, but the economic interests geographically closest to the affected areas were generally in favor. The City of Ely and its Commercial Club supported the proposal while the Chamber of Commerce of the largest city in the region (Duluth) opposed it in part. A number of conservation groups including the Izaak Walton League were opposed. The concern of Sigurd Olson and other guides and the local canoe outfitters convinced the Commercial Club to vote against the proposal, but the vote was reversed six days later. (13)

In 1926 United States Secretary of Agriculture William Jardin issued a compromise wilderness and road policy for the Superior National Forest that eliminated some of the proposed new roads but permitted others. The settlement allowed for two roads to be built from Ely, one to the northwest (the Echo Trail) and the other east, the Fernberg Road. A major effect of this compromise was to set up a situation guaranteed to produce more conflict later in that it permitted 33 resorts to be built on lakes not previously accessible and it created a corridor on either side of the Fernberg Road that remains an awkward intrusion into the BWCAW. The settlement also included the establishment by the Forest Service of three "roadless areas" in what later became the BWCAW. These areas included about 1,000 square miles of "the best of the lakes and waterways." (14)

When the consequences of the settlement became clear, Olson wrote his first articles focused on conservation. They were critical of how the Forest Service was administering the Superior National Forest as a whole but included pointed criticism of the 1926 compromise. (15)

Another major threat to the wilderness character of the boundary waters reached a crisis point in the early 1920s, a plan by lumber magnate Edward Backus to build several power dams on lakes and streams that flowed into the Rainy River watershed. This would have raised the water level up to 80 feet in many lakes, inundating a vast

acreage of shoreline in the canoe country. (16) Backus already owned a power dam and paper mill on the Rainy River at International Falls. He and his supporters argued that the vast amount of electricity generated by the additional dams would bring much needed economic growth to the region by enabling more extensive exploitation of its minerals and forests.

The first phase of a campaign to stop Backus was led by a group formed in 1927 in association with the Izaak Walton League, the Quetico-Superior Council led by Ernest Oberholtzer, a neighbor to Backus on Rainy Lake. The first battle was successful in that an Act of Congress was signed into law in 1930 by President Herbert Hoover. This is known as the Shipstead-Nolan Act, and it prohibited raising the water level of lakes and rivers on land owned by the federal government anywhere in the country, making the law nationally significant. It also went beyond the immediate threat posed by Mr. Backus in putting a hold on all federal lands north of Township 60 in the entire Arrowhead region and restricted logging in ways that would protect "the natural beauty of shorelines for recreational use" on these lands. (17)

This did not, however, end the threat posed by Backus since the International Joint Commission, an official body created by the United States and Canada by treaty in 1909, had the final say on the dam proposal. Important hearings were held by the Commission in 1932 and Sigurd Olson testified in opposition. According to his biographer, this "marked the beginning of a new phase in his role as a wilderness activist." (18) Earlier that year Olson had testified in Ely against allowing a power dam on state-owned land near Ely. The Izaak Walton League and Ernest Oberholtzer were also impressed by Olson's involvement. He was Oberholtzer's junior by 15 years and in 1947 he succeeded the older man as "the spearhead figure of the Quetico-Superior movement. (19) The Backus plan was rejected and the goal of the Quetico-Superior Council became the consolidation of the boundary waters wilderness by promoting Forest Service purchase of the private lands there, a program supported by Secretary of Agriculture William Jardine.

Recognizing the importance of the Quetico-Superior as a "wilderness sanctuary," President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an executive order on June 30,1934 creating the Quetico-Superior Committee, a body that was to include the Quetico-Superior Council members plus one member each from the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior to facilitate communication between the Council and the federal government. Through the Committee, the Council was able to effectively promote its program of consolidating the boundary waters wilderness, but in 1947 an impasse had been reached in drafting a bill that to enable the Forest Service to purchase private land in the area for recreational purposes, establishing an important precedent for the agency which had never before acquired land for such use anywhere. It was in connection with this piece of legislation that Olson resigned his position at the Ely Junior College and was hired by the Izaak Walton League as its "wilderness ecologist" to lobby Congress and organize a media campaign to gain support for the bill across the country. He wrote several articles urging support of the bill in journals ranging from the *Christian Science Monitor* to *Sports Afield*, *Nature Magaine* and *Living Wilderness*, the organ of the Wilderness Society created in 1935 and in which Olson was to hold leadership positions. He had reached a pivotal point in his life. (20)

After President Truman signed the bill in 1948, Minnesota's Eighth District United States Representative John Blatnik praised Olson for his invaluable work in getting it passed:

> The publicity which you gave this through your excellent magazine and newspaper articles certainly brought results, for many Congressmen told me of receiving letters and wires from interested organizations and individuals. (21)

One particularly powerful and effective piece was an editorial by Olson in *Sports Afield*, "Quetico-Superior Challenge," that had been sent to newspapers all across the Midwest and that Blatnik had inserted into the *Congressional Record.* In that piece Olson wrote that "the development of airplane fishing camps will spell the doom of our cherished canoe country within a year." What he was referring to was a number of resorts and other facilities built in areas of the boundary waters with access provided by airplanes. This had not been anticipated when the roadless areas were created in 1926. Using aircraft, individuals could build resorts on private property in remote lakes, thus violating the intent of both existing legislation and Forest Service policy. It had become a serious issue during the early 1940s and reached crisis proportions in 1947. And once again an issue acutely affecting the boundary waters achieved national attention.

Howard Zahniser, executive secretary of the Wilderness Society and editor of its organ *Living Wilderness*, publicized the threat by working with Oberholtzer, conservationist Olaus Murie and others to terminate the practice. No less important was the proliferation of motorboats in the roadless areas. These developments had to be confronted and "no individual proved as important in that campaign as Sigurd Olson." (22) Among other things Olson drew up a detailed statement in favor of an air space reservation based on the legal history and policy precedents set relating to the Quetico-Superior area. Forest Service officials sought an "air-space reserve" over the Quetico-Superior from President Truman and it was granted effective January l, 1951, although challenges delayed full implementation of the ban until 1956.

The battle to ban airplanes was protracted and stressful for Olson since it put him at odds with most of the population of Ely, where the divide on this issue and other efforts to preserve and expand wilderness had deepened. It also established his standing in the conservation movement, drew national attention, and set important precedents for wilderness protection elsewhere. Other wilderness areas in the United States had been set aside in the national forests since the 1920s, but after the air ban was affirmed, none was better protected. (23)

Sigurd Olson's role in the wilderness movement in northern Minnesota continued but his growing stature on the national scene drew him into the larger campaign to protect and expand wilderness wherever possible while working to foster awareness of wilderness values and open eyes to nature and beauty. Looking back on his decision in 1947 to become a professional conservationist, or as he put it:

> a freelance canoeman trying to get the rest of the world excited about saving . . . the finest recreational resource on the continent, our wilderness canoe country...
>
> I have made the break and new horizons have opened up – a fuller life – more realization—more and bigger objectives. . . . I have found fame and friends and encouragement. When I write now it will be with a new and bigger audience. (24)

Olson and the Wilderness Conservation Movement, 1956-1982

The grass roots based Wilderness Society under the leadership of Howard Zahniser and others including Olson, who joined the society's governing council, decided to begin work on a bill in Congress that would establish a national wilderness preservation system. Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota sponsored the bill in June 1956 after getting Sigurd Olson's opinion on the matter. Olson's reply included these words:

> I feel strongly that this is the last chance to preserve the wilderness on this continent, for we are on the verge of an era where the pressures to destroy or change it will become greater than anything we have ever experienced. (25)

Among the objectives of the bill was to standardize through federal law certain protections to areas given wilderness designation. It would prohibit logging and mining, and motorized traffic of all kinds would be limited. In northeast Minnesota the bill was generally opposed in that it was seen as unduly limiting economic growth. When news of the bill reached Ely, Sigurd Olson and his supporters were subjected to renewed hostility. The publisher of the local *Ely Miner* suggested that the town would have no future if the bill was enacted since it would shut down all three of the area's basic industries: mining, lumbering and tourism. Olson was able to ease the controversy somewhat by insisting on changes in the language of the bill to make it more intelligible and specifying that it would not ban outboard motors where they were already in use. Moreover, other uses, e.g. resorts, would be allowed to remain as and where they were already established and the the federal government would not seize private property outside the roadless areas. (26) This compromise eased opposition in northeast Minnesota but not in the Rocky Mountain and West Coast states where conservationists joined the opposition because they did not support the compromise that granted an exception to existing uses in the boundary waters.

Nevertheless the Wilderness Act of 1964 did pass in Congress and President Lyndon Johnson signed it into law. Its provisions granted wilderness status to some nine million acres including the boundary waters, which had been officially dubbed the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) in 1958. The bill also included a provision for review of all other federally owned "primitive areas" in the United States for later inclusion in the wilderness system. In fact the creation of a national wilderness system was perhaps the most important provision in the bill:

> The Wilderness Act stands as a landmark achievement in the protection and management of lands defined as wilderness in the U.S. (27)

This was the view of most conservationists and Sigurd Olson's contributions to getting it passed were many--- as a lobbyist in Washington, DC, publicist via many essays in the popular and specialized professional press, and as the person who was able to convince the opposition in northeast Minnesota that the bill would not mean any change in established uses of the boundary waters. It would take another Act of Congress to address some of the exceptions in the 1964 law regarding resorts and motors in the boundary waters, namely the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness Act of 1978.

Olson's activities on behalf of the boundary waters were not limited to the American side of the border. The Quetico-Superior Council's program had included getting a treaty signed with Canada on matters affecting the boundary waters in both the Superior National Forest and the Quetico Provincial Park. This was not accomplished and threats to the wilderness on both sides of the border had emerged more than once since the 1920s, primarily relating to logging. By the time this issue emerged again in 1970 in Canada, Olson had achieved iconic status in the conservation movement even beyond the United States border, and especially in Canada where he was well known and where his books were also popular. On October 3, 1970 Olson gave the keynote speech at an important meeting on the issue in Ontario, an event that was called an "international summit" by Canadian conservationists. According to Olson's biographer David Backes, he:

> galvanized his listeners. The resulting media coverage was decidedly pro-wilderness. (The) speech was the turning point of the campaign, which led to a ban on logging and reclassification

of the Quetico as a primitive park. (28)

Sigurd Olson was one of that rare breed of humanity that can communicate effectively in many different ways: by action, through both the spoken and written word, and visually. (29) As a speaker he became sought after by many national conservation groups. He became involved with the National Parks Association, created in 1919 as a "friendly ally"of the National Park Service. He became president in 1953 and subsequently got involved in two important conservation issues---protection of the historic Chesapeake and Ohio Canal in Maryland and stopping a water project on the Colorado River affecting the Dinosaur National Monument (Echo Park). Both were successful and the first was widely publicized after United States Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas challenged the editor of the *Washington Post* to join him in walking the length of the 185 mile canal. The challenge was accepted and Douglas invited 36 people including Sigurd Olson to join the trek.

At a meeting of the National Parks Association in 1954, where Olson gave the keynote address, the publisher Alfred Knopf was in the audience and was impressed to the extent of contacting Olson about writing a book. More about this below, but in 1959 he resigned his position as president of the National Parks Association and joined the National Park Service Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings and Monuments the same year and in 1962 he became a consultant to the Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall. He had already been working as a National Park Service consultant and joined its task force charged with investigating the feasibility of a wilderness preserve in Alaska. This group's recommendations were not immediately followed but in 1980 they were realized in the Alaska National Interest Lands Act. Summarizing Olson's achievements in Washington during the early 1960s, David Backes writes that Olson:

> worked for several years on issues that became major planks in Udall's conservation program. He had, for example, worked behind the scenes to arrange the transfer of lands and timber rights in a key portion of the proposed Point Reyes National Seashore in California. He also had inspected Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and wrote a report advocating national park status for the area.

Olson also traveled:

> across the United States to study potential additions to the national park system. He paddled . . . the Suwannee River in Georgia and Florida; he walked the beaches of Cumberland Island in Georgia and Padre Island in Texas; he traveled the Missouri River in Montana and the Currant and Eleven Point rivers in Missouri. Nearly everyplace he went the proposal was for a national seashore or lakeshore or river. (30)

In 1968 Olson became president of the Wilderness Society but resigned three years later for health reasons and in order to devote more time to writing. During his years as president he opposed the Alaska pipeline but supported the effort to establish the Voyageurs National Park in Minnesota just west of the boundary waters in the Rainy Lake area. Protection of this segment of the border lakes had been in the Quetico-Superior program all along. In 1961 Olson persuaded National Park Service director Conrad Wirth to visit the site. Wirth agreed that the area deserved park status and Olson claimed that he himself came up with the name, "Voyageurs," referring of course to the fur trade and the many voyageurs who traversed the area. It took ten years to achieve park status, and after the legislation was finally introduced in 1968 the lines had been drawn once more between strong support in Minnesota generally but with opposition in the northeastern region stemming from the view that the federal government already owned too much land in the region and was too powerful.

The bill became law in 1971 and National Park Director Wirth summed up Olson's contribution in a letter dated December 15, 1978:

> I doubt very much if the Voyageurs National Park would have been established if it had not been for Sig. He not only explained and recommended it, but followed his concept through to its establishment. Of course he had help, but he was the spirit behind it. (31)

In the last major battle over the status and meaning of wilderness in the boundary waters, Sigurd Olson's iconic status was affirmed at home in Ely during the build-up to passage of Public Law 95-495 in 1978 that re-affirmed the wilderness designation of the BWCA by expanding somewhat and clarifying the protected zones within its complicated boundaries. Olson was hung in effigy at a congressional hearing on the bill in Ely. It was passed by Congress and signed into law the same year by President Jimmy Carter.

While wilderness preservation is no less important in the public eye today, in the more than 40 years since President Johnson signed the Wilderness Act, ideas about how wilderness should be defined and how much attention it deserves have changed somewhat in response to new challenges to what might be called the natural order. (32)

In his later years, Sigurd Olson responded to some of these newly emerging issues, recognizing that the larger threats would affect not just wilderness but all planetary life:

> We are at last beginning to understand what is at stake. It is more than wilderness, beauty or peace of mind: it is the survival of man and his culture. Other ages have passed into oblivion; . . . it was not war or pestilence that brought their end, but changing climates, unwise use of the land, and lack of vision. (33)

Sigurd F. Olson and American Nature Writing

Nature writing has been a genre in American letters since Colonial days and it has roots in sixteenth century England. (34) An early example would be Izaak Walton's The *Compleat Angler; or, the Contemplative Man's Recreation* (1653), a book that is more than a how-to manual but also a plea for peace and simplicity in an age of civil war in England.

In the prologue to his anthology, *Great American Nature Writing*, American social and literary critic Joseph Wood Krutch cites additional early English examples but examines the subject in a still wider context, extending his survey to the European Middle Ages and Ancient Greece although his major focus is on the period 1850 to 1950. In his section "Thoreau and the Thoreauists" he indicates that over time one kind of nature writing does not replace another. Rather there are genres and sub-genres as will as recurrent themes. Among these are the search for peace and quiet, especially after the advent of the Industrial Revolution and the desire to escape the unhealthy influences of civilization on mind and body. Related to this is the idea that man must return to nature in order to recover an original innocence that had been corrupted by civilization. And then there is the myth of a Golden Age and nostalgia for an earlier, more primitive way of life.

Krutch also emphasizes the importance of science in nature writing, since without the intimacy with living things that science can offer to man, nature would be "a sort of stage set against which he plays out his drama, rather than something in which he participates." (35)

Another important recurring idea is that nature can supply "a kind of soothing vacuum, a realm of peace which permits man to turn inward upon himself and to ponder the great questions of wisdom and morality . . . " (36)

Although he came too late to be included in Krutch's anthology, most of these themes can be found in the works of Sigurd Olson and others including Aldo Leopold who is not included either and for the same reason. Krutch devotes a good bit of space to conservationists and nature writers Henry David Thoreau, John Burroughs and John Muir, and Olson comes to mind when reading this passage from *Time and Change* by Burroughs who, like Olson, was an educator as well as a writer:

> To absorb a thing is better than to learn it, and we absorb them in the fields and woods and on the farm. When we look upon Nature with fondness and appreciation she meets us halfway and takes a deeper hold upon us than when studiously conned. Hence I say the way of knowledge of Nature is the way of love and enjoyment, and is more surely found in the open air than in the schoolroom or the laboratory. (37)

Krutch considers Burroughs to have been the most popular nature writer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the same could well be said for Sigurd Olson in the second half of the twenthieth century.

Several more recent anthologies and studies of nature writing have defined the field more tightly, and Sigurd Olson figures in all of them, either by including his writing or as a subject of discussion. One of the most important of these, certainly for the period beginning with the year of its first edition (1961) is Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind.* Olson is mentioned in various contexts and is generally regarded as "prominent in the wilderness movement." (38) Nash also suggests that:

> After the passing of the frontier, wilderness literature becomes more specialized and, indeed, has developed in the works of Sigurd Olson . . . and others into a (sub) genre within nature writing. (39)

Conservation historian and philosopher Peter Fritzell links Olson with nature writer Edwin Way Teal and others including John Muir, all notable for their "straightforwardly informative and most often conventionally hopeful" outlook, noting also that Olson is part of the "conventional literary history of nature writing " from Thoreau to Burroughs and Muir. (40)

The most recent anthology (1998), *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, is a collection of nature writings from American theologian and metaphysician Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) to the present. It also includes several essays about how concepts of nature have changed and what it means to recent nature writers and scholars. Olson's 1938 essay "Why Wilderness?" is included and the editors propose that "the popular wilderness idea" or "Received Wilderness Idea" was given shape by Olson along with Edwards, Thoreau, and John Muir among others. (41)

The relationship between nature writing and the conservation movement is important. For one thing, some important nature writers have also been important in the conservation movement as civil servants, lobbyists, leaders of conservation groups, activists and educators, and Olson is among them. In addition, nature writing has aided the conservation movement, a project that includes getting laws passed and enforced, items that are best achieved with public support. Admittedly, the impact of nature writing on public opinion would be difficult to measure. Nevertheless, author Paul Brooks has examined the issue in his book *Speaking for Nature. How Literary Naturalists from Henry Thoreau to Rachel Carson Have Shaped America* (1980). His general thesis is that:

> The literary naturalists have been the appreciators . . . of the out-of-doors (leading) readers to a similar attitude.

Early conservation activities only succeeded with the support of a public "made aware of nature's fragility" by writers such as John Burroughs. (42) With regard to the passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964, Brooks asserts, referring to the opinion of Sigurd Olson on the matter, that by the early 1960s:

> More and more Americans were becoming sensitive to their natural surroundings as they took a fresh look at the world through the eyes of our literary naturalists. (. . .) Along with this went a growing appreciation of the esthetic and spiritual values to be found in wild nature unmanipulated by man. (43)

The Wilderness bill had been introduced by Senator Hubert Humphrey in 1957, but it took years to get it passed because of opposition from logging, mineral and other interests, but in the end "the public pressure was too strong to be resisted forever." (44)

And in addition to Sigurd Olson's role in passage of the Wilderness Act already discussed, it is important to note in the present context that according to historian Mark Harvey:

> Olson's distinctive contribution proved to be his many essays for sporting and conservation publications such as *Living Nature Magazine*, *Wilderness* and the *National Parks Magazine*, that eloquently presented the values of the wild. (45)

Brooks sums up his argument:

> Our greatest nature writers have not necessarily been consciously promulgating any special doctrine or arguing on behalf of any specific cause. But in expressing their profound joy in nature---their observations, their experiences, their insights---they have sharpened our perception of what is at stake and strengthened our resolve to fight for its survival. (46)

Joseph Wood Krutch agreed with this basic contention, namely that our nature writers have been an "indispensable ally" of the conservation movement. (47) And to quote Brooks one last time:

> For it is obvious that we fight to preserve only what we have come to love and understand. (48)

Olson's biography and statements he made late in life strongly suggest that writing was his major life goal. His material is usually drawn from the boundary waters, or gains its initial impulse, theme or direction there

but can also range widely in scope and emphasis, from simple description to entertaining and evocative stories to philosophical musings.

His earliest writing, from the 1920s to about 1940, is about hunting and fishing and was published by outdoor magazines like *Sports Afield.* He also wrote for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources *Minnesota Conservationist* (later the *Conservation Volunteer*), the *Minnesota Waltonian, American Forests* and *Living Wilderness*. Along with the hunting and fishing pieces there are some explicitly philosophical essays and polemical statements regarding the threats to wilderness in the boundary waters. (49)

It was noted above that the publisher Alfred Knopf approached Olson about writing a book in 1954 after hearing him speak at a National Parks Association conference. This was an important breakthrough for Olson since he had been attempting for years to find a publisher and had employed literary agents in the process. Knopf had already published conservation related titles and was himself a wilderness advocate and an advisor to the National Park Service. He was also highly respected in the publishing world for the high quality and wide range of his books.

Olson's first book, *The Singing Wilderness*, contained 245 pages in 34 chapters that can be variously called stories, essays or musings. Most of them had already been written, so he only had to make a few changes and add some additional material. Knopf visited the Olsons in Ely as did the *Life* magazine photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt, whose photos, especially his portraits are well known apart from the magazine. Knopf went on to publish seven more books by Olson in roughly the same format, the last coming out in 1982. The writing is enhanced by artwork commissioned from artists Francis Lee Jaques, Les Kouba and Robert Hines.

The Singing Wilderness came out on April 16, 1956 and it was an instant success. Five weeks later it was a *New York Times* bestseller and has remained Olson's most popular book, with sales near 70,000 in hardcover alone by 1996. It was reprinted several times by Knopf and is now available from the University of Minnesota Press. With this first book Olson finally reached the wider audience he had been seeking for more than 30 years and he had found the form he felt best suited to his message or intent, namely to interpret wilderness in ecological, ethical, aesthetic, historical, scientific and spiritual terms.

His method was to relate his own responses to the natural world in wilderness settings and to share his reflections on natural and human history, including the long period of Native American presence and the relatively recent episodes of logging and the fur trade. The reading public responded with a huge volume of letters of appreciation for having anticipated or put into words what so many of them felt about wilderness. (50)

The success and importance of *The Singing Wilderness* is also demonstrated by the many reviews it stimulated, not only in nature and conservation oriented publications but also in literary and general interest journals like *Saturday Review, the New York Times* and *The Christian Science Monitor.* What many readers found in the book can be illustrated in a piece by Bruce Hutchison ("Woodman's World") in the *Saturday Review.* Mr. Olson "has set down, in the form of a splendid nature book, his personal credo, his philosophy of life, and his dream of America."

> Mr. Olson's argument---if one can call it an argument in such a charmingly simple and manly narrative---is that man's ancient and essential relationship with the wilderness and basic things has been broken in Modern America and must be restored if America is to recover its sanity. Man, he says, must reforge 'a link in his memory which was broken when men abandoned

> the life of the nomad and moved from the forest, plains, and mountains to the security of villages.'(51)
>
> A day with such a man in the woods must be an education. Even with the abbreviated compass of a book written rather like a casual yarn around the evening campfire, he manages to mix an extraordinary amount of information with a picture of the wilderness whole. For to him it is a whole thing, an organic body of which all life, from the lichen to the man, is interdependent, logical, and in timeless rhythm. (52)

The American Library Association concluded that the book had made "a signal contribution to the literary world." (53) It also made a favorable impression on Olson's colleagues in the conservation movement, including Olaus Murie and Benton MacKay of the Wilderness Society, which decided to invite Olson to join the organization's governing council.

His subsequent books are also collections of essays and stories that can stand alone although there is usually a general theme that provides some degree of flow or coherence. This is certainly true for his second book, which differs from the others because of the special association with him. This is *Listening Point*. It came out in 1958 and was also widely reviewed and has remained popular over the years. According to David Backus, *The Singing Wilderness*, *Listening Point* and *Reflections from the North Country* (1976) remain Olson's most popular books. (54)

The Significance of Listening Point the Place

There have been many nature writers in American literary history, but few were active in the conservation movement of their time and fewer still left a property that expresses in built form the values they articulated in words. The National Register includes properties associated with conservationists Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, the Muries (Adolph, Olaus and Margaret) and John Muir, but none are associated with these individuals in the same way as Listening Point is to Sigurd Olson. Listening Point is an example of built philosophy, or "showing with an ax rather than tell(ing) with a pen." (55)

Among properties associated with conservationist-writers, Henry David Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond comes to mind as a project similar to what Olson did at Listening Point. And while the association is equally intimate, the men had different objectives. Thoreau wanted to determine how much one could do without in living simply and close to nature, and Olson set out to provide an example of how one should treat nature and the remnants of history when establishing his presence on the land.

Since Listening Point was not intended to be a primary residence, Olson was free to select a piece of land and build on it without the limitations imposed on a permanent residence. And yet the fact that the primary structure on Listening Point, the cabin (minus the fireplace), had been the year-a-round domicile for a family of immigrant homesteaders in the area was important to Olson because of its aesthetic appeal and historical interest.

The motives behind selecting the place, what it means, and how it was accomplished have been best articulated by Olson himself and his younger son Robert K. Olson, who wrote a booklet for the Listening Point Education Series in 2004, *The Story of Listening Point*. This is drawn from a wealth of source material in his collection and his own recollections. It is a history from a family perspective but with due attention given to how

it relates to the larger contexts of wilderness protection, the conservation movement, and world affairs.

The land was purchased in 1956 and the book came out two years later. It is a series of essays and stories and most relate to the Listening Point property either as material drawn directly from observations and descriptions or as the subject of an essay that may have occurred to him there but that subsequently takes him far afield, sometimes returning to the point but other times not. The significance of the place begins with Olson's choice of the land and what he did and did not do there. The primary motives, objectives and values that guided his decisions are on display for the visitor and also articulated in his writings.

For years Olson had the intention of someday locating a piece of ground on a lake near Ely for a cabin, but by the time this particular parcel became available, he was more ready than ever for several reasons, the most important perhaps being the increasing stress associated with being a leading figure in the wilderness preservation movement, locally and at the national level as well. At home in Ely he had lived with the hostility of opponents for years, and he was spending increasing amounts of time away from home in Washington, DC lobbying, giving speeches across the country and administering the National Parks Association, of which he was president. And when he became famous after *The Singing Wilderness* came out, people would turn up at the Olson home without warning. According to Robert Olson, the writing shack behind the house in Ely no longer could provide the occasional refuge he needed even though it "remained throughout his life the place where Sigurd worked and wrote." (56)

> It was not long, in fact about ten years (after having built the shack) before Sigurd resumed his search for the perfect place, for a truly get-away-from-it-all place not so close to the house, to visitors, to civilization and all that. (57)

It was, however, to be much more than a retreat. Olson was ready for a project like Listening Point in another sense as well. In 1956 he was at the midpoint in his adult life, a point in time when he had acquired more than 50 years of living, observations, stories, discoveries and travel, in short, experience---all making the place more meaningful and evocative if he could give it physical form there to stand along with his writings.

In the first chapter of the book he identifies many of the reasons he chose this particular place and its name: (58)

> One day after a long search I found my point. I had come through woods and swamps off the end of a road and was suddenly out of the brush and trees on an open shelf of rock. There it was as I had dreamed, a composite picture of all the places in the north that I had known and loved. (p. 5)
>
> I named this place Listening Point because only when one comes to listen, only when one is aware and still, can things be seen and heard. Everyone has a listening point somewhere. It does not have to be in the north or close to the wilderness, but some place of quiet where the universe can be contemplated with awe. (p. 8)
>
> For me it would be a listening-post from which I might even hear the music of the spheres. (p. 7)
>
> Listening Point is dedicated to recapturing this almost forgotten sense of wonder and learning from rocks and trees and all the life that is found there. Truths that can encompass all. Through

> a vein of quartz at its tip can be read the geological history of the planet, from an old pine stump the ecological succession of the plant kingdom, from an Indian legend the story of the dreams of all mankind. (p. 4)

And it was more than natural history that Olson found there:

> The point had seen the Indians and voyageurs, the prospectors and loggers, had been a stopping place for countless travelers long before I found it. (p. 7)

And as for what to do there in the way of what could be called "management,"

> I must leave it as beautiful as I found it. Nothing must ever happen there that might detract in the slightest from what it now had. I would enjoy it and discover all that was to be found there and learn as time went on that here perhaps was all I might ever hope to know. (p. 8)

> No so-called 'forest improvement' would ever take place here, no elimination of breeding places for ants and beetles and insects on the supposition they might be a hazard to living trees. The natural ecological balance would be preserved, and with the dead and decaying trees and their vital contribution to the survival of the species dependent upon them, the entire forest would benefit and thrive. (p. 196)

The desire to move to or erect buildings on the property would challenge these objectives, especially since an access road would have to be built and trails laid out for getting around on the property to minimize the impact of foot traffic. The conventional idea that would place the cabin next to the lake was rejected:

> At first we thought of placing it out on the point itself . . . . But the more we thought about it, the more we were convinced it would be wrong, for nothing must ever change the point itself; it must remain . . . a place reserved for vistas and dreams and long thoughts.

> So we looked to the south below the pines and the shelf of rock where a huge glacial boulder had been dropped by the ice. I had always liked that boulder and the way it sat so solidly at the base of the point as though it were a commanding monument marking a frontier, a line beyond which one must never go. The boulder guarded the point. (p. 19)

> (The cabin) must be as natural as a shelter back in the bush, like an overhanging ledge or a lean-to, or a cabin on some trapper's route. (p. 18)

> It must be only one room, just large enough for a couple of bunks, a fireplace and a table, as close to the primitive as we could keep it and in harmony with Listening Point. (p.18)

> We wanted a cabin that blended into its surroundings, a cabin as gray as the rocks themselves. The north country is full of old cabins built by the original Finnish and Scandinavian settlers when they first moved in. (p. 21)

> Built of tamarack, jackpine, or cedar, with dovetailed corners, these cabins are so expertly

> hewn and logs fit so closely together that little chinking is ever required . . . the result of centuries of building in Europe's north. (p.21)
>
> The new settlers brought their broadaxes with them, and more than that, skills perfected by necessity. Such a cabin, it seemed to us, would fit the point, for it would have tradition behind it, and in its soft grayness there would be no jarring note. (p. 22)
>
> The fireplace would be built of native stone gathered down at the shore . . . of the same rock that made up the point so it would blend into its background of greenstones, granites and schists that were all around. It would be no higher than just above the peak of the roof . . . but the draft would be good because the winds would sweep from one side of the point to the other. (p. 23)
>
> The cabin would be a symbol of a way of life, an extension of an ideal that was all involved with Listening Point. . . . It would be part of the north, part of the wilderness, and within it would be the simplicity, the stark beauty and reality of the forests of northern Europe from which it came. In those hand-hewn logs with their tight-mortised corners that through the centuries have made existence possible there, was a sense of belonging to a harsh and forbidding land. (p. 24)

Most of this is also true for the sauna, and the privy, dock and woodsheds are minimal structures built on site. In addition to the cabin and sauna, a plant was brought to the point for both symbolic and esthetic reasons. This is the fleur-de-lis, an iris emblematic of the French monarchy, planted near the beach as a memorial to the voyageurs of yore:

> It would be a fitting place for the fleur-de-lis, for this was a route of the early traders in fur and no doubt many times in the past they had stopped there to rest after the arduous trek from Fond du Lac to Lake Vermillion and Basswood some twenty miles to the east. (p. 89)
>
> The point has changed little since those early days, and the silhouettes of the islands and the vistas across the water are much the same as they have always been. I can sit here and dream of the past, for in the fleur-de lis is a living bridge between the voyageurs and me. (p.93)

At the Point as in his writing, Sigurd Olson aimed at linking past with present, esthetics with natural and cultural history, man with nature.

His observations at Listening Point as elaborated in the book and elsewhere in his oeuvre demonstrate how experience and knowledge including that obtained by scientific studies can enrich and deepen what one sees. "To open eyes" to nature and beauty has been an important goal of not only nature study in America but in art as well at least since the days of Emerson and Thoreau. (59)

Olson's biographer David Backes has made the point that the period of Listening Point (book and place) was also a time when he was searching for balance between several contending forces. For this was among other things the crucial period of negotiations on the Wilderness Act. In addition, Olson wrestled with the conflicts between man in an age of industrialization and wilderness, but also the problem of modern man divorced from nature and uneasy as a result. For Olson these conflicts became acute at Listening Point and are elabora-

ted at some length in two chapters of the book.

For example, the necessity of building an access road into the point led to the traumatic experience of witnessing a bulldozer tear up and re-arrange the land (Chapter 4, "The Breaking"). In the end he becomes reconciled to it and draws an analogy between the bulldozer and the plow, both tools of man since the time when he abandoned nomadism as a way of life to till the soil.

And in Chapter 18, "The Whistle," Olson relates his thoughts and feelings after unexpectedly hearing the whistle of a steam locomotive and automobile traffic in the distance:

> I wondered for the first time since coming to the point if I had chosen well, if the railroad and the highway might not destroy the very essence of the sanctuary I had found. (p. 147)

Then he recalls having had the same experience years before at a location much deeper in the wilderness, and in a wide ranging meditation too long to include here, he concludes that:

> Only through my own personal contact with civilization had I learned to value the advantages of solitude. (p. 151)

He also comes to a realization that to condemn what the whistle stands for would be to condemn himself and fail to accord anything positive to "man's inventive genius and all the realms of his exploring mind" that civilization had brought forth. His central conclusion is that without the experience of civilization he would not be in a position or state of mind to "really appreciate the wilds and their importance to mankind." (p. 151)

To some this might be taken as an unsatisfactory justification of the fact that certain forces and interests at the heart of civilization were bent on eliminating what remained of wilderness, but achieving a balance between these competing forces was one of Olson's most persistent themes, and he addresses it elsewhere including in the chapter "Balance and Order" in *Reflections from the North Country*, published in 1976. In the 20 years between this book and *Listening Point* it would seem that Olson had become considerably less optimistic about achieving the desired balance:

> As man contemplates the order of the universe and nature in all its manifestations, he is conscious of an enormous incongruity in the surge toward more and more, rather than trying to live with less and less. What system we see in nature, substantiated by our vast and growing understanding, is no longer an empty or nebulous thought we can ignore. Compared to this very obvious truth, our own imbalance is a major threat. (60)

A related theme equally persistent in Olson's thought and writing is the importance of achieving harmony between man, his intrusive structures and lifestyles, and other life forms. As he expressed it in *Listening Point*, speaking about the cabin:

> We wanted the partridge to walk around it, to come out in the dusk and sit there in the twilight unafraid. We wanted red squirrels spiraling down the trunks of the pines and vaulting onto the roof as though it were part of the trees themselves. Even the deer mice would be welcome to build their nests in some dark corner under the rafters. The chickadees would be part of it, and

> the soft warbling notes of the whiskey-jacks, and the calling of the loons on the open lake. The wind and the waves and all the sounds of the night would be there. (p. 18)

The balance and harmony that Sigurd Olson sought for civilized man was at least achieved at Listening Point, and the restrained simplicity of the place in 1956 was well on the way to what he saw as a necessity for man 20 years later when he wrote of the challenge of new frontiers:

> True, the frontier days are past, but there are others just as challenging: frontiers of the mind and a drastic change in lifestyle to more simplicity, with rewards other than material. (61)

Set in the midst of the Sha-Wa-Nok Beach subdivision on Burntside Lake, Listening Point is not wilderness, at least not as defined by Olson's friend conservationist Bob Marshall in his article "The Problem of Wilderness" written in 1930 or in the Wilderness Act of 1964. And despite the changing goals and emphases of today's conservationists and wilderness advocates, none would argue with Thoreau's contention that "in Wildness is the preservation of the world." And wildness is what Olson endeavored to preserve at the point with due consideration for the needs of modern man. It is an example of one person's attempt to achieve harmony between modern man and nature.

And there is another way that Listening Point is associated with Sigurd Olson. At about the time the book came out in 1958, the well-known photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt came to the Point and made several photos of him. The best known of them shows Olson seated on the bench at the west end of the cabin. It was published in *Life* magazine in a special issue devoted to conservation (December 22, 1961) and it is on the cover of David Backes' biography. This icon (iconic image?) has been followed by more photos of him at Listening Point by several other photographers over the years to accompany articles about him. It seems clear that he wanted himself seen, in the widest sense of the term, in the context of Listening Point.

Significance Summary

In surveying his work as a whole one could very well conclude that Sigurd Olson should be remembered above all as a philosopher, for he identified and wrestled with some fundamental issues affecting man---his achievements, limitations, needs and viability over the long term. His life work amounts to a critique of modernity articulated in both words and action. The overriding goal was of course to protect wilderness and even places not so wild that embodied the same values and were fully as important as wilderness itself. His means were activism and education, if we may include his efforts as interpretive naturalist under that rubric. While he may have preferred to concentrate his efforts exploring the back country and writing, the press of events and his abilities at relating to people on a personal level drew him into political activism.

As an activist Sigurd Olson was never shy when it came to confronting his opponents, nor would he allow his name to be used to endorse actions he disagreed with. In 1981 he turned down the United States Department of the Interior's highest honor (The Conservation Service Award) because of some of the agency's actions under Secretary James Watt. (62) At the same time, David Backus suggested in an interview in 1997 that among the things that people could learn from Olson was "how to leave personalities out of the battles and focus on issues." (63)

And recently the president of the Wilderness Society, William Meadows, paid tribute to Olson in this way:

> Sig Olson was a quiet man, a contemplative man, a man who valued the opportunity to live in nature and listen to it above all. But he did not hesitate to speak when needed. He did not hesitate to involve himself in the difficult political struggles he knew were essential to preserving the places and the things he loved. (64)

In his writing, Olson pursued several strategies directed at preserving wilderness. One was to show why it is important and another was to open his readers' eyes and other senses plus the mind to experiencing it. As to the first, his central overriding theme is that modern man had lost contact with the wild (nature) in the process of becoming civilized but the need to experience it was still there, albeit only dimly realized by most people if at all. He initially became aware of the problem as a professional guide and in talking about it with other guides. It was first clearly articulated in his 1938 piece "Why Wilderness." and it is a major subject in all his books. The first sentence in this essay reads:

> In some men, the need of unbroken country, primitive conditions, and intimate contact with the earth is a deeply rooted cancer gnawing forever at the illusion of contentment with things as they are.

The same idea was stated by Aldo Leopold 10 years later in the first lines of his *Sand County Almanac*:

> There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. These essays are the delights and dilemmas of one who cannot. Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them.

Or one can go back to the early American physician-philosopher Benjamin Rush:

> Man is naturally a wild animal . . . taken from the woods, he is never happy . . . til he returns to them again. (65)

A phrase used by Olson and others for this is "racial memory," the survival of a need for contact with nature that has become built-in, as it were, to human nature by evolution over the many thousands of years man existed before the advent of civilization. The persistence of this idea in Olson's writing and the many ways he has addressed it represents a major contribution to wilderness philosophy, according to conservation historian Roderick Nash and David Backes, Olson's biographer. Moreover, Backes indicates that the subject is now being taken seriously by scholars in the field of evolutionary psychology, and that Olson "gave far more emphasis to it than any other leading wilderness movement thinker or nature writer. (66)

There is also a spiritual dimension to this idea that can of course mean different things to different people. For example, Olson refers to "intangibles" often in his writing and speaking, and in a speech in April 1961 he stated that:

> The intangible values of wilderness are what really matter, the opportunity of knowing again what simplicity really means, the importance of the natural and the sense of oneness that inevitably comes within it. These are spiritual values. They, in the last analysis, are

the reasons for its preservation. (67)

He also wrote in several pieces about the sense of fellowship that often developed among the individuals on the canoe trips he guided and that for him this spiritual kinship extended to the numberless explorers, voyageurs and Native Americans that had preceded him in the boundary waters wilderness.

In order to be successful in raising the public's awareness of the meaning and importance of wilderness, Olson intended that his writings be accessible. In a note to himself written in August 1960 he said, "I must bridge the gap between (Loren) Eiseley and my audience of common people, the non-intellectuals." (68) His success is shown by the long press runs of his books and the many letters he received from readers.

Sigurd Olson's writing, in particular his books, can be seen as a kind of extended autobiography, sharing with the reader how he became aware of the value and meaning of wilderness and his response to its threats. Once he realized its value and importance to man he was driven to use any means at his disposal to defend it. His achievements as wilderness activist and writer were widely recognized by national wilderness groups. He received the highest honor of five leading organizations devoted to preserving public lands: the Izaak Walton League, National Wildlife Federation, Sierra Club, the National Parks Association and the Wilderness Society. He was also awarded the John Burroughs Medal for nature writing.

The wide range of Sigurd Olson's activities on behalf of wilderness conservation is uncommon among conservationists and nature writers, running from education to political engagement and writing and speaking to building. Accordingly, the nominated property has satisfied the NRHP Criteria Consideration G standard of exceptional importance. Listening Point remains an inspiration to individuals from near and far looking to see how one man successfully expressed his vision and values by integrating built form into a natural setting. Moreover, this was done in a way that can enhance awareness of the native flora and fauna and the meaning of ecology, but also human history and the vast span of geological time. Listening Point is of exceptional significance for its intimate association with Sigurd F. Olson and as a representation of his wilderness philosophy.

Notes

(l) Robert K. Olson. Letter to Susan Roth. December 28, 2000. SHPO File.

(2) A DVD produced by Ray Christensen et al. for Twin Cities Public Television in 1982, "The Wilderness World of Sigurd F. Olson" is a rich source of interviews and other material about the Olsons.

(3) This and most other biographical information included here is from David Backes. *A Wilderness Within. The Life of Sigurd F. Olson.* Minneapolis, 1997.

(4) Hans Huth. *Nature and the American.* Berkeley, 1957. pp. 89-90. Joseph Wood Krutch. *Great American Nature Writing.* New York, 1950.

(5) Backes, pp. 51-52, 242.

(6) Sigurd F. Olson. *Open Horizons.* New York, 1969. pp. 72-73, 194.

(7) Backes, p. 64.

(8) The complex history of the boundary waters is the subject of Kevin Proescholdt et al. *Troubled Waters. The Fight for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness*. St. Cloud (MN), 1995.

(9) Stephen Fox. John Muir and His legacy. *The American Conservation Movement, 1890-1975*. Boston, 1981.

(10) The text of the Wilderness Act is available in J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson. *The Great New Wilderness Debate*. Athens (GA), 1998.

(11) R. Newell Searle. *Saving Quetico-Superior*. St. Paul, 1977. This contains maps and additional data on the conflicts over wilderness there.

(12) Olson. *Open Horizons*, p. 195. See also Searle, Chapter 2.

(13) Backes, p. 66.

(14) Searle, p.31.

(15) Backes, p. 104. These essays were published in the *Minnesota Conservationist* (an organ of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources) and the *Minnesota Waltonian*.

(16) A map of the affected area is in Searle, p. 37.

(17) Searle, p. 74. Minnesota passed a similar law three years later protecting state owned land.

(18) Backes, p.101.

(19) ibid., Joe Paddock. *Keeper of the Wild*. St. Paul, 2001. Note 34 to Chapter 18. See also Paddock. "Ober and Sig: Champions of the North." *The View from Listening Point*. Volume VI, No. 2.

(20) Searle, p. 151. Backes, pp. 194-196.

(21) Backes, pp. 196-197.

(22) Mark Harvey. "Sound Politics. Wilderness, Recreation, and Motors in the Boundary Waters, 1945-1964." *Minnesota History*. Fall, 2002. p. 134.

(23) ibid., p. 137.

(24) Backes, pp. 194, 207.

(25) ibid., p. 266.

(26) ibid., pp. 273-274.

(27) Harvey, p. 143.

(28) Backes, p. 329.

(29) Olson wrote, directed and appeared in a 30 minute documentary film, "Wilderness Canoe Country," produced by the Quetico-Superior Council in 1949 and narrated by Paul Harvey. Olson is also the subject of a 1982 video production of Twin Cities Public Television. See note 2 above.

(30) Backes, pp. 296-297.

(31) Backes, pp. 323.

(32) See Callicott and Nelson, and William Cronon (ed.). *Uncommon Ground.* New York, 1996. Olson's 1938 essay "Why Wilderness?" is included in the Callicott anthology.

(33) *Reflections from the North Country.* p. 7.

(34) Krutch, pp. 21-22.

(35) ibid.

(36) ibid., p. 26.

(37) ibid., p. 118.

(38) Roderick Nash. *Wilderness and the American Mind.* Princeton, 1st Edition, 1967. p. vii.

(39) ibid., p. 244.

(40) Peter A.. Fritzell. *Nature Writing and America.* Ames (IA), 1990. pp. 292, 42.

(41) Callicott and Nelson.

(42) Brooks, pp. xiv, 32.

(43) Brooks, p. 270.

(44) ibid.

(45) Harvey, p. 134.

(46) Brooks, p. 274.

(47) Brooks, p. 198. Brooks is quoting Krutch here.

(48) ibid. These are Brooks' own words.

(49) David Backes (ed.). *The Meaning of Wilderness*. Minneapolis, 2002. This contains a complete list of Olson's writings and speeches. See also Mike Link (ed.). *The Collected Works of Sigurd F. Olson*. Volumes I and II. Stillwater (MN), 1990.

(50) Many of these are in the Olson Papers File at the Minnesota Historical Society.

(51) *Saturday Review*. April 14, 1956.

(52) ibid.

(53) The quotation is from Backes (1997), p. 255. See his Chapter 12 for more on the book's reception.

(54) Backes (1997), pp. 282-283.

(55) Backes (1997), p. 280.

(56) Robert K. Olson. *The Story of Listening Point*. p. 6.

(57) ibid.

(58) *Listening Point*, p. 196. All quotations regarding the cabin are from the 1958 edition.

(59) See Huth, Chapter Six.

(60) Quotation from p. 138. This theme was not new on Olson's time, but by the time Roderick Nash had written a new final chapter for the Third Edition of *Wilderness and the American Mind* ("Toward a Philosophy of Wilderness"), the issue had become more acute and he includes an extensive discussion of Olson's and others' thoughts on it. See pp. 242-252.

(61) *Reflections from the North Country*, p. 147.

(62) Backes (1997), pp. 336-337.

(63) Dennis Anderson. "A human visionary." *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*. October 10. 1997.

(64) William Meadows. "Menacing Storm-Listening Point." *The View from Listening Point*. Volume V, No.2 (Fall/Winter, 2003-2004), pp. 4-5.

(65) *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush*. Princeton University Press, 1948, p. 72.

(66) Backes (2002), p. xxxii.

(67) "The Spiritual Aspects of Wilderness." Reprinted in Backes (2002). p. 119.

(68) Quoted from a statement by David Backes in support of the present NRHP nomination dated March 16, 2005. Copy in the SHPO File, St. Paul.

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Proescholdt, Kevin et al. *Troubled Waters. The Fight for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness*. St. Cloud (MN), 1995.

Searle, R. Newell. *Saving Quetico-Superior*. St. Paul, 1977.

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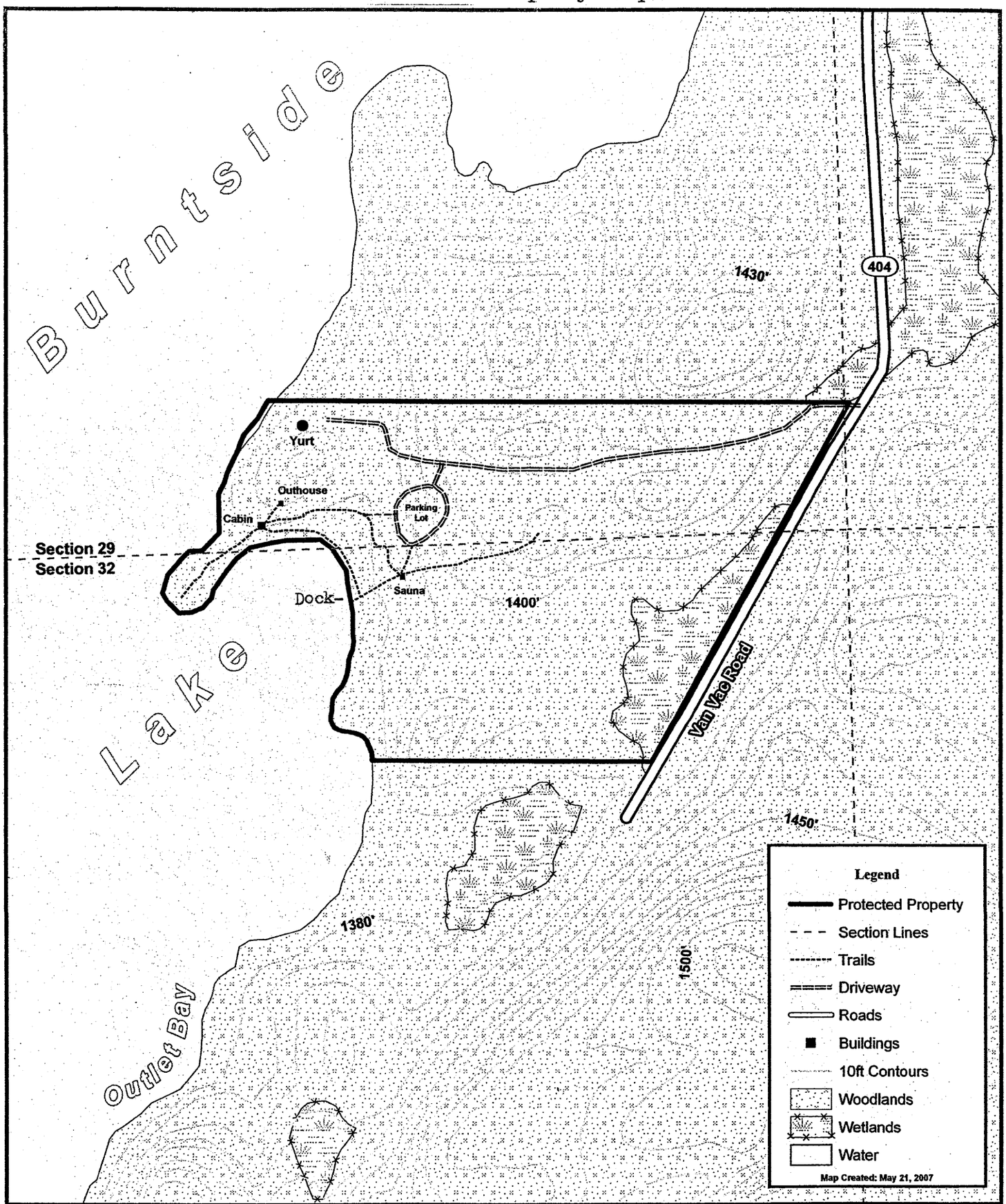
Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property includes the south one quarter of Lot 5 and Lots 6 through 16 of Block 3 in the Sha-Wa-Nok Beach Subdivision of Morse Township, St. Louis County, Minnesota.

Boundary Justification

The above description includes all the land historically associated with the nominated property.

Property Map



Listening Point, Morse Township, St. Louis County, MN

Map Resource Information

Section Lines obtained from USGS Topographic Maps.
Protected Property, Roads, 10-Foot Contours, Woodlands, Wetlands, and Water created by Community GIS Services Inc.

Site: Burntside Lake - Tract: Listening Point

St. Louis County - Twp. 63 N Rng. 13 W Sec. 29 & 32

communitygis geographic information systems

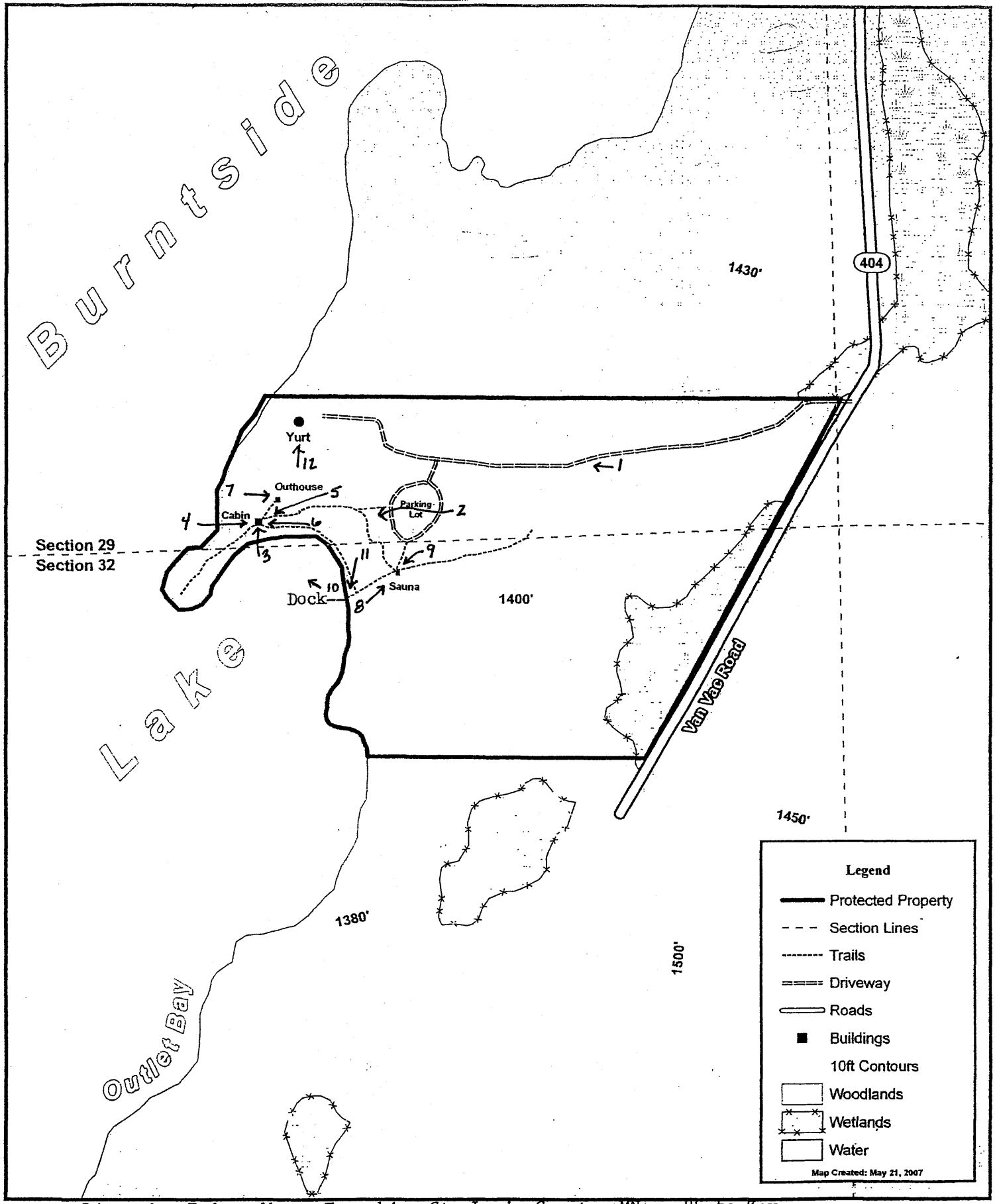
Minnesota Land Trust

Scale:
1" = 400'

N W E S

400 200 0 400 Feet

Property Map



Listening Point, Morse Township, St. Louis County, MN Photo Key

Map Resource Information

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Site: Burntside Lake - Tract: Listening Point

St. Louis County - Twp. 63 N Rng. 13 W Sec. 29 & 32

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MINNESOTA LAND TRUST

Scale: 1" = 400'

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