



Ernest Oberholtzer



Ernest Oberholtzer (right) with dog Skippy and Billy Maggie (left) holding cabbage. Photo from Bob Hilke.

Ernest Oberholtzer (1884- 1977) was born and grew up in Davenport, Iowa. In 1903, he entered Harvard University.

In 1907, Oberholtzer graduated from Harvard with a Bachelor of Arts. The following year he devoted time to graduate studies in Landscape Architecture. He studied under Fredrick Law Olmstead.

Ober's health was failing and doctors told him he likely had but a year to live. Ober headed for Ely, Minnesota to go canoe camping. During this trip he discovered a great love for the wilderness and said that his health "improved with every stroke of the paddle." A few years later he traveled to Rainy Lake where he met an Ojibwe Indian guide named Billy Magee from Mine Centre, Ontario, Canada. They became friends and traveled many miles together through the Quetico- Superior Country of Northwestern Ontario, the Arrowhead region of Minnesota and to Hudson's Bay.

After leaving Harvard, Oberholtzer returned to the Northland many times for his beloved canoe trips, and eventually in 1915 he settled on Rainy Lake in 1915. Over time, he built a home on Mallard Island, two and a half miles west of Voyageurs' western boundary.

In the first decade of the 1900s, most of northern Minnesota was wilderness, but developmental efforts were becoming visible. The pine forests were being cut for lumber, and water power was needed for the development of industries. In 1925 Edward Backus, paper and lumber magnate, proposed a series of dams in the Rainy Lake watershed to create water storage areas and a more efficient controlled power source. Critics of the proposal – including Oberholtzer – pointed out that many shorelines in the Superior National Forest and what is now Voyageurs National Park and Quetico Provincial Park would be flooded.

Backus' plan was to build seven dams, which would have turned much of the boundary lakes region into an immense storage basin for industrial water power. He asked the United States and Canadian governments to pay for the dams and to compensate landowners for the inevitable flooding that would occur. Both countries declined. It's speculated that had Backus' plan succeeded, it would not have affected some lakes but significantly raised levels in others ~ as much as 80 feet.

In 1927 Oberholtzer spearheaded a movement to stop Backus from building his intended dams. He became the lifetime president of the Quetico- Superior Council, an organization established to preserve the wilderness character of the boundary lakes region. He developed an alternate plan for the region and testified and lobbied before the United States Congress. He was such an eloquent speaker that a pro-Backus individual attending a Kettle Falls meeting once said, "Don't let him talk or he'll have everybody on his side."

Oberholtzer's persistence led to the passage of the Shipstead- Newton- Nolan Act in 1930. This legislation, based largely on Oberholtzer's alternative plan for the region, prohibited the changing of water levels in the Superior National Forest. It was the first legislation ever passed by the U.S. Congress that mandated wilderness values on federal lands. Backus' dream of unlimited industrialization of the northland had suddenly collapsed.

Ironically, Oberholtzer and Backus were neighbors on Rainy Lake. Close friends of Oberholtzer said, in the end, Oberholtzer did not feel anger toward the timber baron, but did disagree vehemently with what he stood for.

Following the defeat of the dam proposal, Oberholtzer was increasingly recognized for his ideas on wilderness preservation. He was one of the eight founding members of the Wilderness Society, a group active in preserving primitive areas. In time, Oberholtzer and the many other conservationists with whom he worked were successful in setting aside nearly three million acres of wilderness known today as the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

Ernest Oberholtzer's home was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2000. (Rainy Lake Islands Historic District). For further reading about Oberholtzer read *Keeper of the Wild: The Life of Ernest Oberholtzer* by Joe Paddock or log onto www.eober.org for more information. You may purchase the book at the Lake States Interpretive Association's bookstores located at any of the three park visitor centers.