

Back in the day

Helping to tame the wilds of Wisconsin's Northwoods.

Kathryn A. Kahler

He grew up idolizing Teddy Roosevelt, knew the works of John Muir and was a contemporary of Aldo Leopold. He was born during Grover Cleveland's presidency, lived through the world wars and the Depression, and died when Ronald Reagan was president.

"That's a lot of history," says his granddaughter, Marcia MacKenzie. "Throughout, he had tunnel vision about preserving land and the concept of game management.

"Grandpa, or 'Mac' as they called him, was opinionated, larger than life," she recalls. "He was a brilliant guy who could play just about any musical instrument by ear. He had a trumpet, a violin, and I can remember listening to him play the bagpipe."

Harley MacKenzie was hired in 1917 as one of the first of Wisconsin's field wardens, stationed in Antigo. At the time, the



SUBMITTED BY MARCIA MACKENZIE

Chief Conservation Warden Harley "Mac" MacKenzie.

average warden made \$60 a month, and besides chasing poachers, spent much of his time feeding game, putting out forest fires and planting fish. As legislators began enacting hunting and fishing laws, reflecting a new public appreciation for natural resources, the warden force grew, took on new roles and was organized into six districts across the state. MacKenzie was named Chief Warden in 1929.

Supervising a staff of 70 field wardens — many of whom drove their own vehicles patrolling the "wild west" that was northern Wisconsin a century ago — MacKenzie was instrumental in organizing his colleagues into a force of professional law enforcement officers.

"He designed the first warden uniform and handbook and absolutely refused to let a person with influence get off the hook for poaching," Marcia said. "That was the first time that had happened in the state."

MacKenzie was promoted to director of the Wisconsin Conservation Department in 1934. In 1936, he oversaw the move of the State Game Farm from Fish Creek in Door County, to Poynette, where his family had acquired acreage over the years. A portion of it would eventually be split off into an environmental education

center and named after him in 1971.

"He also hired biologists so they could demonstrate that places like paper mills were polluting the streams and the effect it was having," Marcia recalls. But what his granddaughter remembers best was listening to his warden stories.

"My grandfather was such a vivid storyteller," Marcia says. "That was part of the Scottish tradition. They had a great oral tradition. In his later years, the retired wardens who had worked with and for him had a tradition of going to Alaska or Canada to hunt and fish, and then on their way to Florida they would stop in Poynette and we would have game feeds with all the food they would bring. Mac and the others would tell their stories of the early warden years, and if you were a lucky kid like me, you'd be there to hear them.

"He drank Scotch whiskey every day, and that's how he stayed alive into his 90s. He would have a tumbler neat, and then a big glass of ice water, and tell stories to his grandchildren. And you didn't interrupt him. You just listened, right?"

One of Mac's favorite stories was about an incident that nearly cost him his life. It was winter of 1922. He and two other wardens were checking spring ponds in a remote area of Langlade County northwest of Antigo in a Model T Ford. They split up and Mac was crossing a snow-covered cedar swamp when he came upon three men who had been arrested for poaching in the past. They were transplanted Kentuckians — Kaintucks, as they were then called — who were also known for making moonshine during the years of Prohibition, and one had as recently as a year before pulled a gun on another warden during an arrest.

MacKenzie was carrying a rifle and a Luger pistol in a shoulder holster and noted that the three men were also armed, not only with a shotgun but a double-bladed axe as well. Mac observed them catching trout from the spring fed lake and surprised them on a trail on their way out of the area. When he identified himself as a

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SUBMITTED BY MARCIA MACKENZIE

MacKenzie and Gov. Patrick J. Lucey at the MacKenzie Environmental Center marker after the center's 1971 dedication.

MONSTER MUSHROOM

Attached is a photo of a 38.88-pound hen of the woods mushroom that I found in the fall of 2015. I have been looking for these mushrooms since I was a kid with my father, Emanuel, and my grandfather. We found many of these and some very big ones but the largest one we ever found weighed 34 pounds.

Chuck Rizzo
Kenosha



SUBMITTED BY CHUCK RIZZO

SEASON'S END

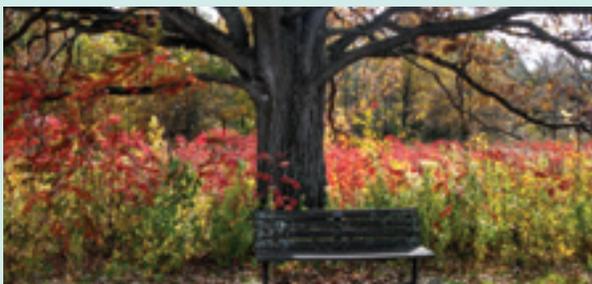
I am asked often what is the draw to small stream trout fishing? The fog embraces the stream on the final day of season. The thrill of the unknown on every cast stokes my fire. A picture is painted by Mother Nature that is second to none.



LEN HARRIS

Len Harris
Richland Center
Visit Len Harris' blog at <http://lenharris.blogspot.com/>

Thankfully, early inland trout season runs through May 6 with the promise of season beginning photos, too.



FORREST L. FULLER

SERENITY

I captured this photo in the sweet serenity of Owen Park, located in Madison, on an early October afternoon.

Forrest L. Fuller
Middleton

OWL ID CORRECTION

The owl pictured on page 28 of the December issue appears to be a leucistic barred owl, not a barn owl — though both can be mostly white. The rounded face and chunky body alerted reader Alan Bennett of Pardeeville. Thanks Alan!

COMMENT ON A STORY?

Send your letters to: Readers Write, WNR magazine, P.O. Box 7191, Madison, WI 53707. Or email letters to dnrmagazine@wisconsin.gov. Limit letters to 250 words and include your name and the community from which you are writing.

NO ACCESS TO THE WEB?

Don't have access to a link we mention in a story? Let us know when you want to follow a link we list. We'll do what we can to get you a copy of the material if it is available free of charge and is relatively short in length.

PERPLEXING BURROW

We spotted these sandy burrows on a sunny hillside along the Ice Age Trail north of Mauthe Lake in the Northern Kettle Moraine in early summer. What critter made these and lives here?

Christel Maass
Fox Point

Thanks for the photo. This appears to be a badger den. You've probably never seen one since they are solitary most of the year and stay hidden inside their shallow dens during the day. They hunt mostly during the night and live in large open fields and grasslands extending between 400 and 600 acres. You can look for signs of the badger by looking for piles of dirt outside of large burrows which they dig with their incredibly long thick claws. If you see a short, stocky animal with a small face staggering around in the grasslands, it could be a badger.



CHRISTEL MAASS

BEE HIVES

I live in the Town of LaFayette, Walworth County and the first photograph depicts what I observed on Aug. 20 while I was mowing the trail back to my woods. The second photo was taken on Sept. 1. It has always been my understanding the bees would seek out a tree cavity to build their hives. Perhaps they do not know that our winters are not conducive to their survival in this exposed type of hive.

Bruno E. Schifflerger
Elkhorn

This article is an interesting read and speaks to the importance of having shelter from the wind for the hive to survive including during the winter: beesource.com/resources/usda/overwintering-of-honey-bee-colonies/.



BRUNO E. SCHIFFLEGER

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conservation warden and reached to take the shotgun one of them was carrying, a fight ensued. As he wrestled with the man, another threw the axe at him, catching him on the side of the head and knocking him unconscious. When he came to, he was hit with the axe again, then managed to pull the trigger of his rifle, hitting one of the other men. Amazingly, the bullet entered the man's mouth and exited through his heavily bearded cheek!

After further struggle, Mac again lost consciousness and the men made their escape. When he came to, Mac dragged himself to where he was to rendezvous with the other wardens and they drove him to a doctor in Antigo. The two men who had tried to kill him were eventually caught — one in Michigan just across the Wisconsin border, the other in Kentucky. They were tried and each sentenced to about a year in prison.

As the last living relative with the MacKenzie name, Marcia is resolute in keeping her grandfather's legacy alive. She studied environmental law in law school and is currently in the Dane County Corporation Counsel. In her spare time, she is vice-president of Madison Audubon Society and has been instrumental in creating partnerships between the society and the MacKenzie Environmental Center.

Marcia's 11-year-old grandson, Cole Hendrickson of Madison, also volunteers at MEC.

"When MEC was threatened with closing, Cole organized his 5th-grade class and they all wrote the Natural Resources Board, asking it to 'Save MacKenzie,'" Marcia recalls with pride. "Cole and his brother John are passing on the 'Grandpa stories' to others in the oral tradition of Scottish families."

Marcia gives talks whenever she can to schoolchildren at MEC. As she tells the stories of Mac's exploits with moonshiners and poachers in the wilds of northern Wisconsin, the children listen with rapt attention. And they don't interrupt. 

Kathryn A. Kahler is a writer for Wisconsin Natural Resources magazine. The full account of Harley MacKenzie's encounter with the poachers can be found in "Game Warden Centurion: 1879-1979," by Jim Chizek. Chizek was a Wisconsin conservation warden from 1955 to 1986 and wrote the book out of the belief that law enforcement officers' varied and rich experiences should be shared with others. His book shares "the many changes wardens experienced in law enforcement through the last century, probably the greatest change there ever will be in conservation and natural resource protection as an infant state and nation struggled to settle a wilderness and develop a conservation consciousness." Check for the book at your local library.