

Wisconsin Conservation Department
Madison 1, Wisconsin

Rev. Y. Crawford
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ORIGIN AND TRADITIONS OF THE MIDWEST WILDLIFE CONFERENCE

Edw. Schneberger .
Wisconsin Conservation Department

In presenting this paper I am not assuming the role of a historian, nor do I necessarily classify myself as an "Old Timer". However, it has been my good fortune to attend a majority of the annual Midwest Wildlife Conferences from the beginning and have therefore witnessed its growth and development. The stimulus for this report came from some speculation that perhaps the conference should be formalized, adopt a constitution, elect officers, assess dues, publish a journal and all such activities that accompany a formal organization. Upon hearing such statements, I commented to some colleagues that it might be well to review the origin and precedence of the conference for the benefit of the new and younger participants. True to form, the person making a suggestion gets the job. As the time approached to prepare this paper I wished I had kept my mouth shut. I only hope now that this paper will be sufficiently informative and interesting that you won't have occasion to say, "He should have kept his mouth shut!"

I am a firm believer in the free exchange of knowledge and ideas; I am firmly convinced that personal contact with persons similarly engaged has great value; that the "bull session" type of discussions taking place in corridors, hotel rooms, and at the dining table are frequently as productive as formal papers; that the Midwest Wildlife Conference has served us well and contributed toward the improvement of quality of fish and game management in the Midwest. This conference has earned the reputation of being a "hard-working conference". Most delegates come to learn and teach. It has not been a junket type of meeting although there are moments of hilarity for some. The old saying that, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," still applies and after all, men are merely boys who have grown taller, balder and rotund. One Madison (Wisconsin) newspaper carries a slogan in the editorial policy, "Let the people have the truth, the freedom to discuss it and all will be well." Such a motto could well apply to the Midwest Wildlife Conference.

The material I present here is based on a few references from literature, some of my own recollections, personal correspondence, participation in numerous capacities and a review of past programs. My research has not been exhaustive and therefore there may be some omissions. However, I believe the highlights I present will be sufficient for the purpose of this review.

The idea of an informal conference for the Midwest was originally conceived by Dr. David H. Thompson, then with the Illinois Natural History Survey, who along with Dr. Yeatter presented the suggestion to Dr. Frison, Chief of the Survey. In Dr. Thompson's own words, and I quote from a letter dated October 11, 1961, he states:

"The idea of a meeting of technical fish and game men to discuss a midwest viewpoint had been growing on me for several years. In 1934 Doctor Yeatter joined the Illinois Natural History Survey staff and supported the idea. Early in 1935 he and I presented our argument to Doctor Frison, Chief of the Survey, who accepted our suggestions, organized the first conference, and carried it to completion."

Dr. Thompson then refers to meetings he had been attending that did not give him information he was seeking and again quoting from the same letter he states:

"...At these sessions the discussion were confined almost exclusively to marine fisheries, salmon, trout, muskellunge, big game, seals of the Pribilof Islands, and so forth. At that time these had little interest for Illinois hunters and anglers. We wanted a meeting where we could talk about things we were most concerned about -- cottontails, squirrels, fur-bearers, waterfowl, quail, pond management, carp, catfish and sunfish."

These statements therefore establish the original conception of the conference and its purpose. However, good ideas wither and die on the vine if there isn't the right man around to carry them out. In this instance the right man was Dr. Frison and to him we are indebted for "getting the show on the road". No one knows how many weeks, days and hours he expended in promoting the first conference. In the obituary published in the Journal of Wildlife Management, Volume 2, No. 4, James S. Ayars states: "The first meeting of the Midwest Wildlife Conference, held in Urbana in 1935, was largely the result of Dr. Frison's insistence on more and better wildlife research."

Frison himself gives the best description of the conference in a symposium of the 31st annual meeting of the Illinois State Academy of Science. He states and I quote from a paper entitled "Advances in the Renewable Natural Resources Program of Illinois" published in that Society's Transactions for 1938:

"Three years ago there was held at Urbana under the sponsorship of the State Natural History Survey a Wildlife Conference, the first of its kind in the Middle West and perhaps in the country. This was essentially a fish and game clinic at which scientists from all the north-central states, without being dominated by administrators or the political type of conservationists, freely discussed wildlife management practices in an effort to winnow out the chaff from the wheat, to coordinate such researches and to orientate scientific studies of wildlife resources in such a way that demonstrable sound management practices would result. This conference is now an established affair between the states concerned and has served, too, as a forerunner of nation-wide activities along this line. Conservation activities in the past, except possibly in the case of forestry, have been exceedingly wasteful of public monies, have had policies based largely upon fancies and undemonstrated assumptions, and often have been directed by individuals who knew little of and cared less for the biological or scientific principles involved."

It is quite clear that Dr. Frison wanted a clinic type of conference where all discussion would be free of any and all types of encumbrances and hence gave birth to this "unorganized organization", if I may use such a double-talk phrase.

The first conference was highlighted by talks given by Ding Darling and Aldo Leopold. Darling gave a fiery talk as only Darling could, but in it gave encouragement to the scientific approach to fish and game management. In contrast Leopold quietly but effectively gave stimulus to research by reviewing game management in Europe and showed some movies he had taken.

The second meeting was held in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and is described in part in an unpublished manuscript written by Dr. John Van Oosten as follows:

"The North Central States Wildlife Conference held its second annual meeting at Ann Arbor, Michigan, on December 10, 11, and 12, 1936. About 200 conservationists and naturalists attended representing the states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Missouri, Iowa, North and South Dakota, and the various conservation bureaus of the Federal Government. Some 50 topics concerning wildlife management were discussed during the first two days of the session while the third day was devoted to an inspection of the various University of Michigan properties near Ann Arbor.

"The conference, which has no elected officers or members, was formed at Urbana, Illinois, in December, 1935, 'to provide an opportunity for discussion of matters concerning wildlife management, to facilitate the exchange of views on controversial questions, to disseminate information on current research projects and to focus attention on important conservation problems'.

"Attendance is drawn from various sources -- state conservation departments, universities and colleges, the U. S. Bureau of Fisheries, the U. S. Biological Survey, the U. S. Forest and Soil Conservation, the Resettlement Administration, and individuals directly interested in conservation work."

The program of the 8th Midwest Wildlife Conference sponsored by the Missouri Conservation Commission and the University of Missouri in December, 1946, lists the following cooperating states: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio and Wisconsin. Initially it was mutually agreed that the following sequence of meeting places would be followed: Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri and Indiana. This schedule has not been adhered to rigidly, but has been interrupted on several occasions. The first break came before the first cycle had been completed when Illinois asked permission to host the conference out of turn in 1940 in order that the conference might participate in the dedication of the new Natural Resources Building constructed on the campus of the University of Illinois. Naturally such permission was granted by the cooperating states and this illustrates the flexibility with which arrangements can be made.

A second interruption came during World War II in compliance with travel restrictions and the moratorium on large gatherings, hence there were no meetings in 1942, 1943, 1944 and 1945, but the schedule was resumed in 1946 with Missouri as the host.

The earlier conferences were attended by 150 to 200 delegates so you can see that attendance has perhaps trippled in size. The region has also expanded and now includes the Province of Ontario, the States of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska and Kansas. The routine sequence was interrupted in 1960 in order to accept the invitation of Ontario and in 1961 in order that we might be guests of Nebraska. Presumably the sequence will be re-established by meeting next year as guests of the State of Iowa, which has on two previous occasions established itself as a most gracious host besides being the state where the tall, tall corn grows. In making this announcement I am not usurping the Time and Place Committee function as this committee last year in accepting the invitation from Nebraska decreed that Iowa's invitation be accepted for 1962. If the Time and Place Committee this year will designate the site for the 1963 conference and the custom is continued, the hosts hereafter will have an extra year to make plans and arrangements.

Numerous organizations have taken advantage of this conference to hold meetings of their own in the same location just prior to, during and immediately at the close of the conference, thus avoiding duplication of travel and other planning. No attempt is made to give a complete listing of associated organizations but the list does include the following:

1. The Wildlife Society has several committees that meet at this time.
2. The Mississippi Flyway Council.
3. The Upper Great Lakes Fishery Committee.
4. The North Central Division of the American Fisheries Society.

The latter perhaps needs a brief word of explanation. The American Fisheries Society recognized that only a small percentage of its members are able to attend the annual meetings of the Society and therefore formed four geographic divisions which hold annual meetings in order that there be greater attendance and participation by members. The north central group, however, felt that if another meeting were to be developed in the Midwest, the attendance at both would suffer. It was therefore decided to use the Wildlife Conference as the annual meeting and for the discussion of technical reports. A short business meeting, however, is held during the course of the conference. I might add that this organization, like the Midwest, has no dues.

I now wish to discuss briefly the duties and responsibilities of the host in the development and planning of the annual conference. There are no set rules, but instead the host state has considerable latitude and discretion in the planning of the program. Since there are no officers, constitution or bylaws, the host -- if without previous experience -- is somewhat frustrated by the lack of direction and is without any guidelines as to what has to be done and what not to do. While I do not intend to

present a handbook of conference management, I can perhaps establish a few guides for future hosts that may to some degree eliminate some of the early confusion that exists in getting the work organized.

Usually the hosting responsibilities are shared by several organizations within the state such as the conservation department, the state university and related organizations. The first step, in my opinion, is for the host to appoint a program committee chairman as a "take charge" guy. This individual should be aggressive, imaginative, adept in using sound judgment, and able to make decisions with a minimum of delay. There follows then the appointment of subcommittees and the delegation of duties. This "take charge" guy or over-all general chairman, of course, must have the authority to proceed as necessary.

The housing of the conference is one of the arrangements that must be made early. If the conference is held in a city lacking institutional facilities such as we find here in Nebraska, then a hotel must be selected and accommodations engaged. Since most of us who attend as delegates are persons of moderate and limited means, moderately priced rooms and meals are important. Usually, the convention bureau of the local chamber of commerce can be of great assistance and is very cooperative. The present trend in hotels is to restrict the gratuities previously offered. Here is where the convention bureau manager can often help you gain these favors.

The opening session of the conference is always a combined meeting attended by all delegates. The topics discussed should be of interest to both fish and game workers. A topic of current interest may be discussed, or if there is a controversial issue existing at the time, a panel of persons presenting both sides of the question makes for a good program. A meeting room seating at least 600 persons should be available.

Following the opening morning session, the conference is divided into at least two groups -- one devoted to fishery topics and the other game management problems. Various methods of presenting the program have been employed, but usually the emphasis has been on the presentation of individual papers. Panels have also been employed quite successfully. Sometimes these are used in combination. Whatever method is employed, care must be taken not to overcrowd a program. The speakers should be permitted to present their papers without being hurried and time for some discussion should be allowed.

The Midwest Wildlife Conference offers an excellent opportunity for students and junior staff members to present papers and I believe this type of presentation should be encouraged. We need to give these persons experience and help them gain self-confidence. It is important that these individuals have the opportunity of attending without undue formality and expense. There are also opportunities for interviews between employers and prospective employes. In this regard the conference serves as an in-service training school and employment center or placement bureau. The conference also offers an excellent opportunity to test new ideas, new theories and new philosophy since publication does not necessarily

follow. There are usually enough uninhibited critics present so any unsound proposals will soon be subdued. Sound ideas, on the other hand, will gain support and momentum.

Evening sessions have been held in the past with varying degrees of success. It is my opinion that evening sessions should be discouraged. The time, I believe, can be spent more profitably by informal visits with others on problems of mutual interest. Many persons have told me they get more out of such contacts than any other phase of the program.

The provision of a social hour and a banquet are also decisions that must be made by the host. There is no rule that either has to be held. In those areas where spirits are prohibited or unavailable the question of a social hour is quickly answered. A social hour can be classed as nonessential. In reference to a banquet, I find several schools of thought. There are those who hold the banquet as one highlight of the conference and others feel just as strongly that a banquet should not be held. Some hotels have a policy that no charge is made for meeting rooms if a banquet guarantee of a given number of tickets is made. Under such circumstances, of course, it is to the advantage of the host to stage a banquet. I find almost universal agreement that the banquet program should be entertaining rather than presentation of lengthy, serious speeches. As for my own experience, likes and dislikes, the program provided by the Purdue University Men's Glee Club was the most outstanding.

There are many other things that have to be done that I shall not attempt to discuss, but persons responsible will always find there are "1,001 details to worry about in arranging a conference. Notices must be mailed, abstracts of papers obtained, projection equipment, sound equipment, operators, exhibits, etc., are details needing attention.

The maintenance of a mailing list for the conference is unique and deserves comment. At each conference the delegates are asked to register by placing their name and address on a card. These cards, along with the cards of last year's conference, are then forwarded to the host for next year. This process is repeated each year. Thus, the mailing list used by the host is comprised of the registered attendance for the past two years.

A Time and Place Committee for future conferences is usually appointed by the host state. The primary function of this committee is to ascertain that the next host is willing and able to accept the responsibility of the conference. The invitation is then extended to the group by a representative of the host state.

At this point I think it is pertinent to raise the question of whether or not the conference has accomplished the avowed purpose as seen by Drs. Thompson and Frison. It is my opinion that even more has been accomplished than visualized by these men. The conference has grown in size from the standpoint of area, annual attendance and subject matter discussed. It continues to be a hard-working conference. The next question to be

raised is: "Would the conference be improved by formalization involving the election of officers, adoption of a constitution and bylaws, assessment of dues and publication of a journal?" My own reaction is that improvement would not necessarily follow, but we could easily suffer a relaxation on the part of persons now voluntarily contributing to the welfare of the group. Furthermore, formalization could easily remove some of the freedoms and privileges now enjoyed. It would be unwise to disrupt a program that has and is contributing so much to the continued improvement of fish and game management. Therefore, formalization is totally unnecessary.

As my concluding statement I again quote from Dr. Thompson's letter of October 11, "I have often boasted that the Midwest Wildlife Conference is a unique organization. More accurately, I should say non-organization because it has no constitution, no bylaws, no officers, no dues, no published reports, and, usually, no banquet speakers. It is astonishing how such a state of anarchy could endure and operate so smoothly for over twenty-five years."