

A full-page background image of a sunset. The sky is a deep, vibrant red with a bright, glowing sun in the upper left. Below the horizon, the sun's light is reflected on a body of water, creating a vertical column of golden light. The silhouettes of trees and land are visible against the darkening sky.

## These Things Know \_\_\_\_\_

*I have planted a garden, so I know what faith is.*

*I have seen oak trees in the breeze, so I know what grace is.*

*I have listened to birds singing, so I know what music is.*

*I have seen mornings without clouds, after showers, so I know what beauty is.*

*I have seen the miracle of sunset, so I know what grandeur is.*

*And because I have perceived all these things, I know what wealth is.*

—By Phil Sander



# “Mr. Conservation”

Story and Photos By Ed Pembleton

When he is affectionately referred to as “Mr. Conservation” you quickly get an idea about Phil Sander’s lifelong dedication to the place where he has lived for almost a century—the Des Plaines River valley in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Phil’s lifetime volunteer contributions to conservation have been so continuous and outstanding that the Kenosha Chapter of Pheasants Forever recently presented Phil with a life membership.

John Burke, manager of the Des Plaines Wetlands Conservancy and long-term friend, pointed out, “It is easy to underestimate Phil’s impact on conservation and history in the Kenosha region and beyond because Phil never brings up self-accomplishments, unless you ask.”

## Hunting Led to Conservation

Like many committed conservationists, Phil developed a passion for being outdoors and hunting as a young lad growing up and exploring Kenosha. Phil first explored the Des Plaines River, its wetlands, the surrounding prairies and the Lake Michigan shore. He often walked the six miles from Kenosha south to the Wisconsin/Illinois border without seeing a house. By age 15, he began hunting waterfowl from shoreline sand dunes in the Des Plaines River Valley. Phil’s deer hunting continued for more than 50 years—documented by the sling of Wisconsin metal tags that now hang in the Halter Wildlife Club. Fortunately, Phil’s love of hunting and active dedication to conservation has lasted a very long time—he will be 99 on September 10, 2005.

Phil’s hunting pursuits rapidly led to active involvement in conservation. He began meeting other leaders in the state and soon established a network of fellow conservation leaders. In 1935, he and a small group of like-minded sportsmen organized the Grey Dawn Gun Club. They leased 160 acres of marsh and woods along the Des Plaines River and built a clubhouse reconstructed from an abandoned home they had purchased and demolished for the lumber. This “recycled” building became known as “The Shack,” and served for over 11 years as the “mansion on the marsh” for the Grey Dawn Club.

When the Grey Dawn Club finally dissolved, Phil’s dedication to protecting the Des Plaines River Valley persisted. In 1984 he joined a citizens’ group that founded the Des Plaines Wetlands Conservancy, a non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation and ecology of more than 700 acres of ponds, marshes, uplands and two miles of scenic river with over 20 miles of trails. As the surrounding suburban areas develop, the Conservancy is becoming a key natural focal point for the community.

## Leopold’s Influence

A constant student, Phil read Aldo Leopold’s classic textbook Game Management just after it was published in 1933. He appreciated Leopold’s thinking and recommendations for game management and followed up by reading a series of Leopold’s articles in

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*Mike Leitch, left, habitat manager & past president of Kenosha County PF and Ron Kuvasny, right, Wisconsin’s first Patron PF member, present Phil Sander his PF Life Membership Certificate.*



# “Mr. Conservation”

the Wisconsin Conservation Bulletin. Interested in the newly introduced ringneck pheasant, Phil wrote Leopold in 1944 inquiring about the pheasant's status in Kenosha County. Based on Leopold's reply, he helped start a local sportsmen's club that began a winter feeding program. He then launched a farmer-sportsman habitat project the following spring. Phil and his partners began working for pheasants and pheasant habitat almost 40 years before PF was founded. It is natural, then, that Phil was one of the first to join as a member of PF when the Kenosha County Chapter (#290) was chartered in May 1989.

Phil had several other links to Aldo Leopold. At the 1941 annual convention of the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology, a proposal was made to erect a memorial to the extinct passenger pigeon. A design engineer, Phil volunteered to design a stone monument and metal plaque. Wisconsin artist and conservationist, Owen Gromme sent a drawing of the bird. A. W.

## The Good Oak

Phil has strong connections to “The Good Oak,” the tree that Leopold memorialized in the Almanac as a metaphor for the history of conservation. The essay recounts the cutting of a bur oak near the Shack. When Aldo's wife, Estella, provided a split log from the “good oak” to Phil, his talents as a wood worker were endowed upon it to produce a gavel and bases for a series of his bird carvings. The gavel and one of the carvings now reside in the Leopold collections at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. People fortunate enough to visit the Shack and see where the ‘good oak’ stood may read the commemorative plaque Phil designed for the Citizens Natural Resources Association.

The Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary on the Carthage College campus was named after Phil in honor of his leadership and work with college students to convert 6.5 acres of de facto landfill into what is now a vibrant refuge. Phil's interests and



*Above: Phil designed the plaque for the memorial commemorating the extinction of the Passenger Pigeon. Above Right: The University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Museum of Natural History protects a gavel and bird carving with a base that Phil made from The Good Oak. Bottom right: Phil also designed the plaque that marks the location of the “Good Oak” at the Leopold Memorial Reserve.*



Schorger, the biological authority on passenger pigeons, contributed the monument's legend. In May 1947, the memorial was dedicated and can still be seen on Sentinel Ridge overlooking the Mississippi River in Wyalusing State Park. Leopold further memorialized this event with his essay, On a Monument to the Pigeon, in **A Sand County ALMANAC**.

In the early 1940s, Phil, Walter Scott and Gromme accepted an invitation from Leopold and the members of the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology to see the family's prairie and woodland restoration projects and visit his “Shack.” Phil still recalls that during this visit he and many others got a new addition to their conservation vocabulary when they heard Leopold use the word “ecology” several times.

writings encompass many areas beyond conservation—especially history and archeology. It was Phil's map that led to the discovery of a mammoth fossil that is now the main attraction of the Kenosha Public Museum. In 1995, Carthage College in Kenosha presented Phil with an “Honorary Doctorate of Public Service” for his many contributions to his community.

Phil has provided us with a great example of how to live Leopold's “land ethic” through his lifelong dedication to knowing and conserving the place where he lives and providing a legacy for future generations.

 Pembleton is PF's Leopold Education Project director.