

WCWA 25 YEARS



WCWA CELEBRATES SILVER

On May 29, 1989, a group of Wisconsin conservation wardens met in Wausau to discuss starting an association that would promote, educate and intensify conservation efforts for the enjoyment of all. Those attending the spring meeting decided on proposed goals, set membership criteria, discussed a museum concept, and considered name and logo proposals.

Out of that meeting came the Wisconsin Conservation Warden Association.

Sue Miller, a recently retired conservation warden from Hayward, was at that first meeting and immediately became the association's secretary. She said a warden's association had been created about two decades earlier, but it became defunct in the 1970s. Warden Dave Arendt, now retired, was elected as the first president of the new association.

Wardens had been talking informally about getting an association started before that meeting, she said, but that May meeting was the first meeting of record. The association was to be a fraternal organization that would educate the public about the warden force and conservation.

"From the very beginning, we wanted the association to be non-bargaining and not associated with the union," said Bill Schwengel, a retired conservation warden from Eau Claire, who was also at that first meeting and served as the *Wisconsin Game Warden* magazine editor and publications committee chairman in those early years. "We wanted membership to be voluntary and include all ranks of wardens."

They were also careful to stay separate from the Department of Natural Resources and politics. "We didn't start this organization using public funds," Schwengel said. "It was started through our own individual private donations and during off-duty



Top: The MacKenzie uniform is one of about 3,000 artifacts the association has gathered for its eventual museum. Harley MacKenzie was the first chief warden for the Wisconsin Conservation Department, and is remembered for professionalizing the warden force, including securing official uniforms. Bottom: Dave Arendt, right, became the association's first president. Here he is pictured with warden Larry Kriese at the 1990 warden conference.

hours; this was a genuine group of wardens who wanted to form an association, not a quasi-government institution. But while it is privately funded, it offers public benefits.”

Membership was open to voting members, which included active and retired conservation wardens; honorary members, former conservation wardens who served part of their career as wardens, past or present special and county conservation wardens, and active and retired conservation law enforcement officers from other agencies; and associate members, or individuals, organizations and businesses wanting to support the association. Annual dues were \$10.

Miller said it took a few meetings to get the association going. They hired an attorney and legal adviser who looked over their charter and helped them complete the paperwork to become a nonprofit organization.

A full membership meeting was held at the 1990 warden conference and the charter and bylaws were officially approved. “Every warden who was a warden at that time joined the association then,” Miller said. In other words, all 161 full-time wardens became charter members that first year, as well as 54 retired members, 15 honorary members and three associate members.

The group also held elections at the 1990 warden conference, electing representatives from each district, she said.

Retired warden Jim Chizek was elected the first vice president of the WCWA. He said the organization was needed for education purposes, especially during its early years. “Our department didn’t always look too good,” he said, noting that those in law enforcement were often ridiculed in the field. “We knew that it would be better to educate people about what the Department was doing, especially in the area of the warden force, rather than just arrest them.”

Members spoke up in the summer 1990 magazine and agreed that starting the WCWA was a good move. “This has been a long time coming and this time I know it will fly,” Melvin “Bingo” Lange wrote. Chauncey Weitz added, “If there is a magazine, I’d like to write an article for it, telling these young wardens how it was when I went to work in 1932. The picture has changed some.”

The timing with Andy Krakow’s murder in June 1990 gave even more purpose to creating an association, Schwengel said. Krakow, a conservation warden at Montello, was killed while assisting the Marquette County Sheriff’s Department with a domestic disturbance call. A 13-year-old boy, who had threatened his mother, shot and killed Krakow as he arrived at the house, before he could get out of his patrol truck or defend himself.

The first issue of the *Wisconsin Game Warden* magazine was dedicated to Krakow’s memory. And one of the first things the WCWA did was create a scholarship in Krakow’s memory, Miller said. The \$500 scholarship was given to a deserving UW-Stevens Point student whose goal was to become a conservation warden.

Since then, the WCWA has allocated more money and created more scholarships. It now annually gives six \$1,000 scholarships

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Warden Andy Krakow was killed on the job in June 1990, giving the association even more purpose in its formation. One of the first things the WCWA did was to create a scholarship in Krakow's name.

to students at UW-Stevens Point. The first scholarships were given as memorials to former wardens such as Krakow, Robert Markle and Harold Hettrick. But in recent years, new scholarships have recognized Emerson Noyes, who faithfully carried on his family's tradition of presenting a gold pocket watch to an outstanding Wisconsin warden each year; to Tyler Kreinz, a 21-year-old Berlin native who died while serving in the U.S. Army in Afghanistan and who hoped to become a conservation warden; and Cordero "Cord" Rodriguez, whose goal was to become a conservation warden before he died in October 2012 at the age of 17.

In addition, just this June, the WCWA introduced a new scholarship for WCWA members. The \$1,000 scholarship, which will be awarded starting in the fall of 2014, is for WCWA members, their children or grandchildren pursuing a degree in conservation or law enforcement and can be used at any accredited four-year college or university within the United States.

The WCWA has always had goals of connecting wardens and educating the public. "The association is a really good way for wardens to stay connected, but it also does a lot for wardens' public image," Miller said.

"The need for education continues, not just in what wardens do, but in natural resources in general," Schwengel added.

"Whether we do it in publications or on our website, through sponsored activities, or with our scholarships, the goal of educating people is always going to be there."

After re-launching a second time due to provider issues, the WCWA website is back, said current WCWA President Randy Dunkel. "With the help of a very dedicated volunteer, Alix Lumina, the website is beginning to do what it should — provide our members and potential members with information and allow them to even become members." In the near future, it will also provide a place for people to buy merchandise, he added.

Schwengel said there has been a lot of interest about the warden history, from both wardens and the general public. The association helps to preserve that 155-year heritage of the warden force. In particular, WCWA member and retired warden Harland Steinhorst, who writes the popular "Looking Back" feature in each issue of *Wisconsin Game Warden* magazine as well as other stories on the history of the Wisconsin warden force, has done a great job documenting warden history, Schwengel said.

Wisconsin Game Warden magazine was first published four

times a year, Schwengel said, but it got to be too expensive and time consuming and now is published twice a year. "At first, the format and direction of it was more internal with some inside humor that only wardens would understand," he said. "Today's magazine is more readable for the general public with articles not only about wardens, but also on natural resources and other human interest topics."

Miller recalls hand stamping those early magazines, then bundling them by ZIP code and taking them to the post office to be mailed. Magazines were sent not only to members, but also to the public libraries, as well as Wisconsin district attorneys and judges.

Editors have changed over the years, as well as printing companies. Tamara Groth and Pat Lisi served as editors from 1992 to 1998. Current editor, Barbara A. Schmitz has been working on the magazine since 1998. ALS Printers in Oshkosh has printed the *Wisconsin Game Warden* and handled mailing since 2006. Educating the public continues to be a priority, with magazines being sent to all 466 public libraries and public library branches within the state, as well as to student law enforcement associations.

"That's a carryover of the *Wisconsin Conservation Bulletin*, which went into every public library," Miller explained.

The association also helped to acquire warden memorabilia for a warden museum to be located in the upper floor of the barn at the Mackenzie Center in Poyette. However, the museum was never completed due to the cost of adding an elevator to make the then-state-owned building handicap accessible, said Chizek, who headed the museum project.

Initially, they hired a fundraising company to help collect enough funds to open the museum. But when it was decided that they'd need to add an elevator to the property, they went to the legislature requesting \$1 million in funds, Chizek said.

"We thought the state legislature would approve funding of the museum," Chizek said. "We had the approval of the finance committee, but then Gov. Tommy Thompson left for Washington (to become secretary of the Department of Health and Social Services) and his replacement, Lt. Gov. Scott McCallum, vetoed it."

The items collected and catalogued stayed at the facility for some time before being moved to a fire-suppressed and environmentally controlled building in Madison, he said, and the WCWA continues to collect items to exhibit.

Retired warden John “Jack” Daniel, treasurer of the WCWA and Wisconsin Conservation & Education Foundation (WCEF), has been working to re-catalog the materials for several years at the Madison site.

“Originally, the items were stored in cardboard boxes in a basement of a building at Poynette,” Daniel said. “We acquired a computer and have been transferring the items from cardboard boxes into plastic totes to keep them safe from moisture. Since everything is done by volunteers, it’s been a slow process.”

As Daniel transfers items into the plastic totes, he has been re-cataloging all the items, putting the necessary information — including item number, description, donor information and more — into a computer database. “We have in excess of 3,000 items, and it is a tedious process,” he said. “But we are about two-thirds of the way done.”

Daniel said what the WCWA really needs is to hire a curator to complete the job and keep it going. But that requires money the association does not currently have. Future plans also call for creating mini traveling museums that could be used throughout the state, as well as a virtual museum with information online.

Daniel said not everything is just stuck in storage. He did put together one exhibit that was included at the Fond du Lac Historical Society; another exhibit is at the DNR offices in Madison.

But both traveling exhibits and virtual museums take time and money. “To do a mini traveling museum, you need to give great thought about what story you want to tell and how to put that display together,” Daniel said. “And you need traveling cases, too.”

A virtual museum is also a big job since all the items would

have to be photographed and described.

“But it is the way to go,” Daniel said. “The warden history is a fascinating history. It parallels the conservation movement in Wisconsin, so really the story of the warden force is the story of the state conservation movement. Wisconsin has been a leader in this movement from the very beginning, and like any history, it needs to be preserved and told.”

Warden memorabilia also help the association and its members stay connected to its past.

“The association helps to keep the history of the warden force, of what it was in the past and what it has become today,” Miller said. As part of that, education, for its members and the general public, has been and continues to be an important goal.

“It’s easy to become a closed association,” Schwengel said, “but from the beginning we said education was one of our main objectives. It wasn’t just a buzz word.”

But educational efforts take money. That’s where the WCEF came in.

The WCEF was founded in 1998 as an offshoot of the WCWA. The 501(c)(3) non-profit organization provides grants to various conservation and natural resources focused organizations and individuals within Wisconsin. These grants are then used to promote public education regarding the improvement of Wisconsin natural resources, environmental stewardship, and outdoor heritage through publications, events, and projects.

“There really was a need for the WCEF as a means to infuse money into our association,” Miller said.

To raise funds for its many projects and needs, the group first started a calendar raffle. Throughout the years, a gun raffle was added, and for the last two years, a WCEF banquet featuring silent auctions and raffles has been a major fundraiser.

Since beginning its scholarship program, the WCWA has awarded more than 60 scholarships in excess of \$70,000 to students pursuing degrees in the College of Natural Resources at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. Many of those award recipients have gone on to become wardens for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Warden Jon Scharbarth, center, presented scholarships to the 2011 recipients. From left, they include Michael Weber; the Andrew Krakow Memorial Scholarship; Tricia Verville, the Harold Hettrick Memorial Scholarship; Jonathan Kaiser, the Emerson Noyes Memorial Scholarship; and Christopher Bartlett, the Robert Markle Memorial Scholarship. The association now also gives scholarships in memory of two young men who hoped to become conservation wardens, as well as to members or members’ children or grandchildren seeking a degree in conservation or law enforcement.



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Tyler Kreinz, a 21-year-old Berlin native who died while serving in the U.S. Army in Afghanistan in June 2011, hoped to become a conservation warden once out of the military. The WCWA now annually gives a scholarship in his name to a deserving student at UW-Stevens Point.

As the group made money, it allowed the WCWA and WCEF to help finance events that go along with their missions. Throughout the years, the WCWA has provided grants to help pay for events such as learn-to-hunt or learn-to-fish days. Other grants were awarded to wardens so they could attend the North American Wildlife Enforcement Officers Association (NAWEOA) conference or other educational events, Miller said.

Retired warden William Engfer, current WCEF president and board member since the group's inception, said the foundation was formed primarily to promote and raise funds for the warden museum. In fact, in its articles of incorporation, it states: "...the corporation shall be operated to (1) advance the social welfare by promoting the conservation of the natural resources of the State of Wisconsin; (2) educate the public regarding the environment and natural resource management; and (3) serve as a "friends group" under Section 23.098 of the Wisconsin Statutes, for the purpose of raising funds from the general public to be applied for the improvement, maintenance or operation of facilities owned and operated by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, an agency of the State of Wisconsin, including but not limited to the MacKenzie Environmental Education Center Conservation Law Enforcement Exhibit and museum to be owned and operated by the said Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources."

While a physical museum never was opened, the WCEF has continued to raise money for other educational and charitable projects.

"One of our main challenges is to maintain a steady funding source so we can continue to fund projects," Engfer said. Another challenge is that everyone involved in the WCEF is a volunteer. "Everyone is busy so it's hard to find people who have time and the expertise we need..."

While the WCEF faces some challenges, it has also experienced many successes, especially in recent years.

"We changed the focus of fundraising to a banquet, and that has been extremely successful," Engfer said. "In the last three years, we've also built on and improved our partnership with the WCWA so that there is more cooperation between members. Their membership and ours are working hand-in-hand to raise money for projects or events that benefit both groups."

In addition, Engfer said the WCEF has worked hard to better promote itself, which has resulted in an outpouring of support and contributions that go above and beyond normal fundraising.

"So many people today have a better understanding of what we are and what we do."

Dunkel agrees that the two organizations have a good working relationship that benefit both. But he acknowledges that some people are still confused by the associations' split roles of being both a charity and a brother/sisterhood.

"WCEF President Bill Engfer and I have made a conscious effort that funds that have been raised in the name of charity go to charity, and that funds raised for the association go toward association efforts," he said, noting that the two plan to create educational materials on how the two organizations work with each other.

In addition, the WCWA and its grants, scholarships and other things, often get lumped together as being a part of the Department, Dunkel said. "We have to ensure that people understand that the grant didn't come from the state, but rather from a dedicated group of people who worked hard to raise money so a person's learning experience for an outdoor activity could be more enjoyable."

The WCWA's mission statement, although shortened, remains basically the same. It states: "The WCWA is dedicated to promoting outdoor recreation, instilling conservation ethics, and preserving Wisconsin's natural resources heritage." Dunkel said the board has established a business plan and works hard to make sure their efforts still focus on those categories.

"But because we are still a fraternal non-profit organization, we also have a responsibility to our membership," Dunkel said. Recently, the WCWA partnered with the Department on the honor guard project started by Warden Supervisor Jeremy Peery. "When offered the opportunity to join in this effort, the entire board was in favor," he said. "It wasn't a matter of, 'Shouldn't the Department pay for this?' But rather if this is what it takes to support and respect our wardens and their families, then the Association is on board."

But the association also has many opportunities, particularly if members become involved.

"Be an active board member or committee member, run a local fundraiser through the WCWA to support a large effort you may have, or assist with merchandise ideas," Dunkel said. "Our members are some of the most talented and hardworking individuals. They come up with great ideas for the association on a regular basis. Often, the association will support the



Left: Since 2013, the Wisconsin Conservation and Education Foundation’s annual banquet has become a major fundraiser for the organization. About 200 people attended in both 2013 and 2014, and were able to bid on a large variety of silent auctions or participate in raffles. Right: Bill Miller won a stained glass warden patch emblem, made and donated by Jim and Suzi Blankenheim, at the 1990 warden conference.

warden with that idea or project, but it does not have a strong enough volunteer base to take each idea and handle it on its own. Volunteering for a committee or taking on the challenge of bringing a merchandise idea to fruition helps at levels most don’t understand.”

However, Warden Matthew Groppi gets that. He has been the WCWA vice president since May 2012, and previously served as a representative for the southeast region and as the membership coordinator. “During my time of being actively involved in the WCWA, we have undergone some fairly significant changes in terms of who is involved and how the association operates,” he said.

But finding active members to lead projects and contribute their time continues to be a challenge. “We have undergone quite a bit of turnover in the last few years as some of our former board members and officers have either retired, transferred or promoted,” Groppi said. “We have been able to get new members to get active and fill the vacant board seats. However, in the next couple years, we will continue to see turnover with our board and officer positions. As these positions become vacant, we need more people to get involved.”

Not only does the WCWA have to keep its board and officer positions filled, but it also needs committee members to work on association business plans and objectives, publications, merchandise, the annual banquet and the warden honor guard, Groppi said.

“I would encourage anyone who is interested to get involved,” he said. “Taking an active role in the association is a great way to network with other wardens and contribute to the

overall success of the association.”

Groppi frequently gets asked what the association is doing. “My short answer to that is ‘A lot.’ We are still producing two magazines every year, a raffle calendar, newsletters, running a website, providing financial support to our members for professional development and professional gatherings, awarding annual grants for regional projects and events, and selling merchandise.”

Chief Conservation Warden Todd Schaller, who was actively involved in the WCWA for 15 years, sees firsthand the impact the association has. “The WCWA allows us to accomplish some things that benefit the Department and the citizens,” he said. “The association does things we couldn’t do alone... such as offering regional grants to programs that promote outdoor activities, particularly to youth.”

Secondly, the WCWA provides opportunities for members to participate in training or to attend national conferences that the Department cannot, Schaller said, while also allowing members to build on that “family” tradition or feeling. “The WCWA allows us to connect and engage each other on group projects and at events outside the regular workday,” he said.

Dunkel said the association has an impact statewide and he encourages members to take pride in that fact. “The number of people who have benefitted from a scholarship or a grant, or who were recognized by the group is tremendous,” he said. “We go beyond the daily grind, beyond the politics, beyond the bad contact, beyond the frustration and say we love the outdoors, we love our jobs, and we want to share that experience with others.”