

Bob Hilke: Many Happy ‘Returns’

By Paula DeMars

Bob Hilke has known Ernest Oberholtzer his entire life. A photograph of Ober holding Bob as a baby that hangs in Cook’s House on Mallard Island (also on this page) highlights the beginning of his story. But Bob’s family history and connection with Ober began more than 30 years before he came into the picture.

Bob’s grandfather was Adolph Hilke, one of the first commercial fishermen on Rainy Lake. He moved to the American side in 1907 and continued to ply the waters the rest of his life. The earliest fish camp he had was on Rabbit Island on the upper part of the lake not far from Kettle Falls. But the one that Bob remembers is the camp in Brule Narrows, between the upper and lower sections of Rainy Lake.

Ober probably met Adolph Hilke while traveling through Rainy Lake. The railroad had come in to Ranier in 1907 from Bemidji, but Ober may have traveled by canoe to Tower (MN) to take the train as it was a more direct route through to Duluth. It was common practice to stop and visit with folks on the lake—to take a meal and catch up on news. Ober and the elder Hilke likely became fast friends. A couple of Ober’s photographs from 1917 show a 10-year old Fritz Hilke (Adolph’s son) posing in uniform with a BB gun near the end of the First World War. Ober was a frequent family visitor in the early years. Before he had Mallard Island, Ober wintered one year at Adolph Hilke’s home at what is now Houska Point in Ranier.

The other side of Bob’s family had been in the area perhaps even longer. Bob’s great-grandfather was C.B. Kinney who worked for the Koochiching Company, an organization planning the civic development of the International Falls area, then Koochiching Falls, around E.W. Backus’s industrialization program. Bob says “It was interesting in our family because, of course, Kinney was a Company man all the way.... Then on the other side of my family there was my dad who was very close to Ober.” Fritz Hilke worked at the paper mill. But, Bob says, “My dad didn’t hesitate to stand up for what Ober wanted to do.” Fritz was well respected, and people listened to him.

One day, when Bob was 12 or 13 years old and living at the family home, Ober stopped by to visit with Fritz over lunch. Ober knew Fritz would be home from his job at the mill for lunch. Often dropping in by boat for lunch or conversation, on this occasion Ober asked Fritz if young Bobby could join him for a canoe trip. Fritz said that would be fine. Later Ober invited Bob. Having overheard the conversation between his dad and Ober, Bob eagerly said ‘yes’. Within the week, Ober and Bob were off on their first canoe trip of many to come.

(continued on page 6)

In The Words of Ernest Oberholtzer:

From Ernest Oberholtzer’s Journal
Sunday, July 15, 1956

“Mid afternoon, Frances (Andrews) drove me to Orr with aluminum canoe on top of her car. Rain. Found Howard Zahniser family awaiting me at Orr. They drove ahead to Crane Lake while we had dinner at a bus station. Ray Anderson had provided us with a canoe, and Bobbie Hilke was to follow later with my own. Quite a mix-up with Crane Lake about arrangements for moving and return of cars. We were all kept up late. Bobbie arrived at 1:30 a.m. after a breakdown of his own car. “



Photo: Oberholtzer Foundation Archives

Dear Readers,

All is in motion. The strip of sunlight moves across the floor at a new angle, while the thermometer drops. Our friend, Bryne Johnson, just called from International Falls, and he quoted John Erickson (store owner in Ranier back when) who said, “Up here, we need a thermometer about six feet long, with zero at the top!”

My life is rich when I get calls like that. Meanwhile, the snow swirls and the dreamers dream. January is the time at my desk when certain summer weeks always fill and others open up with hopeful small gaps. If you want six days on Mallard Island this coming summer and you have ideas about that, send me an email and let’s talk about what space is left. Managing Mallard is like the BWCA or any national park in the way we need to think about *capacity* at every turn. Without carefully defining “carrying capacity,” our fragile island would become distinctly worn out.

All is in motion with our leadership as well! As you can see, on page 4, we welcome three new board members. And, after 15 years, Bob Hilke leaves us. Letting Bob term off the board of directors is only fair, but it’s hard to see anyone who knew Ernest Oberholtzer that well retire from our meetings. At least Bob is nearby and we can call him with our questions. I’m glad to feature more details about the Hilke family in the cover piece written by Paula DeMars.

As you may know, things are in motion at home, too. Don Maronde was my life partner for 16 years, and you likely know that he died in October. As I come to know more about all of the 82-plus years of Don’s life, I am reminded that he lived big and broad and boldly. My favorite photograph of him was taken years before we met, and in it Don is bone-tired and smiling widely at his stringer of seven Northern Pike—Don’s favorite even with the y-bones. That’s the photo you see on page three. So, I am re-defining my own life, but relishing in the memories and shared causes of our life, Mallard being a big one.

Finally, one of the exciting turns in our organizational life is our newly re-designed web site. Do visit www.eober.org!! And our huge thanks to Fiona Reid for getting us this far and helping us to continue to refine it as a beautiful place on the Internet.

- Beth



Library dock photo by Nance Kunkel, 9/18



MALLARD ISLAND

THE OBERHOLTZER FOUNDATION

The Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation maintains Ober’s legacy and North Woods island home as a source of inspiration, renewal, and connection to Indigenous Peoples, kindred spirits, and the natural world.

This newsletter is published twice per year, generally February and October. Cover sketch of Mallard Island is credited to Gene Ritchie Monahan. Send poems, stories or articles to Beth Waterhouse at beth@eober.org

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WWW.EOBER.ORG

Please take a minute to visit our newly re-designed website. Our thanks to Fiona Reid for getting us this far and working with us as we continue to refine this space.

Please support this legacy as you are able. Soon, you will find a “donate” button on the website! And meanwhile, checks are received with gratitude—mail them, please. (Our address is on page 3 or the return on this newsletter.)

Note: We gratefully receive gifts of stock, and the Foundation is a perfect recipient for your estate planning gifts. Ober’s legacy on Mallard Island in Rainy Lake soon approaches 100 years!



A Plane Ride

by Don D. Maronde

“My first experience with the Mallard and the power of its story began with a plane ride from Marshall, Minnesota to International Falls. I had not flown much at all and never in a small plane. I wasn't sure I liked it much. I was soon distracted by the view of the countryside on this beautiful October day. Jean wanted my then wife, Sandy, and me to fly with her to see if this place was real. I already had a feeling of mythic adventure in the brief picture Jean had shared with us. As you know, Jean is of mythic properties herself. I'd never heard of any Oberholtzer so he must not be real. I'd never been to Rainy Lake, another legendary place. So we were off to something like a Hobbit adventure. Then we went through the looking glass.

“We were maybe about Deer River when the world disappeared. No ground, no reference up or down. I even got a bit of vertigo. No one else seemed worried. The pilot just kept on. I stared straight at the white, trying not to think of what might appear. I may have tried to put my feet down, in case that would help. The plane's sound changed some, and suddenly (none too soon) the ground rose up, and up came a runway made just for us.

“That was dramatic enough for me. What could be next? We were met by a mythic being I later learned was Gene Ritchie Monahan. She was really real, and she took us out on the big lake and soon to Mallard Island, and the mythic place took on substance, and that was okay. I wanted to wake up gently. Gene Ritchie gave us the keys and set us on our own. She sat on a dock and read. I looked a few times to see if she hadn't vanished. We three opened, and opened to, every building, and we counted books. Time was not enough. I did not want to leave. The rest of the story goes on.

“That was 1982. We and several small groups that Jean put together worked on the beginning of the book project for two years, two weeks each summer for Sandy and me. Jean and others continued. For me, there was a hiatus of about ten years and then in 1996 I returned for a Readers' Week and I have been back every year in some program or work project since.

I like getting there much more than leaving.”

(Written in 2015.)

Don Maronde 1988



A 2004 Cabin Log Entry

In Jeopardy (the game show) you phrase your answer in the form of a question. At Mallard Island, I first experienced the answer, and then the question.

The answer:

Openness, appreciation, getting down, letting go, curiosity, acceptance, connection, possibility, affirmation, acknowledgement, shared laughter, warmth. Quiet competence, congenial labor, richness, grace.

The questions:

What is happiness?

What is Magic?

What is hope?



Janet on Mallard Island

June 2012

- Janet Pearson

To Contact Us:

In a few months, the Oberholtzer Foundation will plan for its spring migration up to Mallard Island in Rainy Lake. Although it was -44 Below Zero this morning (1-31-19) in International Falls, we do seem to trust in the tilt of the earth's axis!

The Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation Board of Directors: Peggy Anne Smith, president; Bob Norbie, vice president; Michael Reid, treasurer. At Large Board Members are: Bill Forsyth, George Glazier, Bob Hilke, Mary Swalla Holmes, Pebaamibines (Dennis) Jones, Dave Rolloff, and Diane Tessari.

We also honor our predecessors and our **Trustees Emeritus:** Marnee Monahan, Gene Ritchie Monahan, Dolores DeLaittre, Ted Hall, Charles A. Kelly, Doug Wood, Joe Paddock, Hugh Monahan, Jean Sanford Replinger, Mary Swalla Holmes, Robin Monahan, Jim Davis, Harry Sweatt, Elaine Thrune, and Tim Heinle.

Staff: Beth Waterhouse, Executive Director; Mairi Doerr and Prudence Johnson are Summer Program Directors; Paula DeMars is on contract as Archivist / Historian; Fiona Reid is our Webmaster.

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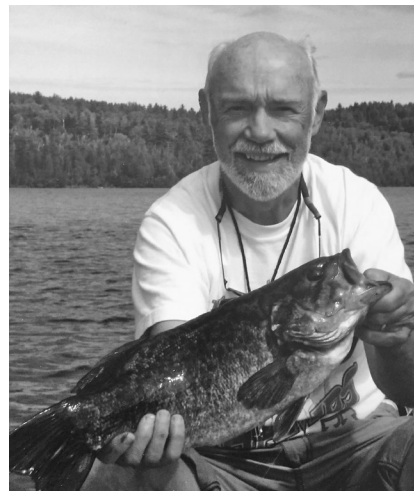
Special thanks to the cadre of **Mallard Island caretakers** who will again assist with the summer: Daniel Laurence Andersen, Judy Blais, Paula DeMars, Mairi Doerr, Barb Draper, Jim Fitzpatrick, Mark Granlund, Mary Swalla Holmes, Prudence Johnson, Nance Kunkel, Emily Larscheidt, Jane Lund, Jennie Ross, Kelly Sassi, Danielle Sosin, Diane Tessari and Elaine Thrune. Two new caretakers will be training in July: Clay Gustafson of Minneapolis and Athena Kildegaard of Morris, MN. **Welcome!**

Introducing New Foundation Board Members:

When each candidate for the Oberholtzer Foundation Board of Directors is nominated, they are also asked to link themselves (in their own words) to us and our overall mission. In the past year, we have welcomed three new board members, and we'll let each of them introduce themselves here. The Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation wishes to say "Welcome, Bill and Dave. And welcome back, Mary!" This leadership group will meet in Minneapolis in March and then for one day in mid-June and one day in early September on Mallard Island.

From **Bill Forsyth** in early 2018:

"For as long as I can remember, I have loved the outdoors, lakes and wilderness areas. I have traveled to the BWCA two or three times a year for over fifty years and am deeply committed to the preservation of the beauty of this area and of other wilderness areas on our planet. I have a passion for canoeing, camping, fishing, backpacking and hiking in remote and wilderness areas. For this reason, I have also had an interest in Indigenous cultures and their deep spiritual relationship with the earth and nature. I was excited to learn of the relationship between Ernest Oberholtzer, Mallard Island and Indigenous communities in Minnesota. Preservation of four islands in their relatively primitive state and using them for programs that enable individuals to experience the beauty and natural environment of Rainy Lake is a wonderful mission."



Mary Swalla Holmes returns to us in late 2018:

"Over the last 28 years, I have served as volunteer caretaker, board member, Treasurer, Vice President, Photo Archivist and grant writer for the Oberholtzer Foundation. I also served as its first Executive Director for three years ('05-'07) shaping a position that was effective and sustainable. I've been humbled and blessed to be a member of the Board as it struggled to articulate its mission and vision, and create program and educational opportunities around Ober's values. I was a part of the team that wrote the first by-laws and initiated the first fund-raising program. One of my most instructive times of being on the Island was during the deconstruction and reconstruction of the Big House fireplace and glacial stone chimney. We proceeded with ceremony and prayer, and asked for the help of all those who protected and loved the Island. A project that seemed overwhelming opened into an opportunity to participate and learn for many people, and, in 2012, was completed with great success. Being off of the board (for a time) has given me new perspectives and a chance to apply my skills and talents in new ways."



David Rolloff wrote this in November 2018:

"My mother's family spent summers on the Rainy River near Baudette in a log cabin built by my grandfather in the 1920s as an escape from 'town' when he was superintendent of schools across northern Minnesota. I spent most summers of my childhood and youth in the same cabin, and I return there every year. Indeed, Mallard Island feels like a material extension of my family's intensely loved place on the Rainy River. The difference is that Ober's Island links me to the foundation of my professional life: the 20th Century conservation movements and the people devoted to them. In addition to a personal connection to Rainy River country, I would expect I could enrich the mission of the organization as someone with extensive knowledge of protected area land management history and policy in the US, particularly relating to the preservation of the Boundary Waters, but primarily as someone who appreciates Ober's legacy of wilderness advocacy. I regularly translate his history in my work so college students and wilderness rangers can develop an appreciation for what I call *the long game of advocacy*. People, places, policies, and passions of the 20th Century wilderness movement are personal to me."



Mallard Island Summer of 2019

“More Students on Mallard”

Recognizing trends that we could not quite live with, the Oberholtzer Foundation put the brakes on growth in 2018, cutting program weeks from the previous nine to just three. This year, we are bringing the contingent of weeks back up *somewhat*, to try to achieve a sustainable usage. One need was clearly articulated in our renewal work last summer, and that is for youth! Thus, you will also see—reflected in the summer schedule below—interesting new changes for summer programs on our favorite rocky isle.

May 21 to 25	Opening days of Reflection, Fasting, and Indigenous Drum Ceremony as we welcome the spring.
May 26 to June 1	Land and Buildings Work Week: With a focus on both carpentry and repairs. Michael Reid, coordinator.
June 2-8	ISLAND REST WEEK
June 9-14	Island and Gardens Work Week: With a major focus on the island’s 28 garden spaces. Peggy Anne Smith, & Mary Alice Smith coordinators. Sunday through Friday noon.
June 15	Spring Oberholtzer Foundation Board Meeting
June 16-22	Archives Week: This year’s focus returns to Ernest Oberholtzer’s book collection or Island Library. Inventory and care, 3-yr cycle.
June 23-29	“Writing as a Tool for Healing” A writers’ week for a group of women who have been meeting for six years in Minneapolis to explore and heal life experiences. Hosted by Karla McGray.
June 30 to July 6	ISLAND REST WEEK
July 7-13	Individual Artists and Special Projects: a program week hosted by the Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation. Spots remain open.
July 14-20	Caretaker Training Week II: Training on island systems, boats, philosophy and roles, mission and history, CPR and first aid.
July 21-27	“Indigenous Art and Writing at Mallard Island,” hosted by Kelly Sassi and Denise Lajimodiere. A writing retreat within the auspices of the National Writing Project. Teachers / leaders who are Indigenous and/or committed to place-based writing that is culturally sustaining. Focused on the Anishinaabe culture.
July 28 to August 3	ISLAND REST WEEK
August 4-10	“Anishinaabe Earth Sciences,” hosted by Melinda Neville, Leech Lake Tribal College Experience, in collaboration with LLTC’s Earth Systems Science (ESS) Program (Azhegiwe Bagwajaya’ii: “S/he goes back to the wilderness.”) Teachings will combine western science and Indigenous knowledge. Week benefiting both Leech Lake students and Mallard Island.
August 11-17	“Stewards of the Wilderness,” hosted by Daniel L. Andersen and Beth Waterhouse. This is a week intended to bring new-coming youth ages 20-25 to the island, and to offer experiences and education to them about the ecology of the islands, cross-cultural awareness and traditions, and Oberholtzer’s legacy.
August 18-24	Individual Artists and Special Projects II: a second “individuals” week hosted by the Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation. This week is FULL.
August 25 to 31	“Oberholtzer Foundation Presents” hosted by Prudence Johnson, Minneapolis. Prudence offers International Falls a connection to her community of artists and musicians. Event to be co-sponsored at the Backus Center. After time on the island, event may include a modest photo show, an early Friday (8/30) reception followed by a concert with music and storytelling.
September 1-6	“Crossing the Waters,” hosted by Carolyn Light Bell (with Lucy Bruntjen) Five days for this group of writers to spend in nature, writing on their own projects or manuscripts.
September 7	Autumn Oberholtzer Board Meeting, all day Saturday



(continued from page 1)

Throughout his high school years, Bob visited Ober frequently, even skiing out with his high school friends to meet the storyteller one cold winter day. Ober wove stories in the drum room late into the night. When the students' parents called Fritz concerned, he assured them there was nothing to worry about. The group left Mallard to walk back across the ice by moonlight after midnight, their minds full of Ober's hospitality and stories of adventure.

Ober built Bob a dock on the north-east side of the tiny island where Japanese House sits. The dock ran to a shallow reef about 10 feet out from shore. Bob could arrive late at night, tie up his boat, and run up the trail to Big House. Ober had constructed Bob a special 'bunk' or pallet under the eaves on the upper level screened-in porch, facing west. Bob could climb up the ladder to sleep under the eave, looking out to the stars above and the lake below. If the wind came up, Ober had rigged a tarp Bob could hook up to shelter him from wind and rain. The pallet and the hook for the tarp are still there today.

In 1956 Bob met Ober with Howard Zahniser, then staffing the Wilderness Society, and his family at Crane Lake. Ober had planned a family canoe trip with the Zahnisers from Crane Lake to Kettle Falls, down the Namakan River. Once at Kettle Falls, the canoeists jumped on the Fish Boat, a commercial fishing barge. The Fish Boat motored from Kettle Falls to Ranier twice a week hauling supplies up to Kettle Falls and fish back to Ranier. The Fish Boat took on the 2 canoes, the Zahnisers, Ober and Bob, and even made an extra stop to drop them off on Mallard Island as it passed by.

That same year, during his summer break from college, Bob participated in the Wilderness Society canoe trip as well as the annual meeting of the Wilderness Society Council at Mallard Island. He says he had "great admiration for these people.... They really dedicated their life to some of this." He kept in touch with some of those meeting attendees until only a few years ago.

During Bob's college years in the Twin Cities, he was frequently invited to Sunday suppers with Ober's lifelong friend, Frances Andrews. Bob remembers Frances as a wonderful support during his years away from Rainy Lake. Remarkably, Rosa Oberholtzer had done the same for Bob's father, Fritz, when he was in college in Minneapolis twenty years earlier.

After Bob completed college, he took a job in Portland, Oregon for three years. Yet, Bob wanted to return to raise his children on Rainy Lake. In 1963 he was thrilled to accept a teaching job back in International Falls. Upon arriving at the family home, Fritz told Bob he had better get ready because Ober, at the age of 80, was planning a fly-in trip to Nueltin Lake. Nueltin, or *Nutheltin* Lake as it was called, crossed the border between Manitoba and what is now Nunavut, in the northern arctic barren lands. It is an enormous lake. Ober and Billy Magee had spent many days back in 1912 searching for the outlet, the Thlewiaza River or Seal River, leading them to Hudson's Bay.

Ober had told Bob many times over the years that he wanted to revisit Nueltin Lake and that he would ask Bob to come with him. This was their last chance. Fritz told Bob they were to leave the next day. It is still one of Bob's favorite stories to tell – making that trip and finding the baking powder can at the top of Hawkes' Summit, which Ober had left there in 1912 with a note for his mother. They brought that can back that day from the far north.

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After fifteen years, Bob Hilke is retiring from the Oberholtzer Foundation Board of Trustees in the spring of 2019. His years of attention to detail on Mallard Island also include a return of his own to the far north with friend, Les Oystryk of Saskatchewan. In 2012, marking the centennial, Les and Bob shared stories with many of the communities through which Ober and Billy had paddled.

Sources:

Hilke, Robert. Interview by Paula DeMars, Personal Interview, May 31, 2018, Mallard Island.

Hilke, Robert. Interview by Paula DeMars, Oral History, November 4, 2018, Hilke home in International Falls.

Oberholtzer Photograph Collection

Drache, Hiram. *Taming the Wilderness: The northern border country, 1910-1939.* Interstate: Danvers, IL, 1992.

Drache, Hiram. *Koochiching: Pioneering along the Rainy River frontier.* Interstate: Danvers, IL, 1983.



Nov 1954

Letter from the Treasurer

Dear Friends,

As with any winter in Minnesota, especially when it's 20 below, one tends to get a little antsy. Sure you can get outside and chop some wood, ski, ice-skate or walk the dog (if you can persuade him) but inevitably all you can do is plan for the moment when the weather breaks. By the time you read this letter, my guess is that it already has, and yet the below-zero of late January 2019 will have left a strong impression on us.

In the North Country, the seasons force us into different states of mind, projecting how the spring and summer might evolve. For those who will have a little time up on Mallard Island, the Oberholtzer Foundation shares your excitement to envision how the weeks will look for building, planting, writing, painting, studying or whatever creative pursuit the island visitors take.

This year we're almost back to a full complement of programs without stressing out the fragile environment, with a mix of age groups involved in music, storytelling, writing and visual arts amongst the standard and much-needed volunteer projects. We plan, for instance, to open up a beautiful space on Gull Island (farthest to the south). On Mallard, we are making a concerted effort to draw in young adults, designing these programs across the generations, promoting the values and teachings not only of "Ober" but other community leaders including the Anishinaabe.

Some of these summer 2019 programs will require additional cost, for which we are soliciting specific donations to support individual scholarships. We call on all of you to think of this type of support as a way to highlight what Ober also was afforded when he began his early career on Rainy Lake. Many benefactors from Frances Andrews to Harry French to the Winstons or Kellys or Hubacheks helped Ober continue his mission. In this spirit, we also are attempting to promote other leadership opportunities as part of our programming.

We have a small but very loyal following, and it's necessary for us to expand our profile to new and younger individuals. We hope you will join us with the all the energy and support you can muster during these changing times. If you wish your gift to be designated specifically as a "scholarship," please write that in the memo line on your check. We will use it as such.

Sincerely

Michael Reid, Treasurer



Photo by Sue Carver



Photo by David McPhee



Front rock sunrise, Beth Waterhouse



MALLARD ISLAND

Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation
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Our Constituents Make Many 2018 Gifts in Memory of Family and Friends:

In Memory of Gladys Meade:

Muriel Copp * Mary Meade Evans * Marjorie Frost * Lisa D. Johnson * Jyl Josephson * Bonnie Kuhlman * Nance Meade Kunkel * Ardis Kyker * Christy Maust * Jean Sanford Replinger * Anderson Fabrics Workroom * Meade Family

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In Honor or Memory of Others as Named in 2018:

David Andes and Karen Lewis in honor of Mary Swalla Holmes
Tom Blum in honor of Tim Heinle
Carl and Carol Haag in honor of Jean Sanford Replinger
Charles A. and Jean E. Kelly in memory of Tim Heinle
Carol B. Marshall in honor of Jean Sanford Replinger
H.G. McNeely in memory of Tim Heinle
George Simmons in memory of Tim Heinle
Jack Wadsworth in memory of Tim Heinle.



Photo by Nance Kunkel