

# Mallard Island

## *Living Lightly*



**Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation**

The beauty and grace of Mallard Island reward those who take the time to look and listen. Unexpected surprises await those who explore at Nature's pace.



Cedarbark House witnesses the afternoon sun as Rainy Lake laps underneath.

# Mallard Island

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The Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation fosters 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. *Gi-bezhig-oomin*

We envision a world where people understand and honor their relationship with the arts, indigenous culture, and nature.

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# **Table of Contents**

## **Introduction**

Geology  
Flora and Fauna  
Human Habitation

## **Island Dwellings**

House by House

## **Common Spaces**

Boat House  
Wannigan  
Drum Room  
Japanese House

## **Facilities**

Pump House and Wood Shed  
Ice House and Tool Shed  
Composting Outouses  
Shower House

## **Utilities**

## **Collections**

Music and Art Prints  
Maps  
Books  
Photographs

## **Mallard Island Summer Programs**

## **Volunteer Work Weeks**

## **Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation**

## **Philosophy and Longevity**

## **Please Join Us**

# Introduction

Mallard Island is a thin and sinuous spine of Canadian Shield bedrock. The ancient rock rearranged by glaciers now cradles Rainy Lake. It has seen floods and droughts, fires and logging, storms and serenity, native peoples and explorers. The island lies a few miles east of International Falls, Minnesota, and Fort Frances, Ontario. To the east and southeast is Voyageurs National Park, named for the voyageurs who followed canoe routes of the native people.

Mallard is one of five islands that make up the archipelago known as the Review Islands. Protected by the four other islands, Mallard offers seclusion and privacy not often found in today's world. At the same time, the vast expanse of water and sky to the east offers a sweeping vista where one can sense the curvature of the earth and be filled with the power and beauty of the universe.



*Review Islands - Aerial View circa 1983*

# Geology

The islands have been forming for 2½ billion years. Mallard Island reveals Canadian Shield bedrock, glacial boulders and striations, white quartz veins and basalt flows. “Crow and Gull Islands are mixed geology. Mallard is mostly an igneous rock called *Tonalite*, closely related to granite.” \* Erosion by wind and water, freezing and thawing, and glacial scouring and plucking shaped the islands. Lichens colonize the bare rock and begin the process of soil building.

All that lives on the island eventually dies and decomposes, giving back nutrients to the ground. This litter, or duff, is home to fungi, bacteria and insects. These “recyclers” assure the continuity of all life. The building of soil is a slow process, about one thousand years to the inch. All life depends on soil—plants, animals and us!

\*Geologic review by Brian Klawiter, 2013



## Flora

Photos of Mallard Island from the early 1900s show an island different in many ways from what today's visitors experience. No big pine trees are seen, and far more glacier-scoured bedrock is visible. One can imagine that most plants at the time were native to the North Country.



Native wildflowers still found by observant visitors today include tiny sweet-scented twin flowers trailing in green mosses, delicate corydalis growing improbably from thin cracks in the bedrock, blue harebells nodding in the breeze. Blueberries must have been long present, and they continue to yield their delicious fruit.

Today, mature pines soar into the sky, white cedars screen a deck and young oaks produce diminutive acorns. Planted in Ober's day, a crab apple tree still blossoms and sets fruit, and spring lilacs waft their fragrance along the trails. Native flowers mix delightfully with those that Ober introduced into 28 planned gardens—an exploration into creating a balance of cultivation and wildness. Gardeners have been working for the last several years to increase native plants, which may not be quite so tempting to visiting whitetail deer.

## Fauna

Quiet observation may lead to magical encounters with wildlife. Songbirds serenade you from trees and bushes. The white-throated sparrow song is a favorite of many and is heard all of June through early August. Loons call their wild haunting notes. Bald eagles often perch in tall pines and fledglings might be heard squawking for food. A cormorant's snaky neck may emerge unexpectedly from dark waters just offshore. Meanwhile, a merganser "baby-sitter" may drift by,

tending to a nursery of a dozen and more bobbing ducklings, or white pelicans may spiral gracefully overhead.



Frogs, toads or turtles might cross your path. Mice, voles and bats live here too. Red squirrels will steal your sandwich if left unattended! Fresh deer tracks may be found in the soft soil of morning, near yesterday's petunias now nibbled away. Muskrats and mink forage in the shallows. Beavers have active lodges nearby, and one sometimes finds fresh-cut branches floating in the water. A startled beaver will break the silence with the sharp sound of his tail slapping water. A playful family of otters may chatter and cavort along the nearby shoreline. Bear, fox, hares and pine martens occasionally visit the islands. Be alert for signs—you never know who might be around!

## **Human Habitation**

There have long been humans on and around the islands of Rainy Lake. The first people lived, hunted and fished this area as early as 9,000 years ago. Since the 1600s, the Anishinaabe have traveled the waterways and harvested its bounty. They may have had homes or camps on these islands during that time. The Review Islands are a spiritual place to Indigenous Peoples.



Ernest Oberholtzer (Ober) acquired Mallard Island around 1922 from William Hapgood who had purchased it from the United States government after it was logged. Ober called Mallard Island his home for nearly 40 years. In 1950, he also purchased Crow and Hawk Islands from Hapgood. The buildings, gardens, stone paths and rock walls on Mallard reflect the styles or values that became apparent during his college years studying landscape architecture with Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. at Harvard University. In a college paper, Ober described his development philosophy, considering “what would be necessary for both practical utilization and enjoyment, while at the same time maintaining or even increasing the height of wilderness charm.” Years later, he put that philosophy into practice on the place he called *The Mallard*. The island buildings are constructed using native materials and blend into the natural landscape.

Today, time on Mallard Island teaches us to live lightly, respectfully and in harmony with wildness. Rewards include lullabies of lapping waves, loon’s song, northern lights and the gentle sighs of the breeze through white pines.

“Individuals who in their youth built a tree house or a fort in the woods and found it to be a magical place, a place in which they felt connected to the deep source of things, will rediscover old emotions when they step onto The Mallard. In many, an archetype is awakened that releases an ancient joy at finding human shelter so in continuum with nature. There are, of course, others who snort that the island’s dwellings are worn and impractical. This is an arguable point, but, in any case, those in whom the archetype awakens become playful, expansive, and creative on The Mallard. They regain connection with soul.”

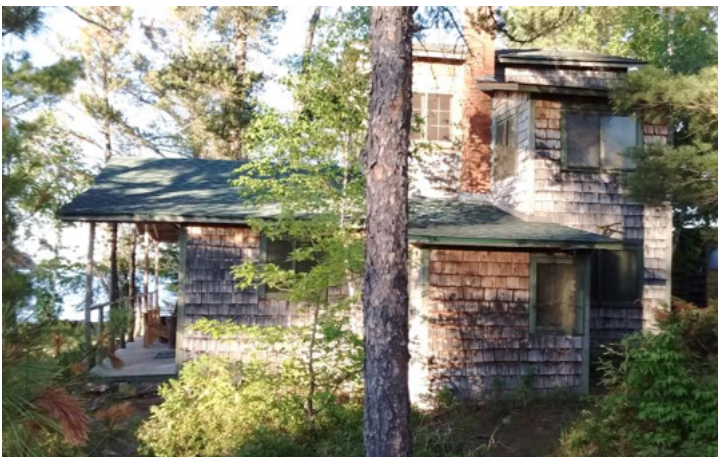
- *Keeper of the Wild* (2001) by Joe Paddock, p.243.

# Island Dwellings

## Front House

The core of Front House (historically called Sunrise Cabin, Honeymoon Cabin and Front Cabin) was moved from nearby Deer (or Grassy) Island sometime in the mid-1920s. A simple one-story cabin was moved to a position near the eastern tip of The Mallard. Additions later were made to the east and west sides. In 1933, it was moved back a bit from its original position and a second story was added.

Visitors often wonder why the south part of the main floor is raised a step above the front part of the structure. This was done to adapt the building to a rise in the level of the exposed bedrock. Unlike many modern building projects that would have called for dynamiting the rock that was “in the way of the building,” construction on The Mallard called for altering buildings to fit the lay of the land. Frances Andrews, a wilderness advocate and lifelong friend to Ober frequently rented Front House for her summer home in the 1950s. Visitors continue to delight in discovering the porches, trap doors and ladders that add charm to Front House.



## Cedarbark House

Cedarbark is a houseboat that provided shelter early on. Like many Mallard Island structures, it was covered initially with cedar bark siding—an example of the extensive and intentional use of natural and native materials. That siding was replaced in recent years by cedar clapboard, yet the Cedarbark name lives on. This boat once provided floating services on the lake; it is said to have been a gambling parlor and brothel.

Ober acquired the houseboat and moored it at The Mallard as a cabin space. By 1926, it was permanently situated on stringers and pilings over the water at its present location. Ober's mother, Rosa, a concert pianist from Davenport, Iowa, lived here for several summers in the 1920s (and one winter?).

Waves lap beneath Cedarbark's floor when the winds ruffle the surface of the lake. A stone fireplace was added, providing warmth and comfort on chilly days. This structure flooded in 2014, requiring major floor repairs.



## Cook's House



Cook's House perches atop the Pump Room and presumably took its name from the duties of its prior occupants. It was probably built by Oscar Gilbertson, who acted as handyman and island caretaker for Ober and lived here or in its lower level in the 1940s and 1950s.

Today, Cook's House serves as a one-room dwelling, often used by one of the island caretakers. Guests are typically charmed by its cozy sleeping space and a screened porch that provides a spectacular view of Crow Island and its white pines across the narrow channel. Sunrises in June brighten its yellow room!

## Artist's House

Artist's House was built onto the west side of Ice House as a studio for artist Gene Ritchie Monahan. In fact, she and her sons built it in the 1960s, with Ober's permission, and the room features a skylight and large windows that face the channel. Gene served as a founding board member and a caretaker and hostess to island visitors especially in the period immediately following Ober's death in 1977.



The room was completely re-built in 2001 and 2002 by Don Maronde and Dean Nordaune who re-installed most of its original features. Large old cedar trees frame lake views and nearby stone steps invite a quick swim.

## Winter House



Winter House, the only insulated building on The Mallard, was built by Charlie Friday in the early 1950s as a possible winter residence for Ober. It is the last building built on Mallard during Ober's time. Ober originally called it the *Flood Control House*.

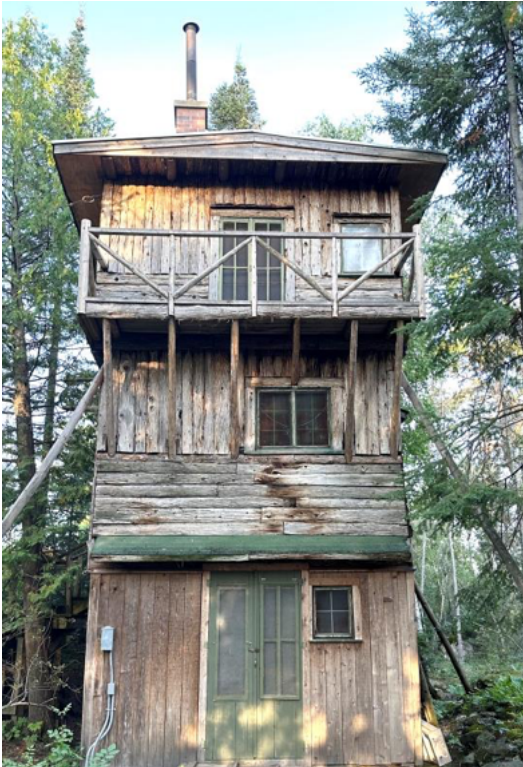
The rectangular room has corner windows opening onto the channel with a view of Crow Island.

Although near the main path, this house is quiet and often feels secluded. It can be a little cooler on hot days and with a wood stove, a little warmer on chilly nights.

## Bird House

Bird House is an intriguing example of adapting architecture to place in a way that minimizes impact on the natural landscape. It was built in 1926 with a very small footprint--three rooms stacked one on top of the other, soaring into the treetops! When carpenter Emil Johnson was shown the design for this towering building, he exclaimed that it simply would not stand. Ober directed him to make it stand, thus you'll see the buttress poles and innovative cabling that hold it steady in the winds.

When the house was finished, Tay-tah-pah-swe-wi-tang or Billy Magee, local Anishinaabe friend, canoeing partner and guide to Ober, gave "Bird House" its name.



The lowest level was used by Ober as an office. Now, it houses publications, papers, news clippings and maps. The upper two levels are summer dwelling spaces.

The wind in the pines and bird song right outside the windows make inhabitants feel as though they *are* living in a bird house!

## Ober's Big House

The building of this structure began in 1936. Then called the Main House, it served as Ober's year-round residence for the remainder of his time on The Mallard. It is built on a steep rocky slope along the highest ridge of the island's spine and offers entries at each of three levels. It has breathtaking views in all directions, especially of the channel between Mallard and neighboring Fawn Island.

Big House (once called Old Man River House or now Ober's House) began as three rooms stacked one atop the other—Ober's coal room, an office, and the living space above. By 1940, the Drum Room was added as a gathering space with a beautiful fieldstone fireplace. The winter kitchen below was a warm winter space for cooking and eating.



A number of screened and open porches on various levels still provide spaces for relaxation and inspiration.

The Big House is a stunning example of principles similar to Frank Lloyd Wright

architecture, a structure that is built *into* the environment, not *on* it. It was built by Emil Johnson, a local craftsman.



# Common Spaces

During each week of the summer months, up to twelve individuals have the opportunity to live together as a group on Mallard Island. Living in close community, sharing meals and spaces requires awareness, sensitivity, and respect for others. Cooperation develops as everyone works together to cook, clean, turn compost, and carry water during the week. Time can be spent together paddling canoes or sharing conversations and evenings of Scrabble, dominoes, or cribbage.

## Boat House



Boat House, built in the mid-1920s, was used as a library by the foundation for years, but went back to being a Boat House after the 2022 flood and now holds personal flotation devices, paddles, swimming toys, seat cushions, and more. Several thousand books formerly here now reside at the Mallard Island Annex library in International Falls.

## Wannigan

The Wannigan or Kitchen Boat was originally built to serve as a floating kitchen following the log booms. A rare survivor of the logging era, it was later used as a gambling boat on Rainy Lake. During Ober's time, it served as the main kitchen and dining room, often accommodating ten to twelve diners just as it does today.



For years it was simply afloat and moored to the shore. By 1929 or so, the boat had been placed in its present location and secured by timber and rock cribs. Its lights, refrigerator, and stove—all fueled by gas in 1955—are now electric. After the 2014 flood, the kitchen got a new floor, and in 2015, volunteers raised this building 14" to protect it from future flooding. The 2022 flood reached the raised Wannigan, but repairs to the floors and walls were successful.

The Wannigan is a hub of activity on Mallard Island for preparing and sharing meals. Camaraderie abounds with lively conversations and open sharing of ideas that often lead to new ways of seeing the world.

## Drum Room

If people knew Ernest Oberholtzer in the 1940s and 1950s, they usually speak about visiting this room. As the living room in Ober's main house, the Drum Room reflects a great deal of excellent community energy once brought by his friends and now renewed by those who come for a week on Mallard Island. This room with its huge glacial stone fireplace offers comfort, a warm place to talk around a fire in the cool of an evening, and a quiet place to read or listen to music on a summer afternoon.



Sometimes the drum room rocks with music or laughter that just might be heard all the way to Canada.

## Japanese House

Around 1922, the Japanese House was the first building constructed on the island. A wooden bridge spanned the narrow channel that separates the western tip from the main island. That wooden bridge was later replaced after the 1950 flood by the current arched stone bridge.

Japanese House was originally a single, small room built as an office with two porches. It was rebuilt in the mid-1990s by Michael Reid and David Donisch who carefully screened in a new porch that wraps entirely around the original space. A Japanese-style arch called a “torii” stands over the trail at the east end of the stone bridge.



Today Japanese House serves not as a dwelling, but as a retreat for individual meditation or writing and small group contemplation and creativity. It is also a wonderful spot to observe beavers or loons, view sunsets and, if the timing is right, moonrises!

# Facilities

## Pump House

This small cement room supports Cook's House and adjoins Ice House—all in one structure. It was once referred to as "Oscar's Room" because in the late 1940s and early 1950s it served as a dwelling place for the island caretaker, carpenter and stone-mason Oscar Gilbertson.

Today, it echoes the function of the old Ice House by housing a freezer and the island's largest refrigerator



This house has its name because it houses the main pump, and water treatment system that filters Rainy Lake water for island use.

All water for cooking, drinking and washing dishes is carried by island visitors from the Pump

House to the Wannigan or to their dwelling spaces. The floor was torn out after the flood of 2022 and rebuilt to withstand future floods.

## Wood Shed

The Wood Shed near Winter House was built in 2006 by Darrell Rundell and David Markwardt (and their families) for dry storage of firewood needed for the wood stoves.

## Ice House

Ice House was originally used for the purpose its name implies. Its large door opens onto the channel from which ice was cut during the winter. Blocks of ice were hauled up into the building and stored in sawdust to provide cooling in the warm season. When electric refrigeration became available on The Mallard, Ice House became a workshop and storage space for tools and supplies.

## Tool Shed

A small cedarbark-sided tool shed near the center of the island dates to the 1920s, and it still stores hand and garden tools, fasteners, and assorted items. The building was rebuilt in 2021, as the original structure was in considerable disrepair.



## Composting Outhouses



In the mid-1980s, two composting outhouses were built near Front House and Winter House by Mallard Island friends and volunteers John and Edie Rylander. In the early 1990s, Michael Reid built an additional composting outhouse on the path east of Big House.

Once a week, the access panels are opened and material is shoveled from the “active” chamber under the hole to the “passive” chamber

where evaporation of liquid continues and the remaining material breaks down into compost. The compost is removed annually for further decomposition.

The Swedish-designed Clivus Multrum composter was installed at the southwest corner of Winter House in 2003 by Don Maronde (replacing the original composter near that location). See photo page 20. This facility uses electricity for a fan and water spray system that automates some of the biological material processing. It does require occasional addition of wood shavings.

Weekly maintenance is typically handled by island caretakers. One can enjoy the wonderful views from the throne in this room!



Thomas Hall designed and installed the unique ramp and railings to the Clivus Multrum's entrance. Kent Scheer designed the canoe-paddle gate. Gate down means "in use," so please lift it up when you leave!

## Shower House

In August 2008, Don Maronde and Beth Waterhouse built a rustic shower house using recycled wood from the island. It is located on the flats east of the Boat House in an area once called the cornfield. This area has two unique hackberry trees, rare in this part of the country. The shower house, under the shade of one of those hackberries, has a pulley for a sun shower.

The shower house was finished during a week that happened to be an Ojibwe language week and the builders asked Pebaamibines (Dennis) Jones (a descendant of Billy Magee) for a name. He helped name it the "Giizibiigazhe Wigamig," which means wash (giizi) whole body (biigazhe) little house (wigamig).



# Utilities

Electricity provides energy for lighting, cooking, and refrigeration through underground cables from a transformer on Half Mile Island. It also powers the water pump and filtration system.

Our electrical system was negatively impacted by the 2022 flood. After flood waters receded, all buildings on the east end of Mallard Island were rewired to code. In 2023, all buildings on the west end of Mallard Island were rewired to code. These upgrades made our cabins safer for our guests, allowed us to get rid of many extension cords, and the entire system is now flood resilient.

# Collections

## Music and Art Prints

An eclectic mix of long-playing records, sheet music and art prints are located in Ober's Big House and can inspire long hours of browsing. An index of sheet music and a turntable are available for the enjoyment of a collection of vocal and instrumental music—Ober's companionship on many a dark winter's evening.

## Maps

As an avid canoeist and explorer, Oberholtzer was also a lover of maps. His maps can mostly be found in the lower Bird House office and an inventory of them is still in process. Ten maps are also available in digital format. Current maps of Rainy Lake and Voyageurs National Park can be found in the upper Wannigan or in Winter House.

## Books

Numerous shelves in the Big House have an amazing variety of books collected by Ernest Oberholtzer between the 1920s and the late 1950s. He had standing relationships with many book houses, including some in Europe, and he watched for specific contents or graphic quality.



At the time of Ober's death in 1977, some of his books were still in their shipping boxes and others were in Ober's houseboat home on the mainland. All were brought together here in the early 1980s by Jean and Randy Replinger, Don and Sandy Maronde, and Bob and Mary Lou Norbie (and others) who catalogued them all in the unique wall-by-wall system used today.

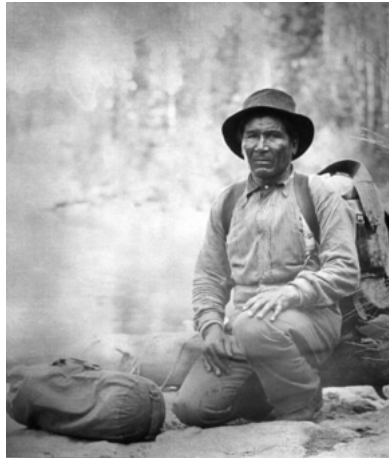
Now, for one work week each summer, volunteers inventory, clean and repair this unique collection. Visitors can learn more about the topics that interested Ober and find books that are more intriguing every year.

In the Upper Wannigan, one can find books and documents about Ober's life in the Rainy Lake region plus a collection of books written on or about Mallard Island by dozens of well-known authors.

## Photographs

Ernest Oberholtzer was a photographer known in his day for capturing images of the Indigenous Peoples in the far north as well as wildlife. He was particularly interested in moose. His canoeing partners, especially Tay-tah-pah-swe-wi-tang (Billy Magee) would paddle Ober very close to moose, allowing for amazing images with his Graflex camera even without today's modern zoom lenses.

After Ober's death, Ray Anderson of International Falls took it upon himself to organize all of Ober's negatives and to print them for our use and enjoyment.



Ober's photographs from his 1912 canoe journey to Hudson Bay with Billy Magee have been compiled in a book called *Toward Magnetic North*. Many of the photos and others are housed in the office in Ober's Big House. You will also find other favorites that are framed and hung in various buildings around the island.

All of Oberholtzer's known images have been digitized and are archived by the Foundation. Some are also held by the Minnesota Historical Society.

# Mallard Island Summer Programs

The island programming began in the mid-1980s under the capable direction of Jean Sanford Replinger. It has grown and evolved into our current mission-guided model.

Each summer, about ten weeks on Mallard are dedicated to the environment, science, and the arts, with special priority for groups of people whose lives touch our mission or who will make good use of the archives, books, and unique natural environment (including opportunities for both collaboration and solitude) that Mallard Island offers.

The Executive Director organizes programs all winter through an application process. We adhere to an island carrying capacity of twelve people for any given week. In order to allow the island to regenerate, two weeks each summer are also devoted to resting the land, trails, and compost systems.

Often, week-long groups are hosted by individuals who have applied with a specific ready-made group in mind (such as a group of architects or a writers group).



Each summer at least one week is scheduled for individual painters, writers, photographers, musicians, naturalists, or researchers to come with their own projects. They glean the best from the unique resources

and a quiet week among the sounds and rhythms of nature.

# Volunteer Work Weeks

Each year several volunteer work weeks are scheduled in order to maintain our buildings, collections, and landscape. We couldn't do what we do without them.



Putting finishing touches on Big House west deck.

Feeding branches into the wood chipper to make chips and mulch to use on Mallard Island.



# Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation

The Oberholtzer Foundation is a non-profit organization based in Minnesota with an active and dedicated volunteer board of directors, one Executive Director, two part-time summer program directors, and an extensive and loyal volunteer base. Financial support is derived primarily from individual donations, foundation grants, royalties, summer program fees, and a growing endowment. Your financial donations are important!

## MISSION

**The Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation fosters 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.**

**Gi-bezhig-oomin.  
(we are all one)**

The Board of Directors and staff are guided by this mission and by the values and philosophies infused throughout Mallard Island and Ober's wilderness advocacy work. A cross-cultural Board meets four times a year to oversee Foundation business, finances, and Mallard Island programs, and to implement various projects inspired by Ober's multi-faceted legacy left in his archives and islands.

Mallard Island is designated as a historic district on the National Register of Historic Places. We also have a conservation easement with the Minnesota Land Trust.

## VISION

**We envision a world where people understand and honor their relationship with the arts, indigenous culture, and nature.**

# Philosophy and Longevity

Ernest Oberholtzer bequeathed a remarkable richness in place and in values. His ideas and words were powerful enough to persuade Congress to set aside lands and avoid rampant industrialization of a northland so rich in beauty and animal life. His Anishinaabe friendships not only taught Ober about life, but helped him build the island's rock walls and unique structures. He learned the Ojibwe language, asked for the local stories, and earned the name Atisokan, which means storyteller.

Many others have added their own life legacies in the form of work with this organization—not just to honor the life of Ober, but so that something solid lives beyond them as well. It is a rare opportunity.

Ober created a life on The Mallard that “was a rich blend of natural simplicity and cultural sophistication,” helping to dissolve and transcend western civilization’s “sad heritage” of a “nature-culture division.” (*Keeper of the Wild* by Joe Paddock, p. 266)

“On the island, I discovered as well something for which I, and I think most of us, had long yearned: an integration of nature and culture through which we are able to experience something of our fullness.”

- *Keeper of the Wild* (2001) by Joe Paddock, p. xiii

Mallard Island is a teacher—each week, each morning a new lesson, if one can learn to listen and live within its natural habitat. Many have tried to capture in words what is unique about Mallard Island. It is some combination of the power of solitude within community, something about creative experience over theory, something about nature’s beauty—certainly—and how we all need it in our lives.

People who have never been to Mallard Island and perhaps will never sleep on the island, love and support it just because it exists. It is testament to something much larger than any of us and it depends upon all of us.

Mallard Island is a gift of the watchful spirits as well as the hundreds of people dedicated to its longevity. It is a heritage to be taken very seriously, yet enjoyed in each moonlit canoe ride or bone-shaking thunderstorm along the way.

## **Please Join Us**

The Oberholtzer Foundation maintains connections with friends and donors through various means: semi-annual newsletters, email subscription lists, Facebook, an annual report, and a Fall Gathering.

You can subscribe to communications on the foundation website at: <https://eober.org>

Annual and monthly donations supplement program fees and provide the basis for keeping Mallard Island, as well as the surrounding islands (Gull, Hawk, and Crow Islands) healthy and welcoming. Bequests and planned giving strengthen the Oberholtzer Foundation in caring for, maintaining, and sharing the rich history and legacy of this unique living museum.

**Your financial support is important to us.** You can give online at: [www.eober.org/donate](http://www.eober.org/donate).





Each fall the Foundation sponsors a gathering of summer program participants, board members, volunteers, and friends of the organization. Above, Douglas Wood and Steve Borgstrom regale the audience with Doug's EarthSongs—guitar and mandolin, songs about life, living, and the earth that sustains us.



**Ernest C. Oberholtzer  
1884–1977**

**Explorer, Conservationist, Landscape Architect,  
Classical Violinist, Photographer, Book Collector,  
Scholar and Reader, Friend of the Ojibwe,  
Master Storyteller...  
Atisokan**

Visit us online at [www.eober.org](http://www.eober.org)

651-867-4803 (main) or 651-867-4649 (direct)

*Donations are welcome and much appreciated.*

Being quiet, calm, and still on Mallard Island can reveal unexpected surprises and reward those who explore at Nature's pace. This incubating hummingbird was visible from the Wannigan deck. After her eggs hatched, we watched her feed her young.



