



# FALL NEWSLETTER



## The Annex Library

by Keir Johnson

Some of Ober’s books are at the Backus Center? How ironic is that?

After Ober’s death, books on Mallard Island could be found double-shelved, in boxes from his Frigate Friday mainland cabin, and in various stacks and boxes around the rooms. There were also 25 boxes of books stored on the mainland. Meeting this reality on her first visit to Mallard in fall, 1982, Jean Sanford Replinger proposed to the board that she catalogue them and get them all on shelves, calling for new shelving in the structure formally used as a boat-house/workshop. Thus was born “the library.”

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Jean Sanford Replinger shelving the final book in 1984.

## Board of Directors

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## Mission

We foster Ober’s legacy and north woods home as a source of inspiration, renewal, and connection to Indigenous Peoples, kindred spirits, and the natural world.

## Dear Reader,

Ober was famously called ‘Atisokan’ or ‘teller of stories’ by the the local Ojibwe. He collected stories and was by all accounts an enthralling storyteller. It’s no wonder, then, that stories and storytelling seem as central to Mallard Island as cedar bark siding. Good thing, as stories can be a powerful and necessary antidote to an increasingly disjointed and divided world.

A communal meal in the Wannigan invites collective sharing, exchanging bits of our lives through stories. The profusion of books on Mallard makes one want to curl up and take in a story, or get inspired to pick up pen and paper and contribute a verse. If you listen and attune your senses, over time you might catch the whisper of a story being told through the gurgle of waves against rock or the evening light burnishing the tops of the near island pines.

More than ever we need to come together around stories and shared meals. We need to court silence and solitude. We need community, ceremony, wildness and beauty. We need wonder and mystery and to take bracing swims in a cold lake. We need the old stories told to us once more, lest we forget, and we need to create new stories to nourish our hearts and make sense of the world. As Barry Lopez says,

“We keep each other alive with our stories. We need to share them, as much as we need to share food. We also require for our health the presence of good companions. One of the most extraordinary things about the land is that it knows this—and it compels language from some of us so that as a community we may converse about this or that place, and speak of the need.”



The new Oberholtzer office in Duluth.

We need to inhabit stories that encourage us to pay close attention. We need stories that will encourage us toward acts of the imagination that in turn will drive us to the arts of empathy, for each other and for the world. We need stories that will encourage us to understand that we are part of everything, that the world exists under our skins, and that destroying it is a way of killing ourselves. We need stories that will drive us to care for one another and for the world. We need stories that will drive us to take action.

-William Kittredge

I left my position as Hartley Nature Center's Executive Director after thirteen years because I am drawn to the sacred nature of the Oberholtzer Foundation's work: Caretaking Mallard Island and Ober's important (and unsung) legacy, further developing cross-cultural connections with Indigenous Peoples and infusing Indigeneity into the foundation's ways of thinking and being, and providing opportunities for artists, nature advocates and other kindred spirits to be renewed and inspired by a stay or visit to Mallard.

The Oberholtzer Foundation exists because of its amazing community of volunteers and supporters. I am in awe of the dedicated people that caretake this wondrous place and Ober's important legacy, and am happy and grateful to be in this new role. Thanks for welcoming me into the community!

If I haven't already, I hope to meet you in due time, preferably at the Wannigan table on a rainy day, to hear your story of connection to Mallard Island and the Oberholtzer Foundation's mission. If you find yourself in Duluth, consider this an open invitation to stop by the new headquarters. I've got a shack in the woods where we can sit and visit.

Warmest regards,

*-Tom O'Rourke*



Water, literacy, stewardship, and place-based learning were themes of Sowing the Seeds week.

## Summer Memories

A talented team of musicians and storytellers, Mallard Island Presents week, which culminated in a free concert in International Falls.



The 2022 flood presented an opportunity spurred by crisis. Historic flood levels required staff and volunteers to box and move 3,508 books that had been stored in the Boathouse building since 1982. After much consideration, and with climate-change resiliency in mind, the Foundation Board decided to rent space in the Backus Community Center in International Falls for conservation, display, and use of those books and other items. We call this new space the Mallard Island Annex Library. The vast majority of Ober's books—over eight thousand—remain housed on Mallard.

Ernest Oberholtzer believed in books, in the cultural statement of a personal library, and in the companionship and self-education it offered him on Mallard Island. He began to collect books in the 1920s, and book orders continued into the late 1960s. Some friends had initially thought that he ordered books at random or took “blanket orders” from various book houses, but our study of the book orders says otherwise—that Ober took his time with catalogues from many of the major book houses in Europe, NY and elsewhere and that he corresponded in detail about books across the decades. What were his preferences? In a November 1936 letter to a bookseller in Manchester, England, Ober wrote:

... I am interested in a great variety of good books, particularly natural history, American Indians, folklore, exceptionally good old editions of standard works of any sort such as the Bohn and Muses libraries, attractive pocket editions, very well illustrated volumes of any kind especially the older poets. Dancing, music, the arts and biography included but not theology or the occult or law or economics. Can use good foreign books... I am not in the market for the highly regarded, extremely rare books as such.

The main categories in the annex library collection include: natural history, travel and exploration (especially Arctic exploration), Indigenous lore and culture, anthropology, literature classics, music, history and art. Publication dates go back to the 1700s (one book from the 1600s) and continue up to the mid-1960s. Kristen Eide Tollefson, book care specialist from Frontenac, MN, reflects in her June 2009 interview with Jean Sanford Replinger, that “generally the life and destruction of native peoples and the religious and political rationale for this, would seem to be one concern of this collection.” Clearly Arctic exploration and any wilderness exploration was another major theme.



“The vast majority of Ober’s collection--over eight thousand--remain housed on Mallard.”

In addition to the books, by 2023, the Foundation rented a storage locker in Minneapolis that housed organization files, donated items from previous organizational leaders, plus a collection of Navajo art prints and large copies of photos by Ober, including many from the Hudson Bay trip. The Board decided to rent an additional room at the Backus Center to hold those archival materials and other corporate records.

The Minnesota Legacy Fund generously supported a study to determine our storage needs for the library books and then made a large grant to allow us to purchase commercial library shelving and materials. The shelving was installed in May of 2024, and the books were finally reshelved—a huge effort led by Beth Waterhouse, Connie Ghinazzi, and a dozen dedicated volunteers in June of 2024.

How will the Annex Library be used, and how might it help us promote Ober’s Legacy?

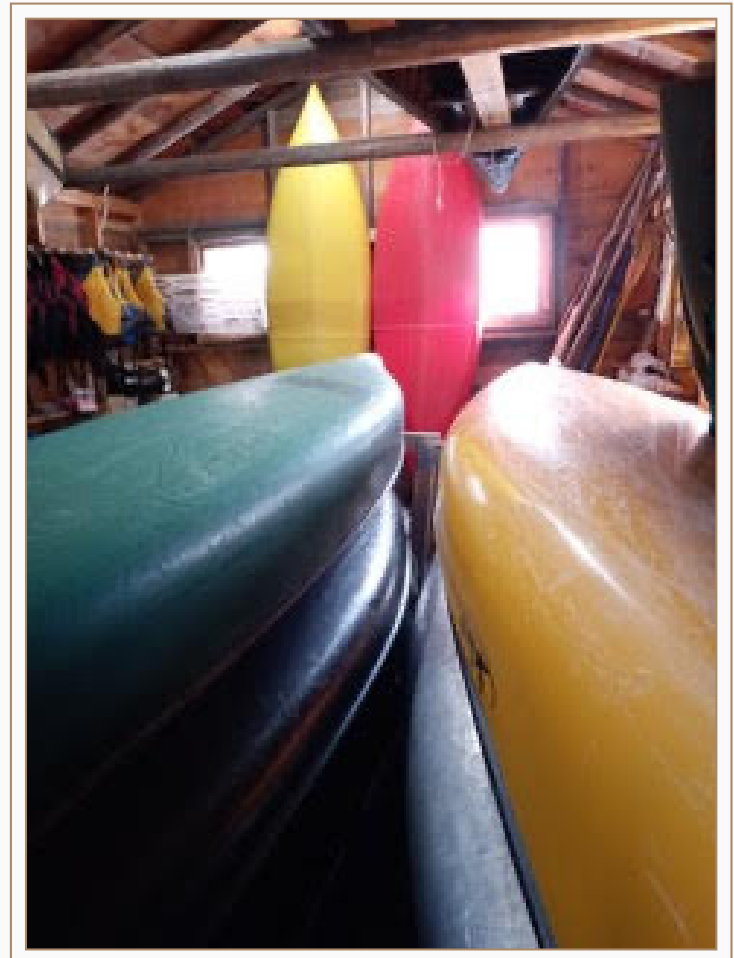
Mallard Island is an isolated and fragile spit of rock in Rainy Lake. The Foundation works to provide access to the buildings and resources that Ober left in our care, but the opportunities to do so are naturally limited by a small island and a short open-water season.

The Annex Library will allow us to:

- Improve access for academic researchers, volunteers to care for the collection, and staff or readers/ writers who have been to Mallard before and would love to revisit these books again. This helps the Foundation further share Ober’s legacy with more people.
- Increase our visibility as a Foundation and share Ober’s legacy in the International Falls community.
- Work with the Backus Community Center staff and other partners to provide future programming around Ober’s life and legacy.
- Expand upon our partnership with the local Koochiching County Museum and with the Backus Center and others as opportunities arise.

Stay tuned as we develop new opportunities for the community in the annex library space!

How will the Annex Library be used, and how might it help us promote Ober’s Legacy?



The Boathouse once again housing boats.

# Message from the Chair

Today, the Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation situates during a time of rapid social, economic, demographic, and climate change.

Ernest C. Oberholtzer or “Ober” as he was called, wrote prolifically about risks to the Rainy Lake and Lake of the Woods watershed, “These border lakes, though lying in two countries, are physically one and inseparable and, in view of rapidly changing conditions, can only be regarded as one of the most precious cultural assets left to the present generation.”

In many respects our era is different from others and, in many respects, it is exactly the same as it was in Ober’s time. Ober battled with big business and wrote about them being “ever bolder and more far-seeing than mere governments.” If you’ve been paying attention in the Boundary Waters Watershed, it's the same today, only the big businesses are bigger and multinational and the “mere governments” are still mere, as in Ober’s time.

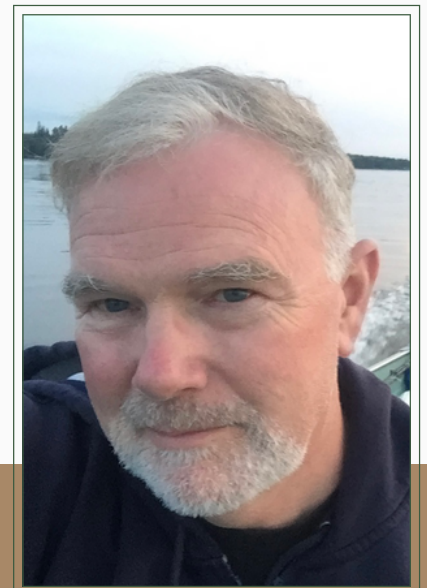
The good news is many people are rethinking their relationship with nature and adopting a more pragmatic approach to sustainability, conservation and preservation. Born not by virtuous thoughts and expressions but by experiencing in real life what Ober termed the “tonic of the wilderness.” If you’ve ever woken up before dawn deep in the forest by the cool still waters of the lake, listening long to the silence, the flit of a bird, the rustle of a creature, the swirl of a fish, the deep starlit sky slowly giving way to the warm glow from the east, you will know what Ober means by wilderness as medicine, a tonic.

We’ve got to work vigorously to interest our people, young and old, in the value of experiencing our natural world as medicine, and in our Indigenous people who understand their old ways as new again. We must find friends, allies and partners in every quarter of society, station, and political persuasion to tell Ober's story, or risk losing “one of the last and best opportunities to play square with future generations.”

- George Glazien



Mallard sunrise. A great time to to seek inspiration and renewal. Photo by Connie Ghinnazi.



# Letter from the Treasurer

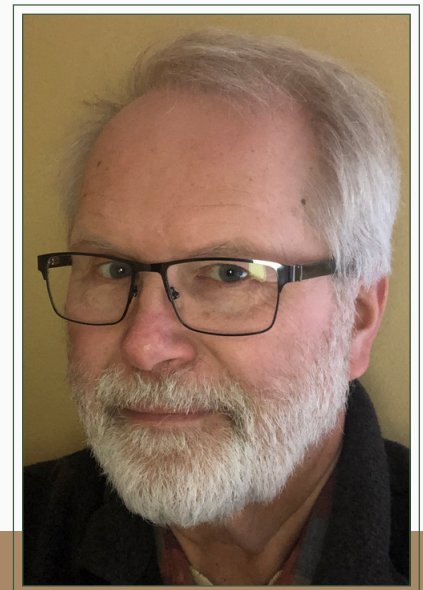
Our Mission is to foster Ober's legacy and north woods home as a source of inspiration, renewal and connection to Indigenous Peoples, kindred spirits, and the natural world.

Ober's legacy was shaped by his connections with Indigenous life and his unique worldview. That worldview influenced all of his advocacy work, including his lobbying for the Wilderness Act. Sadly, Ober is not nearly as well-known as he should be and we are working to bring his legacy to a broader audience.

We are extremely fortunate that earlier Foundation superheroes, including Jean Sanford Replinger and Beth Waterhouse were able to preserve Ober's letters, journals, and other writings, along with his vast trove of photographic plates and maps. We are exploring grant opportunities for the necessary funds for digitizing documents and improving access, but we will also be relying on our generous extended family to help with the process. When the materials are available, we will also need the help of writers, story tellers, conservationists, and new media specialists of all sorts to help bring the stories to new generations.

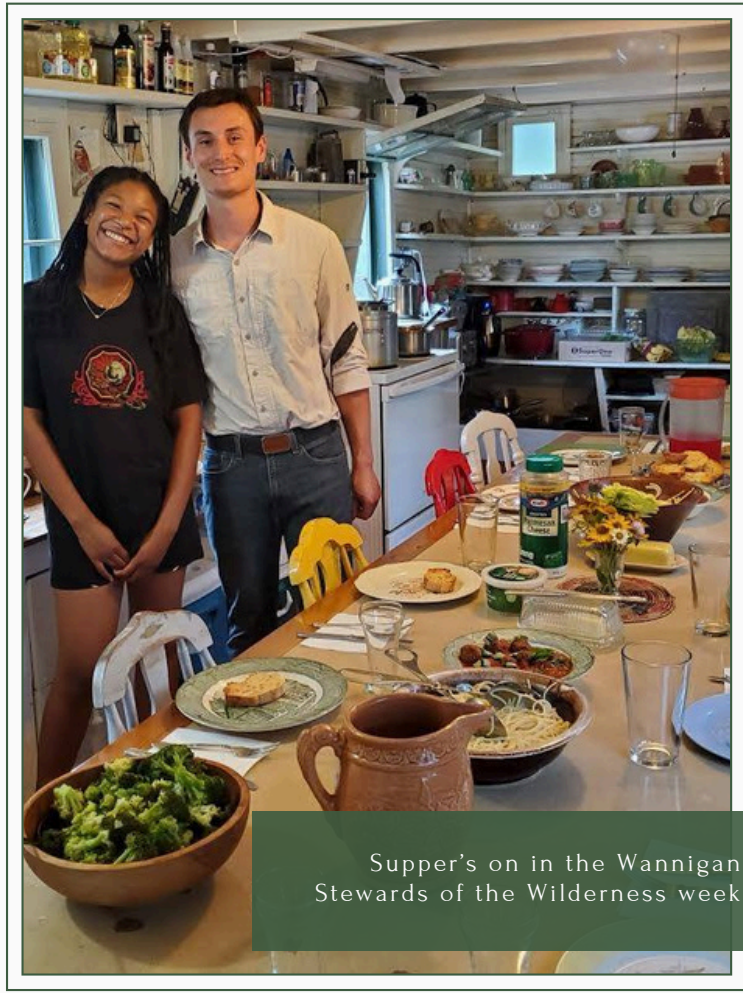
I would ask all of you to think of your support for the Oberholtzer Foundation with a new perspective as year end approaches. The human brain tends to put things in buckets. When you write your year end checks, they come from cash and income, which is the smallest mental bucket. This year, consider making your gift from an "asset" bucket with a gift of appreciated stock or a qualified distribution from your IRA. If you don't know how, get ahold of Tom or Keir and we can walk you through the process. You will find that thinking of your gift as coming from your total wealth, rather than just your checking balance, makes it easier to have even more impact in telling Ober's story.

- Keir Johnson



# Summer Memories

Community Outreach: Board members Ward Merrill and Jerry Williams proudly display Ober's replica canoe at Ranier Days.



Supper's on in the Wannigan. Stewards of the Wilderness week.

## Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation

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