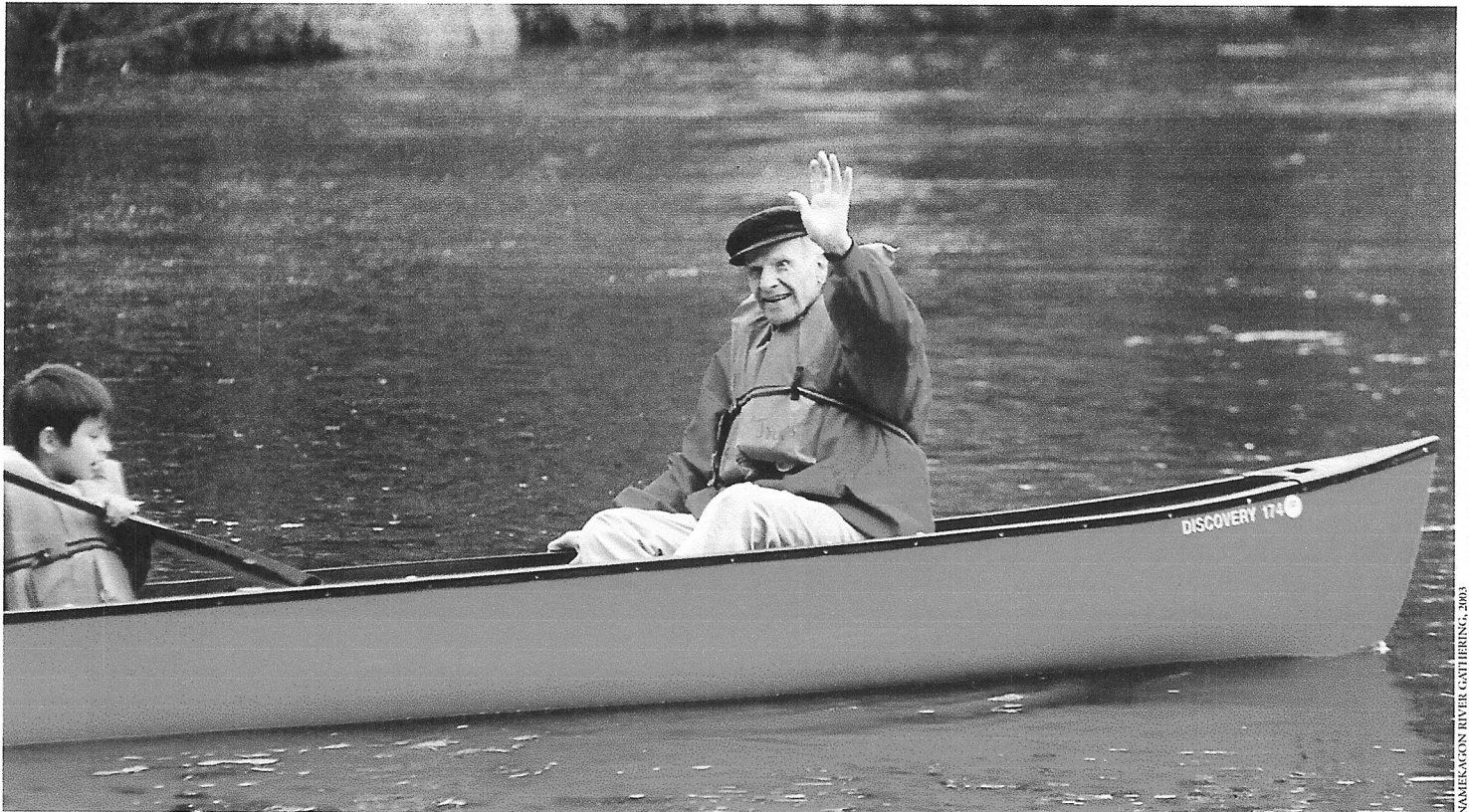


## IN MEMORIAM: Gaylord Nelson, 1916-2005

SAYING GOODBYE TO THE FATHER OF EARTH DAY



NAMESAGON RIVER GATHERING, 2003

*It took a week for word* of Gaylord Nelson's passing to reach us. Our team of Wisconsin teachers had traveled to a remote wetland reserve in the Far East to work with our Russian counterparts and a campful of kids, sharing lessons in conservation science and land ethics. Though far from home, we were about as close to Nelson's spirit as we could be.

I'd known about Nelson's faltering health, so when the news of his death finally did reach Russia, it was not a shock. It came instead as a somber pause, a quiet moment to consider how he had influenced our lives and our world. It seemed entirely appropriate to do so there, on the edge of a faraway marsh where red-crowned cranes danced and bugled, in a nation struggling along its democratic path.

Born in Clear Lake in Polk County on June 4, 1916, Nelson grew up in the cutover north, where opportunities for outdoor adventure and contact with wild things were yet close at hand. He came of age in an era

reconfigured by Wisconsin's Progressive movement, cutting his political teeth on the 1940 senatorial campaign of Robert "Young Bob" La Follette Jr. After graduating from UW Law School in 1942, Nelson joined the U.S. Army. He would serve for four years, including time as commander of an all-black company in the still-segregated Army. While stationed in Pennsylvania he met Carrie Lee Dotson, an Army nurse with whom he would share a 57-year marriage.

Returning to Wisconsin after World War II, Nelson led the Progressive revival within the Democratic Party, serving three terms as state senator, two terms as governor, and three terms as U.S. senator. He gained fame as a champion of conservation programs and environmental legislation at the state and national levels, leading ultimately to his celebrated role as the father of Earth Day. Less conspicuously, he was a determined advocate for civil rights, consumer

*Continued on page 72...*

**TRAILS' END** ... continued from page 74  
 protection, educational opportunity, small businesses, and family farmers, and an early and persistent voice of opposition to the Vietnam War. After losing his Senate seat in 1980, Nelson chose not to move through Washington's revolving door to a retirement of insider influence and financial gain. Instead, he took up his station as chairman, later counselor, for The Wilderness Society, a post he used until the end of his life to advance environmental awareness. In 1995, he received the nation's highest civilian award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

issue or how strong his disagreement with a political adversary, Nelson never made it personal and never carried a grudge." Years later, Nelson recalled Wisconsin politics as he had known it: "Republicans, Democrats, Progressives actually socialized as friendly adversaries. They did not consider one another as enemies."

Nelson was also renowned for his wit and Jack Benny timing. He was a master at using humor to leaven dry speeches and sober messages. One often had the feeling that he simply couldn't help himself. In April 1990, for the 20th anniversary of Earth Day,

squirmed in their seats, wondering if the father of Earth Day was ever going to get serious. Some left the auditorium. When at long last he focused on his topic, though, Nelson was straight on point. Perhaps it was a lesson learned alongside his father, a doctor, on his rounds in Clear Lake: When practicing the healing arts, a positive bedside manner is downright essential.

Gaylord Nelson called upon us all to accept our responsibilities as citizens and caretakers. Those responsibilities begin at home—wherever home is—and they extend outward, to the far ends of the earth. As he expressed it toward the end of his life, "Forging and maintaining a sustainable society is The Challenge for this and all generations to come." Nelson met that challenge with courtesy, conscience, honesty, and humor. Even as we lament the erosion of these traits in our civic life, we say goodbye to one whose life exemplified them. ☼

Half an hour into Nelson's 50-minute speech he was still telling stories. Earnest students squirmed in their seats, wondering if the father of Earth Day was ever going to get serious.

**G**aylord Nelson was known for his ability to maintain cordial relations and enduring friendships regardless of party affiliation. As Bill Christofferson writes in his biography *The Man From Clear Lake*, "No matter how sharp the debate on an

Nelson returned to Madison to speak on environmental issues at the university. He started his speech with a joke . . . which led to a story . . . which suggested another joke. Half an hour into his 50-minute speech he was still telling stories. Earnest students

*Curt Meine is a research associate with the International Crane Foundation and senior fellow with the Aldo Leopold Foundation. He spent Earth Day 1970 picking up garbage with his fellow fifth-graders in suburban Chicago.*

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