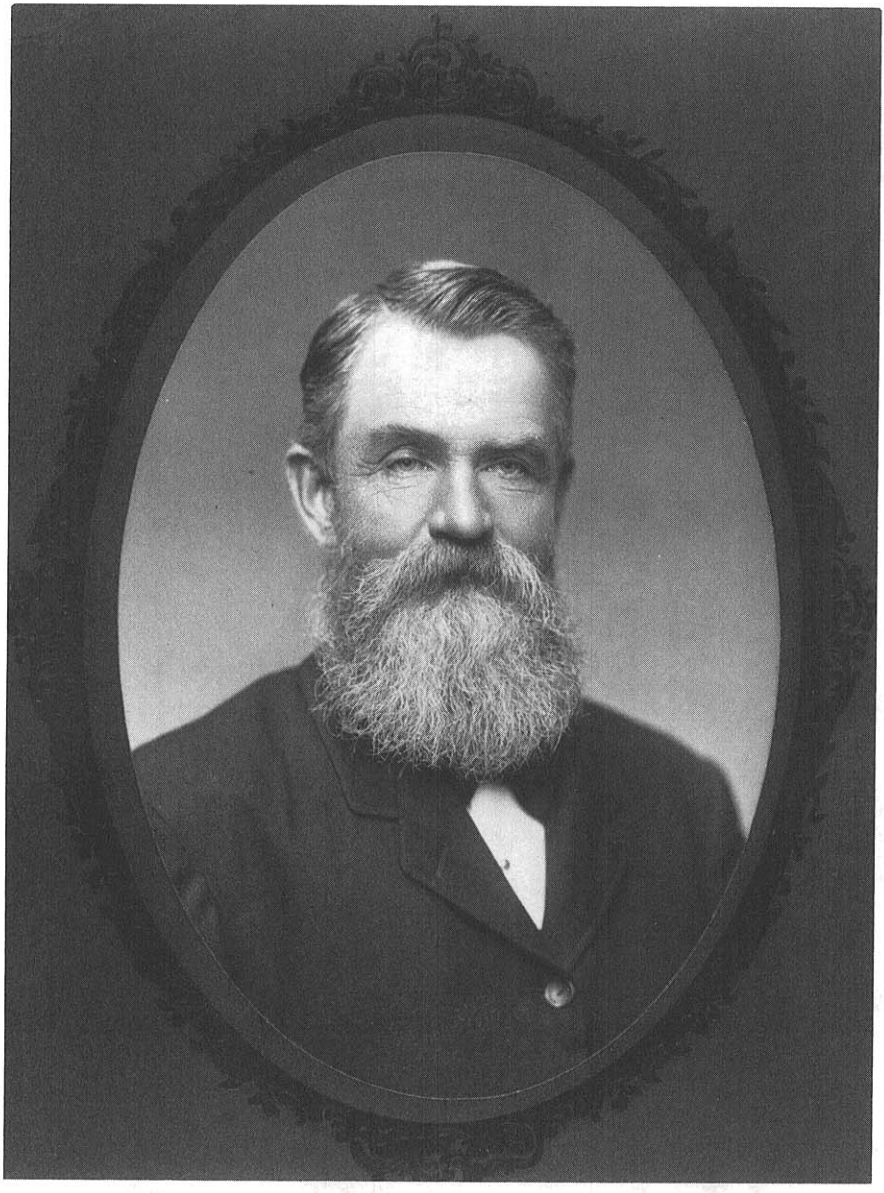


Halvor Skavlem at the age of about 59, ca 1905 (*photograph courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*).

In the Words of Ornithologists Past . . .

Halvor Skavlem, the "John Burroughs of Wisconsin"

by Michael J. Mossman

"I am one of the last of the old-time naturalists who knew a little of most everything, and not much of any one thing."

So spoke Halvor L. Skavlem (1846–1939), early Wisconsin student of nature, history, and archeology (Usher 1914). Born to pioneering, Norwegian immigrants on the prairie near Beloit, he lived nearly all of his 92 years in Rock and Jefferson counties, leaving behind a few writings and his personal influence on unknown numbers of naturalists and casual observers, young and old. Among his legacy to us are: archeological studies, which were preserved mainly in collections and in the writings of others; an insightful documentation of the history and frontier lives of Norwegian immigrants; poetry; some popular articles on birds; and a particular, invaluable reminiscence of the breaking of Wisconsin prairie and its effect on bird life.

Skavlem was a colorful personality, especially in his later years. He was remarkable for his self-styled, intelligent pursuit of knowledge and for his gracious and entertaining ways of sharing it. Much of what we can learn from him today is to be found in what others have written about him.

He received a country school education typical for rural Wisconsin children in the mid 1800's, then moved from his prairie home, now five miles northwest of Beloit, to Fort Dodge, Iowa. Here he taught school during the winter, farmed in the summer, and was involved in a hotel business. In 1873, at the age of 27, he returned to Rock County, purchased a farm adjacent to his parents', and married Gunnil Ommelstad, also from a Rock County frontier family. They were to bear four children. In 1880, they moved to the nearby city of Janesville. Halvor served in various public positions, including county sheriff, county board chairman, county highway commissioner, librarian, and member of the library board of directors. He was also apparently successful at dealing horses and real estate, and he retired from active business endeavors in 1896 at the age of 50. At about the same time he purchased a farm at Carcajou Point, the former site of an Indian village on the northwestern shore at Lake Koshkonong, in adjacent Jef-

ferson County. From thereon the Skavlems spent summers at Koshkonong and winters in Janesville, until his death at the age of 92 in 1939, and her's later the same year.

A Progressive Republican and a Unitarian, he fought for social and economic reform measures that at the time "were sneeringly referred to as socialistic propaganda," for example in the Granger's movement. Even at the age of 68 he was "still on the firing line of progress, and rather likes to be referred to as 'unsafe and dangerous' by the 'mossbacks' " (Usher 1914). He was a member of Wisconsin's State Historical Society, State Archaeological Society, Natural History Society, and Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, and helped organize the State Library Association.

Skavlem was locally well-known as a naturalist and he made some significant contributions to the fields of ornithology and botany. He collected mushrooms for a Smithsonian exhibit at the 1893 World's Fair, and his collection of southern Wisconsin plants has been incorporated into the University of Wisconsin-Madison Herbarium. He prepared a collection of bird mounts of nearly 300 Wisconsin species, and donated it to the Janesville Public Library. His Passenger Pigeon is now displayed at the Rock County Historical Society museum in Janesville.

His first ornithological publication, of which I am aware, appeared in one of the many collectors' journals of the late 1800's (Skavlem 1889). He then published a series of three articles in the short-lived *Wisconsin Naturalist* (Skavlem 1890–91), in which he assaulted taxonomists' "splitting" of both the Canada Goose and the Snow Goose into subspecies. Similar tirades by field workers and egg collectors against the oftentimes conflicting dictates of the "museum experts" were common in amateur ornithological publications during this period. Although controversies on taxonomy have by no means ceased, their published expressions lack the unmuzzled vehemence of those early days:

> "If a "Naturalist" worthy of the name you have undoubtedly many a time collided with some "big book authority.". . . . What an unfaltering trust some of us have in authority; with unquestioning faith we often accept the statements of museum naturalists, who from their dried up skin and skeleton specimens proceed to sort out our flora and fauna into convenient genera, specie [sic], or variety, finding constant variations and even specific differentiations in the wrinkles of the shriveled, shrunken, dried up skins, which the honest field naturalist fails to discover, although he may have had opportunity of comparing and studying hundreds of fresh and perfect specimens.
>
> Sometimes it appears as though the more complete and extensive the comparison—the more painstaking and minute your study—the less you know."

In a March 1890 letter to the editor of *Forest and Stream*, Skavlem gave his opinions on waterfowl hunting regulations. By today's standards, waterfowl hunting regulations and enforcement at that time were archaïc, and the hunting public, except for wealthy hunting clubs, was poorly organized. Illinois still allowed spring hunting. Skavlem's egalitarian convictions led him to argue against most conservationists, in favor of reinstating the spring season in Wisconsin, when ducks were widely distributed (in part because of high water), while short-

ening the fall season, when ducks were more concentrated in a few areas such as Lakes Koshkonong and Puckaway. Access to these large, productive marsh-and-lake complexes was often, to varying extents, controlled by hunting clubs, whose members could shoot almost without limit. Also at issue was the shipping of waterfowl to market, which was still legal in-state, and illegal but poorly enforced for shipping out-of-state.

> "With the advent of bluebird and robin comes the revival of the spring shooting controversy, particularly so in this locality, situated as we are near the dividing line between open and closed spring shooting.
>
> Our friends across the line send cheering reports to *Forest and Stream* of glorious sport on the Calumet and Kankakee marshes, and we are entertained by accounts of how some prominent members—in one instance the president of one of our prominent game preserve clubs—is slaughtering the ducks down South during the winter months. Again, we read of clubs organized in Chicago, composed of "way up" sportsmen, who with unlimited command of money, have secured the control of still another of the few remaining good fall shooting grounds of our State. Thus they go, one after the other, and soon the omnivorous greed of these wealthy sportsmen, most of them non-residents at that, will have secured every pond, lake or marsh in the State, where wildfowl stop during their fall migration.
>
> . . . Suppose we should shut out the whole outfit of club house and market-shooters—yes, all shooting entirely—from our wild rice and celery grounds, would there not be many thousands of ducks saved in the fall, which returning in the spring and scattering all over the State, for a few days, would give hundreds of people a little sport at that time of the year when nothing else is available? Instead of this, now we are having them slaughtered in the fall by a few men who, day in and day out, week in and week out, "pound it to 'em" from a blind over a big bunch of decoys, and ship them by the thousands to Eastern markets, assisted it may be by those very men whom the people imagine to be their game protectors."

In 1904 and again in 1905, Skavlem reported to the Wisconsin Natural History Society on the reliance of Canvasbacks on sago pondweed (*Potamogeton pectinatus*) at Lake Koshkonong (Skavlem 1905a,b). At that time, unlike today, this lake was rich in aquatic vegetation and in both breeding and migratory waterfowl.

During 1911–1913 Skavlem published several short articles on Wisconsin bird life in the Wisconsin Audubon Society's journal *By the Wayside*. He contributed a series of articles on birdlife to the *Janesville Gazette*, which was also published in the *Jefferson County Union* (Skavlem 1917). Nine of the ten articles in this series dealt with individual species or species groups, such as House Wren, swallows, Eastern Bluebird, "Golden-winged Woodpecker," American Robin, and woodland thrushes. The first article in the *Union* series was prefaced by the editor's comment "Everybody knows that Mr. H. L. Skavlem is an authority on birds. No one can afford to miss reading this series." These articles and others of their sort in local Wisconsin newspapers of the early 1900's suggest a greater general public interest and familiarity with birdlife, in contrast to today, as well as a greater reliance on the medium of newsprint.

Not being one to pass up an opportunity to comment on matters scien-

tific or political, Skavlem began the first article with a perspective that revealed the irony in newspaper censorship during those years of the Great War: "A plea to the better element of our human nature in behalf of nature's handiwork may pass uncensured, so long as we refrain from any comment on the glorious privilege of destroying our own species." He continued with yet another denunciation of authority, this time against "economic ornithology" (e.g., King 1883, Beal 1911), which argued the value of birds based largely on their roles as destroyers of insect pests and weed seeds.

> " 'A BIT OF OLD PASTURE. A disreputable bit, you say? Well perhaps from a thrifty farmer's point of view. But this particular bit is not selected for utilitarian purposes; but for its color, its wildness and waywardness, for its vagrant beckoning to feet weary with useful plodding.'
>
> This is the introduction to a bit of charming word painting by Frank H. Sweet, in a popular magazine article published several years ago. . . . To any true bird lover and nature student that one little sketch of the 'Old Pasture' is worth more than the price of the magazine for a year. Now understand me: I say, any true bird lover and right here be it understood that I bar from this title all those who everlastingly chatter about the 'utilitarian' and 'economic' value of this, that and the other kind of a bird—now that I have the floor I'm going to 'speak right out in meetin'.
>
> The average utilitarian and economic arguments in favor of bird protection are 50 percent nonsense, 25 percent wild guesses, and perhaps the most of the balance self-evident truths that require no arguments. Isn't it about time that we let up on pickling the stomachs of wrens and swallows, sparrows and woodpeckers—crows, hawks and even owls, that our scientific economic ornithologists may give us crazy-quilt tabulated statements of grasshopper legs and snout-beetle heads—pigeon grass and blackberry seeds with a generous sprinkling of buckwheat, barley, oats, and wheat—if the 'collecting' has been done at that season of the year when these grains have become palatable to the birds.
>
> We have enough silly assertions and half-baked theories on the money value of bird life to last us for generations to come. I would not write a word nor whisper a syllable that I thought would in any way blunt our appreciation of bird life, or tend to a false estimate of their value to man, but this penny valuation of a bird by the supposed—and often glaringly unreliable—estimates of the quantities of various seeds or the number of bugs and creeping things—good, bad or indifferent—that constitutes its daily rations is doing more harm than good.
>
> Our young bird students soon get the idea that our birds must pay for their keep in visible $ marks, or they are 'no good'.
>
> With this $ diplomacy ever uppermost in our discussion of bird life, we educate the young bird student to a standard of bird values as irrelevant as would be the same standard applied to the flower garden or to an oil painting. And those who have learned to value birds according to their penny income I am afraid must lose the very best there is in Mr. Sweet's 'old pasture lot'."

If the above quotations seem to paint Halvor Skavlem as an opinionated old crank, bear in mind that this sort of writing was not uncommon in the ornithological literature of the late 1800s and early 1900s, even by a scientist as well respected as Elliot Coues. Skavlem's arguments stem largely from a skepticism for authority and the conviction that "in order to gain any knowledge of value in the study of na-

ture, the essential qualification is the ability to pursue an accurate, critical habit of observation" (Skavlem 1912a). In fact accounts of Skavlem and his work show him to have been a humble, generous, and articulate lover of nature, more in line with the oft-repeated description of him as the "John Burroughs of Lake Koshkonong" or the "John Burroughs of Wisconsin."

Some of the more revealing and interesting information on this old naturalist come from publications on his archeological work. Skavlem was an expert on Wisconsin Indian mounds, village sites, and artifacts (e.g., Stout and Skavlem 1908, Skavlem 1914a, 1914b, Brown and Skavlem 1914). He was world-renowned as the first contemporary to master the lost art of manufacturing arrowheads and other stone implements using only those tools, such as bone, antlers, and stones, available to prehistoric native Americans. His techniques were thoroughly documented by others, particularly in a monograph by Alonzo Pond (1930), which also contains excellent photographs of Skavlem at work. Following is a selection of excerpts about him:

> "In his boyhood the Indians lingered in his neighborhood. Their artifacts and other evidences of their former occupancy were then numerous. Naturally of an inquisitive mind, young Skavlem began to ask himself how they made these stone utensils. In his later life, after a long study of the matter, he began making Indian tools as he believed they were made originally. He became very skilful and adept in the fashioning of stone.
>
> Since September, 1912, when Mr. Skavlem first started making arrowheads and axes . . . his summer home . . . at Carcajou Point . . . has been a gathering place for hundreds of visitors eager to see how the Indian made his weapons. These visitors have come from all parts of the United States and Canada and many of them have written articles for publication about the 'charming old arrowmaker of Lake Koshkonong.'
>
> In the passing years many members of the Wisconsin Archeological Society have sat on the hospitable porch of the Skavlem home at Carcajou Point. Here in a number of boxes he kept his flint and stone-working tools consisting of stone breaking and flaking hand-hammers, stone and flint pecking hammers, bone and antler flakers and sandstone grinders and other tools required for his experiments. Here also was a supply of flint and other stone, raw material obtained from neighboring stone heaps or sent to him by friends from aboriginal stone quarries and other sources. Here, on request, he was always willing to demonstrate and explain every step in the aboriginal manufacture of an arrowpoint or an axe. Many distinguished American archeologists and ethnologists have been among his visitors.
>
> He has never commercialized the results of his experiments, no one has ever been able to purchase even an arrowpoint from him. In Eastern and Western museums are specimens or series of specimens of his manufacture all of which he has freely donated as contributions to archeological science.
>
> No Wisconsin scientist of the present day has a larger circle of friends who respect him for his scientific knowledge and contributions in various fields of scientific research and investigation than Halvor L. Skavlem of Lake Koshkonong." (Anon. 1929)
>
> "Mr. Skavlem has always had a taste for the study of natural history in which he takes great delight, and which has led him to gather a large and varied collection of birds and animals. . . . He has a fine library of standard historical and scientific works, and has also been a great student in that direction. Gentlemanly and courteous in manner, well informed

on the topics of the day, and an original thinker of the school of Darwin and Huxley, he is always an entertaining companion and pleasant host." (Acme Publishing Company 1889)

"I have never met a man who represented the lover of Nature so purely and so simply, and with no ulterior motive. He is not a writer, nor a speaker, nor anything that reaches out for fame. With him, Nature is her own reward; and she still continues to reward him, in the eighth decade of his life. He knows the birds, the animals, the rocks, and the flowers. Every wren that selects its place for a home becomes his companion for the summer; and he has humorous appreciation of its strong character and little household ways. Along with this love of Nature, he has the strict truth-telling instinct of the pure scientist—all the more so, perhaps, because of this profound simplicity of mind.

He has little inclination to write. The State Historical Society has recently been urging him to write some articles upon the making of stone implements, but so far with no success. The nature-lover in him tells him to write; the pure scientist—whose respect is all for the thoroughgoing and accurate—tells him not to do so. He confided to me that a scientist is on the downward path when he starts writing 'just to please people.' Such is the literary philosophy of Skavlem.

But there is, I think, a deeper reason why he does not write. He takes it out in first-hand contact—the pleasures of talk. His summer seat on the lake has become a Mecca for his friends—bird-lovers, geologists, hunters, and archaeologists. It is the social instinct that drives on your true writer. He is reaching out for people to share the world with. But when a man is so truly in love with Nature that she is her own reward, and when this brings a man just the human contact he needs, he is likely to put off the labors of the pen." (Stewart 1923)

"In [about 1912] the writer and Mr. Skavlem made a visit to the Chippewa river region in Rusk County to conduct some preliminary archeological investigations. In the party was a man of Indian blood who wished to know of the manner in which the Indians of northern Wisconsin had made their flint arrowpoints. He had made inquiries of old Indians whom he knew, but without being able to obtain any reliable information. Some thought that they had been made by a "little bug" that stirred up little whirlwinds of dust in dusty places. This man was astonished when Mr. Skavlem told him that he would himself make an arrowhead for him. When the party reached Flambeau P. O. at the mouth of the Flambeau river, Mr. Skavlem procured a piece of beef bone which he whittled to a blunt point. No flint was available so he broke into pieces with a stone hammer a beer bottle which happened to be lying near by. Seated on the steps of the local tavern boarding house he fashioned glass arrowheads for an interested audience of Indians and half breeds which soon appeared. Later during the progress of the party down the Chippewa, people came for miles across country to meet the arrowmaker. The news of his presence had gone before. In that region the fame of his exploits continues to this day although his name has been forgotten.

Archeologists, historians, museists and biologists throughout Wisconsin mourn the passing of this 'grand old man.' During the years of a long and busy life many young investigators have received help and real inspiration from him." (Brown 1939)

Among these young proteges were Angie Main (Mossman 1989) and Alonzo Pond, who would eventually be renowned as an archeologist and explorer.

Skavlem loved to consider the "old days," "and in his later days his con-

A photograph from the 16 October 1932 Milwaukee Journal (*reproduction courtesy of Rock County Historical Society*).

versation sparkled with anecdotes of the early times. Possessed with a characteristic sense of wit he remembered the little points that go to make a story doubly interesting. Many of his stories he ended with a chuckle in which his audience did not find it difficult to join." (Anon. 1939). His best writings were those that dealt with personal reminiscence and history. At least a few of his poems were written in this vein, under the pseudonym "Carcajou," including the following:

MY OLD CANOE

Yes, I'm old and out of fashion,
And my hand is shaky too,
Yet with Springtime comes a longin'
For my battered old canoe,
Yet with Springtime comes a longin'
For my battered old canoe.

Old time mem'rys cluster round it,
Days and scenes of long ago;
Shades of friends now long departed
Hover round my old canoe;
Hover round my old canoe;
Shades of friends now long departed
Hover round my old canoe.

Down life's stream we're slowly drifting,
Drifting slowly, I and you:
Time the scene will soon be shifting

For our battered old canoe;
For our battered old canoe;
Time the scene will soon be shifting
For our battered old canoe.

Aye, the shadow's growing longer,
Yet the sky is bright and blue,
And I see Nirvana yonder—
For my battered old canoe,
For my battered old canoe;
Yes I see Nirvana yonder—
For my battered old canoe.

Halvor was the historian of the extended Skavlem family, and his efforts culminated in an extraordinary family history (Skavlem 1915), which stands as a thorough and interesting account of Norwegian emigration and early life on the Wisconsin prairies. In his words, "it is hoped that these brief records of the life and conditions in the early formative days of our state may add just a trifle to the permanent history of Wisconsin, and at the same time revive our memories and enlarge our appreciation of what those sturdy pioneers—our fathers and mothers, grand-parents and great-grand-parents have done for us so that we and our descendants are privileged to enjoy the highest type of twentieth century civilization. . . . Long after the finish of my life's work, I hope through the medium of this book to be present at the tales by the firesides of our descendants, and thus help to 'keep green the memories of those who did so little for themselves and so much for us'."

The Skavlems were among the very first Norwegians to settle in Wisconsin. Halvor's father Lars was a pack-peddler in southern Norway until he and three of his brothers emigrated to America in 1839. They traveled via the Erie Canal and Great Lakes to Chicago, where they spent the winter. The following spring they traveled by foot and ox-cart "across the wet and boggy marshes and swampy prairies of northern Illinois" to the prairie west of Beloit where they served as a focal point for further Norwegian-American settlement. He acquired his first 40 acres in T1N R11E S11 nw ne for $1.25 per acre. This was 3 years before naturalist Thure Kumlien arrived at nearby Lake Koshkonong from Sweden, 8 years prior to statehood, and 9 years before young John Muir emigrated with his family from Scotland to settle in central Wisconsin. Wisconsin's population was but 31,000, yet growing rapidly with the influx of Yankees and western Europeans. Norwegian settlement remained centered in Skavlem's general area during the early 1840s, then spread northward.

In 1844, Lars married a neighbor woman, Groe Aae, and they soon moved from his initial log home to a newly built frame house. In 1846 Halvor was born—the first of 12 children, only 5 of which survived to adulthood. Halvor's mother was apparently quite a storyteller, and some of her tales and recollections were recorded by her granddaughter—Halvor's daughter—Hannah. Her interesting accounts of the Aae family's emigration from Norway to Rock County were reproduced in the Skavlem family history, and include some stories about early pioneer life as well:

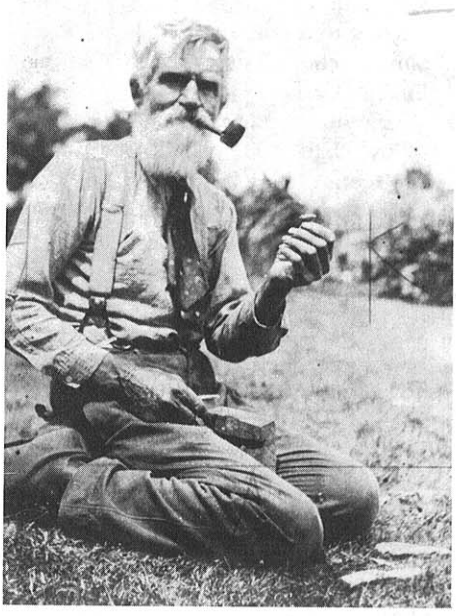
> "The wolves had not yet been frightened away from their favorite haunts. Civilization had no terrors for them. With a most contemptuous disregard of the respect due us in our role of conquering invaders, they held nightly vigils in the woods behind our house with old

time energy and vim. Their unearthly wailing cries were not the most pleasant of serenades. I do not remember of their making any very savage attacks upon the settlers. In those early times the woods and prairies swarmed with foxes and wild game; prairie chickens, quails and wild turkeys were numerous.

I was now married and lived with my husband, Lars Skavlem, in our cabin. We had a chore boy living with us. He had just come over from Norway and belonged to the more ignorant and superstitious class of emigrants. The first Sunday he took his hymn book and strolled off into the woods. Before very long we saw him coming across the opening at a break-neck speed, evidently laboring under some great excitement. When he reached us he was all out of breath.

'What's the matter?' asked my husband, 'I have—have seen the devil,' gasped the terrified boy. 'I was lying on the ground reading my hymn book when I heard a slight noise which caused me to look up, and there he stood, more terrible than I have ever seen his picture. He was green, blue, yellow, black, and a great red thing hung down from his neck, and such claws, I know it was the devil.' And he really did believe he had caught a glimpse of his Satanic Majesty. My husband tried to explain to him that it was undoubtedly a wild turkey gobbler he had seen, but he ever insisted that he had seen the devil in the Skavlem woods."

Based on accounts such as the above, and a sketch by Skavlem in the family history, the homestead was at the juncture of prairie and either oak woods or oak savanna ("oak opening"). Originally covering some 7–8 million acres in southern Wisconsin, the prairie/savanna landscape was rapidly changing to a patchwork of cultivated fields, pasture, and—in oak openings no longer maintained by fire—woodlots. Today very little of this landscape remains, and only in tiny, isolated parcels such as the 20-acre Newark Road Prairie Natural Area, just 1½ miles south of the Skavlem homestead. Today's naturalist may ache to know what it was like in those days, when the prairies and openings, which are today so scarce and vulnerable, extended to the horizons and beyond; when, for example in 1848, western Rock County was "mostly wild uncultivated land [with] no inhabitants scarcely but Norwegians" (Current 1976, p. 7). Consolation comes from today's prairie remnants and the potential to expand them, and in the old accounts of eye-witnesses. One such account has been given us by Havlor Skavlem (1912b), and it is probably his



Halvor L. Skavlem, ca 1922, making stone artifacts (*photo courtesy of State Historical Society of Wisconsin*).

most important writing on natural history. It is a rare account of the actual breaking of the prairie, written by a careful and sensitive observer of nature, though he was less than 10 years old at the time. This passage is especially noteworthy for its description of Long-billed Curlews, which once nested abundantly on the Wisconsin prairies. Breeding populations plummeted "with the disappearance of the original prairie sod" (Kumlien and Hollister 1903) and they were eventually extirpated from the entire Midwest.

"Some of the most lasting and vivid impressions of my boyhood—I may well say childhood days—relate to and recall pictures of bird-life in Southern Wisconsin, somewhat more than half a century ago.

We hark back to the time of the ponderous slow moving, breaking team, consisting of five to seven yoke of oxen, hitched to a long cable of heavy logchains attached to a crudely but strongly built "Breaker," with a beam like a young saw-log and a mould-board made of iron bars that turned over furrows two feet or more in width.

Those great unwieldy breaking teams, consisting of 10 to 14 large oxen, are yet distinctly outlined on memory's page, and reminiscently, I see them crawling like some huge Brobdignagian Caterpillar around and around the doomed 'land'—'land,' in breaking parlance, being that piece of the wild selected for cultivation—leaving a black trail behind, that, day by day, increased in width, bringing certain ruin and destruction—absolute annihilation—to the plant habitants who had held undisputed possession for untold centuries.

The mild-eyed, slow-moving ox teams were not only instruments in the destruction of the centuries-old flower-parks of the wilderness, but with them came tragedies in bird-life, resultant from the inevitable changes from nature's rules of the wild, to man's artificial sway. Often in preparing or planning for the breaking of a new piece of land, the same was guarded from the prairie fires of the fall and early spring, so that it could be 'fired' at the time of breaking. This would commence the latter part of May and continue on through June and July, covering the nesting season of the numerous species of bird-life, that had for untold generations, made this beautiful park region of the Rock River Valley their summer home.

It was in the early fifties that I, then a little tow-headed tot, chased butterflies and gathered armsfull of prairie flowers, at the same time 'spotting' bird nests of many and various kinds, on a piece of land destined to be civilized by the big plow that very season.

I distinctly remember the large eggs of the 'Prairie Snipe' and the still larger ones of the 'Crooked-bill' or 'Big-Snipe.' The former I later learned to know as BARTRAMIA LONGICAUDA [Upland Sandpiper], and the latter, long after they had entirely disappeared, I found had the book name of NUMENIOUS LONGIROSTRA, or LONG BILLED CURLEW. These snipes were so numerous at this particular season, that a bird student might have been misled to the conclusion that they were nesting in colonies. But, undoubtedly, the true explanation was that this protected piece of prairie with its dead grass unburned, was the ideal condition for the ground-nesting prairie birds.

The snipe were not the only birds that appeared in unusual numbers, but all bird-life seemed to regard this particular piece of land as a perfect paradise for a summer home.

Bob-White would mount the top of a dead sumach and call to his mate 'Wheat-most-ripe,' 'Wheat-most-ripe,' while she sat patiently brooding the nest-full of snow-white eggs in the thick bunch of dead grass nearby.

Near the little knoll at the farther side of the prairie, where earlier in the season the Prairie Chicken clan held their camp-meeting when many a lively scrap between the gallants of the company was settled to the entire satisfaction of the coy hens who would always give expression of their approval with a timid 'ye-es,—ye-es—yes, yes, yes,—ye-es,' these same matronly hens were now quietly tending their domestic duties, silently slipping off and on their well-filled nests even so cunningly hidden under the tufts of dead grass. Some of the nests were already far advanced towards that stage when the peeping egg should announce the arrival of the covey of young chicks; indeed, some of the most enterprising ones had already added their quota to the bird census of the season.

The patches of hazelbrush that looked like tiny islands of green set in a field spangled with the many colored gems of Painted-cups, Pinks and Blazing stars, were densely populated with a variety of bush-loving birds. Conspicuous among these were the Brown-thrashers and Cat-birds, who opened the morning services at day-break with bird melody rivaling the over-rated Avian Opera of the old world.

Evening vespers were softly chanted by the Robin and the 'Vesper-bird' [Vesper Sparrow]; 'Cheewinks' [Rufous-sided Towhees] rustled in the dead leaves that mulched the hazel-groves, while untold and unknown varieties of just little 'ground-birds' and 'bush-tits' animated every nook and corner of this bird paradise, during the long June days away back in the early Fifties of the last century.

This is but a repetition of the annual picture of this favored locality—during the preceding years, decades and centuries—when nature's rules were supreme, before the Paleface's Art and greed and their Chief Manito, Mammon had invaded the sacred precincts of this part of the natural world.

A slow-moving monster comes creeping up the trail over the picture of this pleasant June day. It is the great breaking team slowly and solemnly approaching the new-made home of the pioneer settler. The patient-looking oxen are unyoked and the driver with his great long whip playing a snapping tune that sounds like a scattering volley of pistol shots, 'herds the cattle' with many a 'haw' and 'gee' to a nearby part of the common, where there is good 'feed' and restful shade until they are 'rounded-up' the next morning to continue their work of breaking the wilderness.

The time has now come to 'fire the land.' All conditions are favorable for a good 'burn': a clear warm afternoon, a gentle breeze away from the homestead. The dry grass under the flower spangled green and dead leaves that mulch the hazelbrush will burn like powder.

All hands now set to work starting the fire. Pulling up great bundles of dry grass they ignite the outer end of the bundle and then run along the edge of the 'land' scattering the ignited grass as they go, down one side and up the other. The little boy is all excitement helping pa with little bundles of dead grass because he too must act his part in the new order of things; and soon the land is all encircled with flame and great clouds of vapor-like smoke roll upwards and onwards signaling distant neighbors that they are burning 'breaking-land' where new fields are being born.

But what of our bird friends, the old habitants of the land: Bob-White and his interesting family, the Prairie Snipe and their big eggs or their curious, odd-looking long-billed babies, the Brown-thrashers, Cat-bird, Bobolink and Lark, that filled the morning air with their songs of happiness and swelled with bird pride in anticipation of happy little families? What of the hundreds of happy bird homes that the morning sun brightened and warmed? All,—all are gone. A black, scorched and desolate scar profusely

sprinkled with wrecks of nests, scorched eggs and charred bodies of little baby birds, disfigure the face of Mother Earth. Oh, could I but command the language of 'Christopher North' or John Muir in word painting, I would BURN this horrible bird-tragedy into the brains of my readers—young and old—so they would never consent to the burning of grass or bush during the nesting season.

I doubt if anyone of the human agents of this pathetic bird-tragedy gave a single thought to the bird victims of their fire, or even noticed a single distressed and bewildered mother bird hovering over the smoking ruin of her family home.

It was not until the next day that the little boy realized the loss of his flowery play-ground and the many bird-nests that he had 'spotted' with boyish ingenuity. He started for the 'Big Snipe' nest but where was it? All his marks were gone, some of the large green plants were still standing, but scorched, blackened and wilted, DEAD, all DEAD. Here comes the big snipe, with silent but graceful motion she sails a circle around the distracted child, then utters her harsh call, indicating both anger and distress. Soon her fellow sufferers respond from all points of the compass and the air is full of the big long-billed birds angrily screaming and scolding, now and then making threatening dives at the thoroughly scared and crying lad. Grandpa comes to the rescue, and to soothe the troubled child he tells him he may pick all the eggs he wants. With his little home-made cap for basket, he starts his collection with the baked eggs of the big snipe and—though his little bare feet are sorely pricked by the sharp stubs of the burned grass—he soon fills his cap with eggs,—baked and burned,—large and small—spotted, speckled and white. Grandpa now directs the way to the house and in his eagerness to show his treasure the boy starts on the run, stubs his toe and falls. Memory fails to tell what became of the eggs and cap, but I distinctly remember that Grandpa wore a blue peaked knit cap, doubled over on the side with tassel dangling from the tip end—you can see a picture of it in Ross Brown's 'Land of Thor'."

I wish Havlor Skavlem were still around. I would like to hear his stories, watch him use a toothbrush handle to fashion the bottom of a beer bottle into an arrowhead, and ask him questions about bird life in the old days. Yet I wonder—had I been born at the turn of the century, and therefore without the advantage of today's hindsight, would I have recognized the singular value of his knowledge while he was still alive?

Hopefully, such thoughts lead us to consider the special perspectives that today's old timers have to offer their younger counterparts. It was not so very long ago—within the memory of many now living—that there were landscapes of pasture and grass hay full of the songs of meadowlarks and Upland "Plovers" where there are now corn, alfalfa, and industrial parks; extensive marshes and meadows where there are now open lakes; sharptail barrens that have since succeeded to dime-a-dozen forest; and when the sighting of a cardinal in southern Wisconsin was more significant than that of a prairie chicken.

What a tragedy—common though it may be—if the experience of these former worlds are lost forever, even to those still living. This prospect presents a double challenge: to seek out the historical perspectives of our elders, and to be enough aware of our own, contemporary environments that we will have something in turn to offer succeeding generations.

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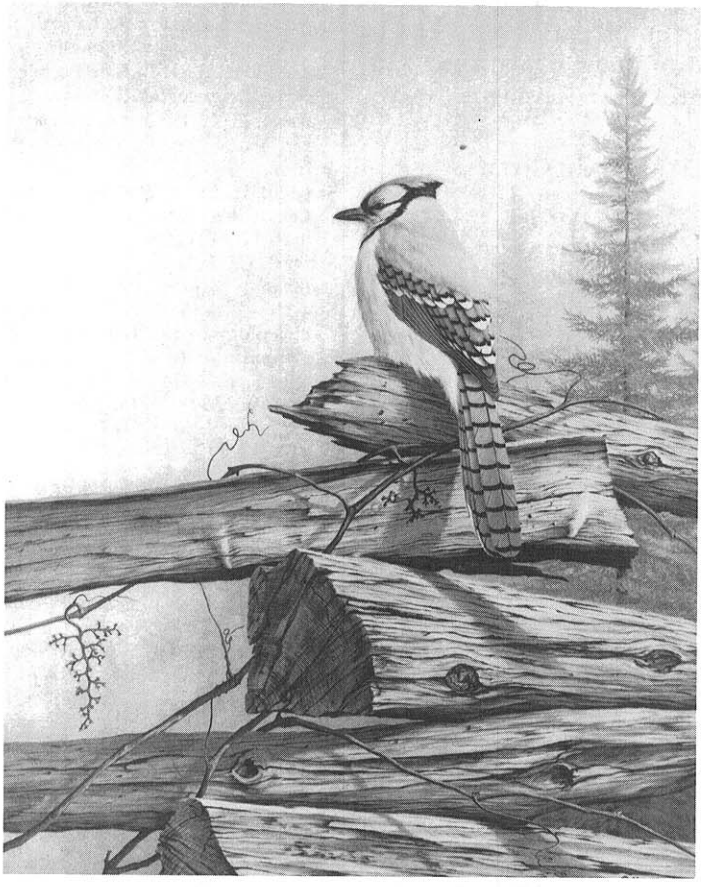

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