

# Natural politician



**Martin Hanson's Ashland County home became a center for wildlife and Democratic politics.**

## **Martin Hanson never held office, but he instilled a conservation ethic in many who did**

By Paul G. Hayes

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Martin Hanson of rural Mellen was happiest when he was surrounded by Democrats and the other wildlife of Wisconsin's North Woods.

Thus he was happy for most of his life. He planned his estate west of Mellen so that it attracted forest critters. Flying squirrels soared like nervous bats among the limbs of a tree that held a feeder just outside his bank of windows.

Some chickadees became so tame that they would perch on Martin's outstretched hand for a snack. Deer were constant visitors, arriving by the herd at eventide. Badgers tunneled into his hillside, beavers built dams in his lake, otters cavorted near logs lying in the lake, bears ambled down his driveway.

Hanson also planned his North Woods enclave to be an informal shelter for Democratic governors, congressmen, senators and other officials, a place where notable political and conservation initiatives in Wisconsin were hatched and nurtured, and where politicians could chat informally.

A partial list of regulars included Gaylord Nelson, John Reynolds, Patrick Lucey, David Obey, Henry Reuss, Morris K. Udall, Stewart Udall, Harold "Bud" Jordahl, Frank Zeidler, Martin Schreiber and Anthony Earl. There were scores more, and many brought their spouses and offspring.

The estate became known as "Camelot North," from a 1994 feature about Martin Hanson in *Wisconsin*, The Milwaukee Journal's Sunday magazine. The name stuck as descriptive of the feasts and boisterous conversations that took place year after year at a big table laden with prime rib, baked potatoes and cream pies.

Even when Hanson had a houseful of guests, which was frequent, he would interrupt his chores as host to photograph a wild beast or bird as it passed in front of the video camera on a tripod that was aimed out the windows at the lake and forest beyond.

## **Last of the Hansons**

All that ended last month. Hanson was found dead on his property on Oct. 22. A coroner ruled that he died of complications from a fall in which he broke a hip. He was 81. Although in failing health, he had kept up his wildlife photography.

He was the last of three Hanson siblings. Brothers Martin and Louis Hanson, heirs to a Chicago furniture manufacturer, moved permanently onto more than 1,200 acres in Ashland County in 1961. Later they were joined by their sister Anne.

Their father, also named Martin, bought the Wisconsin land in 1926 when Louis was a baby and young Martin was "in the oven," he said in 1994. At the time the land still bore the scars of the great white pine cutover that left thousands of square miles of northern Wisconsin bereft of trees.

Their father dammed the sparkling Brunswiler River to form the 25-acre Beaverdam Lake, built a lodge and cabins and brought his family and business clients to the place every summer from Oak Park, Ill. It was an interesting family.

"My father was a Chicago Tribune-Colonel Robert McCormick Republican," Martin said in 1994. "My mother back in the 'teens ran for attorney general on the Socialist Labor

ticket in Illinois."

The children admired their successful father but took their liberal politics from their mother and from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose tree-planting Civilian Conservation Corps and forest expansion programs began to heal the north.

Soon after moving to Wisconsin, the brothers encountered Nelson, who was stumping the state to promote his Outdoor Recreation Act Program (ORAP), the forerunner of Wisconsin's Stewardship Program that buys and protects natural areas. Hearing him speak, the brothers invited Nelson to their Mellen hideout and the three began a lifelong friendship.

Influenced by Nelson, Louis developed political savvy while Martin became an accomplished environmentalist. Neither brother had gone to college, but they quickly excelled in their respective roles.

Louis was to become chairman of the Wisconsin Democratic Party and later administrative assistant after Nelson became one of Wisconsin's senators. During this time, Nelson sent Louis Hanson back to Wisconsin to help in Obey's first campaign for Congress in 1969. The seat had been held by Republican Melvin Laird, who had joined the Nixon administration as Secretary of Defense.

Obey recalled that when Hanson came into the campaign office, he decided to stay around for a while. "Everything needed doing," Obey recalled. "He helped organize operations, scheduling and set up a press strategy. "

Obey won the seat and has been re-elected ever since. When his district was expanded by redistricting, it included Ashland County, and Obey began to be a regular at Camelot North.

In 1965, Louis married Camilla Sorenson, the former wife of Theodore Sorenson, special counsel to President John F. Kennedy. Louis died of cancer in 1989, and his widow continues to live in a house on the Hanson property.

## **Persuading Kennedy**

Martin supported a broad array of environmental causes, especially the protection of the Apostle Islands of Lake Superior as the Apostle Island National Lakeshore, an effort begun under Kennedy in September 1963 and completed seven years later.

"Conservation filled his life," Jordahl, of Madison, said of Hanson. Jordahl headed the Wisconsin Department of Resource Development under Nelson and helped fashion the ORAP plan. He and his family became regulars at Camelot North.

Shortly after he was elected to the Senate, Nelson persuaded Kennedy to visit Wisconsin. Martin Hanson served as JFK's guide aboard a helicopter as he toured the islands. An

iconic story told by William Bechtel, Nelson's aide at the time, has it that Hanson secured JFK's interest in the project when he pointed out to the accomplished sailor that the Apostles were prime sailboat habitat.

That was the beginning of his long career in conservation. Martin Hanson worked quietly at the grass-roots level for environmental causes, reading everything he could about his subject, then attending town and county meetings to secure the support of local public officials.

He was a founder of the Friends of the Apostle Islands, which continues to raise money that helps National Park Service programs for lakeshore protection and operation, according to Robert Dunne, a lifelong friend of the Hansons and treasurer of the Friends group.

Hanson led the effort to reintroduce elk into the North Woods. He opened up the Mellen land to the University of Wisconsin; its Department of Wildlife Ecology used the land for a study of white-tailed deer that lasted many years. Since then, the land has been sold to the U.S. Forest Service, except for three parcels that hold the houses.

Like his brother Louis, Martin also engaged in politics. In 1976, he helped Obey manage the Wisconsin campaign of Arizona congressman Morris K. Udall, when Udall sought the Democratic nomination for president. Udall lost that campaign by only 7,000 votes to Jimmy Carter in the race that launched Carter's successful presidential campaign.

For 13 years, Hanson served as Obey's home secretary, helping voters with personal problems involving Social Security, veterans benefits, taxes and the like. During this time, he referred to himself as the "Ann Landers of the North."

In later years, Hanson was an important supporter of Northland College's Sigurd Olson Institute for Environmental Studies, and he helped lead the effort to endow the Gaylord Nelson Chair at UW's Gaylord Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies.

Stephen M. Born, professor emeritus of planning and environmental studies at the UW-Madison and a longtime tarpon fishing companion of Martin Hanson, told of Hanson's impish sense of humor. Hanson carried a squirt gun to the state Democratic convention in Madison one year.

At one point, Born and Hanson and others were waiting for an elevator. When it arrived and the doors opened, they confronted Sen. William Proxmire. Suddenly, Born said, a puzzled Proxmire began wiping moisture from his forehead. The senator never did detect the shooter.

"Not many people I know will sit in the back of a meeting room with a squirt gun shooting skyward, so that people in front wonder where the rain is coming from," Obey said. He explained Hanson's amusement as arising from "sheer boredom."

## **An outdoorsman**

Hanson was ever an outdoors lover. In 1956, he killed a 550-pound Alaskan brown bear that stood as a world record among bow hunters for two years. He and Louis rounded up some Dall sheep in Alaska for the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago.

It was on the land west of Mellen that he quit hunting deer and other large animals. As deer returned night after night to feed just outside Hanson's windows, he gave them individual names. "If you name 'em, you can't shoot 'em," he explained.

So while he kept on fishing, he replaced guns and bows with cameras for stalking mammals. In later years, he led parties of friends on treks to Churchill, Manitoba, to see and photograph polar bears, and to Everglades City, Fla., to fish for tarpon.

For the latter, he used light spinning rods and casting lures, tied his own knots and employed a special technique to land the monster fish, and he was on your case if you didn't do it his way, Born recalled. On the other hand, if you hooked and landed a tarpon, you often received a taped record of the event as a souvenir.

In Ashland County, Martin Hanson was known as "Martini," Bechtel recalled. The name came from a basket full of "martini fixings," which was carried on board the Misda, a pontoon boat that plied the Brunsweler River on fine weekend afternoons.

Hanson was a disciplined drinker, filling a tumbler with bourbon precisely at 5 p.m. every evening and heading off to bed by 8 p.m. After a health scare a few years ago, Hanson quit drinking altogether.

Dunne said that Hanson deplored funerals and weddings and wanted no public display over his death, and so his remains have been cremated. Born is planning a celebration of Hanson's life in June in Ashland, which will be attended by members of what he called "The Five O' Clock Club," among other guests.

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