

Voyageurs

Ernest Oberholtzer

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Voyageurs National Park



Left to right: Ernest Oberholtzer and dog - Skippy, with Ojibwe Indian guide, Billy Magee, holding a cabbage. Photo courtesy of Bob Hilke; Ernest on Mallard Island, Oberholtzer's home on Mallard Island. Photos courtesy of the Ernest Oberholtzer Foundation and the NPS.

A Love of the North Woods

"It was not a somber forest but a forest threaded with sparkling waterways, flooded with sunshine, and peopled with all of its ancient creatures." Ernest Oberholtzer

Ernest Oberholtzer better known by his friends as "Ober," was born and raised by his mother in Davenport, Iowa and in 1907, he graduated from Harvard. Soon after graduation, Ober headed north to Ely, Minnesota for a canoe trip - despite his doctor advising against it. During his trip Ober discovered a love for the wilderness and said his health "improved with every stroke of the paddle."

Years later Ober traveled to Rainy Lake where he met an Ojibwe Indian guide - Billy Magee. They became friends and traveled, by canoe, thousands of miles through the Quetico-Superior Country of Northwestern Ontario, Northern Minnesota, and Hudson's Bay.

Over the years, Ober returned to the North Woods many times for his beloved canoe trips, and in 1915, built a home on Mallard Island, in Rainy Lake.

Conservation – A Life's Work

In the first decade of the 1900s, most of northern Minnesota was wilderness, but developmental efforts were becoming more visible. The pine forests were being cut for lumber, and water power was needed for the development of industries. In 1925 Edward W. Backus, paper and lumber magnate, proposed a series of dams in the Rainy Lake watershed to create a more efficient controlled power source; turning much of the border lakes region into an immense water storage basin for his hydroelectric dam in International Falls. These seven dams would be in addition to the dams at International Falls, Kettle Falls, and Squirrel Falls.

Critics of the proposal – including Oberholtzer – pointed out the shorelines in Superior National Forest, the area now known as Voyageurs National Park, and Quetico Provincial Park would be flooded, some by as much as eighty feet.

In 1927, Oberholtzer spearheaded a movement to stop Backus from building his intended dams by developing an alternate plan for the region, and by testifying and lobbying before the United States Congress.

Leaving A Multitude of Legacies

Oberholtzer's persistence led to the passage of the Shipstead-Newton-Nolan Act in 1930. This legislation, based largely on Oberholtzer's alternative plan for the region, prohibited the changing of water levels in the Superior National Forest. It was the first legislation ever passed by the U.S. Congress that mandated wilderness values on federal lands. Backus' dream of unlimited industrialization of the northland had suddenly been defeated.

the end, he did not feel anger toward the timber baron, but did disagree vehemently with what he stood for. Following the defeat of the dam proposal, Oberholtzer was increasingly recognized for his ideas on wilderness preservation.

Ironically, Oberholtzer and Backus were neighbors on Rainy Lake. Close friends of Ober said, in

Oberholtzer and the many other conservationists, with whom he worked, were successful in setting aside nearly three million acres of wilderness known today as the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Many of his fellow conservationists would later help establish Voyageurs National Park.

Voyageurs National Park Oberholtzer Trail

County Road 96
(Park Entrance Road)

Rainy Lake

Rainy Lake
Visitor Center

Ojibwe Camp and
Ethno-botanical Garden

Local Access Road

- Accessible trail
- - - Wooded Trail
- Road
- Ⓜ Visitor Center
- P Parking
- 🔥 Campfire Ring
- 🚤 Boat Launch
- 🚻 Restrooms (accessible)
- 🪵 Picnic Tables
- 🎣 Fishing Area

