



Ideas is the Academy's quarterly magazine of contemporary Wisconsin thought and culture.

First Earth Day



Lake Mendota's Picnic Point in 1960. George Gurda, via UW Digital Collections

The first international Earth Day celebrations were held in April 1970, and I experienced it at a 6:00 sunrise gathering at Picnic Point, on the University of Wisconsin campus in Madison. It was a day and event I was looking forward to, when as a culture and nation, we joined the world to honor our Earth. It turned out that the celebration I attended was disappointing, inadequate, and inappropriate, but the day included inadvertent lessons, plus an unexpected brush with disgraced U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy's legacy that I will never forget.

As our crowd assembled in the woods, in a clearing near the end of Picnic Point at Lake Mendota, we were asked to sit in a circle and watch the sunrise over the lake and city of Madison. Our group included a few campers and hikers like me, outdoor-oriented folks who usually got up early. We were in our element—celebrating the sunrise as we had on many mornings when fishing, hiking, camping, or canoeing.

Most others in the assembled bunch, however, had not yet slept that night. They were still up from their evening adventures, and brought their recreational items to smoke and drink with them to the service. It was a mellow crowd. We listened to sitar music like that of Ravi Shankar, played by a skilled Indian musician, and listened to words and poetry from local thought-leaders of the era.

As we got up to leave, I was aware of the huge swarm of aluminum pop tops and cigarette butts now littering the site where we had just worshipped our fragile, precious Earth, honoring our home planet. It seemed strange and asynchronous to leave that blot of refuse as our marker of remembrance. Along with just a couple of others out of the crowd of 60 or so, I picked up what trash I could.

As I hiked the forest trail back to my dorm room in Kronshage Hall, I noticed an underground, hidden drainpipe discharging a steady flow of white liquid into Lake Mendota. Whatever was pouring from it was creating murky white clouds of spillage into the near-shore green mess of weeds and algae. I walked over to the water's edge to inspect it further from the weedy, muddy lake bank.

As I waited and watched, the discharge increased, along with my level of alarm, having just come from the debut Earth Day service. Another hiker soon came up to join me. He was a fellow student and resident of my dorm. Norm (not his real name) was also a vocal, devoted supporter and follower of former Sen. Joseph McCarthy. Norm went annually to McCarthy's gravesite to honor the former senator, and he and I were as diametrically opposed on political and social issues as young, draft-age men could be. In our usual world of dorm and campus life, I did not like him. He did not like me. We had never talked, but I knew who he was from the posters he put up around our dorm area, and the speeches he gave in campus commons areas and around the university. Our political and social distances from each other at that time were huge, contentious, and unresolvable.

But on that day, at that moment of shared concern over the waste dumping into "our" lake that we swam and fished in, and skated on in winter, we talked. We spoke amicably, with both of us expressing our dismay and disgust at this blatant, unabashed dumping of waste into Lake Mendota. We were stunned to see this on the early, sacred morning of the first-ever Earth Day celebration we had both just come from.

We agreed that local media must be informed as we hiked fast, back to our dorm rooms and telephones. We divided up who would call which television and radio stations, plus newspapers,

to inform them of this amazing, unsettling departure from what we had celebrated that historic morning.

Norm made his calls, and I made mine, both from our own rooms. Then we hiked back to the drainage site. In about an hour, reporters and photographers started to arrive as we watched from a distance. The news in Madison that day, both on-air and in print, covered this egregious breach of Earth Day spirit on our campus, pointing out how innocuous carelessness toward what we do to our planet each day adds up. “Citizen reports,” newscasters said, had alerted them.

Norm and I were pleased. We had a speaking relationship for the rest of that year we lived in our dorm. Earth Day had brought us two, from such different perspectives, together for a few hours. We agreed that if all could unite over the centrality of our home planet’s health, our Earth would be doing better. I came away from that day reminded that nothing else, whether political, religious, social, scientific, or financial, mattered if we ruined our home world, and that we seem to be bent on continuing our thoughtless degradation despite our floundering words, sympathies, and legislation to the contrary.

Sen. Joseph McCarthy had divided Norm and me, but our planet Earth united us. We must put our precious planet ahead of all other issues. It is the largest, most important matter at hand now and always. Let’s first do what is right for Earth, our Mother to all we know and live for. And our only home.

Excerpted from Boots, Blooms, Barks, and BAAAs: A collection of tales, poems, essays, lyrics, anecdotes of Northland life and lore, Thomas Wayne King © 2024. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.



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