

# Don Aldrich

1912 – 1990



Born in Deer Lodge in 1912, Don spent nearly his entire life within two miles of the Clark Fork River. His high school years were spent in Superior, where he was a standout athlete and soon became an avid hunter, angler and lover of the wilds.

In 1935, he earned a degree in journalism from the University of Montana. Times were tough during the Great Depression and Don embarked on a 33-year career with the Montana Power Company. However, a 1984 *Missoulian* article noted that Don really had two careers, the second after-hours working on wildlife management, resource conservation and forest management issues.

Don helped legalize hunting of either sex of deer in areas where winter ranges were overused and winter mortality levels were very high. In 1956, along with professional wildlife managers and a number of hunters, he embarked on a field trip to winter range near Salmon Lake. On a 1,200-acre plot, they found 131 carcasses of deer, all showing acute signs of malnutrition. Conservationist and writer Robin Tawney proclaimed, "That was Aldrich's epiphany; it also marked the beginning of citizen advocacy for conservation."

Don became a leader in the Missoula-based hunter and angler organization, the Western Montana Fish and Game Association. As president, he shifted the group's "good old boy" focus toward conservation-based management of wildlife and other natural resources. In 1963, he began a long career with the Montana Wildlife Federation, serving two terms as treasurer, one as vice president, two as president and six as executive secretary.

As executive secretary, he spearheaded the first-ever publication of legislators' voting records on conservation issues and single-handedly represented all Montana conservationists at the state legislature. He also helped build a state-wide telephone network and provided the foundation for the Montana Environmental Information Center. As a member and officer in local, state, regional and national conservation groups, he also lobbied Congress on natural resource matters and became a much-respected contact for many lawmakers and land and resource managers.

According to Tawney, "Don's breadth of knowledge and his ability to get things done were legendary among conservationists and policy makers alike. His awards made him conservation's 'Man of the Year' for any given year."

Those awards included the American Motors Conservation Award (1966), Sears Conservationist of the Year (1967), Ray T. Rocene Sportsman of the Year (1967), KGVO TV and Radio Citizen of the Year (1967), Shikar Safari International Award (1970), the Mellow-Ohrman Conservationist of the Year (1980), Montana Wildlife Federation Conservationist of the Year (1983).

Don's American Motors Award came with a check for \$500 which he promptly turned over to the Save the Upper Selway Committee.

From the early 1950s until his death in 1990, Don was involved in virtually every major conservation battle fought in Montana: wildlife habitat, stream and lake shore protection, wild and recreational rivers, wilderness, strip and hard-rock mining, Colstrip plants 3 and 4, water reservations, energy, water quality, pesticides and more.

These were all important issues to him and to the growing conservation constituency he inspired.