



William B. Mershon Chapter of Trout Unlimited

Conservation, preservation, and restoration of Michigan's cold-water resources

The Story of TU Founder, Art Neumann

This message was delivered by TU founding father Art Neumann to the Saint Lorenz Men's Club in 1991. It is presented here as part one of a two-part series.

This story is about the evolution of a great basic conservation organization, slanted toward trout, that has become the world's most powerful guardian of our cold-water resources.

The story can be divided into five parts:

1. The pre-TU days
2. The early years
3. The surge to national prominence
4. The Van Gytenbeek period
5. The Herbst growth years

I will try to give you a true feel for the organization not by telling you just the official facts and figures, but also the inside story—interesting happenings, exciting moments, and difficult times. But in order to properly understand the story, especially my own personal involvement, it will be necessary to first provide you with a little background information.

My father was an ardent outdoorsman—a hunter and a fisherman—so it was quite natural that I, an only son, would become one also. Our annual family vacations were spent at Uncle Joe Lavoy's cabin at New York Works, below Zilwaukee on the then-beautiful and pure Saginaw River. There was ice fishing on the Saginaw River between Court and Bristol Bridge while I was still in grade school at Holy Cross. There was pike and bass fishing at Edenville and at Long Lake near Hale. And then in the high school years, I fished a lot at Pratt Lake near Gladwin. But it was all fishing for warm-water fish, not for trout.

Father was also a conservationist, not just a fisherman. Not as an environmental activist as we know them today, but he was a stickler about fish

and game laws and he made certain that his fishing and hunting friends obeyed the laws, too. He cooperated with the DNR in enforcing those laws and he impregnated me with the same ethics, principles, and values.

I got my grade school education at Holy Cross Lutheran in Saginaw, and my high school education at Michigan Lutheran Seminary, graduating in 1934. My first job was as a Hoover salesman. There's nothing special about that, except that many of my fellow salesmen were trout fishermen and they introduced me to fishing for trout. My next job was with Morley Brothers in the retail store, first in the hardware department and then in their sporting goods department. There I got to meet and become friends with all the dedicated fly-fishing conservationists of the area. They converted me to fly-fishing for trout and impressed on me the need to become concerned about the welfare of wild trout.

From Morleys I went to Sears and ultimately to Eaton Manufacturing. I got married in 1941 and then along came World War II. I joined the navy, had a couple of very close calls aboard a light cruiser in the South Pacific, and returned home a mature grown man. The first thing I did was take a personal inventory and make a master plan of my life. One of the parts of that plan was a decision to better utilize the talents God had given me. That resulted in the starting of a small business called Rod Renew Shop that later became Wanigas Rod Company, where we made fine custom fishing rods and sold all related tackle. From the beginning, the little shop attracted the serious fishermen, probably because the preaching of conservation and good sportsmanship was also one of our products. Wanigas became almost like a "hot stove" league, a gathering place of the faithful. I became a director of the Caro Conservation Club. I sent out a fishing letter regularly to my mailing list, discussing the fishing issues of the time—especially issues about trout. I lectured on the banquet trail. I talked before the DNR's Conservation Commission, even to the legislature on one occasion. I preached to anyone who would listen.

During this period I was very fortunate to meet Dr. Albert Hazzard, probably the greatest trout scientist that ever lived. His research on Bait vs Flies, Put and Take fishing, Fishing For Fun— or Catch and Release, as we know it today— were landmark discoveries in the trout world. He became my mentor and I became his protégé. Because he was a public employee, he could not promote the results of his research, so I became his unofficial spokesman. I carried his torch. His credibility made my preaching authentic.

While this was going on, George Griffith became chairman of the Conservation Commission's Fish Committee. He was present when I made my appeals to the commission and he also became a rod shop customer, so he got on my mailing list and received my fishing letters. One day he called me up and

said, “George Mason thinks we ought to have a Trout Unlimited like we have a Ducks Unlimited. What do you think of the idea?” I told him it sounded like a good idea. So he invited me up for a weekend “to make some medicine on the idea,” as he put it. The upshot of that get-together was that George got together some 16 people at his home, on the AuSable near Grayling, in July of '59, to discuss the feasibility of forming such an organization. The consensus was positive, plans were made, and Trout Unlimited was officially formed at Grayling in September of 1959. Over 300 attended the organizational meeting. Dr. Casey Westell, a brilliant research scientist himself, was elected president, I became vice-president, John Kean was treasurer, Vic Beresford, a professional newspaperman, became our part-time executive director, and we were off and running.

An office was set up in Lansing. Vic hired an office girl, we approved an \$805.00 per month budget, and we immediately had cash flow problems. But we had assembled a great board and set of officers who were dedicated, influential, and biologically sound. I have never worked with a finer group of volunteers in my life. We didn't have quantity, but we sure had quality!

Once the organizational details were completed, we immediately launched a campaign to tell the world who we were, what we stood for, and what we wanted to accomplish:

1. We favored wild trout management over put-and-take, wherever possible.
2. Demanded an inventory and classification of all our trout waters.
3. Launched the organization's first official publication—“Trout Unlimited Quarterly.”
4. Formed the National Board of Scientific Advisors.
5. Took a real hard-nosed position against the alteration, pollution, and destruction of trout habitat by industry, mining, road construction, agriculture, impoundments, and the like.
6. Promoted intensive management through special fly-fishing-only, fish-for-fun, and any artificial lure regulations.
7. Supported urgently needed research into trout management techniques, and the application of the fruits of this research. And above all—
8. We violently condemned Michigan's put-and-take hatchery program, which research has shown harmed our trout resources instead of helped them.

This was labeled the Trout Unlimited Program and was officially presented to the DNR brass at the special membership meeting on December 5,

1959, in Saginaw. The scientific community supported us—unofficially and off-the-record—but management, and especially the hatchery people, violently opposed us. After all, they controlled the Fish Division and there was no way they were going to give up that control, right -or wrong, good -or bad. It was a setback, but it didn't stop us.

We were determined to work within the system to make the necessary changes and we proceeded to devise a strategy to accomplish our objectives. We kept after the department, pointing to their own research on the subject. We brought the subject before the Conservation Commission at every one of their monthly meetings, both publicly and privately. We spoke to every conservation club, men's club, church group, and service club that would listen to us. In March of 1960, we put together an impressive second membership meeting in the Kellogg Center at Michigan State University that featured a trout management panel made up of many of the top, unchallengable trout scientists in the business. It was very well received, got lots of publicity, and left us with the feeling we were making headway. We followed that up with our first annual convention in Traverse City in August of 1960. It was well attended and the panel discussions created quite a stir in the scientific community. Young Trout Unlimited was definitely securing the support of the right people, but it didn't phase the hatchery bureaucracy one bit. They stonewalled tougher than ever. It would take something really big to move them.

In the meantime, we were having cash-flow problems. The first year had been anything but successful financially, even though we had grown from less than 200 members to 850 members. But at \$10 dues per member, that barely paid staff salaries. By November 1960, we were \$2,500 in debt and without any immediate solution. We had no recourse but to close the office, discontinue the "Trout Unlimited Quarterly," and release our executive director, Vic Beresford. But we did retain our office girl and hoped for the best.

In spite of our financial problems, we never slacked off on the pressure we were applying to the DNR. The officers and board took up the slack, working harder than ever. We put together an impressive membership meeting in December of 1960, at the University of Michigan, with a panel discussion made up of top professional management and research scientists. Again they vigorously supported the TU program. Again we realized increased media coverage and public support, but again the hatchery element stonewalled! The result? Back to the drawing board. □

Part one of “The story of Trout Unlimited,” which appeared in the Fall 1998 issue of *The Mershon Muddler*, included a brief biographical sketch and a review of the ten-year period immediately preceding the formation of T.U.

We then told about how T.U. was formed, what some of its early trials and tribulations were like and, finally how cash flow problems forced us to release Executive Director Beresford and proceed strictly as a volunteer organization “out of a shoebox” as President Westell put it. Part two follows.

With the loss of Beresford, the officers and board were forced to take over many of his duties. John Kean was made secretary-treasurer, I took over as editor of the TU Quarterly and also accepted the responsibility of representing the organization at commission meetings. But there were a couple of bright spots, too. In December of 1960, we became a tax-free, non-profit corporation, with tax deductibility and that not only helped with donations, but also qualified us for a \$2,500 loan from the National Bank of Detroit.

The organization was now 1 ½ years old, the pace and pressure had been viscous and some of the founding fathers were showing signs of burnout. But in the interim, the TU program had attracted the support of the scientific community, as well as almost all of the big-name outdoor writers, which in turn sold memberships, increased donations, and brought in fresh blood, including quite a few out-of-state members. One of these out-of-state members—Herb Moore—became a director. Our first chapter—at Big Rapids—was formed in March of 1961 and our Second Annual, and first out-of-state, convention was held in Chicago in March 1961. It was a great success, with Lee Wulff the principle speaker, and it received national attention and coverage.

About the same time, both Presidents Hoover and Eisenhower became members. With the help of Bradford LaRiviera, I was able to put together our first full-color brochure, as well as convert our rag sheet Quarterly into a slick full-color magazine, and make Ken Peterson, of Flint its new editor. Our financial problems had eased off because we had only one employee, and we seemed to be picking up steam. But we all knew that running as large and active an organization as TU had become, with voluntary help on a part-time basis, couldn't last much longer. We were planning our second out-of-state convention at Rockwell Springs, Ohio for September 1961 when I acceded to the board's request to become Temporary Executive Director—without pay—and implemented the convention plans. It was really more than I should have taken on, but a leader was really needed, and the results were most rewarding. The trout panel was made up of the four top outdoor writers in the country—Fox, Schuyler, Schwiebert, and Wulff—and we got more ink out of that convention

than any previous one. The breaks were coming our way. Then we had a stroke of really good luck.

George Romney was running for Governor of Michigan, and at a campaign stop in Grayling, George Griffith advised him of the problem that TU was having with the DNR. Romney sympathized with Griffith and promised that if he was elected, he'd do something about it. Well, Romney got elected and one of the first things he did was establish a citizen's committee to investigate the DNR. Both George Griffith and President Casey Westell were appointed to that committee, and the investigation began. It was not easy. The DNR fought it tooth-and-nail. They not only refused to cooperate, they made several efforts to sabotage it. Besides, the committee was fully aware that, like any citizen's committee, they could investigate and recommend, but they had no power whatsoever to order change. It was our president, Dr. Casey Westell, who struck on the solution. Why not have some highly respected independent outside organization evaluate the DNR and provide their recommendations. The governor bought the idea, and the Wildlife Management Institute of Washington D.C. was hired to do the job. The investigation was thorough and the report dramatic. The Department was basically sound, but it wasn't perfect, and 95% of the smell was coming from the Fish Division. What they recommended, for all intents and purposes, was a blueprint of the TU program. As a result, the chief of the Fish Division was forced to retire, the put-and-take hatchery system was closed down, research and stream improvement was enlarged, and a brilliant young biomatrician from the University of Michigan, Dr. Jim McFadden, was hired as the new Fish Division chief. His first duty was to put together a new fish division policy based on the newest and best information available. The result—another TU blueprint.

We had won! When the word got out, the rest of the country begged us to help them because they had the same problems. New York, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Washington D.C., and Ohio all requested certification as Chapters. But we had no money and no staff to support the cause. I was serving as temporary Executive Director without pay, as well as being active vice-president, working 7 days a week at Eaton and running Wanigas Rod Company, too. Some nights I never even went to bed. I slept a few hours in the lazyboy. I ultimately became so overextended, I was forced to tell the board, "Hey, Fellas, look. I'm a married man with a family. I love what I'm doing, but if I continue this pace it will kill me. We've got to hire an executive director to run this show, or let's forget it." There was no immediate response from the board, but when we met a couple of weeks later at Higgins Lake, on September 8, 1962, the board announced that they were going to hire a full-time executive director. I was shocked, but my first comment was, "Great, but we're broke. Where are we going to get the money?" "Oh, we've raised some seed money"—from where I do not know to this day. Again I said, "Great, do you have any candidates?" "Oh yes,

we know who we're going to hire." "Who?" was my next question. "You" they said. "Why you guys are crazy! I told you I'm a married man with a family. I can't afford to throw away my job at Eaton, with all the security and benefits I've acquired, just to take a wild fling with TU." Their response, "We understand, but why don't you see if Eaton will give you a leave of absence so you can give it a try." I was certain that was impossible, but I agreed to give it a try. To my amazement, they gave me a year's leave with an option for a second year, the board promised to match my income at Eaton (40 hours per week income—not the seven days per week I had been working), and on October 1, 1962, I became Executive Director of Trout Unlimited full-time!

The next 2 ½ years were the busiest, the most exciting, and the most rewarding years of my life. To properly tell that story would require a book, but here are some of the highlights.

Initially, it took awhile to get the entire organization reorganized. The Lansing office was closed and national headquarters was moved to Saginaw, specifically to the Modart Building on the corner of Lapeer and 2nd, which was owned by former National Director Rollie Burrows. The facilities there were provided rent-free by Rollie for 2 ½ years, and all TU ever had to pay was their own telephone bills. I immediately hired Lydia Schmidt as secretary and office manager. A part-time co-op student, Diane Stroebel, was hired soon afterwards. The three of us made up the national staff, and a more dedicated, hard-working pair of gals you will never find.

In accepting the position, I advised the board that I was putting together a five-year master plan of action that I intended to implement in two years, that I would be their "Indian", and that I expected them to be my "chiefs". They, in turn, gave me complete freedom to carry out my plans and to feel free to come to them for assistance as required. It was a unique arrangement, and while I carefully operated within the framework of the policies laid down by the board, I can remember only one instance when they refused a request—a promotional trip to the far-west, which they only postponed to make sure I did not overextend myself and the organization. In great part it was that arrangement that permitted us to make the great strides we did.

One personal policy I adopted early on was to spend as much time on the road as was possible—up to 75% of my time if I could—building chapters, selling memberships, badgering the various state DNR's , as well as the Federal Government. The first such trip was up and down the east coast. I started in Georgia and ended up in Maine, meeting with key groups in Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York, Vermont, Massachusetts, Maine, and especially the feds in Washington D.C.. Everywhere I was greeted with open arms, except in Washington D.C.. There they held me at

arms length. While I succeeded in conferring with most bureaus and departments related to our cause, breaking down doors was tough. I was disappointed but, if anything, it made me more determined than ever to win them over. It only took less than a year to do that. The next time I appeared in D.C. and the word got out that TU was in town, the 'phone was off the wall, the red carpet was out, and they became our friends and supporters. Meeting, conferring with, and getting the approval and assistance of people at the very highest levels of government is an experience one can only appreciate by being privileged to be there. Before another year was up, Secretary of the Interior Udahl was our keynote speaker at the Trout Unlimited Convention held at the Institute for Humanistic Studies in Aspen, Colorado, as great a compliment as a fledgling organization like Trout Unlimited could ever hope to realize! I spent five weeks on the trip from Georgia to Maine. I stayed with TU members, ate in the cheapest restaurants, used the cheapest gas, and when I turned in my expense account, that five-week trip—everything included—cost TU \$540!! I was proud of that. So was the board. And I didn't get to fish even once!

The eastern trip was followed soon thereafter by a Midwest trip through Ohio, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, where the same things were done with the same phenomenal success. In six months time, we had doubled our membership and increased our chapters by 80%, with some 30 more chapters in various stages of formation. Even our cash flow had improved, and by July 1963 we actually had a surplus of \$1,000 with all bills paid!

It might be of interest to note that our 1963 budget was just over \$25,000, our 1964 budget just under \$30,000, and our 1965 budget \$45,000. But today's TU budget is over \$6 million!

Early in 1963, the Pennsylvania chapter petitioned the national board to hold the '63 Annual Convention at Allenberry, PA, a famous resort on the Yellow Breeches River, near Carlisle, PA. The board accepted and it was decided that the trout panel there would be composed of the members of our National Board of Scientific Advisors, and the theme would be "Trout Management for Sport Fishing." The end result was the formation of TU's North American Trout Policy, a document that remains to this day the guideline for professional trout managers everywhere. Allenberry was a beautiful place and every available lodging space in the area was sold early on. Hundreds attended and, once again, TU received unprecedented media coverage, rave reviews, and increased acceptance and support, not to mention a generous outpouring of donations, new members, and chapters. Again, it surprised all of us that such a small organization could wield such tremendous influence. It was quality, not quantity.

The fall and winter of '63/'64 was utilized to consolidate and capitalize on the tremendous amount of prestige, power, and growth that TU had realized in just one year. But there was no reduction in our efforts to expand the organization and its programs even further. There was a second eastern seaboard trip. It was not a long trip, but was even more successful, especially at the Federal level. TU was coming of age and everyone, it seemed, wanted to be on the bandwagon—including the Feds.

With the advent of spring 1964, the west—especially Montana—was crying for help. The situation there was different. Their DNR was solid, but timber interests and cattle ranchers and water users were a real problem. And so it was that I went west a couple of times, first to fight the Forest Service, and then the water spoilers, interests that sometimes took so much water from a river that the river ended up totally dry!

On one of those trips, I continued south to Aspen, Colorado, where we were scheduled to hold our 1964 National Convention, at the Institute for Humanistic Studies. The convention was to be preceded by a week-long seminar at the Institute, where representatives from the lumber, mining, insecticide, agricultural, and industrial communities—along with representatives from TU—would discuss the subject of “America’s Diminishing Trout Resources and the Population Explosion.” It was a prestigious gathering, but no more so than the panel discussion on “Trout Administration for Sport Fishing” where the top fisheries administrators from across the country talked about administering our nation’s trout resources! Again, hundreds attended and again, the media was there enmass. U.S. Secretary of the Interior Udahl was our main speaker, sports greats like Ernie Schwiebert and Joe Brooks put on fishing demonstrations and, automatically, TU was elevated to the next plateau. It seemed almost too good to be true.

I was particularly pleased because I felt I had succeeded in cramming five years of hard work into two years of success. In two weeks my tenure would be over and I would return to Eaton. But the board did not believe that I would leave TU and had made no effort to replace me. So, at the last minute, I agreed to stay on as temporary Executive Director part-time until they could find a replacement. It wasn’t easy. I was exhausted and on the edge of burnout. Eaton had gone on a seven-days-a-week schedule, and Wanigas Rod Company needed to be reactivated. But I stuck it out until June 1, 1965. In the interim, the board hired a potentially great new executive director from British Columbia, but he ultimately had second thoughts and turned the job down.

The next several execs that we hired didn’t measure up, and the organization sort of drifted. But then they found a Harvard grad, Pete VanGytenbeek, they moved the offices to Denver, and TU took off again. The

membership got up around 25,000 and then Pete left. Again TU floundered. But in 1980 Bob Herbst took over and much of TU's current size and stature can be credited to his efforts.

As of 1998, TU has 100,000 dues-paying members, not counting affiliated members. There are 450 chapters, 34 councils with 6 regions, and we have affiliates in Canada, South America, Japan, New Zealand, Yugoslavia, and Russia. In addition, we have members in almost every country in the world that has trout—and some that do not have trout. The annual budget that totaled \$25,000 in 1962, has grown to \$6 million in 1998. It is a marvelous organization, a credit to the righteous cause that is Trout Unlimited.