

**GAYLORD ANTON NELSON  
June 4, 1916 - July 3, 2005**

In the July/August edition of *Water & Wasterwater Products*, the first appearance of this column, I referred to my first "real" job: a 1974 internship in the office of the U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson who died recently at the age of 89.

The internship with Gaylord Nelson's office influenced just about everything I have done since then — even though I never had much of a relationship with Senator Nelson. My job that summer was part of a three-segment college course I was taking on U.S. health policy. But, with Nelson's office in the Washington, D.C. segment, it very quickly morphed into the then-nascent areas of environmental health and environmental law.

Senators come and go, and they often seem, like brands and fashions, to go in and out of style. Nelson, however, in his 18 years in Congress, was quietly and consistently behind a "new" issue that would, in fairly short order, become a permanent one in the national dialogue.

**Watergate Summer**

I met Nelson during my first week on the job in early June 1974. My direct supervisor was an experienced legislative assistant and former medical journalist named Judith Robinson, who was assigned to Sen. Edward Kennedy's already famous (or infamous) health subcommittee. On my first day, Judy asked me to write a press release in support of urging a brand new arm of the federal government called the Environmental Protection Agency to ban a certain carcinogenic pesticide (Aldrin-Dieldren, which was eventually banned for all uses).

Nelson met me in his huge office in the Russell Building, shook my hand, and signed off on the press release after some discussion with Judy. That was June 7, 1974, (the date of the press release, which I still have). I, like nearly everyone who met him, immediately liked Nelson, and unfortunately, my brief meeting was one of only three or four I would ever have with him.

At the time, Nelson was in his late 50s, a second-term Wisconsin Senator who had been governor of that state from 1958 to 1962. Nelson was a traditional old-school "liberal" Democrat — probably more liberal than I or any of my friends have been at any stage of our lives. It showed up in his votes on everything: his stands on the war in Vietnam, consumer advocacy, and social welfare programs. His ADA (Americans for Democratic Action) rating was high — close to 100 percent. He once even introduced legislation banning the internal combustion engine as an amendment to the Clean Air Act. Overall, his voting record was nearly the polar opposite of the voting record of the moderate Republican member of Congress I worked for four years later.

# The Earth Day Senator

**Saying goodbye to a mentor who was a pioneer in the U.S. environmental movement**

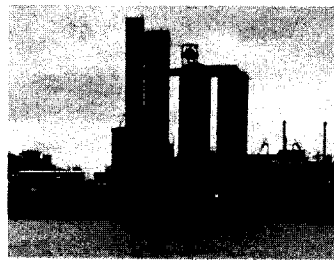
*By J. Daniel Hull, J.D.*

**The Environmental Senator**

While assertive and strong, Gaylord Nelson was quietly outgoing and universally liked by other senators. He was quite at home with his Senate colleagues at The Monocle, a Capitol Hill bar on D Street, Northeast, near our office in the Russell Building. He was folksy, funny, and self-deprecating; he reminded me and other interns a little of the comedian Bob Newhart. His personal staff said he did funny things — like reading the comics section of the *Washington Post* before anything else, and very occasionally, but furtively, smoking "Eve" cigarettes when no one was looking because of the embarrassment it would cause him if that bit of information got out, given his reputation as the "Earth Day Senator." He had a wicked wit. He did one-armed pushups at parties. He said "Holy cow!" a lot.

Nelson, of course, is now known as the "Environmental Senator." He is probably most famous for starting Earth Day in 1970. He sponsored or co-sponsored the 1964 Wilderness Act (preserving millions of acres of federal land) and laws that protected hiking trails or banned DDT, Agent Orange, and phosphate detergents. In fact, in his first speech as a Senator in March 1963, he declared the erosion of the nation's air and water quality to be a pressing national issue. This was new and different stuff: "We need a comprehensive and nationwide program to save the natural resources of America," he said. "Our most priceless natural resources...are being destroyed." Conservation, once the province of civics classes, the scouting movements, and a few scattered organizations like the Sierra Club, was about to become political.

And from the beginning, Nelson was serious. In his first few months in office, he lobbied President Kennedy to push environmental protection as a national priority. In September 1963, Kennedy went on a week-long, 10-state tour to talk up the importance of conservation. Nelson wrote the first Environmental Education Act. He had a part in writing most of the environmental legislation in the ten years following the first Earth Day.



**Earth Day's Wake**

Even before entering law and politics, Nelson was interested in the outdoors and protecting it. Born in Clear Lake, Wis., in 1916, he lived his childhood out-of-doors in a small town. The son of a country doctor, he grew up in the 1920s and 1930s with Wisconsin-style populism and progressivism — with heroes like Bob LaFollette. After graduating from law school in 1942, he served as an officer in the military in Okinawa, Japan, where he met his wife, an Army nurse named Carrie Lee. (Tom Brokaw, in his 1998 book *The Greatest Generation*, told the story of their romance).

After the war, Nelson practiced law in Madison. A turning point in his life occurred when he met Aldo Leopold, author of the ecology book *A Sand County Almanac*. Leopold and the book really moved him. Nelson was elected to the Wisconsin State Senate in 1948 where he served three terms before going on to become governor in 1958. In the late 1950s, as governor, he pushed the environment as a political issue.

I'm sure that the first Earth Day in 1970 surpassed any notion Gaylord Nelson would have had of its success and continuing popularity. He got the idea in 1969 after visiting an oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara, Calif. On his way back to Washington, he read an article in *Ramparts* magazine, about "teach-ins" on the Vietnam War. He decided to adapt that idea to the issue of protecting the environment. He engaged Denis Hayes, then a student at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, to organize the event.

Hayes was serious too; he turned Earth

Day into a political crusade. On April 22, 1970, 20 million Americans cleaned creeks, recycled cans, and held teach-ins on the environment. Congress stopped for a day so lawmakers could participate. In New York City, Mayor John V. Lindsay shut down Fifth Avenue to cars, cabs, and trucks. In the 1970s, Congress passed 28 major pieces of environmental legislation, including the Environmental Protection Act, the Clean Water Act, and the Safe Drinking Water Act.

Eventually, Nelson's style of New Deal liberalism did him in. In 1980, running for his fourth term, Nelson and with several other established liberal Democratic Senators, was soundly defeated on Ronald Reagan's coattails. The people had spoken, and the Republicans won the Senate. A new era in U.S. politics began.

Nelson died in Kensington, Md., at the age of 89. Since his Senate defeat in 1980, he worked for the Wilderness Society in Washington, D.C. A few years ago I missed a Nelson staffer reunion in Washington, and now I wish more than ever I had gone.

Did Nelson focus to any extent on clean water matters? No, not really. He made all environmental issues his issues and, as the *Washington Post* stated on July 4 at the beginning of its obituary, he "introduced mainstream America to the modern environmental movement." He was a generalist. Environmentalists ("conservationists") have been in America since before Teddy Roosevelt, but Nelson really got environmentalism to take popular root and made it a national priority. It changed the way everyone thought about the planet and its resources in America and all over the world. It's not an exaggeration to declare that Nelson's influence is experienced by all of us everywhere we go. When we hear a news item about citizens challenging a construction project because it would destroy a natural habitat, use recycling containers, or notice a hotel room with a sign discouraging unnecessary water usage for washing, Gaylord Nelson's hand is in all of it. His gift to all of us keeps expanding, and it is now part of our national and global discourse. It will never go out of style. ♠

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