

Ecology U

True to its founding 25 years ago, UW-Green Bay remains an advocate for the state's environment

BY CHRIS SAMPSON

A hotbed of environmentalism in a paper-mill town.

A new school with an innovative academic philosophy in a conservative community.

A rallying place for youthful activism at a time when older generations worried about counterculture radicalism.

That was UW-Green Bay — or at least how many in northeastern Wisconsin perceived the year-old university — when the first Earth Day was celebrated on April 22, 1970.

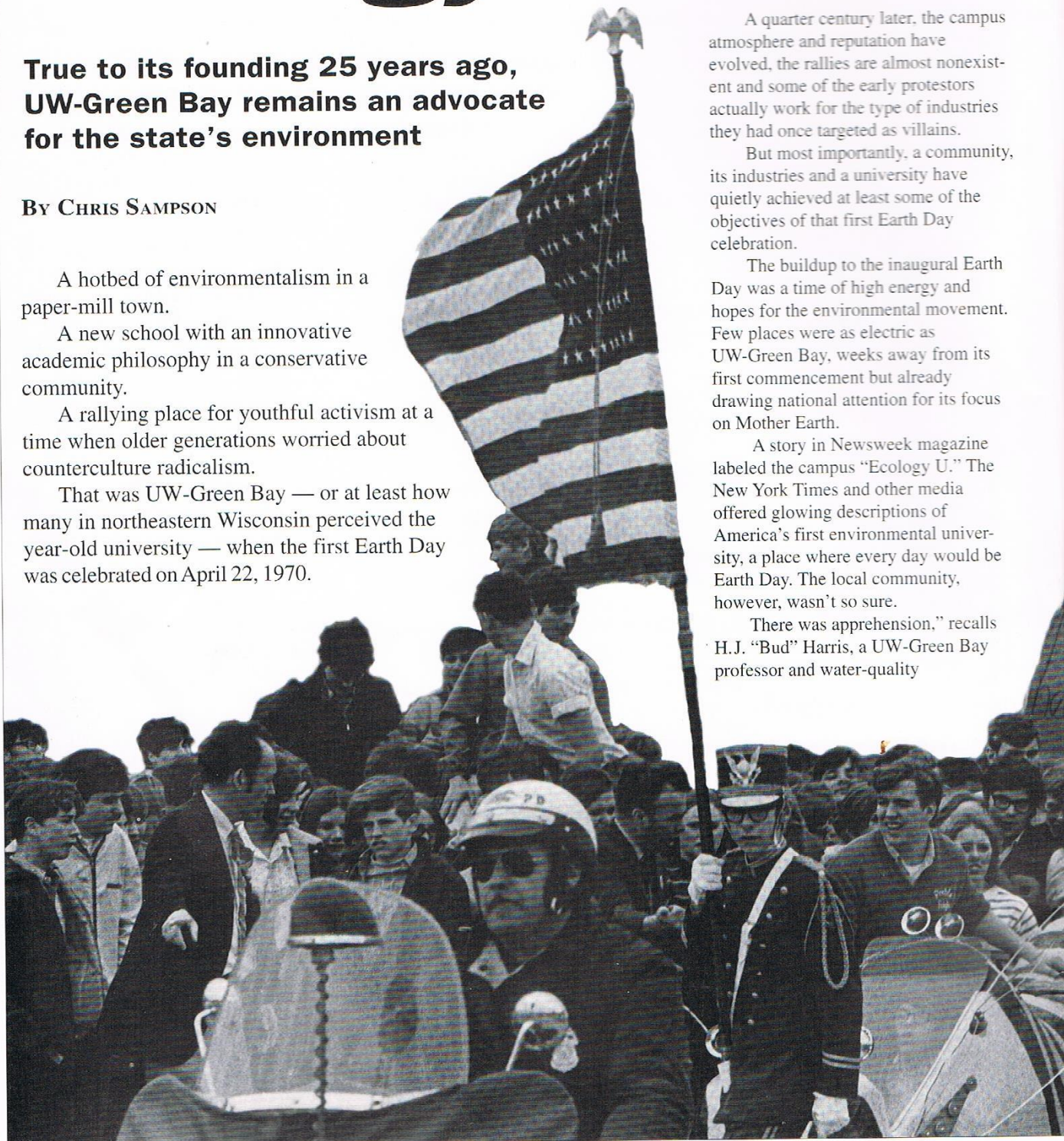
A quarter century later, the campus atmosphere and reputation have evolved, the rallies are almost nonexistent and some of the early protestors actually work for the type of industries they had once targeted as villains.

But most importantly, a community, its industries and a university have quietly achieved at least some of the objectives of that first Earth Day celebration.

The buildup to the inaugural Earth Day was a time of high energy and hopes for the environmental movement. Few places were as electric as UW-Green Bay, weeks away from its first commencement but already drawing national attention for its focus on Mother Earth.

A story in Newsweek magazine labeled the campus "Ecology U." The New York Times and other media offered glowing descriptions of America's first environmental university, a place where every day would be Earth Day. The local community, however, wasn't so sure.

There was apprehension," recalls H.J. "Bud" Harris, a UW-Green Bay professor and water-quality



specialist then and now. "There certainly was mistrust. There were those who thought this was a very radical group of people who had the potential to totally disrupt the way of life here."

Colleague Robert Wenger, a mathematician and faculty specialist in pollution modeling, remembers public concern "that the movement had the potential to go too far ... that it would affect livelihoods."

The new campus occupied a bayshore site not far from the mouth of the Fox River, home to one of the world's heaviest concentrations of pulp and paper plants.

UW-Green Bay's focus on pollution was only one component of its broader "Man and the Environment" mission. The school also emphasized interdisciplinary new approaches to education, communication, urbanization and other concerns. But the ecology issues were most visible.

When Sen. Gaylord Nelson of

Wisconsin lobbied for a day to honor the environment, the Green Bay campus took it to

heart. Some students biked downtown, plugged nickels into parking meters and sat down to deny spaces to gas-guzzling cars; others marched. Many took part in a full schedule of recycling seminars, films, poetry readings and "pocket theatre" performances on campus.

Before the year was out, students had banished throwaway bottles and cans from campus vending machines, sought ways to minimize pollution from cars and insecticides and even suggested energy-saving modifications to outdoor lighting. Faculty hosted what was billed as the first national conference on environmental education.

Earth Day was a hit. Nationally, it was a jump start for major pollution-control legislation and a catalyst for moving environmental awareness from the fringe to the mainstream.

Experience at UW-Green Bay, however, would prove that acceptance is incremental.

Wenger recalls an early field trip to the Thilmany pulp mill in Kaukauna to study air-pollution abatement. He wound up trying to defuse the tension as outspoken students

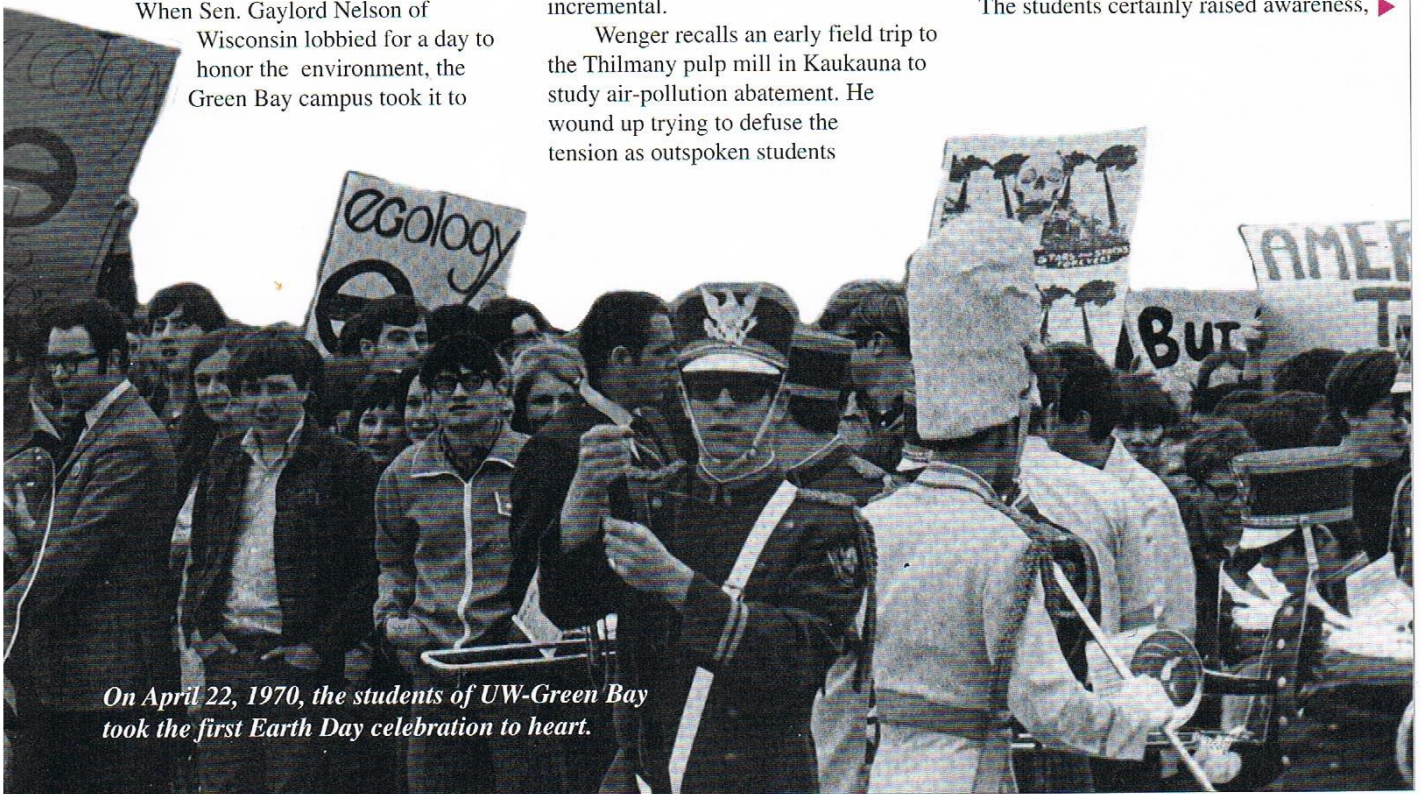
confronted their industry tour guides with pointed questioning.

UW-Green Bay Professor Nancy Sell, a physicist and registered professional engineer, has since collaborated on dozens of waste-reclamation projects with Thilmany and many other local companies. But she remembers that "for a while we had a difficult time getting a foot in the door at some places."

"As much as anything, the university had a problem with terminology 25 years ago," she says. "One of our majors was named 'Environmental Control.' That was exactly the wrong message to send to industry at that time."

Thomas Cuene was a 17-year-old high school senior when he drove his Volkswagen Beetle to the UW-Green Bay campus to take part in Earth Day 1970.

"It did start out to be sort of adversarial," he says. "Rallies and wild statements were part of the movement. The students certainly raised awareness, ▶



On April 22, 1970, the students of UW-Green Bay took the first Earth Day celebration to heart.



Photos by Dave Garot

Brown County Executive Thomas Cuene, a UW-Green Bay graduate, says the university and industry have become partners to improve the area's water resources.

but we probably could have marketed it better."

Eventually, Green Bay activists, industry, government and university representatives came together to explore common ground. By the mid-1980s there was a mechanism in place for an ongoing, systematic, public analysis of the area's No. 1 pollution problem. The Lower Green Bay and Fox River Remedial Action Plan, or RAP, is nationally recognized today as a model for environmental remediation and community cooperation. (See page 7.)

RAP illustrates the quiet yet considerable contributions of UW-Green Bay faculty, students and alumni. Cuene, who enrolled at UW-Green Bay a few months after the first Earth Day and later earned his degree in public and environmental administration, was elected Brown County's chief executive in 1987. He served seven years as chairman of RAP's governing board.

"The turnaround in water quality and pollution abatement efforts has just been phenomenal," Cuene says.

"Cooperation made a big difference. Industry now comes to government and the university for assistance."

Don Schneider, a longtime participant in RAP and vice president of research and development for Fort Howard Corp., gives much of the credit to three decades of watershed research by the UW Sea Grant Institute and UW-Green Bay professors Harris and Paul Sager, among others.

"The university and Sea Grant helped establish a very significant technical base, a history of what the bay was then versus what it is now," says Schneider. "Other places don't have that. We've also established a good working relationship — if I have a question, I can call Bud."

Harris traces that level of respect to early UW-Green Bay and Sea Grant water-quality researchers who zeroed in on hard data and solid science.

"We'd hold informational meetings in the community, and say, 'Here's the research, what do you think we ought to do?' and depolarize the situation," Harris says. "Through those working relation-

ships it has come around to more of a partner approach."

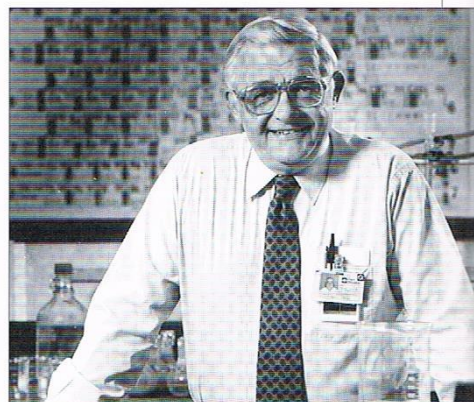
If the activism of Earth Day 1970 had at least some us-against-them undertones, the environmental movement of today has evolved to involve a broader cross-section of society, and frequently, to frame pollution issues in term of lifestyle choices.

"The saying, 'We've met the enemy, and he is us,' was around 25 years ago, but there's a fuller realization now that it isn't any single corporation," Harris observes. "We've moved closer to understanding a key concept — sustainability. Economic and ecological sustainability."

"I like the phrase, 'Good ecology is good economics.' The two don't have to be polarized. They have to be melded."

Harris says the Natural and Applied Sciences unit — and UW-Green Bay itself — benefits from a holistic approach to scholarship. In addition to its role as teacher, it acts as a think tank, government and corporate research arm, small business incubator, technology transfer mechanism and promoter of economic development.

While the "Eco U" label did not stick at UW-Green Bay, science enrollments are at record levels. But time and campus growth have also brought more students and rising profiles to programs in business administration, education, the social sciences and the arts. Division I



Fort Howard executive Don Schneider

basketball and the new Weidner Center for the Performing Arts also figure prominently in UW-Green Bay's public identity.

It remains true, however, that after 25 years the most popular elective course on campus is still *Env Sci 102, Introduction to Environmental Science*. There's still a weekly "eco-lunch" seminar series. And the "Man and the Environment" theme is carried forward in various academic units. Environmental planning students, for example, have assisted on projects ranging from the revitalization of downtown Kimberly to the design of senior housing for the Oneida Tribe.

For some environmental-minded students, however, that's not enough. Student government president Jamie Kuhn helped organize an ambitious but only lightly-attended series of Earth Week programs last April.

"I'm as guilty as the next person, but I think the old activism is a little lost in this generation," says Kuhn, a senior from River Falls who has studied environmental science and sociology.

"It's tough to mobilize people unless you can promise them instant results. Students now have to educate themselves about better recycling, environmentally friendly products, political issues. That takes time."

Kuhn could find encouragement in the paths of UW-Green Bay alumni who have stepped into pollution-abatement careers since 1970. Schneider, for instance, notes that three of seven employees in Fort Howard's research and development environmental group are former UW-Green Bay students.

Harris says the environmental focus at UW-Green Bay remains as strong as it was 25 years ago. What has changed is the way it's expressed.

"There's less arm waving and finger pointing," he says, "and more hands-on rehabilitation and restoration." ■

Chris Sampson is director of news services at UW-Green Bay.

Research breathes life into two vital resources

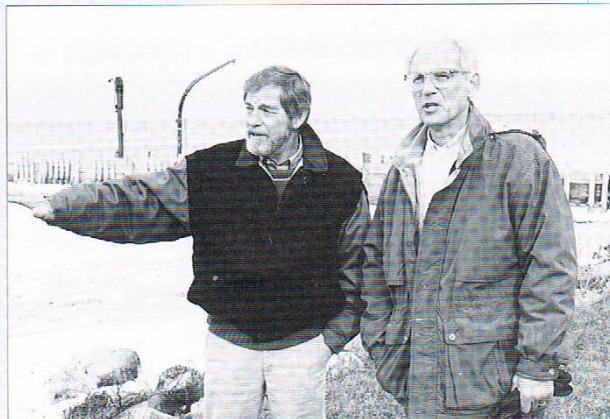
There's good news on Green Bay. The water is clearer, oxygen levels are up, dissolved phosphorus concentrations have declined and fishing has improved.

The bad news? There is some. But it's not nearly as bad as it used to be. Once shunned as lost causes, the lower Fox River and southern Green Bay now serve as blueprints for environmental remediation across the Great Lakes.

The state of Wisconsin, in response to the 1972 Clean Water Act, focused attention on point-source pollution in the lower Fox River. Industries and cities spent at least \$300 million on waste treatment. Wasteload allocation plans were developed. DDT use was all but halted, and steps were taken to virtually end the entry of PCBs into the waterway.

UW-Green Bay Professor "Bud" Harris was among the U.S. and Canadian scientists who came together to compare notes on Great Lakes pollution. By the mid-1980s, eight states and the province of Ontario had committed to developing and implementing Remedial Action Plans (RAPs) to address 43 "areas of concern."

The Green Bay RAP had a head start, thanks to the years of baseline data on the lower bay gathered by researchers Harris and Professor Paul Sager. Industries along the lower river — Fort Howard Corp., Green Bay Packaging and James River among them — supported the RAP and additional research.



UW-Green Bay's "Bud" Harris, left, and Paul Sager.

The lower bay became the subject of a \$13 million EPA study, with Harris as local coordinator, to track the dispersal of toxic materials through the ecosystem.

That study's findings — that PCBs could not be brought under control until contaminated sediments upstream are addressed — spurred new action and formation of the Fox River Coalition, which is now developing plans to attack "hot spots" of contamination.

A second new public-private coalition, Fox/Wolf Basin 2000, is focusing on pollution throughout the watershed, which covers nearly one-fourth of Wisconsin. Experts say nutrients and suspended solids sent downstream via runoff are the greatest barriers to a truly healthy lower bay.

The Green Bay RAP remains active and effective with the involvement of UW-Green Bay faculty. Former RAP chairman Thomas Cuene calls local efforts "cutting edge."

"I don't know who gets the credit," says Harris, "but I can tell you this, this is one of the few places in the country where this has happened." ■