1. **Name of Property**  
   Historic name: _Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack_  
   Other names/site number: ________________________________  
   Name of related multiple property listing:  
   N/A  
   (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

2. **Location**  
   Street & number: _106 East Wilson Street_  
   City or town: _Ely_  
   State: _Minnesota_  
   County: _137 St. Louis_  
   Not For Publication: N/A  
   Vicinity: N/A

3. **State/Federal Agency Certification**  
   As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,  
   I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets  
   the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic  
   Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.  
   In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I  
   recommend that this property be considered significant at the following  
   level(s) of significance:  
   ___national  ___statewide  ___local  
   Applicable National Register Criteria:  
   ___A  ___B  ___C  ___D

   ________________________________  
   Signature of certifying official/Title:  
   ________________________________  
   Date  
   ________________________________  
   State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

   In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.  

   ________________________________  
   Signature of commenting official:  
   ________________________________  
   Date  
   ________________________________  
   Title:  
   State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government
4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

☐ entered in the National Register
☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register
☐ removed from the National Register
☐ other (explain:) _____________________

__________________________
Signature of the Keeper

__________________________
Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

Private: ☒

Public – Local

Public – State

Public – Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box.)

Building(s) ☒

District

Site

Structure

Object
Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack
Name of Property
St. Louis, Minnesota
County and State

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Resources within Property</th>
<th>Contributing</th>
<th>Noncontributing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>buildings</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>sites</td>
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<tr>
<td>structures</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>objects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register __0_____

6. Function or Use

**Historic Functions**
(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC/Secondary Structure

RECREATION AND CULTURE/Museum
7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions.)

_NO STYLE________

___________________

___________________

___________________

___________________

___________________

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)
Principal exterior materials of the property: ________________________

Foundation: CONCRETE
Walls: WOOD/Weatherboard
Roof: ASPHALT/Shingle

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe
contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a summary paragraph that
briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style,
method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has
historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph
See continuation sheets.

Narrative Description
See continuation sheets.
8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations
(Mark “x” in all the boxes that apply.)

A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes

B. Removed from its original location

C. A birthplace or grave

D. A cemetery

E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure

F. A commemorative property

G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years
Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions.)

CONSERVATION

LITERATURE

Period of Significance

1937-1982

Significant Dates

Significant Person
(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Sigurd F. Olson

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Peura, Alex (contractor)
Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack
Name of Property

St. Louis, Minnesota
County and State

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

See continuation sheets.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least one paragraph for each area of significance.)

See continuation sheets.
9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form.)

See continuation sheets.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

____ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
____ previously listed in the National Register
____ previously determined eligible by the National Register
____ designated a National Historic Landmark
____ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #__________
____ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #________
____ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey #________

Primary location of additional data:

____ State Historic Preservation Office
____ Other State agency
____ Federal agency
____ Local government
____ University
_x_ Other

Name of repository: Minnesota Historical Society, Listening Point Foundation

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): SL-ELC-066_________

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 0.32_________
Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack  St. Louis, Minnesota
Name of Property       County and State

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

**Latitude/Longitude Coordinates**
Datum if other than WGS84: __________
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)
1. Latitude: 47.895528°        Longitude: -91.865127°
2. Latitude:                  Longitude:
3. Latitude:                  Longitude:
4. Latitude:                  Longitude:

**Or**

**UTM References**
Datum (indicated on USGS map):

☐ NAD 1927 or ☐ NAD 1983

1. Zone: Easting: Northing:
2. Zone: Easting: Northing:
3. Zone: Easting: Northing:
4. Zone: Easting: Northing:

**Verbal Boundary Description** (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The boundary begins at the northeast corner of the property (northeast corner of the west half of Lot 3) and follows the east property line south to the south property line. The boundary turns west and follows the south property line approximately 110 feet to the east edge of the driveway. The boundary line then turns north and runs along the driveway to the south edge of the flowerbed alongside the south wall of the main house. From here, the boundary turns east and follows the edge of the flower bed and the south edge of the brick-paved patio to the patio’s southeast corner. The boundary line then turns north and extends to the north property line. The north edge of the boundary follows the north property line until it reaches the northeast corner of the property.
Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

This boundary encompasses the Writing Shack and important site features such as the stone path and the majority of the stone wall. It also contains a large amount of the yard and its dense tree cover, which were developed by Sigurd F. Olson and reflected his preference for wilderness. The boundary excludes the family’s house, which received a large addition and other significant alterations after the period of significance. It also excludes flowerbeds alongside the house, which were not contextually associated with the Writing Shack or planted by Sigurd Olson.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Rachel Peterson
organization: Hess, Roise and Company
street & number: 100 North First Street
city or town: Minneapolis state: Minnesota zip code: 55401
e-mail: rachel@hessroise.com,
telephone: 612-338-1987
date: August 1, 2019

name/title: William E. Stark
organization: Stark Preservation Planning, LLC
street & number: 2840 Forty-third Avenue South
city or town: Minneapolis state: Minnesota zip code: 55406
e-mail: __________________________
telephone: __________________________
date: __________________________

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

• Maps: A USGS map or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

• Sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.

• Additional items: (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)
Photographs
Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn’t need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

Name of Property: Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: St. Louis
State: Minnesota
Photographer: Rachel Peterson
Date Photographed: July 18, 2019
MN_St. Louis County_Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack_001.
North (left) and west (right) walls of the Writing Shack, looking southeast.

Name of Property: Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: St. Louis
State: Minnesota
Photographer: Rachel Peterson
Date Photographed: July 18, 2019
MN_St. Louis County_Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack_002
West wall of the Writing Shack with outline of former garage door opening, looking south.

Name of Property: Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: St. Louis  
State: MN
Photographer: Rachel Peterson
Date Photographed: May 25, 2019
Description of Photograph(s): South wall of the Writing Shack, looking east.
MN_St. Louis County_Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack_003
Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack

Name of Property: Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: St. Louis
State: Minnesota
Photographer: Charlene Roise
Date Photographed: May 25, 2019

North (right) and east (left) walls of the Writing Shack, looking south.

Name of Property: Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: St. Louis
State: Minnesota
Photographer: Rachel Peterson
Date Photographed: July 18, 2019

Bluestone path leading to the Writing Shack, looking southeast.

Name of Property: Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: St. Louis
State: Minnesota
Photographer: Rachel Peterson
Date Photographed: July 18, 2019

Yard with plantings west of the Writing Shack, looking east.

Name of Property: Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: St. Louis
State: Minnesota
Photographer: Rachel Peterson
Date Photographed: July 18, 2019

East property line with stone wall and red pines, looking north.

Name of Property: Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: St. Louis
State: Minnesota
Photographer: Rachel Peterson
Date Photographed: July 18, 2019

Stone wall, looking northeast.
Name of Property: Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: St. Louis
State: Minnesota
Photographer: Rachel Peterson
Date Photographed: July 18, 2019
MN_St. Louis County_Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack_009
Fire grate within stone wall, looking northeast.

Name of Property: Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: St. Louis
State: Minnesota
Photographer: Rachel Peterson
Date Photographed: July 18, 2019
MN_St. Louis County_Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack_010
Entrance to footpath surrounded by heavy vegetation, looking northeast.

Name of Property: Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: St. Louis
State: Minnesota
Photographer: Rachel Peterson
Date Photographed: July 18, 2019
MN_St. Louis County_Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack_011
Footpath through the east side of the property, looking south.

Name of Property: Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: St. Louis
State: Minnesota
Photographer: Rachel Peterson
Date Photographed: July 18, 2019
MN_St. Louis County_Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack_012
Interior of Writing Shack, looking northeast.

Name of Property: Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: St. Louis
State: Minnesota
Photographer: Rachel Peterson
Date Photographed: July 18, 2019
MN_St. Louis County_Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack_013
Interior of Writing Shack, looking east.
Name of Property: Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: St. Louis
State: Minnesota
Photographer: Rachel Peterson
Date Photographed: July 18, 2019
MN_St. Louis County_Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack_014
Interior of Writing Shack, looking west.

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management. U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.
7. Narrative Description

Summary
Sigurd F. Olson’s Writing Shack is a one-story building at 106 East Wilson Street in Ely, Minnesota. It is at the southeast corner of a large residential lot that also includes the Olsons’ home (outside the NRHP boundaries). The shack has a simple rectangular footprint and a gabled roof. The walls are clad in wood lap siding. The building was originally constructed as a garage in about 1928, but was converted to a writing studio in 1937. As part of that renovation, the interior was clad with wood paneling and flooring. Sigurd F. Olson spent most of his time exploring northern Minnesota’s wilderness, writing about the importance of nature, or advocating for its conservation. His passion of untrammeled landscapes led him to develop the site around the Writing Shack as a miniature naturalistic landscape. He constructed a stone wall through the site and planted pines and other native plants on the property, which created a rustic landscape surrounding the Writing Shack.

Writing Shack
Sigurd F. Olson’s Writing Shack sits at the southeast corner of the property at 106 East Wilson Street in Ely, Minnesota. The building was constructed c. 1928 as a single-car garage for the family’s home, which is on the west side of the property (outside the NRHP boundaries). The Writing Shack was moved to its current location and converted for use as a studio in 1937. It has a rectangular plan measuring approximately 18’ 6" by 10’ 6". The structure rests on a concrete base and the walls are clad in drop siding with corner boards. The side-gabled roof runs east-west and is covered with asphalt shingles. A pedestrian door is in the north wall, facing the house, and consists of a five-panel wood door and a second screen door. Horizontal sliding windows with storm sashes are on each of the four walls. The outline of the original garage-door opening is visible on the west wall. Wood panels on the south wall indicate the former location of a brick chimney.

The Writing Shack’s interior consists of a single room. The walls and ceiling are covered with pine paneling and the floor is fir planks. A wood bookshelf runs the perimeter of the room above the windows. The outlet for a since-removed heater is at the west end of the south wall. Many of Sigurd Olson’s original furnishings and objects are still displayed in the Writing Shack, including the Royal typewriter he used to write his books, articles, and correspondence.

Site
Olson wanted the landscape surrounding the Writing Shack to reflect the wilderness of northern Minnesota. He planted red pines throughout the property, most of which are along the east and north property lines. A few oak trees are interspersed with the pines. The understory is thick with chokecherry shrubs, sumac, and various other native plants. Flowering forsythia is also present.

The Writing Shack itself is nearly surrounded with vegetation. A cluster of pine trees is near the northeast corner of the building. A line of tall shrubs covers the south property line and obscures the south wall of the Writing Shack. Chokecherry bushes near the northwest corner largely screen the Writing Shack from the main
The southern portion of the property is slightly less rustic in character. Two small flower beds are in the yard west of the writing shack. One bed holds hostas and small ornamental shrubs, which surround the stump of a former boxelder tree planted by Sigurd Olson. The tree fell during a storm outside the period of significance. The other bed is dominated by a large rock circled by ferns and a peony bush. Lilac bushes cover the south property line. A crabapple tree planted after the period of significance is northwest of the Writing shack near the main house.

Beginning in the 1930s, Olson constructed a low wall through the property using rock found on site or nearby. The dry-stacked wall is not formally shaped, but has the naturalistic look of gathered stones. One segment of the wall follows the south property line from the driveway to the Writing Shack. Another segment begins near the southeast corner of the property and generally follows the tree line curving northwest. It tapers off near the center of the north property line. A break near the south end of this wall segment leads to the neighboring yard. Olson constructed a fire pit with a steel grate near the center of this section of the wall. A second break in the wall north of the fire grate provides access to a footpath leading back into the northeastern section of the property.

A bluestone path laid by Olson runs northwest from the door of the Writing Shack to a brick patio at the main house. The stones are all different shapes and sizes, laid in two long rows.

A wood post installed by Sigurd Olson for a bird feeder is northwest of the Writing Shack. The feeder was destroyed by a bear in recent years. Two boxelder saplings are near the bird-feeder post, close to the stump of a tree that was lost during the period of significance.

Alterations
The Writing Shack has remained largely unchanged since Sigurd Olson’s death in 1982. The brick chimney for the stove was removed at an unknown date, possibly during the period of significance. The Writing Shack’s original wood shingles have been replaced with asphalt shingles. The building retains high historic integrity despite these minor changes.

Landscape alterations since the end of the period of significance are more difficult to discern. The red pines planted by Olson are extant. The stone wall and bluestone path he laid are also present. At least two trees have been lost, but one loss occurred during the period of significance and does not adversely impact the property’s integrity. Two new saplings on the property are both boxelder trees, a species planted by Olson, and were planted near the lost trees. These efforts minimize the impact of the new trees on the integrity of the property. Annual plantings and small understory plants with shorter lifespans have presumably been replaced since 1982, but the general character of the site’s landscape is intact.
8. Statement of Significance

The following Statement of Significance is partly adapted from a determination of eligibility entitled “Sigurd F. Olson House and Writing Shack Evaluation of Eligibility, Ely, St. Louis County, Minnesota,” prepared by William E. Stark of Stark Preservation Planning, LLC, in 2017. It is used with permission from the Listening Point Foundation.

Statement of Significance Summary
The Sigurd F. Olson was a nationally recognized writer and conservationist. Through his nine books and numerous articles, Olson’s descriptive prose reflected his deep appreciation for the wilderness and inspired readers to explore it for themselves. Nature was Olson’s primary muse and he worked diligently to protect northern Minnesota’s lakes and forest, finally securing its designation as the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. The Writing Shack and its site are nationally significant under Criterion B in the areas of Conservation and Literature. The property’s period of significance starts in 1937 when the building was converted to a writing studio, and ends with Olson’s death in 1982. The Writing Shack is closely tied to Olson’s productive literary and conservation work. His writing and activism were of exceptional importance at the national level, meeting Criteria Consideration G.

Sigurd F. Olson

Sigurd F. Olson was born in Chicago in 1899, but grew up in Wisconsin after his father, a devout Baptist minister, was assigned to a church in Sister Bay, Door County, Wisconsin. The family moved briefly to Prentice, Minnesota, in 1909, and then relocated to Ashland, Wisconsin, in 1912. Olson attended high school in Ashland and then enrolled at local Northland College. He spent his summers working on a nearby farm owned by Soren Uhrenholdt, and there he met Soren’s daughter Elizabeth, a Northland classmate who Olson would later marry. Olson completed his college education at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, earning a degree in agriculture in 1920. Beginning that same year, he taught animal husbandry, agricultural botany, and geology at high schools in Nashwauk and Keewatin, Minnesota.1

Olson’s dual passions for writing and wilderness presented themselves early in his life. At age thirteen, he won a gold dollar for the best essay in his school’s writing contest for “The Function of the Chamber of Commerce.” Years later in June 1921, Olson took his first canoe trip to northern Minnesota and Canada, fortifying his passion for the wilderness. As a man in his early twenties, Olson spent much time wondering what he should do with his life. He decided that he would travel the wilderness and write about his experiences, setting himself on a path that would bring him great struggle and, eventually, great success. Following his first canoe trip, Olson wrote an essay entitled “Canoe Tourist Finds Joys of the Great Outdoors Through the Vast Watered Wilderness

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1 David Backes, “Timeline of Events in the Life of Sigurd Olson,” n.d., The Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute, Northland College, Ashland, Wisconsin.
of the North,” which became his first published article, appearing in the *Milwaukee Journal.*

In August 1921, Olson and Elizabeth Uhrenholdt were married, and took a three-week canoe trip for their honeymoon. Elizabeth would be Olson’s constant support and collaborator for the rest of his life. She provided reassurances when necessary, as well as critical reviews of his work, which enabled him to ultimately become a successful professional writer. She was also the family’s mainstay, serving as the practical head of the household as Olson’s career would take him on extended absences from home.

Olson left his teaching job in 1922 to pursue a graduate degree in geology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. After Elizabeth became pregnant with their first child, Olson dropped out and began teaching high school in Ely, Minnesota. The Olsons had decided to settle in Ely largely because of its proximity to northern Minnesota’s vast forests and hundreds of lakes, now known as the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

**Teacher or Writer**

Life was challenging for the Olsons during their early years in Ely. They had welcomed two sons between 1922 and 1925, and Sigurd was frustrated with his work as a teacher and with raising a family on a limited income. To make ends meet, he worked throughout the 1920s as a canoe-trip guide during the summer, which allowed him to spend more time in the Northwoods. Olson also continued teaching and in 1926 he began splitting his time between Ely High School and Ely Junior College, where he taught animal biology and human physiology. The outdoors greatly appealed to him and he often brought his students outdoors with the goal of teaching them to “read nature” and gain a scientific understanding through observation. The rigidity of his teaching position and the amount of time it required him to spend in a classroom wore on Olson. A career that kept him indoors held no attraction; writing, not teaching, would be the calling that would bring him the greatest fulfillment.

In the autumn of 1931, Olson moved with his family to Champaign, Illinois, so he could attend the University of Illinois and earn a graduate degree in zoology under animal ecologist Victor Shelford. Olson completed his degree in 1932 with a groundbreaking thesis on the timber wolf. When the family returned to Ely, Olson began teaching at Ely Junior College full time. Even while most of his time was spent in the classroom, Olson found time for writing. Several of his articles were published in popular magazines such as *Field and Stream* and *Sports Afield.*

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4 Backes, “Timeline of Events in the Life of Sigurd Olson.”


6 Backes, “Timeline of Events in the Life of Sigurd Olson.”
With Sigurd’s consistent work in Ely, the Olsons moved to a new, larger home in 1934. The house was in south Ely on Green Valley Road (later renamed East Wilson Street) and would be the family’s permanent residence for the rest of Sigurd and Elizabeth’s lives. The property was just outside city boundaries at that time, but the area had been subdivided into blocks and lots under Fortier’s Plat. The Olsons’ parcel comprised two and a half lots, each lot being 50 feet wide and 125 feet deep. The property seemed larger and more remote due to a quirk of street development. The Olsons’ house and others on the street faced north where Fortier Street would have run, but was never built. An alley on the south side of the block became the principle access to the area. Open and wooded areas dominated the undeveloped land north of the house, where a precipice and a powerline easement offered views into Ely. Similarly, First Avenue East, west of the Olson house, was not developed, giving the property a large side yard. As a result, the Olsons had a sense of wilderness even in their city home.7

When the Olsons moved into the house, the property’s landscape consisted of grassy fields and piles of rocks. Several boxelder trees were near the east property line and a clump of birch stood north of the house.8 Although Elizabeth wanted a landscape designer to create a more traditional look, Sigurd would have nothing to do with it. He envisioned and implemented a more natural design by transplanting native shrubs and trees, such as red pine, maple, and scrub oak, from the nearby forests and planting them in informal lines. Inspired by traditional stone walls in New England, Olson and his sons built a wall from the many rocks unearthed during site work. The wall merited an essay from Olson called “The Stone Wall” in his first book The Singing Wilderness. In it, he writes of the project’s therapeutic effects: “Whenever life doesn’t seem to be fun anymore, I have an infallible cure; I go out and work on my wall—dig rocks out of the turf and move them from where they have been resting for ten thousand years or more to some place of my own choosing. Somehow when I do this the world moves off magically to where it belongs and I take the helm, no matter what the situation at the moment happens to be.” Near the end of his life, Olson reflected on the wall and marveled that he “had ever such strength as to move some of [the rocks] which must have weighed a hundred pounds.”9

For the next decade, Olson continued to write essays reflecting on his adventures in nature even as his teaching career occupied more of his time. He also wrote frequently in a journal and would often reflect on his emotions and goals. In January 1930, he came to two important conclusions. The first was on the centrality of writing in his life: “The more I think of the goal of my life, the more I am convinced that my life holds one thing, and that is the expression of my views of life, existence as seen through my eyes.” The second conclusion was that any career that kept him indoors was not for him: “Other occupations have one goal, an office, executive ability, organization. If that is the goal, no profession has anything for me. I must have freedom above all else and writing is the only occupation that will give it to me.”10

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7 Backes, “Timeline of Events in the Life of Sigurd Olson.”
8 The birch trees were later removed by the Olsons.
9 Sigurd F. Olson Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul.
10 Backes, A Wilderness Within, 72.
The tight financial straits of being an aspiring professional writer was an important consideration in the Olson family. Regular publications, especially in prominent magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, could provide a decent income, but publishing in these types of magazine proved elusive for Olson. He regularly submitted his nature essays, but was met with rejection after rejection, which frustrated his hopes of becoming a paid writer and dashed his confidence. He accumulated “hundreds of rejection slips,” all saved in a box. Yet he persevered in pursuit of “a goal [he] might never achieve.”

The struggles he faced in finding publishers wore on Olson’s mental health. Through the 1930s, he was often afflicted with “ennui,” as he described it. This entry in his journal from 1930 is typical of his reflections on “blue” moods: “This is sort of a blue Monday, just on general principles. . . . This morning I feel lost and out of place as though life has left me, as though I were simply marking time, my youth gone, everything futile.” At times, Olson’s tone was more extreme: “Again, I have reached the doldrums. Yesterday was almost unbearable and today it is worse.” During the periods when his depression lifted, he would be “filled with a delicious sense of having done [his] work well.”

Often, Olson blamed his teaching obligations for his unhappiness and contemplated quitting as early as 1933. “What I want is to be able to do something different so that my friends can point me out as one who has ability of a sort and can make his way by his brains alone,” Olson wrote in February 1933. The following year he continued to struggle, writing, “As long as I have to face another winter of teaching and forget the writing I must do, then I will be in agony.” Financial responsibilities hampered his ability to make the transition into full-time writing; he needed to keep teaching in order to pay the bills. He would be propelled to write, however, by the thought of dying “and realiz[ing] that you never had the courage to take the big chance.”

Olson found his joy not in the writing process itself, but the contentment he felt afterward. He was inspired by the thought that an essay of his “might bring a smile of happiness, or even a tear, or a catch in the throat” to some reader. “I am not happiest when I am writing, but I am perhaps happiest just after I am through,” Olson confessed in 1930. “It is like a physical pain, really enjoyable in a sense because of the relief after it is over.” Olson fantasized about his life as a full-time writer. “If I had to make writing my source of livelihood,” he wrote in January 1930, “I would write in the mornings, and play in the afternoons.” Olson would eventually make that dream a reality, but in the meantime—with a full teaching and administrative schedule at Ely Junior College—he carved out time in the evenings and weekends for writing. In an optimistic entry from 1937, Olson predicted “this year it is going to be different and I shall keep working away until I have fifteen or twenty articles on the road all of the time. I should have no trouble in making ends meet once they begin to sell.”

11 “No. 6, My Writing,” Sigurd F. Olson Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul.
14 Backes, *A Wilderness Within*, 74; Sigurd F. Olson Papers; Sigurd F. Olson Journals.
The dedicated effort that Olson put into his writing during this period yielded only a modicum of success. In 1930, he had four feature articles published in outdoor magazines. The better-paying literary magazines, however, rejected his essays. The feedback he received from publishers encouraged him to write more adventure stories, as this was the type of literature they believed readers craved. Olson attempted to comply, but the writing style did not come naturally to him and felt inauthentic. In February 1935, Olson completed his wilderness essay “Farewell to Saganaga,” which reflected on a canoe trip taken several years earlier to Lake Saganaga on the U.S.-Canada border. It was written in the first-person, the style that would become his hallmark. The essay was rejected by The Atlantic Monthly, but despite the setback, Olson recognized the style as his authentic voice and decided that he would eventually write a book composed of these kinds of essays.15

Olson continued to plot how he could devote himself to writing. He thought “a little cabin to which I could repair and write, somewhere close by,” might be the solution. Some months later, in the winter of 1935, Olson rented a cabin for a couple of days ten miles south of Ely on Bear Island Lake, bringing just a few essentials and his typewriter. He prepared for the trip by considering the type of writing he should undertake and concluded: “No one has as yet developed a philosophy of the wilderness. That is up to me . . . My work must be strong and hard and masculine, the love of men for the wild, its truth, its unvarnished joy, its compensations, the feeling of being alone.” Aside from this clear expression of his writing philosophy, the trip was a disaster from a writing perspective. He achieved only brief starts on two essays and recorded random thoughts and observations. The pressure of the dedicated time to write was too great and he left two days later feeling like he had failed in his quest to become a professional writer.16

A Retreat and a Workshop

The experiment on Bear Island Lake, however, planted a seed for a compromise between trying to write at home or in the office and escaping to an isolated cabin. Sigurd and Elizabeth had made improvements to their house in Ely, but it was still cramped and “bursting with boys,” as his son Robert later wrote. It was difficult for Olson to find the time to write in this chaotic environment, which created a tense family life. In order to give himself a dedicated writing studio free from the distractions of his new job as dean of Ely Junior College, Olson converted a single-car garage on his property into a permanent writing studio called “The Shack.”17

The garage was originally built on the property by Alex Peura, an employee of the Border Lakes Outfitting Company, of which Olson was one-third owner. Peura was also responsible for transforming the garage into a writing studio. The renovation project cost $150, three times Olson’s anticipated budget and nearly one month’s salary. The project included walling in the car door, installing windows on each side, and putting a pedestrian door in the north wall. Olson and Peura laid a bluestone path from the Writing Shack to the main house, which was about 100 feet away. A wood bookshelf ran the circumference of the studio and held Olson’s books and

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15 Backes, A Wilderness Within, 115-118.
16 Backes, A Wilderness Within, 114-115; Sigurd F. Olson Journals.
17 Backes, “Timeline of Events in the Life of Sigurd Olson”; Sigurd F. Olson Journals.
As the Shack was coming close to completion, Olson wrote in anticipation:

I will be much more tolerant of what goes on in the big house and much less irritable. . . . Here there is no chance for irritation, telephone calls, Bobby’s tooting, or anything else. Nothing will bother me out there. It is what I wanted for a long time. . . . I feel terribly selfish spending all of this, but the stake is worth the gamble and I think it was the right idea. At least now I will have no alibi. Now I will have to produce and with the set up out there as it is I do not see why I shouldn’t. . . . I am going to work as steadily as I can, every week four or possibly five nights, Saturdays occasionally, but never Sundays. Sundays belong to my family.\(^{19}\)

Olson followed this passage with a September 27 entry noting “the studio is finished and I have what I wanted for many years, a place to write where I will be alone and at peace for long as I like.” The Writing Shack was also a relief to all in the family. His son Robert later wrote: “From that day on, the ‘Shack’ became an integral part of his life and remained so until his death thirty-five years later. It was his writing retreat, but also his workshop, which became ever more important as his life expanded into national affairs.”\(^{20}\)

The Shack afforded Olson multi-hour stints of undisturbed writing time after his work day at the college. Olson wrote regularly on weekday afternoons and evenings, emerging only for supper. The arrangement was effective; between October 1937 and March 1939, he produced nineteen articles, seven of which were accepted for publication.\(^{21}\)

**Sigurd Olson and Writing**

Despite his new productivity facilitated by the Writing Shack, financial success was not forthcoming for Olson. It took an average of three submissions for each of his seven essays published between 1937 and 1939 to find an outlet. His publishers were outdoor magazines, which paid only fifty or sixty dollars per article, hardly enough to sustain a family of four. Olson submitted numerous articles to more prestigious and better-paying magazines, including *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Scribner’s*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Collier’s*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Country Gentleman*, but all were rejected. Frustrations over the rejections began to affect the Olsons’ family life. His son Robert dreaded going out to the Writing Shack to call his father in for supper, fearing the irritated

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\(^{19}\) Sigurd F. Olson Journals; Robert K. Olson, introduction to *The Collected Works of Sigurd F. Olson: The Early Writings* (Stillwater, Minn.: Voyageur Press, 1988), xiv; Anderson, “Listening Point.”

\(^{20}\) Sigurd F. Olson Journals; Anderson, “Listening Point.”

response he would receive. Robert later recalled the tone of those days:

I can remember the terrible apprehension when Dad got a reply from a magazine, over whether it was going to be accepted or not. All those rejections were accompanied by withdrawal, depression, tension. The house—I mean, you might as well pull down the shades like a funeral when he got rejected. It was grim; it was funereal, and we just scattered to the corners. Who needs this? Who needs this sort of thing? And it went on, year after year. His writing and the success of his writing was a major factor in the family happiness. He didn’t just go out and pound out a story and send it in—no, the whole family was involved.22

One article Olson managed to get published in 1938 ran in *American Forests* for no compensation. The piece was titled “Why Wilderness?” and it was among his most important because in it, Olson articulated his philosophy of wilderness and helped shape the debate about conservation and the importance of spending time in nature. The article helped increase Olson’s profile. Beginning in 1941, he wrote a weekly syndicated newspaper column entitled “America Out of Doors,” which was published in multiple newspapers. Finally, a steady income from writing was on the horizon. In the introduction to the column, Olson was described as “having an entirely new approach” in which “he interprets the beauties of nature and its influence on man’s thoughts; yet he never loses sight of the thrill and lusty physical enjoyment of life in the outdoors.” America’s entry into World War II, however, slowly dashed Olson’s hope of becoming a regular newspaper contributor. Newspaper advertising revenues fell and syndicated columnists across the country were let go by their publishers. By March 1944, only four newspapers ran “America Out of Doors.” Olson wrote in his journal that the column was the “closest I ever came to really arriving.”23

Late in the war, Olson served the Army for one year as a teacher in Europe, preparing soldiers for their return with college coursework. He was also an observer at the Nuremberg trials. Upon his return to Ely, Olson resumed his position as dean of the junior college, which was an increasingly unsatisfying position. Feeling more confident in his writing career and more desperate to align his work life with his passions for writing and conservation, Olson resigned from teaching. Afterward, he optimistically wrote in his journal, “I cannot believe it. It does not seem possible. But now that it is done, I must begin to work out my salvation. I must write as I have never written before. I must remake my life. I must make good for Elizabeth’s sake. We must have fun. . . . I am going to be a different man, a different person entirely.”24

 Olson again attempted to write fictional adventure stories to please literary agents and publishers. The pieces were met with scathing criticism and every story was rejected. Olson resolved to be true to his instincts and to

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22 Backes, *A Wilderness Within*, 141.
resume writing essays, much as he had done for his “American Out of Doors” column and earlier published works. Instead of writing full-time, Olson turned to conservation advocacy to earn money and protect the landscape that was essential to his writing. On his fiftieth birthday in 1949, Olson wrote in his journal, “when I write now it will be with a new and bigger audience. No short stories of adventure of love—it will be books of my feelings and probing on life and nature and mankind.”

The Conservationist

Conservationist themes had been present in his writing for many years, and the process of writing helped Olson refine his beliefs. In a 1935 essay published in *Minnesota Conservationist*, he concluded the piece with his argument on why and for whom the wilderness should be protected from human development:

> With the gradual elimination of wilderness regions, with the rapid settling and opening up of the rest of the country, it behooves us to take stock of this heritage of ages past and think twice before we change it in the slightest. For the charm of the region lies not only in its lakes and rivers, not only in its forest and game, but in its wilderness nature. We must weigh the issues well before we allow the ogre of development and the false ideal of multiple use to rob us of something which seems so particularly suited to the needs of those who want to leave the beaten trails; those who love the swish of paddle and the song of running water. For these the county was created, and for them it should be kept, unspoiled and unchanged as it has come down to us through the centuries.

Olson’s conservation work began in the 1920s when the government proposed building roads into previously inaccessible areas in the wilderness of northern Minnesota. In 1926, the conflict was settled when the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture allowed two major roads to be built and created three wilderness areas within the Superior National Forest, later designating the entire area as the Superior Roadless Primitive Area in 1938. Olson is best known, however, as one of the leading activists in the campaign to preserve the Quetico-Superior canoe country in northern Minnesota and western Ontario.

The wilderness area on the U.S.-Canada border had been a significant reason why the Olsons had moved to nearby Ely in the 1930s. In working to preserve the wilderness, Olson was protecting the landscape that had been his muse and the driving force behind his writing. He thought of entering the boundary waters as stepping back in time, writing: “When I entered the vastness of the Quetico-Superior I would become a part of all that [history.] It would be like lifting the curtain on another world. No longer would I belong to the twentieth century. I would be a voyageur of the seventeenth, a man from Trois Riviere or Montreal. I would see the country through his eyes.” The rampant logging and the construction of new roads and dams in the boundary

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waters spoiled the untrammeled wilderness that was Olson’s refuge and inspiration and spurred him to activism.\(^{28}\)

In the 1930s, Olson joined President Franklin Roosevelt’s Quetico-Superior Council, which was dedicated to protecting the Northwoods along the U.S.-Canada border. Through this group, Olson formed strong relationships with a group of outdoorsmen and conservationists that would become the leading force in wilderness-protection advocacy in Minnesota. Because Olson was intimately familiar with northern Minnesota and had spent a great deal of time traveling the boundary waters wilderness, he was invited to testify at a hearing for the International Joint Commission. His forty-five-minute testimony—over four times the amount given to others—was the beginning of his public lobbying efforts and established him as an articulate and forceful advocate.\(^{29}\)

Olson was particularly consequential in the campaign to ban airplanes and motorboats from the boundary waters. He felt deeply that people who reached remote lakes by plane were missing a crucial aspect of life in the wilderness: hard work. According to historian Mark Harvey, “Olson also associated the pleasures of the boundary waters with the work required to survive there, with the toil and energy required to hoist a heavy pack, brave the elements, and accept nature’s demands on body and mind.” The convenience of an airplane or motorboat was antithetical to the nature of the boundary waters and its ability to draw visitors back to an earlier time, which Olson deeply prized. He served as the Izaak Walton League’s chief spokesperson during lobbying efforts to ban motorboats and planes, forging political connections that ultimately yielded heavy restrictions on motor use in the boundary waters wilderness.\(^{30}\)

To Olson and his fellow conservationists, legislative protection was the only way to ensure that the boundary waters remained a wilderness free of human development or industrial influence. The Wilderness Society in Washington, D.C., and the Friends of the Wilderness in Minnesota led the legislative effort. Olson joined the Wilderness Society in 1935 and became part of its governing council in 1956, eventually being named its president in 1968. He was an influential lobbyist in the society’s effort to include the boundary waters in the Wilderness Act of 1964—a bill that established a national wilderness protection system—and to pass that bill in congress. Olson also served as a counselor and editor to his close colleague Howard Zahniser, who was the Society’s executive secretary from 1945-1964 and largely wrote the 1964 legislation. Olson reviewed drafts with his well-honed writer’s eye, questioning word choices to ensure that the document was as strong as possible. In collaboration with these colleagues, Olson succeeded in limiting new construction in the boundary waters and closing the area to logging. These restrictions made the boundary waters the best protected wilderness area in the country.\(^{31}\)

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\(^{30}\) Harvey, “Sound Politics,” 130-145.

Olson also provided political support for the cause, writing countless letters to fellow activists and politicians from his typewriter in the Writing Shack, as well as lobbying in person during his semi-frequent trips to Washington, D.C. His colleagues in the Northwoods, including forester and ecologist Bud Heinselman, called on Olson to forge connections with political heavy hitters and build support for the Wilderness Act. Olson corresponded regularly with Senator Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota, who became the bill’s champion as it moved through Congress. When President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wilderness Act in 1964, Olson was on hand to witness the establishment of the national wilderness-preservation system that he had ardently worked for. In 1978, President Jimmy Carter signed into law full wilderness status for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, more than fifty years after Sigurd Olson’s first efforts to protect it.32

Olson’s conservation work also extended beyond the Boundary Waters. He recommended nearly 80 million acres of land in Alaska for protection, which would later become law under the Alaska National Interest Lands and Conservation Act of 1980. Olson was also a member of the National Park Service’s Natural Sciences Advisory Committee, which influenced research within the parks, and served as the president of the National Parks Association. Back home, Olson named Minnesota’s Voyageurs National Park, which protected additional land west of the Boundary Waters.33

The Signing Wilderness
In the midst of his conservation work, Olson continued to coalesce his ideas into essays. In the winter of 1953, his daughter-in-law Yvonne came to live with the Olsons for a month. Olson and Yvonne became avid companions and had lively conversations on books, poems, and the human condition. After reading some of his articles, Yvonne encouraged Olson to compile his essays into a book. He quietly began writing a manuscript later that year consisting of rewritten essays from the past as well as several new pieces. Yvonne returned in May 1954 to edit and type fresh copies of his essays, and by June, a portion of the manuscript was ready to submit to publishers.34

Olson found a new agent, Marie Rodell, to help publish his book. Rodell was well connected among science and nature writers; she also represented Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring*. Rodell was concerned that Olson’s essay style would not be a popular seller and pushed his travel stories about nature rather than his lyrical essays on philosophy and feeling. Olson dug in his heels and refused to write another “adventure story.” Based on his travels and speaking engagements, he was convinced that there was a market for his subject and style. Olson’s book was rejected by at least three publishers, but this trajectory changed with a chance meeting with noted publisher Alfred A. Knopf at a meeting of the National Parks Association. Knopf was impressed by

Olson’s keynote address and wrote him to ask “if you are not going to have a book for us one of these days?” Rodell submitted Olson’s manuscript and Knopf responded, “I don’t know how much success we will have with such a book, but I am happy to have it on our list.” Publishing negotiations included a change in title, writing a handful of additional essays, regrouping the stories, and accommodating Olson’s request to use Francis Lee Jaques as the book’s illustrator. The final draft contained thirty-four essays. For a title, Olson looked to music as a metaphor for his experience with wilderness, finally settling on *The Singing Wilderness*.35

The book describes the author’s experience of nature and wilderness through vivid descriptions of place, flora, and fauna. While highly personal, it was also meant to engage readers in their own experience of wilderness, past or future. The introduction concludes with the following passage: “In the chapters that follow I tell of my experiences in the north, but far more important than the places I have seen or what I have done or thought about is the possibility of hearing the singing wilderness and catching perhaps its real meaning. You may not hear it exactly as I did, but somewhere along the trails I have followed, you too may know the glory.”36

*The Singing Wilderness* was published on April 16, 1956, and was a near-instant success, landing on the *New York Times* bestseller list five weeks later. National reviews were thoughtful and positive. The American Library Association said the book made “a signal contribution to the literary world” and included it in its annual list of notable books. Through its many reprints, it has sold over 70,000 copies in hardcover alone. At long last, Olson’s vision of himself as a professional author had come to be.37

*Listening Point*

Olson had long wished for a small cabin in which he could retreat from his frenetic life and commune with his beloved wilderness. In late 1955, he had finally saved enough money to purchase twenty-six acres of lakefront property on nearby Burntside Lake. Once the deal closed, he disassembled an old hewn-log cabin and rebuilt it on the site. It was modified with a native-stone fireplace and chimney and additional windows. The cabin’s name, Listening Point, was inspired by Olson’s daughter-in-law, Yvonne. She and her husband, Olson’s son Robert had lived in Benghazi, Libya, while serving with the U.S. Foreign Service. Their station had been referred to as a listening post in the diplomatic community, a place where people could be in touch with broader events in northern Africa. Olson thought of his cabin as a listening post for the wilderness, and he named his cabin, its site, and his next book Listening Point. The simple cabin remained a refuge for Olson for the remainder of his life, a place where he could escape his obligations—and even writing—for periods of time.38

With success under his wings, Olson wrote with more ease and his second book came shortly on the heels of his first. *Listening Point*, published in 1958, was inspired by his time at his cabin on Burntside Lake. Like *The

38 Anderson, “Listening Point”; Backes, “Timeline of Events in the Life of Sigurd F. Olson”; Listening Point was listed in the National Register in 2007.
**Singing Wilderness, Listening Point** was a collection of essays. In the first chapter, Olson wrote: “I named this place Listening Point because only when one comes to listen, only when one is aware and still, can things be seen and heard. Everyone has a listening point somewhere. It does not have to be in the north or close to the wilderness, but some place of quiet where the universe can be contemplated with awe.” Each of the twenty-eight essays was connected in some way to this site. The new book was met with both positive and mixed reviews, but was enthusiastically embraced by readers of *The Singing Wilderness*. It sold nearly 8,000 copies in the first two months. His drive to write, and his unhappiness when not writing, led him to write and publish seven more books during his life: *The Lonely Land* (1961), *Runes of the North* (1963), *Open Horizons* (1969), *The Hidden Forest* (1969), *Wilderness Days* (1972), *Reflections from the North Country* (1976), and *Of Time and Place* (1982). These books, along with most of Olson’s published articles, were written from his desk in the Writing Shack.39

**The Rewards**

Through the later part of his life, Olson was bestowed with many awards and recognitions, including the prestigious John Burroughs Medal in 1974. Many other honors were related to his work as a conservation advocate, including the highest honors offered by the Sierra Club, the National Wildlife Federation, and the Izaak Walton League for his leadership. Olson’s alma mater, Northland College, also created the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute in his honor. Olson’s writing became arguably his most important legacy. His son Robert wrote: “It was his nine books and hundreds of speeches and articles that had kept his memory alive and touched the heart of the matter.”40

In an introduction to a volume of Olson’s collected works released shortly after his death, Jim Klobuchar, a noted Minnesota journalist and travel guide, summarized Olson’s emerging literary legacy: “Sig was a writer whose voice was fused with his language in a symbiosis that gave an unforgettable vitality and yearning to his message. It was a voice that seemed to resonate the soul of the wilderness and to distill its sounds. It was deep and strong and wistful.”41

Klobuchar also connected Olson’s impactful and poignant writing to his success as a conservation activist. He wrote, “Sigurd Olson didn’t necessarily originate those thoughts,” speaking of his dedication to wilderness preservation and the importance of spending time in nature, but because he wrote movingly of them and because he expressed the feelings that growing numbers of people needed to see expressed, he became one of the leaders of the movement to preserve a good earth, both as a writer and warrior. And it was an idea that eventually reached every person in the country until now it has forced its way into the political debate everywhere in America and around the world. And Sigurd Olson was the embodiment of that idea.”42

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39 Sigurd F. Olson, *Listening Point* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), introduction; Backes, “Timeline of Events in the Life of Sigurd F. Olson.”
40 Anderson, “Listening Point.”
Keeping busy well into his seventies, Olson slowed down after a successful 1979 surgery for colon cancer. Three years later on January 13, 1982, Olson headed out for a snowshoe hike from his Writing Shack and died of a heart attack. The last thing he typed on his typewriter is “A New Adventure is coming up / and I’m sure it will be / A good one.”

After Sigurd’s death in 1982, Elizabeth continued to live in the family’s house until the mid-1990s. The property was then sold to longtime family friends Charles and Martha Wick. The Wicks took special care of these legacy properties, which were conveyed with many of the original furnishings. Cognizant of their historical importance, the Writing Shack and its contents left by Olson remained virtually untouched.

In 2014, the Wicks sold the house, Writing Shack, and Listening Point to the Listening Point Foundation, Inc., a non-profit established to preserve Olson’s legacy. Again, the furnishings were conveyed with the properties and are now on display. The Writing Shack stands virtually the same as it did on the day Olson died, and includes personal items such as books, maps, walking sticks, photographs, and smoking pipes.

Significance of Sigurd F. Olson and His Writing Shack

The Sigurd Olson Writing Shack is eligible for the National Register under Criterion B in the areas of Conservation and Literature. The NRHP nomination for Olson’s lakeside cabin, Listening Point, found Olson to be a historically significant person, noting that he “is nationally important for the wide range, national scope, and success of his many activities devoted to wilderness conservation . . . [and as] an important nature writer and interpretive naturalist.”

While Listening Point was Olson’s “touchstone of his intellectual and spiritual growth and existence,” many sources point to Olson’s Ely home and Writing Shack as the site most significantly associated with his professional life. Olson’s son Robert helps distinguish the practical differences between the two properties: “It was here [Listening Point] that he came for escape and renewal. It was here that he crystalized thoughts about life, about wilderness, and about the sacred and the profane.” In an introduction to a collection of his father’s work, Robert clarifies that “he never wrote there [Listening Point]. His typewriter and tools remained at home in the Writing Shack in the corner of the yard.” After the Writing Shack was built in 1937, it became Olson’s primary writing studio; all nine of his books and many of his influential articles were written there. Correspondence relating to his work in wilderness conservation was also received and returned from his Royal typewriter in the Writing Shack.

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43 Backes, “Timeline of Events in the Life of Sigurd F. Olson.”
44 Anderson, “Listening Point.”
45 Anderson, “Listening Point.”
46 Anderson, “Listening Point.”
The Writing Shack has undergone minimal alterations since Olson’s death in 1982. It remains virtually unchanged and possesses strong integrity of location, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. The brick chimney for the stove was removed at an unknown date, perhaps within Olson’s lifetime. The shingles have been recently replaced. The integrity of the setting is slightly diminished by the changes made to the adjacent house, although the essential character of the setting and landscape, is intact. The stone wall constructed by Olson remains on the property’s south and east borders. A bluestone path between the Writing Shack and the house, built during the Olson period, is also extant.

In contrast to the Writing Shack, the Olsons’ home underwent substantial alteration after 1982 and is not eligible for the National Register due to poor historic integrity. It is excluded from this nomination’s boundary although its existence is important for the Writing Shack’s historic setting.

Sigurd Olson’s Writing Shack is where he completed nearly all of his significant literary and conservation works. It retains a high level of integrity. As such, the property is nationally significant under Criterion B in the areas of Conservation and Literature. The period of significance begins in 1937, with the conversion of the Shack into a writing studio. It ends in 1982, when Olson died shortly after writing his last note on his typewriter. This time frame encompasses the writing and publication of all nine of his books and the majority of his articles and his most influential conservation activism.

Properties whose period of significance ends less than fifty years ago must be of exceptional importance. The Writing Shack is closely tied to Olson’s productive literary and conservation work. His work was of exceptional importance at the national level, inspiring a generation of readers to appreciate the wilderness through his lyrical prose and successful efforts to preserve and designate wilderness areas for posterity. The majority of this work was conducted in the Writing Shack, giving the property exceptional importance and meeting Criteria Consideration G.
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Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack
106 East Wilson Street
Ely, St. Louis County, Minnesota
Coordinates: 47.89528°, -91.865127°
Sigurd F. Olson Writing Shack
Name of Property
St. Louis County, Minnesota
County and State
Name of multiple listing (if applicable)
National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Additional Documentation Page 4

**Photo A**
Sigurd Olson at work in the Writing Shack, undated, from the Listening Point Foundation

**Photo B**
Sigurd Olson at work in the Writing Shack, undated, from the Listening Point Foundation