



dennis  
**anderson**

**STAR TRIBUNE EXCLUSIVE** ♣ ONLY IN YOUR SUNDAY PAPER

# LIKE A FOX

TROUT LAKE, ONTARIO

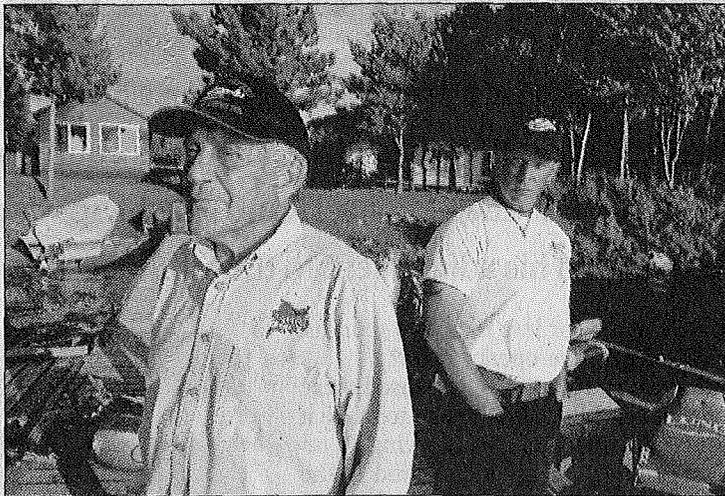
**T**he radically different Bob Lessard, a Minnesota senator for 26 years, sat at a table one morning last week in the Canadian wilderness cabin he calls home in summer, and reflected on the broad arc of a life he couldn't — as a kid growing up in International Falls — imagine. ¶ No one could. ¶ Known as “The Old Trapper,” Lessard has been married twice, divorced twice and buried two children. A DFLer, he was — counterintuitively, perhaps — loved in the Legislature by the NRA, and (really counterintuitively) tapped by George W. Bush to introduce him while campaigning in Duluth in 2000. Lessard also twice successfully championed amendments to the state constitution, perhaps a Minnesota record. ¶ Sometimes reviled by liberal metro legislators, Lessard is a skilled outdoorsman and longtime fishing-camp operator who quite literally knows how to skin a cat many different ways. ¶ Often underestimated, in the manner of a sly fox, he learned early the value of political leverage.

“In high school, I skipped one day of school a week in spring to fish,” he said. “One day, I was on Rainy Lake and had one of our cheerleaders in my boat. We arrived at a favorite fishing spot, and there, fishing, were the superintendent and principal. They had been on me about skipping school, but they were there, too, skipping themselves. I kept my mouth shut, and they never said a word to me after that about skipping. I had ‘em.”

Retired Vikings coach Bud Grant has been a hunting and fishing partner of Lessard's since the 1960s.

“He's different, I'll say that,” Grant said. “But he's totally honest. As a legislator, he didn't steal and he never lied. He's goofy, perhaps. But if you were a constituent of his and wanted to talk, he'd give you his total attention. His integrity is beyond question.”

Famous for his walleye-fry fundraisers, Lessard some years ago



Retired state Sen. Bob Lessard of International Falls at his Ontario fishing camp, where he has escaped to, in summers, for more than three decades. His son Brett, 31, guides at the wilderness camp.

was serving fish to 200 or more supporters in Bloomington when he saw a pretty woman across the room.

Single at the time, the senator walked over to introduce himself.

“Hi, I'm Bob Lessard, thanks for coming,” he said. “And who are you?”

The woman sighed, and said, “Bob, I'm your ex-wife.”

“I hadn't seen her in a while, and guess I didn't recognize her,” Lessard said.

At 78, Lessard still is running the small, fly-in fishing camp on this Ontario lake (also known as Otukamamoan Lake) as an outpost to Sunny Beach, a resort he owns on Rainy Lake, on the Minnesota-Ontario border.

Business for him is tough this summer, as it is for most northern camp operators. So last week,

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▶ ANDERSON FROM C1

Lessard and his son, Brett, 31, who began guiding anglers when he was 11, were together alone in the wilderness, save for Brett's young daughter, Isabelle, who was visiting.

**A fisherman first**

Forever comfortable at the tiller of a big outboard, Lessard angled a 20-foot aluminum fishing boat across an expanse of blue water that seemed to stretch forever.

Then he cut the engine and dropped a jig overboard, looking for walleyes.

"I graduated from high school in '49, went in the Army in '50 and got out in '54," he said. Not long afterward, he bought his first resort, Spawn Inlet, on Rainy Lake.

"The camp owner could have sold it to another guy for more money, but he had promised to sell it to me for \$8,500, and he did," Lessard said. "That's where I first learned the value of a handshake."

Lessard later would manage Great Bear Lodge on Great Bear Lake, in the Canadian Arctic. He and his first wife had two children: Wendy, who "couldn't beat alcoholism," Lessard said, and eventually committed suicide; and a boy, Shawn, who was killed at age 5 while riding his bike.

Lessard and his wife were divorced then, and Lessard had driven to her home to pick up the boy. When Shawn saw his dad, he excitedly rode into the street and was struck there by a vehicle, mere feet from Lessard.

Lessard still shakes uncontrollably, and cries, when he recalls the accident.

"It was later, in 1974, that I first ran for office," he said. "I ran against [the late Minnesota House Speaker] Irv Anderson, who at the time was majority leader of the House. The federal government was trying to put the Bigfork River into the Wild and Scenic Rivers program, and I opposed it. I didn't want to run for office. But when I found out Irv favored the deal, I ran. I lost by 17 votes."

In 1976, Lessard ran for the Senate, was elected, and never was defeated again. His last term, he was elected as an independent, leaving the DFL, which for him had grown too liberal.

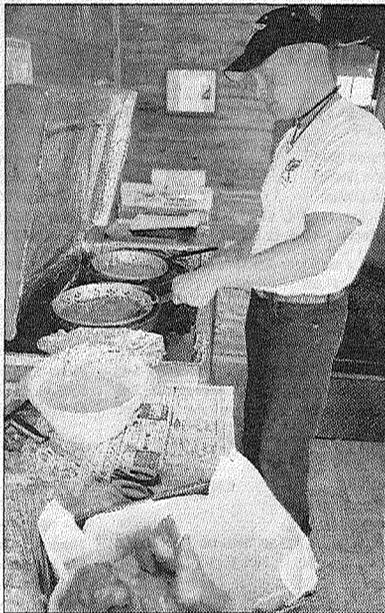
His campaigning style was unique.

"I'd ride in a lot of parades in summer," he said. "I had a friend with a bucket truck — you know, the type with a bucket on the end of a long boom, like electricians use to fix street lamps."

"I'd get into the bucket with a rod and reel, and he'd lift me straight up. That's where I'd ride the length of the parade, casting my line one di-



A De Havilland Beaver, the workhorse floatplane of the north country, sat at the dock of the fishing camp owned by retired state Sen. Bob Lessard of International Falls. The camp is about a 20-minute flight from Fort Frances, Ontario.



Brett Lessard fried fish in deep fryers on a porch of their lodge. The deep fryers are encased in a wooden cabinet and connected, outside, to an LP tank.

rection, then another. A sign on the truck said, 'Bob Lessard for Senate.'

As he spoke, walleyes fairly hopped into Lessard's boat — as, fishing a short distance away, lake trout did for Brett, the middle child from Lessard's second marriage.

Sean, 28, is a Minneapolis police officer. Kelly, a daughter, 34, is the public relations manager for the Minnesota Zoo.

Brett, meanwhile, is an engaging, strapping fellow with a big smile who is just now putting his life back on track after serving about three years in prison for accidentally shooting and killing a young woman friend.

That story, too, began here, in the

wilderness.

The year was 2002. Brett and two friends had spent a long day portaging big fishing boats into his dad's camp before returning to Grand Rapids, where Brett lived.

At home, he went to bed and was later awakened by the college-age woman, who phoned, saying she wanted to stop by to take photographs of him for a class.

The photos were to be of Brett with a handgun he owned. As she pointed the camera, Brett posed, switching the gun from one hand to the other. The gun, which Brett didn't know was loaded, accidentally discharged.

He was convicted of second-degree manslaughter, serving nearly a year in St. Cloud and the rest of his sentence in Faribault.

Still haunted by the accident, Brett, who now attends college, said, "I didn't talk to anyone in prison. I kept to myself."

#### Amending the constitution

"The thing that kept me going during my 26 years in the Senate was protecting the rights of people who made Minnesota the state it is," Lessard said. "The federal government, and sometimes the state, too often come in and say, 'We know best.' But hunters and fishermen have been stewards of the environment forever, and protecting their rights is important."

In 1998, 77 percent of Minnesota voters approved a constitutional amendment guaranteeing them the right to hunt, fish and trap.

Lessard was among those fundamentally responsible for placing the amendment on the ballot.

"I knew Minnesotans would ap-



At retired state Sen. Bob Lessard's fishing camp, nearly all fish caught are released. But these lake trout were destined for the table at a meal hosted by Lessard and his son, Brett, for a longtime friend and floatplane pilot, who had dropped in for supper.

prove it, if given the chance," he said.

He similarly believed Minnesotans last fall would approve a constitutional amendment he first offered about 10 years ago to dedicate a portion of the state sales tax to conservation.

"They did," he said. "This is still Minnesota. Fishing, hunting and conservation is what we do."

Longtime DFL Senate Majority Leader Roger Moe, now retired, was often, but not always, a political ally of Lessard's.

"Bob can never finish a sentence," Moe said. "So in the Legislature at times he might have sounded like he wasn't articulating his position very well. But he was very focused on his district, and on hunting and fishing. The record shows he was successful.

"He was sly like a fox."