John Muir's Wisconsin days

The naturalist's Wisconsin roots anchored his later actions.

Dave Leshuk

If you stood on the north shore of Fountain Lake in Marquette County on a summer day in 1849, you would have likely seen an 11-year-old boy hopping barefoot through a boggy, green, lake meadow. He'd probably shout to his brother in a Scottish brogue now and then, having discovered a snapping turtle or a frog. Fascinated, he'd peer into and poke at the fresh Wisconsin landscape.

Springtime a couple years later would find him wrestling the head-high handles of a large moldboard plow behind a team of oxen. He'd spend the next decade of his life "getting the grain from the ground" by the kind of work that in the end either strengthens or cripples. Still, he managed to teach himself science, mathematics, mechanics, and he read widely in his spare time.

The boy grew strong and left for a bigger world. He became a farmer, "engineer," botanist, geologist, adventurer, writer and philosopher. He advised and debated the leaders of his country. He made conservation a popular cause in the United States and changed the way people around the world think about the natural environment.

John Muir at Yosemite. Hard, physical labor as a Wisconsin youth toughened Muir for later western adventures.
Photo courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin (from *John of the Mountains*, Linnie Marsh Wolfe, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1938)

The boy, of course, was John Muir, and throughout his life he acted on his beliefs. Today, 150 years after his birth on April 21, 1838, part of his Fountain Lake boyhood home is a park and hundreds of other "glorious wildernesses" are protected from development.

Muir landed in Wisconsin in 1849 with his father, Daniel Muir, his older sister, Sarah, and his younger brother, David. This first contingent of the Muir family settled on virgin land, which they called Fountain Lake Farm, while John Muir's mother, Anne Gilrye Muir, and remaining four siblings waited in their native Dunbar, Scotland for word that the Wisconsin home was ready for them.

Pioneer Wisconsin lit a fire of passion for wild things in Muir. The diverse landscape of Fountain Lake Farm held oak woods, prairie, wetland and glacial lake waters. Muir wrote about the experience in *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, an autobiographical account of his life in Scotland and Wisconsin. "This sudden plash into pure wilderness — baptism in Nature's warm heart — how utterly happy it made us!" Muir writes. "Nature streaming into us, wooingly teaching her wonderful glowing lessons, so unlike the dismal grammar ashes and cinders so long thrashed into us. Here without knowing it we were still at school, every wild lesson a love lesson, not whipped but charmed into us. Oh, that glorious Wisconsin wilderness!"

The whipping Muir alludes to was done with a wooden switch, mostly by his father, a strict Calvinist who

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In Muir's own hands, the religious fanaticism of his father changed into a new way of viewing the natural world. Muir became a pioneer of the idea that wilderness should exist for the value of its existence alone, independent of any worth people might place on it for their own satisfaction.

On the family farms, Muir was relatively isolated from the world of cities and nations. He rarely ventured outside a 15-mile radius around Fountain Lake Farm and was only able to attend school for two months between the ages of 11 and 22. Though he managed to be well-read, it was a constant struggle for him to find enough good books and, once found, to get them past his father, who believed that the only book a person needed was the Bible.

But Muir had an incredible talent for inventing that would open the door for him to the University of Wisconsin and, eventually, to the larger world. When Muir was 15 or 16 years old, he began to study algebra and later continued with trigonometry and geometry. He also started to invent with simple tools — with a vise, some files and chisels, a hammer and other items he found. The machines he built from wood and scrap steel — a self-setting sawmill, clocks and thermometers — are famous today, partially because they were made by a teen-ager with no technical or scientific training, but also because of the curious traits he gave them. One of his clocks was shaped like a scythe to represent the scythe of "Father Time." Another clock was designed to be read by workers in the fields and had hands 14

The Fountain Lake home in Marquette County. John Muir lived here from 1849 until 1856. The family homestead was sold to Muir's sister, Sarah, and her husband-to-be, David Galloway. This 1860s photo shows the young Galloway family. The home burned to the ground in the early 20th century. Photo from the Holt-Atherton Center for Western Studies, University of the Pacific, © 1984 Muir-Hanna Trust

followed his religious convictions to often illogical extremes. "The old Scotch fashion of whipping for every act of disobedience or of simple, playful forgetfulness was still kept up in the wilderness, and of course many of those whippings fell upon me." By the time Muir was 11, he had learned most all of the New and Old Testaments "by heart and sore flesh," and though Muir rejected the religious fanaticism of his father, his spiritual roots would profoundly influence his thinking and writing in later years. He would take issue with the Christian concept of dominion over natural resources. In fact, he adopted a kind of pantheism, seeing the spirit in everything: plants, animals, water and soil.

Harsh also was the work of building a farm from scratch on the untilled and tree-studded savanna. "Men and boys, and in those days even women and girls, were cut down while cutting the wheat. The fat folk grew lean and the lean leaner, while the rosy cheeks brought from Scotland and other cool countries across the sea faded to yellow like the wheat. We were all made slaves through the vice of over-industry. . . We were called in the morning at four o'clock and seldom got to bed before nine, making a broiling, seething day seventeen hours long loaded with heavy work, while I was only a small and stunted boy."

In Wisconsin, Muir got "grain from the ground" and love lessons from nature.

Perhaps the best known example of the hardships Muir suffered was the 90-foot well Muir's father directed him to chisel through fine-grained sandstone over an entire summer.

Despite such difficulties, Muir biographers, including Linnie Marsh Wolfe and Wisconsin's own Millie Cooley, have written that his Wisconsin experience was an important key to his future. The hard labor forced on his body made him strong enough for his later adventures. The self-discipline he developed in working and in his coveted 1 a.m. study sessions made him the master of his body and his mind. So much an independent learner was he that after leaving the University of Wisconsin at Madison without receiving a degree, he educated himself in his own "University of the Wilderness." He later received honorary degrees from the universities of Wisconsin, California, Harvard and Yale.

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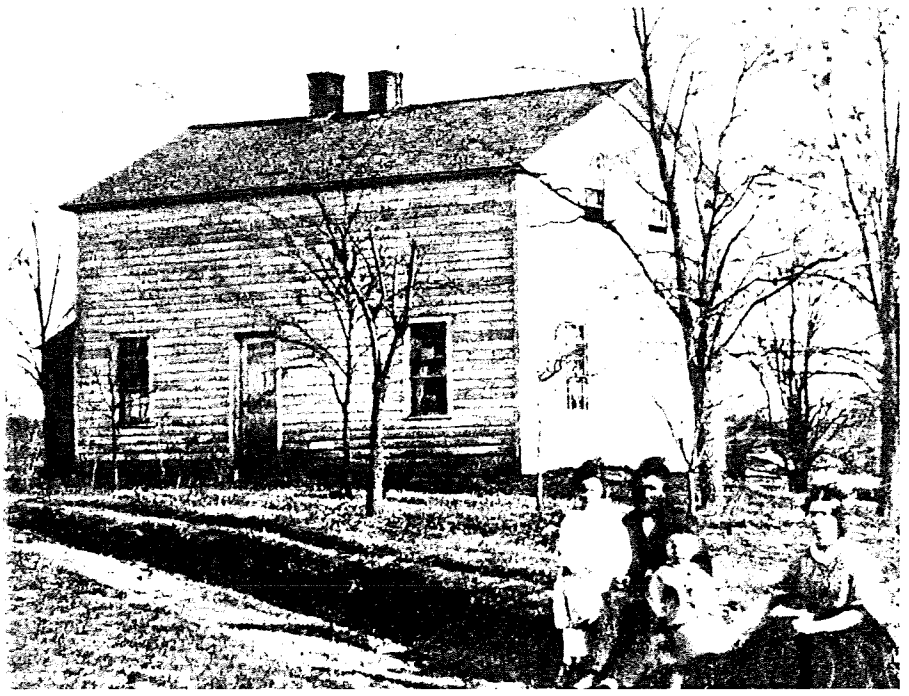


The Fountain Lake home in Marquette County. John Muir lived here from 1849 until 1856. The family homestead was sold to Muir's sister, Sarah, and her husband-to-be, David Galloway. This 1860s photo shows the young Galloway family. The home burned to the ground in the early 20th century. Photo from the Holt-Atherton Center for Western Studies, University of the Pacific, © 1984 Muir-Hanna Trust

feet long. A thermometer clearly showed the difference in temperature created by a person standing four or five feet away. At the urging of a neighbor, Muir took his "early rising machine" — a combination bunk and clock that would dump its occupant out of bed at a pre-set time — to the 1860 State Fair in Madison. The *Wisconsin State Journal* reported that his inventions were a star attraction. Over the next several years, he worked stints as a mechanical and industrial "engineer" in Prairie du Chien, Indianapolis and Canada.

While in Madison with his inventions, Muir enviously eyed students at the University of Wisconsin.

"I thought that if I could join them it would be the greatest joy of life. I

Eyes to the future, Muir was the driving force behind Sequoia and Yosemite national parks. Photo courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin (cabinet view by C.E. Watkins Art Gallery, San Francisco)

was desperately hungry and thirsty for knowledge and willing to do anything to get it." Scraping together what money he could from odd jobs, he enrolled and studied chemistry, math, physics, Greek, Latin, botany and geology. This wasn't a "regular course of studies" and didn't lead to a degree. After four years, Muir "wandered away on a glorious botanical and geological excursion" that would last the rest of his life. He wrote, "I was only leaving one university for another, the University of Wisconsin for the University of the Wilderness."

As Muir began his studies at the University of Wisconsin, the football

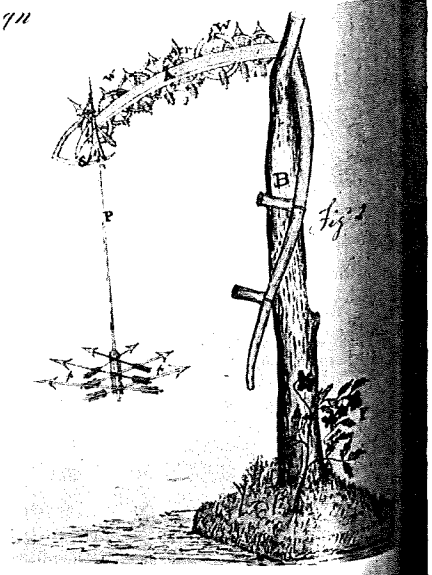
The Muir family moved four miles away to Hickory Hill farm in 1856. A year later they built a frame house on a long, high slope with a commanding view of the countryside.
Photo from the Holt-Atherton Center for Western Studies, University of the Pacific, © 1984 Muir-Hanna Tr

stadium in Madison now called Camp Randall earned its name as the site of a Civil War military camp. Muir's pacifist, religious upbringing naturally found him opposed to war. But, his letters show his was more than a knee-jerk reaction. He mourned for friends who went off to face "the well-directed grape shot, the exploded mine rending hundreds limb from limb in a moment, the dreadful shell thrown precisely into the thickest crowd. . ." In his second spring at the university, Muir saw Camp Randall filled with hundreds of sick and dying Union soldiers and Confederate prisoners shipped back from the battlefields. Later, Muir called war "the farthest-reaching and most infernal of all civilized calamities." When Muir's number was not called up in the early drafts, he left Wisconsin to wander in Canada.

Though Muir's natural inclination to invent and study was exceptional, he was like most of us when it came to writing and politicking. Writing was tedious and difficult for him. He said, "I find this literary business very irksome, yet I will try to learn it." Politics, too, he found distasteful.

"John Muir detested politics as much as he detested war," writes Wolfe. "In it he saw self-interest obstructing every effort toward the common good. 'Political Quag' he named the whole dark and treacherous business carried on in the name of government." Fortunately, Muir believed the struggle for conservation was a battle between right and wrong, and he couldn't ignore it. Despite its drawbacks, the process brought Muir much personal happiness. He was able to make friends out of potential enemies like Edward Harriman, a railroad magnate who backed Muir's wilderness preservation efforts. Other "political" friends included President Theodore Roosevelt and Robert Underwood Johnson, an editor of the then-prominent *Century* magazine and a lobbyist for conservation.

When Muir was a teen-ager, he began to invent sophisticated machines with simple materials and tools. One of his famous creations is this clock, shaped to represent the scythe of Father Time.
Photo courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin

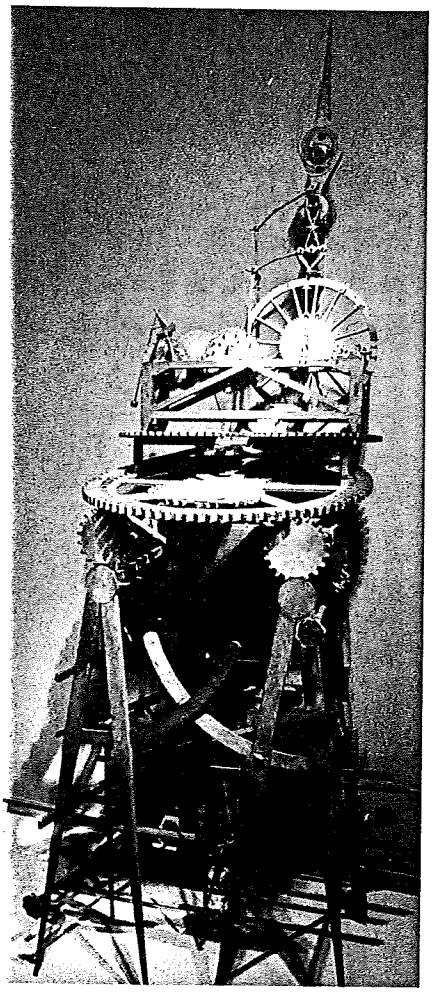


As a founder and first president of the Sierra Club, Muir is also considered a founding father of the modern conservation movement. As pointed out by Steven Fox in *The American Conservation Movement, John Muir and his Legacy,* Muir began the pattern of vested development interest being opposed by committed, zealous "amateurs," people who wished to protect wilderness for its own intrinsic value and who had no economic stake in its preservation, nor special training in advocacy. Muir's legacy is best embodied by the organization he helped launch, which today is still primarily volunteer run and led.

Muir, of course, was the driving force behind the creation of Yosemite and Sequoia national parks. He also had a direct hand in the establishment of Mount Rainier, Petrified Forest, and Grand Canyon national parks. It was after meetings with Muir at Yosemite that President Theodore Roosevelt embarked on a course of action that established 148-million acres of national forest, five national parks, and 23 national monuments during his term of office. Muir also worked as a publicist for these efforts, writing articles for many major magazines and newspapers as well as five books — most of which remain in print.

A legacy of mercy for things wild, natural and free.

But Muir's Wisconsin days are often considered the beginning of the national park system, because a portion of wet, sedge meadow on Fountain Lake Farm was the first piece of wilderness he tried to preserve. In an 1896 speech to a meeting of the Sierra Club, Muir said, "The preservation of specimen sections of natural flora — bits of pure wilderness — was a fond, favorite notion of mine long before I heard of national parks. . . On the north side of [Fountain] lake, just below our house, there



Muir built machines from wood and scrap steel — a self-setting sawmill, clocks, thermometers. Many of his works — like this clock/writing desk — had curious traits.
Photo by Deb Grossfield, reprinted with permission of the Madison Art Center.

was a Carex meadow full of charming flowers — cypripediums, pogonias, calopogons, asters, goldenrods, etc. — and around the margin of the meadow many nooks rich in flowering ferns and heathworts. And when I was about to wander away on my long rambles I was sorry to leave that precious meadow unprotected; therefore, I said to my brother-in-law, who then owned it, 'Sell me the forty acres of lake meadow, and keep it fenced, and never allow cattle or hogs to break into it, and I will gladly pay you whatever you say. I want to keep it untrampled for the sake of its ferns and flowers; and even if I should never see it again, the beauty of its lilies and orchids is so pressed into my mind I shall always enjoy looking back at them in imagination, even across seas and continents, and perhaps after I am dead.' "

Another Wisconsin conservationist, Aldo Leopold, was aware in the 1940s of the significance of Muir's statement. In his *A Sand County Almanac* he described how "John Muir offered to buy from his brother [-in-law]. . . a sanctuary for the wildflowers that had gladdened his youth. His brother [-in-law] declined to part with the land, but he could not suppress the idea: 1865 still stands in Wisconsin history as the birth year of mercy for things natural, wild, and free."

Though Muir failed to preserve the land in his lifetime, Fountain Lake Farm has begun again to feel the caring touch of his hand in the last 30 years. The process began in 1957 when Marquette County acquired the first parcel of land adjoining Ennis (Fountain) Lake to form the John Muir Memorial Park. The county continued to acquire parcels of land until all the land immediately surrounding the lake was included. In 1985, the Sierra Club spearheaded a drive to acquire 27 acres north of the lake, and in 1986 a landscape architect and Muir researcher, Erik Brynildson, bought 17 acres on which his research concludes the original Muir homestead stood. He intends to eventually transfer control of his land to the National Park Service. The park service will become a caretaker of the entire site if the land is named a National Historic Site, sometime in 1989, according to plans. For now, approximately 180 acres on and around Muir's Fountain Lake Farm are under some sort of protection.

So if you wander in the area of Fountain Lake Farm this summer, you're likely to see a modern 11-year-old discovering snapping turtles and blue jays in this piece of preserved "glorious Wisconsin wilderness" that Muir traipsed as a boy. Those who visit, who learn, will become in some small ways what John Muir was. There they can feel "nature streaming into them, wooingly teaching her wonderful glowing lessons."