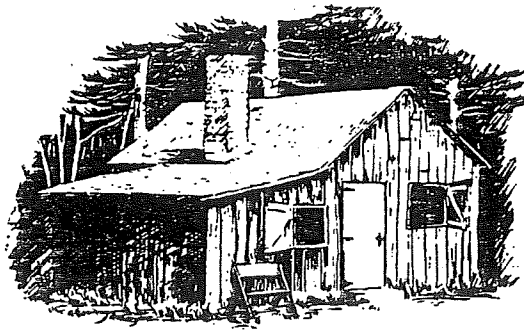


Leopold Recollections



By Phil Sander



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At daybreak I am the sole owner of all the acres I can walk over. It is not only boundaries that disappear, but also the thought of being bounded. Expanses unknown to deed or map are known to every dawn, and solitude, supposed no longer to exist in my county, extends on every hand as far as the dew can reach.

Sand County Almanac

Aldo Leopold

As a tribute to Aldo Leopold, during the 1987 Centennial Anniversary of his birth, may I take this opportunity to share events, anecdotes, and fond memories of a grand gentleman who was a respected educator, ecologist, out-doorsman, and friend. Looking back on the passing years our meetings and visits are still vivid in my memory. I know everyone has some personal memories of those who have touched their lives. Excerpts from my log have refreshed those informal talks, lectures, and conservation articles which I would like to recall in chronological sequence

I was fortunate to have known Leopold, and getting to know him was a pleasure. He had a certain magnetic attraction for those dedicated to increase their knowledge of the natural outdoors. His willingness to answer questions and discuss a subject made him a man to be admired.

His vast knowledge of the wonders of nature and land ethics gave a new meaning for the science of Ecology. He was a master with words which reflected in his presentations and writings.

My first knowledge of Leopold's work was in 1934 when reading his classic textbook "Game Management", a research study of American game populations. Later, I learned he accepted the chair of Game Management at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, the first such position to be established in the nation. Other essays and articles by Leopold that I read were, "Game and Wildlife Conservation", "Conservation on the Farm", and articles in the Wisconsin Conservation Bulletin. Leopold's thinking gave me and other sportsmen a new look at opportunities to cooperate in the conservation of game birds and animals as well as harvesting a yearly surplus population.

As a hunter and outdoor enthusiast it was of interest to learn more about two new introduced game birds, called the English ringneck pheasant and Hungarian partridge. Leopold wrote a number of articles on these new birds and method of establishing winter feeding programs.

In 1944 Leopold answered an inquiry regarding dates as to when pheasants were first introduced in Kenosha County and areas of bird concentrations. As a result of this information a local sportsmens club was formed, which led to a new activity of winter feeding game birds.

Some fifty metal and spike feeders were built. In addition a Spring program was launched by planting hedgerows and trees that promoted a good Farmer-Sportsmen relationship.

During the mid 40's, as a delegate from Kenosha County, I attended the Wisconsin Conservation Congress meeting in Madison at the Loraine Hotel. It was at this meeting that Leopold presented his paper on the serious condition of Wisconsin's northern deer herd. He stated that an irruptive deer population and over browsing during the winter months

was causing drastic deer starvation problems.

He compared Wisconsin's serious deer loss with his studies in the Kaibab Forest in Arizona where an exploding deer population, and lack of browse and predators caused disastrous effects in that state. Leopold suggested additional deer should be harvested in Wisconsin. Many sportsmen did not favor the taking of does; flared tempers and an I-don't-believe-it attitude was expressed by hunters, resort owners, and conservationists. One game biologist, William Feeney, was booed when he tried to tell sportsmen the seriousness of the overbrowsed northern deer yards.

Leopold suggested that a group of Congress members visit several wintering yards during the mid-winter. The following year a team of sportsmen, Wis. Conservation Department, and Federal Wildlife personnel gathered at Ladysmith in mid March to inspect the troubled yards. Three days were spent touring various counties with serious overbrowsing. The most devastating were the Brule and Flag yards. Browse was eaten by deer as high as I could reach, we witnessed many weak and dead deer. Food was sparse as indicated by the girdled trees.

Leopold strived to instill a new insight and understanding to sportsmen and conservationists of the need for biological management practices as a means to have a stable and healthy wildlife population.

As a result, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has a specialized staff of management biologists who monitor Wisconsin's game, fish, plants, forestry, and other environmental programs.

The Wisconsin Society for Ornithology held its annual meeting in the early 40's at the Madison campus. Leopold was chairman of the meeting. He and other birders presented papers and programs relating to ornithological studies. During the meeting Leopold invited the members to visit his Sand County Farm to view his restoration projects and do some bird watching.

In company with Walter Scott and Owen Gromme we cused-it to the

Farm with other members of the society. On arrival, as we walked toward the "shack", I overheard two people in the group discuss Leopold's presentation. One said, "Aldo used the word Ecology several times in his talk, what do you think the word means?" The other person thought for a while and said, "I would take it to simply mean, Man living in harmony with Nature". This conversation etched deeply in my memory, it was the first time that I too had heard the word used.

At the "shack" gathering were members from many parts of Wisconsin. We enjoyed a tour of the Farm, stopped to identify birds and wild plants and picnicked on the "shack" lawn. During our visit Gromme told me about an oak tree that Leopold featured in one of his essays. I asked if he would show me the tree stump location. We walked to the top of the ridge and found the cut stump near the old pioneer wagon road and took several photos.

The "shack" with primitive living quarters was a sort of Do-it-yourself style, unpainted, but the building had the charm of a mansion. I could picture the whole Leopold family pitching-in with the work, hauling firewood, planting trees, enjoying hunting, fishing, and all the tangible lessons portrayed by the changing landscape. But most of all, I could envision a happy family enjoying weekends to a commitment of being a part of Nature's outdoors.

At the annual 1941 convention of the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology it was proposed that a monument be erected as a memorial to the now extirpated passenger pigeon. I submitted several sketches and volunteered to design a plaque and stone monument which was to be placed at an appropriate location in the pigeon's flyway.

Owen Gromme sent me drawings of the pigeon which helped in preparing the plaque. A.W. Schorger, the foremost authority on the passenger pigeon in United States, wrote the legend that was incorporated in the final layout.

Walter Scott acted as the liaison member, constantly checking for a progress report; This kept the project moving, and he asked that I bring the completed sketches to Madison for a viewing. A meeting was arranged at the State Office building. On arrival I was to meet Scott in one of the conference rooms. While waiting, Aldo Leopold walked into the room. We introduced ourselves and I asked Leopold if he would like to see the monument sketches. In his senatorial voice he said, "Yes, I certainly would".

He took a keen look at the drawings and wording and said, "Excellent! Only one word should be corrected. The Wisconsin Society of Ornithology should read, The Wisconsin Society for Ornithology". I appreciated his observation and immediately changed the one word. Soon after Scott and Ed. Vanderwall, Wisconsin Conservation Department Director, and Ernie Swift entered the room and greeted Leopold and me. We then viewed the sketches of the plaque and monument. All agreed the design was appropriate. Later a committee selected a site on Sentinel Ridge overlooking the Mississippi River in Wyalusing State Park. In 1943 Leopold was appointed a Wisconsin Conservation Department Commissioner.

The annual convention of the Ornithology Society was held at Appleton, April 6, 1946. At this meeting Leopold delivered his paper entitled, "On a monument to the pigeon". On May 11, 1947 the Society unveiled its monument to the Passenger Pigeon at Wyalusing Park. Leopold was chairman of the program that made arrangements for several noted speakers. The speeches delivered at the dedication are assembled in the booklet "Silent Wings", by Walter Scott. Leopold was a charter member of the Society.

A 1946 summer vacation was spent near Okee, on the Wisconsin River, fishing, canoeing and exploring my favorite haunts in the Baraboo Hills and trails at Devils Lake Park. Here there are always interesting birds, plants, and wildlife to discover.

On a midweek morning I drove to Portage to tour the old historical

trading post buildings. Being near the Sand County Farm a visit there would complete my day. Driving along Highway 7, I found the Old River Road and the entrance to the "shack". Parking the car at the gate I walked along the trail and noticed that someone was sitting in front of the building. Sure enough, it was Professor Leopold smoking his favorite pipe and making notes. He was sitting on the old rustic bench that he had designed.

He greeted me and said, "Hello Phil! Glad to see you, sit down and have a cup of camp coffee". As we sat and talked we exchanged tobacco and both lit-up our pipes. We talked about pheasants and Hungarian partridge, prairie chicken and quail, deer and bear, and animal-bird behavior. I now wished I had a tape recorder to capture our conversation and his colorful observations.

We took a short hike to see his tree plantings, and he showed me the excellent growth made by the red pines. He spoke of land ethics, and said, "Wildlife is an important monitor of the environment". This visit was the highlight of my vacation and I often think of our visit on that summer afternoon.

In the anthology describing my contacts with Aldo Leopold, not forgotten was the Grand Lady, Mrs. Estella Leopold. It was always a pleasure to meet Estella Leopold with her friendly smile and welcome handshake. She attended many of the Wisconsin Ornithological meetings where we would have an opportunity to visit.

Our conversations often led to birding at the "shack", archery experiences, She and Aldo were both skilled at making bows and arrows. Sometimes I would ask for her recipe to cook wild game. She always had an interesting story to tell me, and people would gather around to listen.

One meeting I remember, she introduced me to her son, A. Starker Leopold who was associated with the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, University of California. He was a man with all the qualities of stature and voice of his father.

She liked to talk about the children, Starker, Luna, Nina, Carl, and Stella. She was so proud of their successful scientific ventures. Estella Leopold liked being surrounded by young people, always giving a helping hand with advice, counseling, and encouragement. Many students still remember her from their campus days.

Professors Aldo Leopold and Joseph J. Hickey were associates in the Department of Wildlife Ecology at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and were very close friends. The families often exchanged visits at their homes and outings at the "shack".

In 1942 Leopold was the best man at Hickey's wedding. Hickey's daughter, Susie and her husband, held their marriage ceremony on the lawn of the "shack", ^{Hickey} said that once on a sunny Sunday afternoon Aldo and Estella dropped in on the Hickeys, in Madison, for a visit. During the visit Aldo proceeded to read excerpts from his essay, "The Good Oak" which he had just finished.

The Good Oak chapter traces historical events as the saw cuts thorough the tree's yearly growth rings. Leopold was extremely lyrical with his prose and phrases that projected the scope of his environmental thinking. He found countless subjects such as trees, birds, animals, and plants that evolved into a comprehensive text emanating from studies at his beloved Sand County Farm, and other resource locations.

It was a sad day when I read on April 21, 1948 that Aldo Leopold had passed away. He died helping fight a brush fire that burned out of control on nearby Plummer's marsh. Many who knew Leopold offered their condolence with a prayer in memory of him whose philosophy will remain as a permanent source of inspiration.

He never saw the revitalized marsh, the growing pines and the little book that was the capstone of his career. His book has continued to be read by countless scholars and conservationists. Leopold's thinking and writing records the findings of his unique and gifted concept of

our fragile ecosystem.

In the summer of 1952 the Annual meeting of the Citizens Natural Resources Association convened at the Leopold "shack". Members and friends had an opportunity to tour the Sand County Farm and observe the recovery of a depleted land that Leopold had reclaimed. Here he and his family enjoyed many outings plus the opportunity to practice his conservation studies.

An afternoon program was highlited when Mrs. Estella Leopold recieved the Association's Silver Acorn Award, which was presented by William J.P. Aberg, Wisconsin Conservation Commissioner.

During the afternoon I spoke with Mrs. Leopold and asked her permission for a small piece of split log from the Good Oak tree. She gladly consented and I told her I planned to make some sort of a memorabilia item and she wished me good luck with my future project.

No thought was given as to how I would use the wood, but later I cut a piece to turn a gavel which I presented at the Annual 1953 meeting of the Association to President Alvin Throne. This meeting was held at Lake Delton. During the afternoon we toured Devils Lake State Park. The gavel is now kept at U.W. Stevens Point in the Leopold Museum display case.

In 1960 I decided to carve a series of shorebirds mounted on a wood base from the Good Oak. My first carving was given to Walter Scott. Others who were given a bird carving were; Owen Gromme, Joseph J. Hickey, Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters, and the last piece of wood to U.W. Stevens Point Museum.

A Christmas gift in 1950 was a copy of the lyrical "Sand County Almanac". It is one of the treasured books in my library. Occasionally I find a spare evening and read a few chapters of a book that has become the bible of the ecological movement.

Professor Joseph J. Hickey once said, "It was cruel to lose Leopold at the height of his literary power, but consoling to realize that his Sand County Almanac has made it possible for more than a million people to appreciate his thinking". Leopold's convictions and philosophy of wildlife and the land has given us an added understanding of our need for environmental harmony.

In 1978 Owen J. Gromme completed his oil painting entitled "Marshland Elegy". His canvas captured a group of sandhill crane dancing and trumpeting in the marshlands along the Wisconsin River. Gromme showed me on the painting where he included the famous Leopold "shack", at the left side of the painting. He said Leopold glassed this marsh many times in his teaching studies.

Gromme said, "In its creation I have tried to depict or say in paint on canvas what Aldo Leopold, the famous ecologist and environmentalist, so beautifully stated in words in his Marshland Elegy". The painting was commissioned by the L.H. Head Foundation.

Financial help to maintain the pristine spot along a river comes from the Head Foundation and others. In a restored cabin the Leopold Fellowship scholars live in the summer while they compile studies of the reserve's biota.

What began as an 80 acre worn-out sand farm has now changed. The enlarged property encompasses 1,300 acres and is named the Aldo Leopold Memorial Reserve. The "shack" and farm are listed on the National Register of Historic Sites and is protected under provisions of the Historic Preservation Act.

Frank Terbilcox is manager of the reserve and Nina And Charles Bradley are co-directors. The Bradleys reside on the reserve and guide graduate students in Ecology classes, and groups interested in environmental matters. The reserve is not open to the public; it is designed as a wild community preserving what is lost elsewhere by too many feet and recreation wheels.

In the summer of 1984 The Citizens Natural Resources Association held their gathering at the Leopold "shack". Before the get-together I met Nina and Charles Bradley at their home in the Reserve, and we drove to the "shack" grounds. While waiting for the group to arrive I assisted Nina in planting seeds of prairie wild flowers. We then walked through the old orchard and saw where deer had browsed on the apple trees.

We walked up the sand rise to the location of the Good Oak stump. It had now disintegrated back to the good earth, but marking the site was a large glacial boulder. Coming back to the stump location gave me that nostalgia feeling that I had walked where he had walked.

Back at the "shack" we joined the other members of the association and enjoyed mid-day refreshments. George Becker, retired professor of Biology, U.W. Stevens Point, long time member and past president of C.N.R.A., had Leopold memorabilia on display. Shown were letters, photos, sketches, books and articles by Leopold. Also shown was the gavel I made from the Good Oak wood. All these items brought back many pleasant memories.

Later the group walked to the Good Oak site for a ceremony and dedication. A bronze plaque was placed on the boulder with the simple wording from the Sand County Almanac. "REST! CRIES THE CHIEF SAWYER" Presented by C.N.R.A. INC. 1984. During the dedication program Nina Bradley recounted experiences at the farm with her father and family. She also read excerpts from his book.

Previous to the dedication, I corresponded with Owen Gromme and Robert Mc Cabe asking their opinion of placing a plaque or stone to mark the Good Oak location. Both concurred it was a good idea and gave their full approval. I then passed the idea and sketches on to the officers of the C.N.R.A. It was good to see the final results of an idea that the

members brought to a reality.

Leopold emphasized the inter-related nature of man and his environment and the growing need to make people aware of the inevitable consequences of continuing land abuse.

The Nature Reserve is thriving. Wildlife ponds dot the marsh. Ducks, birds, animals and a herd of deer reside here. Geese talk as they migrate over the marsh with sounds that Leopold cherished. Scholars and environmentalists will always have an outdoor laboratory to study the science of Ecology, and Aldo Leopold will not be forgotten.

Phil Sander
1987

"Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now we face the question of whether a still higher 'standard of living' is worth its cost in things natural, wild, and free."

-Aldo Leopold
Sand County Almanac