

# GEORGE S. WEHRWEIN AND ALDO LEOPOLD ON PROPERTY RIGHTS, AND AMERICA'S FUTURE LAND USE AND CONSERVATION

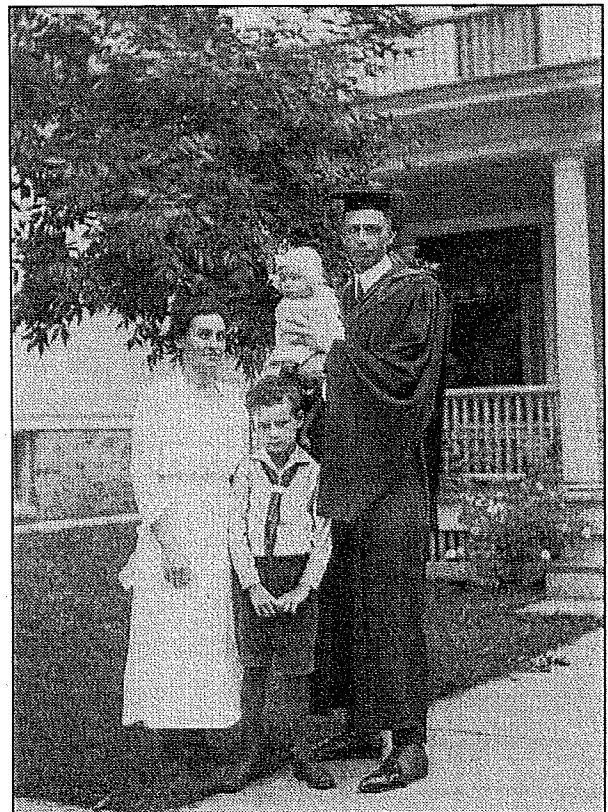
by Gerald F. Vaughn

University of Wisconsin professor George S. Wehrwein (1883-1945) perceived the need for a professional land economist to analyze the land economy of biblical times, especially as to its implications for our modern times and life. America's leading land economist after his mentor Richard T. Ely, and president of the American Farm Economic Association in 1942, Wehrwein was not a theologian. However, he was an active Congregationalist lay leader, Sunday School teacher, and Bible institute lecturer. In 1932 he gave a series of eight lectures titled "Bible Backgrounds of Agriculture" over radio in Wisconsin. In 1938 he authored *The Economic Background of the Old Testament*, from which my prefatory quotation is drawn. He continued to compile biblical reference and other relevant materials, apparently for the purpose of a larger study. The faculty memorial resolution adopted upon his passing states:

*He became an authority among the clergy for his excellent grasp of biblical history and the land economy of biblical times. There is little doubt that, had he lived, he would fairly soon have published an impressive volume on this topic.*

Wehrwein's understanding of the biblical background of land use and conservation became more significant as he was increasingly influential in the 1930s and 1940s in reorienting thought about America's land policies. His research and policy prescriptions focused on land problems including land tenure, land use in the rural-urban

fringe, rural planning and zoning, isolated settlement, forest taxation, soil and water conservation, recreational land use, and public land management. His policy making influence extended far beyond Wisconsin to various regional and nation-



The newly-minted University of Wisconsin Ph.D., June 14, 1922, when getting a higher degree really meant scholarly achievement. Anna, at left; George at right, holding Doratheia and Austin, center. A solemn occasion, as our demeanors demonstrate.

al bodies, including the Land Committee (of which he was a member) of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's National Resources Committee, later called the National Resources Planning Board.

Wehrwein helped to set the stage for his faculty colleague and close friend, the great ecologist and conservationist Aldo Leopold, whose classic book *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) did much to shape the philosophy of the modern environmental movement. Wehrwein illustrated the public interest in private land by quoting Leopold who wrote:

*The land owner whose boundaries happen to include an eagle's nest, or a heron rookery, or a patch of lady's slippers, or a remnant of prairie sod, or an historical oak, or a string of Indian mounds—such a land owner is the custodian of a public interest, to an equal or sometimes greater degree than one growing a forest, or one fighting a gully.*

Joseph J. Hickey, who was a graduate student under Leopold at Wisconsin in the early 1940s, observed that Wehrwein "had an ethical feeling for the land and was much admired by Leopold." He recalls Leopold's saying that Wehrwein "has a Christ-like mentality." Reflecting the Wehrwein influence, Leopold's writing contains the caution:

*"Conservation is paved with good intentions which prove to be futile, or even dangerous, because they are devoid of critical understanding either of the land, or of economic land-use."*

Wehrwein was therefore among the earliest and most eminent economists to join forces with ecologists. He wrote:

*Adam Smith stated the consoling doctrine that, in the main, whenever each person pursues his own self-interest he is automatically also acting in the best interests of society as a whole. The natural corollary follows that any restraint on the action of individuals not only is bad for the individual but also for society and the state. Whatever may have been the validity of this philosophy in commerce and industry it fails when applied to the conservational utilization of natural resources.*

He insisted:

*The land economist must not only consider human institutions but also have some understanding of biotic, ecological relationships and the impact of man on his environment in so far as these affect the relationship of man to man in the efforts of men to live collectively.*

When colonial Americans rid themselves of oppressive feudal bonds, they established a system of land ownership and rights quite different from that of their forebears. They gave to private individuals more freedom to use their land than has ever been granted elsewhere. Wehrwein knew that this extreme freedom in property rights could not be sustained. Society has a bona fide interest in the wise use of private lands. How to legitimately assert society's interest in private lands, without causing undue and uncompensated loss of landowner equity and discouraging or destroying private initiative, is the question. This question will never be answered in a manner to satisfy all peoples at all times. It will be answered by each society in its own era.

Wehrwein and Leopold together tried to answer this question for their era and the indefinite future. Principally through his close association with Wehrwein, Leopold formed economic insights about land use. As a result Leopold became discouraged about market forces as the basis for better land use and conservation. He shared the view of Wehrwein, who observed:

*...the best examples of soil conservation, conservation of wood lots, wild life and forests seem to be independent of profit and loss considerations and be motivated by institutional, psychological and even irrational purposes when judged by the economic yardstick.*

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