

OBITUARIES | NINA LEOPOLD BRADLEY

Bradley leaves legacy of living lightly



Nina Leopold Bradley looks at birds from inside her home near Baraboo in January 2007. She picked up where her father, Aldo, left off and charted birds and plant life daily. Credit: Journal Sentinel files

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By *Amy Rabideau Silvers* of the *Journal Sentinel*

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Nina Leopold Bradley continued the legacy of her famous father - renowned environmentalist Aldo Leopold - but in every sense of the word made it her own.

A lifelong naturalist and researcher, she returned in 1976 to the family land where Leopold recorded his observations of nature in the 1930s and 1940s, published as the seminal "A Sand County Almanac" after his death in 1948. Bradley continued those observations, finding clear evidence of how plants and animals were responding to climate changes since her father walked the same land.

Her work was published in 1999 by the National Academy of Sciences, "in one of the first published studies that species were responding differently to climate change," said Buddy Huffaker, executive director of the Aldo Leopold Foundation.

"She definitely made her own mark," he said. "She committed her life to conservation."

Bradley died of natural causes Wednesday at her home on the Aldo Leopold Reserve near Baraboo in Sauk County. She was 93.

"This morning we are standing around the breakfast table and we're counting how many orioles are at the feeder, just as she did every day," daughter Trish Stevenson said Thursday.

"She passed on the Leopold legacy of living lightly on the land, not owning a lot of things, and taking care of your own backyard to take care of the earth," her daughter said. "We all saw, by example, how to live a good life on the earth."

Bradley also had a way of making people think that they should - and could - do the same.

"She made you feel that you were empowered to make a difference," Huffaker said. "She was a mix between a cheerleader and a sage."

Bradley was the third of five children born to Aldo and Estella Leopold, all of whom went on to careers in environmental work and earth sciences. With her siblings, Bradley was instrumental in the creation of the foundation and later its Aldo Leopold Legacy Center, located on the family land where Leopold worked to restore an abandoned farm to its natural state.

It was where they long spent weekends and summers. The family's ever-so-humble home still stands there - a rehabbed structure known as The Shack - and the only chicken coop listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

"As he transformed the land, it transformed us," Bradley said.

In a 1999 interview, she recalled those experiences, including when their father roused them from a tent in the 1930s. They walked, barefoot and in pajamas, single file behind their father through the darkness.

What he showed them was magic, a log pulsing with light.

"We stared with the thrill of discovery," she said. "A log alive, glistening with life."

Leopold didn't lecture on iridescent fungus, something called fox fire. It was enough to share the wonder of the moment.

They learned to look and listen and make their own observations.

"We would go out for the day, and he'd give us a few clues as to what to look for," she said in an interview early this year. "He'd get quite excited when we shared our findings."

It was a practice called phenology, the study of events in nature that are influenced by climate and seasonal change.

"It gets in your blood," she said. "It's quite a tool to help you know what's going on."

The children helped with the land, including the planting of more than 50,000 trees. Some of those same trees were used to build the Aldo Leopold Legacy Center.

"The center was, in particular, Nina's vision," Huffaker said. "The U.S. Green Building Council in 2007 called it 'the greenest building in the world.'"

As a young woman, she earned a degree in geography from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and married biologist William Elder. His work took him to exotic places, including Hawaii and Botswana.

"She was doing all the field work with him," Huffaker said. "They studied all kinds of wildlife and issues."

The marriage ended in divorce. In 1971, she married geologist Charles Bradley, a childhood friend, in a ceremony at The Shack.

They later used pine trees planted in her childhood to build their retirement home - and for other special projects including the Schlitz Audubon Center in Bayside.

Her husband also became her partner in observing and recording what was happening on the Leopold land, and in training graduate students.

Did global warming concern her?

"You're darn tootin' it does," she told the Journal Sentinel in 2000. "I think it's really scary. The whole ecology changes. The interconnectedness of natural systems is very important. Breach it, and you find yourself in trouble."

Bradley remained mostly positive, hopeful that people would act to protect the earth. That said, she was not shy about criticizing politicians or legislation that threatened the environment. Her work was recognized by a number of honorary degrees, including an unusual joint honorary doctorate of environmental sciences awarded to both Bradley and her husband by UW-Madison.

"There was always hope," her daughter said. "She was very much an optimist. She swam in her pond every summer and she skied until the snow melted in February. ... And she was thinking about the challenges for the reserve and the foundation until three days ago."

Other survivors include daughter Nina Loeffel; stepchildren Dorothy Bradley and Charles Bradley Jr.; sister Estella Leopold; grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Her brothers, Starker, Luna and Carl, died earlier.

Bradley's ashes will be scattered on the land she loved, just as the family did with those of her late husband. A public memorial will be planned, probably at the Legacy Center this summer.

Memorials suggested to the Aldo Leopold Foundation.

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