

Bradley's vision inspired Leopold Foundation



Aldo Leopold Foundation

Nina Leopold arrives at "The Shack," the family farm near Baraboo in 1938 carrying supplies, including a picnic basket, guitar, textbooks and shotgun.

By Paul A. Smith of the Journal Sentinel

Published on: 8/6/2011

Baraboo - The sun embraced the prairie garden in late afternoon, illuminating yellow blossoms of compass plant and purple stalks of blazing star.

Toward evening, there was a flyover of sandhill cranes.

And among the humans gathered on the famously poor farmland near the Wisconsin River, there was a steady stream of songs, stories, laughter and more than a few tears.

Nina Leopold Bradley was well-known to cherish the events of each day, from the bitter cold of Wisconsin winter to the green bounty of summer.

Her spirit seemed to orchestrate an especially memorable gathering Wednesday at the Aldo Leopold Foundation north of Baraboo.

"It's hard to think of a more fitting setting," said Buddy Huffacker, executive director of the foundation. "It's perfect, but bittersweet."

About 250 people, including at least two dozen relatives and extended family, attended a memorial service for Bradley, who died May 25 at age 93.

Bradley, daughter of famed professor and author Aldo Leopold, had earned her own reputation as one of Wisconsin's leading conservationists.

Her work in phenology, along with her father's and that of A.W. Schorger of Madison, provides a 90-year history of nature and weather data for south-central Wisconsin.

Raised in Madison and on the farm near Baraboo her father purchased, Bradley became a leading contemporary spokeswoman for the land ethic and connecting humans to nature.

"She loved learning," said Dorothy Bradley, daughter of Charles Bradley, Nina's second husband. "She worked hard, even up to the days before she died, cramming as much as possible into her brain."

Nina Bradley also loved cross country skiing, hiking and canoeing. For many years she was a competitive archer. And when the pond wasn't covered in ice, she loved skinny-dipping in the pond on the Leopold Reserve.

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 old home still stands there - known as "The Shack" - and the only chicken coop listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Estella Leopold, Nina's younger sister, said although she and her siblings often took schoolwork to the farm on weekends, "they always found a way not to do it."

"There was so much else to learn," Estella Leopold said. "The outdoors was our library."

A 1938 photo shows Nina Leopold Bradley arriving at The Shack with a picnic basket, guitar, textbooks and shotgun.

Leopold Foundation staff has titled the photo "The Essentials."

"I called her my dream girl," said Jeff Nania, executive director emeritus of the Wisconsin Waterfowl Association.

Bradley's death comes with the Wisconsin conservation community in particular discord.

Natural resource management has become increasingly driven by political agendas and executed by political appointees, principles to which Bradley and her father were adamantly opposed.

Bradley appeared at a public hearing in Madison in July 2009 to speak in favor of AB 138, a bill to give the Natural Resources Board the power to appoint the Department of Natural Resources secretary.

With an eye to scientific resource management, Aldo Leopold and contemporaries helped create a non-partisan conservation commission in Wisconsin in the late 1920s. The idea was to keep politics out.

The move was heralded nationally and is widely attributed as the first step toward developing a world-class resource management agency in Wisconsin.

The system was in place until 1995 when, under Gov. Tommy Thompson, the secretary of the DNR became a political appointee.

Although the bill was approved by the state Legislature and Senate in 2010, former Gov. Jim Doyle vetoed it.

"My father worked on nearly the same issue," Bradley said at the hearing. "My appeal is to restore the power to the board. The DNR secretary should not be a political tool."

While some view the world through highly partisan glasses, Bradley was a model of grace, relying on openness, sincerity and a magnetic personality to win friends and allies.

"Nina became the center of the Leopold family," said Susan Flader, a Leopold scholar. "Her vision and motive power drove the creation of the Leopold Center."

Bradley had a rare credibility due to her daily work with and advanced knowledge of wildlife. She was comfortable speaking to hunters, botanists, farmers and academics. And, perhaps, especially children.

"She had a special enthusiasm for the ideas of young people," Dorothy Bradley said. "And she had the unique ability to make you feel like you were the most important person in the whole world."

Nina Leopold Bradley lived the ideals of the land ethic. When she and Charles Bradley moved back to Wisconsin in 1976, they built and lived a modest life on the Leopold Reserve.

While some in the Wisconsin outdoors community feature narrow self-interests, Bradley was a true conservationist, valuing science-based management that included fire and hunting to improve habitat.

The land, as her father wrote, "is a community to which we belong, not a commodity which we own."

With Bradley's passing, it will be the responsibility of the legions of her followers and other members of the "thinking community" to carry on a rich legacy of conservation in increasingly challenging times.

In "Sand County Almanac," Aldo Leopold wrote of a country graveyard that had a small, undisturbed piece of prairie that each July sprouted a compass plant.

"It is the sole remnant of this plant along this highway, and perhaps the sole remnant in the western half of our county," Leopold wrote. "What a thousand acres of Silphiums looked like

when they tickled the bellies of the buffalo is a question never again to be answered, and perhaps not even asked."

Nina Leopold Bradley saw to it that the Leopold Center features a restored prairie of native species. Wednesday, dozens of compass plants were resplendent in the summer light, "man-high" and "spangled with saucer-sized yellow blooms."

As native plants now blossom in the sandy soils of Sauk County, here's hoping the life lessons of Nina Leopold Bradley flourish among future generations of Americans.