

REMINISCENCES ABOUT ALDO LEOPOLD

by

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This tape is being made for the Wisconsin Historical Society and the University of Wisconsin Archives, at the invitation of Mr. Jim Voegeli. It is personal reminiscences about Mr. Aldo Leopold.

This is Mrs. Allen Stokes speaking, formerly Alice Harper. I was secretary to Professor Leopold in the Wildlife Management Department at the University of Wisconsin during the years 1941 to 1945. I married one of his students, Allen W. Stokes. We live at 1722 Saddle Hill Drive, Logan, Utah, where Allen has been Professor of Wildlife Resources at Utah State University since 1952, after getting his Ph.D. under Professor Leopold.

The date is January 11, 1974.

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Mr. Leopold was one of the great and dear persons in my life. It was my rare good fortune to work for four years as his secretary in the Wildlife Management Department at the University of Wisconsin. I will try to turn the pages back for some recollections of those earlier years.

Today is Friday, January 11, 1974, and it would have been Mr. Leopold's 87th birthday. I wish we could turn the calendar back. Perhaps one of Mr. Leopold's qualities that most endeared him to people, including secretaries, was that he took a personal interest in them. I felt he had a high regard for me as a person as well as a secretary.

Working for Mr. Leopold was more than being just a secretary. It was an experience, an experience in which he helped me to grow as a person. He had the greatest respect for my abilities, and let me use a good deal of initiative in the running of the wildlife office. Helping students, handling telephone calls, receiving visitors, correspondence, filing, records, library indexing, cataloguing of reprints, keeping photo albums current, and mimeographing of class materials made up much of the day's work.

Mr. Leopold let me run the slides for his wildlife classes. This was his way of helping develop my interest in wildlife, botany, and land use, though I was not particularly aware of this at the time. For his classes Mr. Leopold kept up a complete system of photograph albums and slides organized for effectively illustrating wildlife and land use principles. He did the labelling of his prints, but it was one of my jobs to paste them in, type the labels, and number the slides. He liked the photographs pasted in with Tri-tix for its lasting qualities. When he worked up a lecture or a talk, he could just give me the numbers of the prints he wanted, and I could pull the matching slides. His prints would be of bobwhite quail, the University Arboretum land, disaster on the deer yards, wildflowers, or fence posts, but would always be something that would tell a story.

I remember after one particular short bus trip, he came home and wrote an account of "An Illinois Bus Trip." In that short ride he made interpretations of much that he saw from the windows of the bus. The beautiful account made one realize how a bus trip can be such a different experience for different people. It was indicative of how much Mr. Leopold got out of his immediate surroundings.

Mr. Leopold let me make reservations for him on his train trips, he let me balance his office checkbook, and arrange appointments. He was very good at administration because he was willing to turn over the details to others. He always seemed to have faith that I could handle anything he asked me to. Since I had never balanced anything very major in the way of a checkbook, or known that it was better to ask for a lower berth on a Pullman, or arranged meetings with other professors or members of conservation departments, his faith did a lot for me.

For Professor Leopold, one of the most important aspects of heading up the Wildlife Management chair was, of course, the students. Many of the students who were there when I came in June of 1941 were out in the field doing their graduate work, and new ones were taken on as Professor Leopold could make a place for them. Some of the undergraduates stayed on to do their graduate work. Some of those who got a Master's degree stayed on for a Ph.D. Professor Leopold gave very generously of his time to help his students both in their work and with any personal problems they might need to discuss. He was nearly always available to them, his big classes in wildlife ecology for undergraduates must have been among the most interesting and best organized of any ever taught, and his field trips with them were a memorable experience. At the time I was there Bob McCabe and Joe Hickey were especially devoted to him, also Irv Buss, Art Hawkins, Albert Hochbaum, Lyle Sowls, the Hamerstoms, Cy Kabat, Jim Hale, Bob Ellarson and others. Bob McCabe would have laid down his life for Mr. Leopold, I think.

Most of Professor Leopold's students had a quality of character that was in keeping with the character of the old office. This had been a private home at one time. After crossing a green lawn lined with shrubbery and walking up the steps of a comfortable old porch with overhanging roof, one would walk in the front door to a welcoming vestibule. The first thing he would notice would be the large skin case in which all of the skins made by students and sent in by others were stored. Perhaps one of Professor Leopold's most-loved photographs was the one taken of him in front of the skin-case while looking at a skin a student had made. Like the Tri-tix paste for the photo albums, Professor Leopold had a strong preference for the kind of moth crystals to be used in these cases; it was always paradichlorobenzine crystals. It was critical that these crystals be added regularly. It is a mark of the man that while his mind was busy on great things he was also aware of the small things.

The office had warm wooden floors in the hallway and all rooms, no carpets; one went on into the main office where the secretary's oaken desk was with an adjoining table for papers and reprints to be carded. An L-shaped part of the main office had a beautiful long walnut table around which the students could sit to read or write. Files and index cards for the library materials were kept in this room, and all walls were lined with book cases and cases of reprints. There was no security on that remarkable library and reprint collection in an old office largely unlocked, but its very availability encouraged the students to read reprints and get out the important papers on a subject.

Big windows in all the rooms looked out on trees, lawns, the rest of the campus, a bird-feeding tray, and next door to us was the private home of Mrs. King, who invited us all over one night to view her night-blooming cereus. It was characteristic of Mr. Leopold that he turned up for this. His own office was quietly and tastefully furnished.

The students had a room in the back of the house that they could use as a study, and "the back room" had sinks and laboratory materials for Bob McCabe's techniques course which the students could use for making up skins, aging bones, and for other laboratory tasks. The second floor of the house was taken up with other departments. But the third floor, the attic, was again "ours," and was used by students and for seminars and for student parties. Enrique Avila, a student from Peru, made it his home for a little while, which the second floor secretaries were not too keen about and threatened to report.

The building itself may have been low on the totem pole compared to fancier buildings on campus, but it certainly had character, and seemed just right for "our bunch." For the old-time students as well as myself, I doubt if it has been replaced in their hearts by the newer finer model.

Professor Leopold ran a bird feeder at the office and encouraged me not only to do the feeding but to band the birds which came to the feeder. We fed mixed small grains and sunflower seed, which drew cardinals, blue-jays, and chickadees, as well as squirrels. Mr. Leopold paid for the seed out of his own pocket, and was always careful to separate personal from professional expenses. So, it was not just game birds that held a place of interest but song birds as well.

And he encouraged this interest in his students. When Allen brought some wild goldfinches which had been separated from the mother, Mr. Leopold was perfectly willing that I take time to feed them in the office with a dropper.

One day there was an undergraduate student who had been out hunting, and was seen shooting from the road near the car. This is something that just was not done, and especially not by a wildlife student. Mr. Leopold was not one to talk about other people, but he would tell me incidents such as this. He expected the highest standards from his students. He gave of himself generously and expected their best in return. He was always fair with them, and considerate. If students felt they had been badly treated, and there were some, he gave them a chance to air their views, but he would not yield to anything that was wrong. I remember how badly he felt when he found out that one of his students in Canada had not known that he had actually been awarded his Master's diploma but through some oversight had never been told and had been feeling dismayed. Mr. Leopold was always concerned for other people's feelings.

Besides going into the field with his graduate students individually to view their projects and discuss their thesis work, Professor Leopold used to take his wildlife ecology classes on field trips, usually on a Saturday morning. Often the trip would be to go to the Arboretum. He was a member of the Arboretum Committee along with Mr. Longenecker and Dr. Curtis. I'm sure those three in particular did a great deal to preserve the arboretum. He always wanted to preserve the wild areas, and habitat in its natural form. He would work toward having a small wildflower habitat protected from grazing. As for the field trips,

or rabbit drives, which Professor Leopold encouraged me to go along on as well, the standing rule for his classes was that if the thermometer registered 15° above zero, the field trip was on; if colder than 15° , the students were not to gather. On field trips Professor Leopold would point out the browse lines, animal tracks, scats, piecing together little signs which would tell the story of last night's activities, which animals were out, what they were doing, and what the conditions of the woodlot were. Spring and fall trips were equally exciting and he had a really warm ability to kindle students' interest in wildlife by encouraging them to go on early morning trips to watch the displays of the prairie chickens, or evening trips to catch the peenting and sky dance of the woodcock, or the drumming of the ruffed grouse. He was very good at getting others interested in phenology, and would draw them out as to their observations on when flowers were blooming, birds arriving and leaving, and gave them the impression that this information was important to him, which it was. He was marvelous at quietly stimulating people's interest in wildlife and beauties of the land by just such encouragements or by pointing out interesting things to read. Mr. Leopold got tremendous joy out of life. He also had a good sense of fun.

Professor Leopold used to hold seminars every other Tuesday night or one Tuesday night a month for his students. It was a good chance for a student to give a seminar on the work he had been doing. The Professor liked his students to be well acquainted with the work the others were doing. He did not dominate the discussion that followed; he took a low-key role there so the students didn't feel hesitant about contributing. He also encouraged the wives

to come to the seminar meetings. He had the neat idea of serving apples for refreshments after the talk. It was my job to get and wash the apples. One time at a student party in the top floor of the old wildlife office, we were playing charades. It was my misfortune to have drawn "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," a phrase I can't recall to this day without effort, and then, as now, could not act out. I know he was hoping I could think of an effective way to act it out, but to me, nothing seems guessable on that.

I remember clearly the day in May 1941 when I walked over Bascom Hill along Linden Drive out to the old wildlife office to be interviewed by Mr. Leopold for the job as his secretary in wildlife management. His previous secretary, Betty Hutchcroft, was to be married to Fred Suhr, and she and Lulie Schumann wondered if I would be interested in the job. I was sure I would, as it was very appealing to me, but I didn't know whether or not I would have the qualifications. Professor Leopold wanted a college graduate. I qualified for that part of it as I had my Bachelor of Arts from the University of Wisconsin. I had majored in sociology, and had taken chemistry and math, history and English, philosophy and French, and comparative literature, but had no botany or zoology. And my shorthand was very sketchy. I told Mr. Leopold that it was not very good as I had never taken it at high school or in any regular systematic way over a period of time. I had taken it at Vocational School at night and had gone to Madison Business College one summer. He said he was not too worried about my being able to handle dictation, and at the end of the interview he said if I would like to,

he would like me to come as his secretary. I remember I wore a hat and gloves to the interview. I was very proper, . . . and very unsure of myself.

I had not started on the job for more than a few days when Professor Leopold had to leave to go on a trip to the western part of the United States, especially to see the Kaibab forest in Arizona and the deer herd there, and then on up to Oregon. When he got back, and had been back for a week or so, the mail had been piling up, and he came out one day to my desk and said, "I guess we better get started on this mail." I went into his office with my shorthand notebook and pencil, my heart in my mouth, and started to take dictation. My hand shook so it could hardly hold the pencil, let alone make the proper shorthand symbols, and it went right on shaking for 15 or 20 minutes or maybe longer. That dear man never gave away by so much as a glance that he was aware of my trembling shaky hand and my even shakier shorthand. I kept on making notes--somehow--until the stack of mail was finished. That night I took my shorthand notebook home, stayed up till three o'clock in the morning trying to transcribe my notes while they were fresh in my mind if not clear on the page. Somehow by the end of the week I had all those letters out. Fortunately I could type easily, and spelling had never given me any trouble. My shorthand did get better, and I could handle dictation, but until it did if he needed a letter right away, he would dictate it to me and let me type it as he dictated.

Memories like this have stayed with me always, and thirty years later, I still have a love for him and appreciation for his tremendous kindness.

There was always the library work to do. He read voluminously, and catalogued all reprints for indexing. I was to make up the library cards for these, and I was seldom up to date on all of the carding. I still, on occasion, wonder if there were some way I could have managed to get this done and stay current with it. I should have. It was one of my failures on the job, but he never had one word of complaint about it.

I can't remember his ever losing patience with me except for one time, and I can't remember what that was about. I was sensitive to his moods and feelings and usually knew how he felt about other people, though it would be only from a word or two of how he felt about things. He was never one to talk against people.

It was unusual for Professor Leopold to miss a day at the office, and those would be for field trips or special meetings, perhaps with the Conservation Commission. He put in long days; he was usually there in the morning before I got there, and still there when I went home at night. He liked to go to his shack weekends with his family during summer and fall, and especially in the springtime. Among her many other fine qualities, Mrs. Leopold was a model wife in that she almost never interrupted him at his work at the office.

He was always available to students, as to others, but when he needed quiet to write, his essays or other creative pieces, he would ask me not to disturb him with calls if they could be postponed or handled in some other way. Mornings were his most creative times, but he could write any time that there were peace and quiet so that his thinking could go deep and not have the smooth flow of his

creative thinking interrupted just as he was putting his thoughts together in an easy, natural, succinct, and beautifully expressed way. Each one was a jewel. They were masterpieces, and yet as he came out and quietly would hand one to me to be typed up, did I realize how great it was? I hope I told him how marvelous I thought his writing was, but I don't remember for sure. I think a person does know when you think he is great. But I think the writing was soul-satisfying in itself. I think we both could tell when he'd had a good morning and that the writing had gone well. I don't remember the times it didn't go well . . . if it didn't.

He wrote, as far as I know, most of his creative pieces in his office, on yellow lined pads, neatly, in longhand, very few things crossed out, with only occasional re-wording, in a pen with green ink, a pen with magic in it, a pen that gave his philosophy of living to the world.

His office was a lovely quiet room, lined with books, and three windows on the north, the center one curving out, like a bay window, giving a feeling of opening into the outdoors. And he had his lovely walnut desk from the Leopold Desk Company in Burlington, Iowa--with his pipe on it. His desk was mostly clear and uncluttered--like his mind. It was an office in which a man could think. And when he wrote he was thinking deeply and creatively and he felt what he wanted to write rather than having to dig around and manufacture language. He had thought so much about the land and man's place in it that in the peace and solitude of his office, he could put his thoughts into words, turn words into essays, and through his essays create in others a mood of thoughtfulness as well as delight. Perhaps his most precious talent he gave to the world in this way.

He could carry one along in his essays from looking up at a flock of wild geese with him to the excitement of wondering whether the big tidal bore would get to the camp.

In the fall I saw a big flock of sandhill cranes circling overhead and bugling. Allen said they had probably come down Logan Canyon from Jackson Hole and were momentarily caucusing as to whether to head over to the Bear River marshes or go directly south. They made me think of Mr. Leopold's "The Geese Return."

And now copies of his Sand County Almanac go out so fast our University book store can hardly keep them in stock.

Mr. Leopold's philosophy that the land is not ours to do with as we want but rather is given to us to use for a little while and to take care of enters much of our thinking and action now as we try to keep developers out of our mountains and canyons, airports out of our swamps, and as we try to hold on to the beauty of our land. Could he have known that the youth of our nation would now be echoing his thoughts and writings of 30 years ago and reading his words on every campus and every hilltop across the land and clinging to his statements for support? I am glad he left his writings to us--because his philosophy seems to me to be one of the most important things in life today--as it was then--but not so many could see it then.

One of my most treasured possessions is one of his originals, but Bob McCabe has most of the rest (along with his own collection of McGuffey readers) and mine has a note on it to be turned over to Bob some day.

There were things as dear to him as his work, and more dear--his family, of course. One time when he and Mrs. Leopold and Estella were taking me to the Shack with them for the weekend, he reached over and touched Mrs. Leopold and smiled--saying without words that he loved her and that all was well with his world.

I think of his getting up before dawn, going out with his coffee pot, to record the order of bird song at the Shack, . . . and remember his saying that it is always harder to be aware of when things have disappeared--the flowers stopped blooming or the birds flown--than to notice when they come. He kept his journal at the shack. We helped to plant a few of those thousands of pines that weekend, as well as Estella's taking me through some of the quiet waters with the canoe, and listening for the call and the sky dance of the woodcock.

That lovely Shack--kept with its quiet simplicity--helped to give the meaning to his life--and peace as well, from some of the real struggles. In 1933 he was the first one to chair a department of wildlife management. It was a whole new philosophy that he was starting up, and not everyone was sympathetic to it nor aware of its import. Conservation departments and commissions felt they had to be aware of the wishes of the sportsmen. And when Mr. Leopold felt the deer herd was too great in Wisconsin to allow proper regrowth of vegetation it was not a popular viewpoint to try to convince sportsmen and the commission that the deer herd needed to be cut down even when it meant allowing shooting of does. It was not popular to protect wolves, coyotes, hawks and owls. But Mr. Leopold was both fearless and persuasive in working toward what he knew to be right for the land and for wildlife.

Mr. Leopold did much work with the Conservation Department and the Conservation Commission. Trying to convince conservation department officials and sportsmen of the need for cutting down the deer herds took a great deal of energy, and I believe many of the meetings were fraught with disappointment for Mr. Leopold. My heart went out to him over these and the drain on his energies.

Mr. Leopold read a great deal. I'm sure he had read every book in his library, every reprint that he carded. One time at a party at his house, perhaps for graduate students, he asked me, "Have you read any good books lately?" And I think this is an interesting question, maybe one not asked too often today. I was at the time reading Theodora Stanwell-Fletcher's "Driftwood Valley," and we talked about living in the Canadian wilderness.

Mr. Leopold always delighted me by making me think I was a good secretary. Not a day goes by, of course, that he hasn't influenced my thinking and my whole way of life. Part of the reason for this is that he brought Allen into my life. Allen had come out from Philadelphia to study wildlife under him the summer of 1944. Allen courted me that summer over the goldfinch nests, and we were married in June of the following year. Mr. Leopold said one day that he had high regard for Allen's judgment in wanting to marry me. This pleased me, of course. And Allen has always been very fond of Mr. Leopold, and like his other students, had the greatest respect for him and an appreciation for his values and ideas and his quiet, sterling worth.

Mr. Leopold was a person who was at home whether talking with the governor of the state, the farmers of Riley Game Cooperative, other professors, or

students. His quiet charm was a beautiful part of his personality. His background of family, Iowa, Yale, New Mexico and the Southwest, and his own inner strength, beliefs, and code made him adequate for any situation...and I guess this is why he could give so much of himself to all of us. I have to mention also that he was very fond of German shorthairs, and his dog Gus in particular. This man was strong, quiet but articulate, deep, forceful, loving, gentle. He cared about people, about wildlife, about the land, and about the quality of life. His relationships with people were very meaningful to him and to them.

I cried when I left that office and I still feel deeply about those four years of being secretary to such a wonderful person as Aldo Leopold. And I'm sure Virginia Kiesel Spence who came after me felt the same way, and later Pat Murrish Schleicher. After I was married to Allen and came back to the office to work part time (there was still a big stack of library materials waiting for carding), he said to me one day as we were working across the table on some proof, "Why don't you drop the Mister?" I didn't hear him at first, and I had to ask what and then ask again. He said after a student got a Ph.D. it was time to call him Aldo and he felt I had gotten my Ph.D. But to this day I think of him as Mr. Leopold.

Mr. and Mrs. Leopold came to see us when our son Allen Jr. was born in 1947. Two months later we went to live on Pelee Island in Lake Erie where Allen was doing his Ph.D. research on pheasants. And I didn't see him too much after that. The following spring the heart-breaking news came to us that he had lost his life while fighting a fire near the shack and his beloved pines. I was

numb for days and couldn't believe it. He had always been in such good health.

But he has been in my thoughts always as have Mrs. Leopold and the rest of their family. There was a remarkable closeness between Mr. and Mrs. Leopold and their five children.

And I think of his beautiful handwriting, of his moving essays, his smile, his keen observation of people, his love and devotion to his family, his wonderful spirit--and I know I have been among the favored people of this world to have had four years at 424 University Farm Place with Aldo Leopold. Just as there could never be another wildlife office with the feeling and spirit of that old house with its overhanging elms and the coffee bean tree out front, so there could never be another Aldo Leopold--so it is good that his spirit and his writings and his family live on.

Happy birthday, Aldo. It was a good day when you were born.

Alice Harper Stokes

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(Mrs. Allen W. Stokes)