

*Aldo Leopold*  
*1887—1948*



*'We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity  
belonging to us. When we see land as a community  
to which we belong, we may begin to use it with  
love and respect.'*

*A Sand County Almanac*

## Aldo Leopold

remarks by Curt Meine

Aldo Leopold led what one historian has called , "perhaps the most distinguished career in 20th century conservation." He was born in the Mississippi River town of Burlington, Iowa on January 11, 1887. His mother Clara, a witty, energetic lady, was the only daughter of a well-to-do German immigrant who made his fortune in Burlington as a grocer, landscape engineer, and banker. Aldo's father was the owner and manager of the Leopold Desk Company of Burlington, which produced fine office furniture, furniture that was, according to the company's motto, "Built On Honor To Endure." Aldo was their first child, and grew up in the impressive family home that stood high on a bluff overlooking the town of Burlington and the bottomlands of the Mississippi. most distinguished career in 20th century conservation."

It was in those bottomlands that Leopold first developed his abiding love of the outdoors. His father Carl was an expert hunter and naturalist, a sportsman of the Teddy Roosevelt variety. He taught his boys to hunt as soon as they were of age. In a time when game laws were lax and ignored and waterfowl populations were fast declining Carl Leopold taught his son his first lessons in conservation thinking, and in appreciation of the natural world around him. Don't shoot in the spring, he taught his children. Search for the crippled bird until you find it. Limit your take. As often as not, Carl Leopold would leave the guns behind, and take Aldo and the other children out in the woods and fields just to see what was going on.

When it came time to choose a line of work, Aldo chose not to enter the family business; he looked for something that appealed to his enthusiasm for the outdoors. He was a bright student with a precocious mind. He did well at Burlington High School - well enough to afford cutting classes when hunting opportunities demanded his presence. His mother, though, had higher hopes for her son. Clara Leopold was, among other things, a doting mother, and insisted that Aldo be sent east to prep school. With an eye toward entering the field of forestry, Leopold left Burlington in 1904 to attend Lawrenceville Prep in New Jersey. Even then, he was devoted to the conservation movement that he would make his life's work. When his father informed him of the annual devastation of the waterfowl, he wrote back:

I am sorry that the ducks are being slaughtered as usual, but of course could expect nothing else. When my turn comes to have something to say and do against it and other related matters, I am sure nothing in my power will be lacking to the good cause.

Leopold entered Yale in 1905. At the time, Yale had the most advanced forestry program in the nation, a program that was filling the ranks of the newly created U.S. Forest Service. Graduating in 1909 with his master's degree in Forestry, Leopold joined the cadre of greenhorn foresters migrating to administer the nation's public forests.

Before Leopold set foot in Wisconsin, he spent fifteen years with the Forest Service in the southwestern United States. His accomplishments during those years are not so widely known, but are every bit as remarkable, as his later work in Wisconsin. He

rose quickly through the ranks to become Forest Supervisor in 1911, when he was twenty-five. After a year-and-a-half bout with a near fatal disease, he returned to the Forest Service and gained national recognition for his militant leadership in the movement to protect the wildlife populations in New Mexico. In his official capacity as forest inspector, Leopold was, forest by forest, deepening his understanding of the land itself. As he travelled the desert basins and forest ranges of the southwest, he saw, he saw the effect that indiscriminate human use was having on the region soils, waters, forests, and wildlife. He decided on his own to investigate the cause and effect behind the problems of overgrazing, soil erosion, watershed maintenance, and unstable wildlife populations. His efforts stand as an early example of ecological inquiry, a system-wide approach to resource conducted at a time when ecology was a word known only to an inner circle of college professors and their graduate students. During this same period, in the early 1920's, Leopold also became known as a foremost voice in the movement to preserve remnant areas of wilderness. Due in large part to his advocacy, the Gila Wilderness in New Mexico became the first area to be so designated. Were New Mexico to start its own Conservation Hall of Fame, it too would have to include the name of Aldo Leopold.

But we identify Leopold with Wisconsin, and it was with Wisconsin that Leopold most closely identified himself. Leopold arrived here in 1924, when he was transferred to the Forest Products Lab in Madison. It was a fateful move. Although Leopold grew disenchanted with his chore at the lab, the job

placed him in the environment where he would fully develop the work and philosophy for which we honor him today. In 1928, he abruptly quit the Forest Service and undertook a survey of the game populations of the upper Midwest, the first such region-wide study ever attempted. For a year and a half he criss-crossed eight states, travelled thousands of miles, talked to hundreds of farmers and sportsmen, and gained a ground-level view of social and environmental conditions across the heart of the continent during one of the most trying periods in our history. The resulting study established Leopold as one of the foremost experts in the wildlife field, a reputation further enhanced when, in 1932, he published his landmark book Game Management. The first textbook to be written on the subject, Game Management helped to establish the then-new science, and is, in fact, still used in many classrooms today. Many of you, no doubt, have been introduced to Leopold through its pages. The year after his book was published, Leopold joined the University of Wisconsin as the nation's first professor of wildlife management. He would receive other job offers in the years that followed, but he chose to remain as a professor in Madison, where he felt he could be of greatest service, teaching the first generation of trained wildlife managers and conducting fundamental research into the ways of wildlife and the complexities of environmental interaction. His students were themselves destined to become leaders in the profession.

In the meantime, Leopold was making contributions in a hundred other ways, writing articles, giving radio talks,

addressing conventions, organizing and participating in dozens of different conservation groups. Through it all, his inquisitive nature never stopped asking questions. He was developing the sort of ecological insight that would come to full flower in the literary essays that were eventually gathered into his best known work, A Sand County Almanac. These essays, written mostly in the 1940's, are Leopold's enduring legacy, the gifts of a man whose special powers of observation he tried to share with those around him. The book has gained a fame all its own, and a place on the shelf of many a concerned conservationist, professional and amateur alike.

When I am asked what I consider to be Aldo Leopold's most impressive accomplishment, I must answer that for me, Leopold's greatest accomplishment is his most subtle one. It is his belief, expressed through a lifetime of writing, teaching, and speaking, that freedom can prosper only to the degree that we understand the forces at work in the world around us, the forces that affect our lives. Leopold's sense of reason, his fusion of logic, perception, his respect for life and, his love of the land inform us still, and challenge us to think clearly about the world around us, and to act accordingly. We honor him best by taking up that challenge.