Communing With Professor Leopold

By Monroe S. Miller

I remember when I got my copy of Professor Aldo Leopold's *A SAND COUNTY ALMANAC* as clearly as though it happened yesterday.

It was in 1970 and I was living about 20 miles north of a city named Saigon in a little country in southeast Asia. I was a sergeant in the U. S. Army, doing what I was told in hopes of surviving to make it home again to Wisconsin.

As with most GIs, I was in a constant state of homesickness, lonely for family and homeland.

That loneliness is probably why I latched onto a copy of A SAND COUNTY ALMANAC when I found it in a shipment of books—all paperbacks—to our unit.

I do not remember the details of those boxes of books we received with regularity—who sent them or why. I would guess they were from publishers or some bookseller organization. They were welcomed by soldiers like me. I read constantly when I was off duty, thanks to those boxes of books.

Professor Leopold's book was especially welcome when I realized it was about home—Wisconsin.

Here I was—a proud alumnus of the College of Agriculture at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and I had only vague awareness of this professor. He was also from the College of Agriculture at the University of Wisconsin. At the time I wondered about that, but only briefly. My focus was on the words he had put on paper, words that reminded me so much of home.

From that time to now, I often randomly open it and read, if only for a bit. The lines are familiar but it often happens that they convey new meanings to me. That reflects, I'd guess, my own accumulating experiences and maturity and changing ways of looking at all things. It also is testimony to the wisdom Professor Leopold shared in the *ALMANAC*.

I've kept the same book for all these years—sentimentality and all that, you know. I smile every once in a while as I am looking at the faded and worn pages that are coming unglued from the binding. It sold for a meager 95 cents, a fair price for a 300 page book. Today you cannot buy a Sunday newspaper for 95 cents!

I have felt a kinship with Professor Leopold grow over my years as a golf course superintendent in Madison, a kinship I'd guess of what I imagine are shared experiences and emotions. The beauty is that he was able to put those experiences in words like no one else.

Professor Leopold made his *ALMANAC* observations in the context of months and of seasons. That has obvious appeal to people like you and me whose work and lives also closely follow those time breaks.

It is curious that I have come to this, a camaraderie of sorts. I cannot quite explain my increasing awareness of Aldo Leopold and a need to know more about him. This spring, for example, Cheryl and I walked from Camp Randall to 2222 Van Hise Avenue after the Cardinal/White intrasquad football game. Professor Leopold and his family lived at that address during his life in Wisconsin. We stopped only briefly for a look and went back to our car.

I cannot quite explain why, lately, I've been doing a lot of reading about Professor Leopold. There are a number of biographies—really good ones—about the man who was the first professor of wildlife management anywhere in the world. The best volume (in my opinion) is one written by Dr. Robert C. McCabe, appropriately titled *THE PROFESSOR*. McCabe was one of Leopold's graduate students, earning both a M.S. and a Ph. D. under ^.L. (as he was called by many who knew him).

McCabe went on to become a faculty member in that department at Wisconsin and ultimately the chairman of Leopold's department. For an inexplicable reason I called the Department of Wildlife Ecology and asked the secretary who answered if, per chance, Professor Emeritus McCabe was in his office. I gulped when she said he was.

What was I to say? Why had I called? What to ask?

Well, such things must have happened to Robert McCabe before. He was perfectly happy to visit and led me on a sketch of his book, giving warm and sentimental answers to my questions. McCabe is a sentimental man.

I cannot explain why I was, this spring on a visit to campus, wandering around on a short street called Farm Place, trying to imagine from photos I have seen where the building that housed Leopold's department was located. It was eventually demolished, but not before I arrived in 1964. Why can I not remember it?

My dad is a grad from the UW College of Agriculture. "Surely he will remember Professor Leopold," I thought to myself.

He did not. I mentioned that to Professor McCabe and he wasn't surprised, telling me that Professor Leopold was ahead of his time and fame didn't come to him until after his death.

It is inexplicable why I've tried to imagine which office was Professor Leopold's in the Soils Building and King Hall. After all, I'd been there for six years. "Why hadn't someone said something?" I wondered.

I also wondered about myself. During the summers when I was an under-

graduate student working at the Nakoma Golf Club I would occasionally walk across the street from Nakoma's shop into the Arboretum. One place I especially enjoyed was an area called The Leopold Pines. I do recall asking myself, "Who was Leopold?" I never once searched for the answer, however.

Aldo Leopold's *A SAND COUNTY ALMANAC* is reading most who manage golf courses out of a deep sense of satisfaction and commitment can enjoy and appreciate. He saw things we see (although you might have to read his thoughts first to realize it). He used words carefully, with respect for his subject, and he used them sparingly. The lines and paragraphs are warm, thoughtful, sentimental, philosophical. They are wise. He could, in a few lines, bring back a flood of childhood memories. Or a few of his chosen words can cause contemplation that will haunt you for weeks.

He can put a worried furrow on your brow or a smile on your face.

I think my favorite two lines of all he has written are in the *ALMANAC's* November thoughts:

"The wind that makes music in November corn is in a hurry. The stalks hum, the loose husks whisk skyward in half-playful swirls, and the wind hurries on."

For me they inspire memories of my rural childhood, the last harvest of the year, the on-coming winter. They speak, too, of life itself.

I think Professor Leopold captured emotions we commonly experience. He was more observant that we are, certainly more literate and likely more sensitive to the world around him.

Read his essay **Great Possessions**, and see if you do not share with him the sights and sounds and feelings of early mornings on your golf course.

Or contemplate his essay **Too Early**. Leopold was an early riser, like most of us, and talks of how early risers are "at ease with each other, perhaps because, unlike those who sleep late, they are given to understatement of their own achievements."

An early morning commune with Aldo Leopold would have included a piping hot cup of coffee, as you will note as you read essay after essay. The two went together for him, just like they do for lots of us who work on golf courses.

Hidden away in paragraphs about wilderness and country things are those lines and thoughts about life. "Our biases are indeed a sensitive index to our affections, our tastes, our loyalties, our generosities, and our manner of wasting weekends", or "it is well that the planting season comes only in spring, for moderation is best in all things", or "our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language."

And so that goes, quietly and softly, line after line, page after page.

Professor Leopold's actions also provide powerful lessons. Professor McCabe recalls a time when the shack on Leopold's property in Sauk County's Fairfield township was vandalized. Is there a golf course anywhere that hasn't been vandalized, frustrating the superintendent and his staff? McCabe recounts his reaction was (and still is today) retribution for the trespassers and thieves. Professor Leopold, on the other hand, was "philosophical, almost clergical" in his attitude. Oh, it momentarily shook his faith in people, but in the end his thoughts were of redemption for the vandals.

Aldo Leopold, as I've read him, had the view and philosophy that the earth is NOT a commodity (very contrary to the belief of too many) but rather a community that includes all of us, and our golf courses.

Careful consideration of his writing reveals that Leopold had the strength and ability to change,—something all of us should acquire. You can tell it from the way he records various experiences

and reactions to them. We should all be as open-minded as he was.

I read Leopold's words, especially his essays dealing with land ethics and wilderness and conservation, and wonder "what would Professor Leopold think of us and our profession?"

I fear that not all in the golf course industry in past years would meet his approval. It doesn't a lot of us, either. It has only been in recent times that proper awareness and sensitivity have been given to siting, wetlands, wildlife, runoff, ground water and scores of other issues that likely would have troubled Professor Leopold. I think that awareness would have his approval, although there are always exceptions.

I do not detect, in his writings, any fundamental disagreement with the existence of golf courses. He had deep feelings about man and leisure time—"how miserable are the idle hours of the ignorant man" he strongly declares in the opening paragraph of his piece called **A Man's Leisure Time**.

It is curious to me that he, in fact, makes some extensive references to golf in one of his best writings, the haunting **Goose Music**. He referred to golf as "sophisticated exercise" and fit it into his thoughts about hunting. He did not belittle our game, although he clearly viewed it as inferior to "a day afield".

I can only guess that Professor Leopold, walking Blackhawk Country Club at dawn with me, might say "yes, this is a good use of land in the middle of a busy, moving and growing city."

I think he would approve of it, knowing one alternative would be more houses, more streets, more stores, more parking lots.

I'd show him the den of fox on the south border of our course, draw his attention to old trees left standing as homes for woodpeckers, and take him to the pond and let him watch the early morning goings on there.

Professor Leopold was a serious and respected ornithologist; he would appreciate the hawk and swallows and mallards and the scores of other kinds of birds that we see every day. Many call our 100 acres "home".

And couldn't we imagine his approval of the USGA Cooperative Sanctuary Program we participate in with the New York Audobon Society?

Muskrat, squirrel, woodchuck, and other small wildlife that call our golf course home would, I know, please him.

I think Professor Leopold would nod favorably on our NOER Research and Education Facility and recognize our efforts to constantly improve our environmental stewardship and citizenship. He likely would applaud our efforts to reduce all inputs to golf courses.

And I believe he would read with interest the many articles that have appeared over the years here in *THE GRASS ROOTS* that reflect on the lifestyle of golf course superintendents and our sentimental attachment to the out of doors.

Wouldn't he read with interest Pat Norton's piece a while back and smile on seeing the picture of Dean Musbach's daughters with a fawn in the northwoods? I think so, on both counts.

Aldo Leopold wrote Part I of *A SAND COUNTY ALMANAC* based on "what his family saw and did at its weekend refuge, The Shack". I've wondered at length about it, reading grad student accounts of time their with Professor Leopold. I visited with Robert McCabe about his feelings and memories of this old chicken coop.

Each year, new faculty at the University of Wisconsin—Madison have

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the opportunity to participate in a program that takes them all across Wisconsin to see and feel a few of the things that make our state what it is. This year, Frank Rossi went on that trip.

I kept track of the tour this year through an account by a reporter who travelled with the new professors. Their itinerary included a visit to the Leopold shack and conversation with Professor Leopold's daughter, Nina Leopold Bradley. I was anxious for Frank to return and tell me about the small building in sand country that had captured my curiosity.

He told of forty people gathered in the shack, out of the rain, quietly listening to Mrs. Bradley talk of her dad. She also read from *A SAND COUNTY ALMANAC*.

Frank was emotionally affected by the experience. I could tell. When he and I talked about it, he offered to call Mrs. Bradley about the possibility of the two of us visiting the little building. She kindly invited us there, Frank for a second visit and me for the first time.

We took off early on a Friday afternoon in May to make our appointed time of 3:00 p.m.

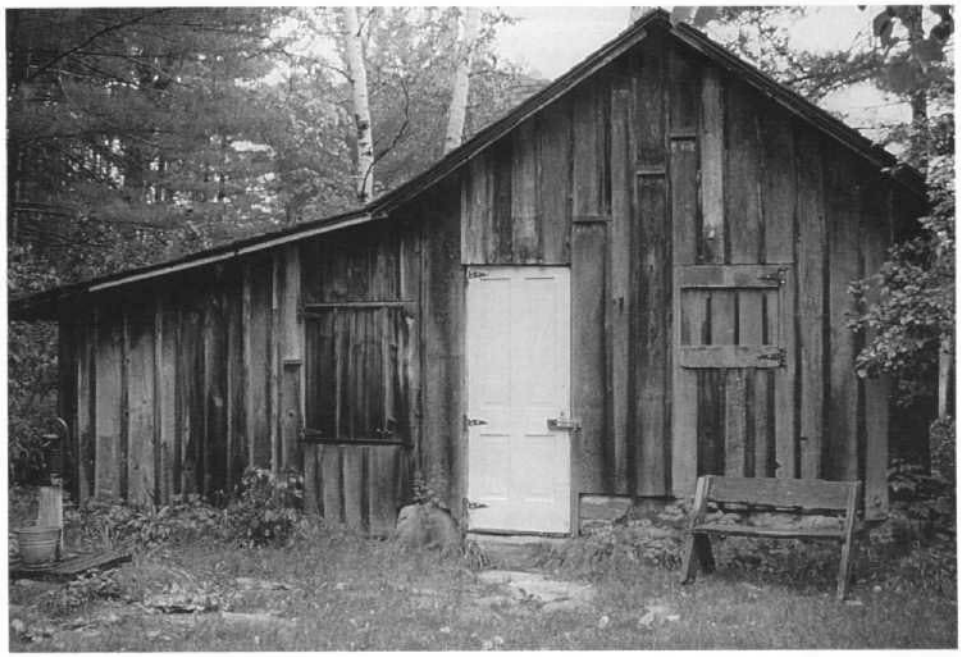
It was a wonderful trip to the Leopold Memorial Reserve. The day was cool and comfortable, and the plentiful rain had given the landscape a rich and prosperous feel. I was ebullient the whole way there from Madison.

I knew I was on the verge of experiencing a dream come true, something that doesn't happen all that often in life. The chance to meet Professor Leopold's daughter seemed to take on greater significance the closer we got to our destination.

The Bradley home is a short distance west of the shack. We drove the lane to their house and Frank got out to announce our arrival. Mrs. Bradley greeted us with a warmth and friendliness that put me at ease. My nervousness of "interfering" was gone immediately.

She led us along the Rustic Road to the shack. It is a short walk from the road to the shack.

As we leisurely walked together, she told Frank and me how the land looked when her father purchased it in the mid-1930s—barren and destitute and desolate. It seemed impossible that it was like that as we walked on the edge of a tall pine woods. The pines were planted by Professor Leopold in what is now almost two generations ago. As we strolled along, I thought about what he had written about pines—"I love all trees, but I am in love with pines."



My first view of the shack left me with the thought that it was smaller than I had imagined. But it looks just like pictures I've seen—rustic and very cozy.

Mrs. Bradley unlocked the door and she and Frank stepped inside. I hesitated, maybe wanting to savor and remember the moment forever. As I entered I surveyed the little room slowly, recalling every word I'd ever read about it. I was flushed with emotion I cannot describe.

Mrs. Bradley invited us to sit as she opened one of the shuttered windows.

I was happy Frank was with me; he is well read and interested in many of the things that go on at the Reserve. He carried the conversation. I was a bit overwhelmed for a while.

Mrs. Bradley was happy to answer all of my very unintellectual questions: "how tall was your dad?" "Did he talk a lot or was he quiet and reflective among his family?" "What do your brothers and sister do now?" "Did your mother enjoy coming here?"

And so on. Very personal questions patiently answered by a sweet and intelligent woman who was clearly very proud of her father.

We lingered a while. Somehow, at once, we knew when it was time to leave. I think Mrs. Bradley knew better than even I why I needed to see this place. I would guess she has seen others with the same need.

We got up and left the shack. She and Frank were visiting about prairie restoration as she locked the small building. I walked around all sides for a final look.

On our way back, a few hundreds of yards from where we parked, Frank and I stopped to see where the **Good Oak** grew "on the bank of the old emigrant road where it climbs the sandhill."

Somehow, I feel more complete, more satisfied now, having made that pilgrimage of sorts. I wonder if I exaggerate to myself when I think of it as spiritual experience.

I know this: I have felt similarly only a few times before—when Cheryl and I visited very early on a cool and misty autumn morning the place of Thoreau's cabin on Walden Pond, when we stood on the Lexington green, when we crossed the bridge at Concord, and when I discovered the graves of many of my ancient grandfathers over the years.

I also know this: how proud we in Wisconsin should be to have had in our midst at a time in history this "mere professor" who has become so influential in environmental matters. It saddens me that he was not fully and truly appreciated during his life. Nearly a quarter of a century passed before his force and vision and wisdom were known as well as they are today.

Imagine if, during the forties, our forefathers had invited Professor Leopold to speak at a WGCSA meeting. He likely would have accepted such an invitation.

The best we can do today is still pretty good. Let us read and think about what he wrote. We can contemplate and commune, each in our own way, with Professor Leopold, even today.

The land we manage and maintain will be better for it.

So will we.