



JOHN MUIR — A Wisconsin Great

By Monroe S. Miller

When the world thinks of great naturalists and conservationists and environmentalists from our beloved Wisconsin, it usually thinks of Aldo Leopold. His name was usually the first to come to my mind, too.

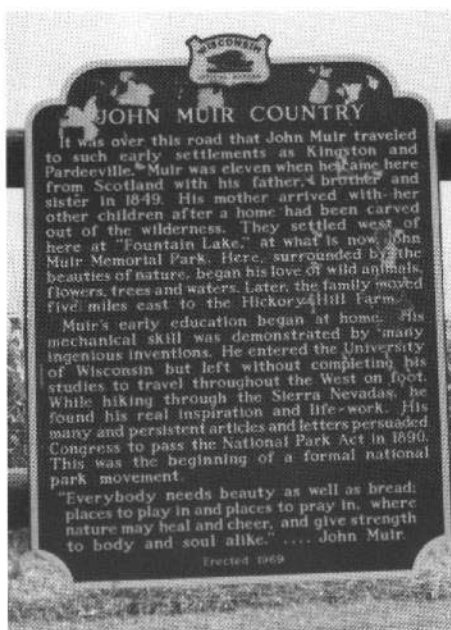
Professor Leopold is more contemporary and his book, *A Sand County Almanac*, has gone through many printings and is on the bookshelf of nearly everyone who loves the outdoors.

It took a trip to the GCSAA conference in San Francisco three years ago to get me thinking about John Muir again. Like many others, Cheryl and I visited Muir Woods and haven't really been the same since. The giant redwoods that have been preserved mainly through the efforts of Muir overwhelmed us. The emotions we felt among those largest living things on earth were like those that result from standing in a great cathedral—what you feel is humility and insignificance. Muir Woods could even be called "nature's cathedral".

When we got home I went to the University Bookstore and bought a copy of Muir's book *The Story of My Boyhood*, knowing that he had grown up in Wisconsin and attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Although I was not completely ignorant of John Muir, I had no idea of the enormity of his life's accomplishment. Time, I fear, has dimmed knowledge of his work.

His boyhood book, which I've now read two other times, led to other extensive reading and to a number of trips to the place in Wisconsin where he grew up. I am lucky—his boyhood home isn't much farther from my home than Aldo Leopold's shack in the sand country. Let me tell you a little bit about his life, especially while he was here in our state.

I find myself often looking for connections, with people and places and events. They were plenty evident with Muir—Scotsman, farm kid, Wisconsin grown, UW-Madison education.

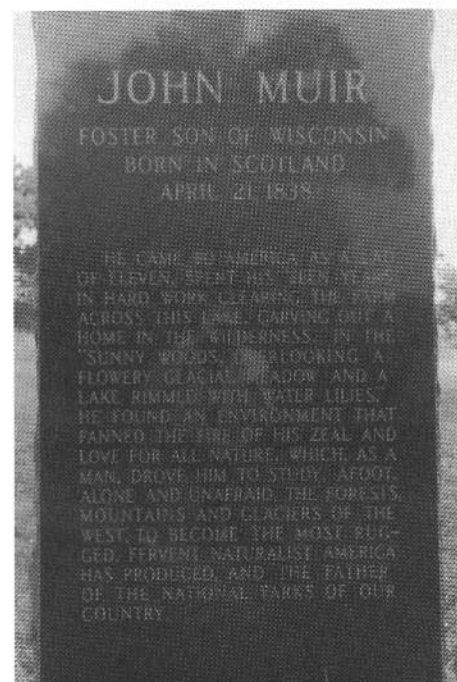


Wisconsin road marker south of Montello on Wisconsin Highway 22, east of Muir Memorial Park.



Welcome sign at Muir Memorial Park.

Those all served as an inspiration to learn more. Unlikely as it would seem, I found a connection with Muir and golf. Two other Scottish immigrant families in the same farm and rural neighborhood the Muirs lived in had sons the same age as John. The Grays, from Edinburgh, lived south of the Muir farm, and the Taylors farmed next to the Muirs. David Taylor and David Gray were strong friends with John Muir. David Taylor,



Official memorial sign at Muir Park.



Ennis Lake today. The original Muir homestead would have been on the left of the photo, across the lake. Nothing of that homestead remains today.



Ennis Lake, formerly Muir Lake and formerly Fountain Lake.

as a competitive youth in Scotland, had played "goff" (golf)!

Muir came to Wisconsin from Dunbar, Scotland, a coastal town east of Edinburgh and down the coast (south) from St. Andrews. His father Daniel was a tough and disciplined parent—John had learned almost the entire bible by heart by the age of eleven, the age when the family left for America. The discipline was something John carried with him his entire life, something that he was in fact grateful for having. So tough was his father that he kept the diets of the children light, feeling that a spartan existence nurtured the soul.

Daniel Muir owned a grain shop in Dunbar. He sold it in 1849 and emigrated to Wisconsin. Although he wasn't a farmer in Scotland, he left there because of a desire to own land. He chose Wisconsin because an American told him most of the wheat he bought came from our state. It may have been good luck that he was ignorant in farming matters—he well might have ended up elsewhere.

But fate brought the Muirs to an area south and a little west of Montello (north and a bit east of Portage) in Marquette county. The soil was thin, but he chose it over rich bottomland soil because of the value he placed on wood and water. They built their homestead on 160 acres on the edge of a pond Muir named Fountain Lake. Generations later knew it as Muir Lake; today, maps and gazeteers show it as Ennis Lake.

John Muir was ecstatic with the new home in Wisconsin. Their farm was rich with wildlife, birds, insects and, maybe especially, plant life. If you drive to the farm site today, you will see a lot of what John Muir saw 150 years ago. The lake area is wild and varied and has been preserved as a 160 acre county park, named for John Muir. Emeritus Professor Hugh Iltis of the UW-Madison (for years he was director of the UW Herbarium), a world renown botanist, once collected more than 250 plant species on a brief visit to the lake. The soil types vary so much that a piece of ground only 12 inches higher than an adjacent piece yields an entirely different flora.

Music farmed at the Fountain Lake site for eight years. Daniel Muir, as I have noted, had no knowledge of agriculture, used no fertilizer or manure on his fields, and wore the land to the point of poor crop yields.

So he started a new homestead about four miles east and south of Fountain Lake, and named it Hickory Hill. He built a large stone house and a very substantial barn. Both are still in use today. He put the buildings in the middle of his 320 acres so his sons wouldn't waste time walking to the fields to work!

Hard work, long days and no free time were the story of John Muir's youth. Despite the gruelling 16 hour days, he could survive on little sleep and spent nights reading and learning on his own. The only formal education of his childhood came in Dunbar, Scotland. Yet he borrowed books by Dickens, Shakespeare, Milton and other classic authors. He read the journals of explorers like Mungo Park and Alexander von Humboldt. All inspired him throughout his life.

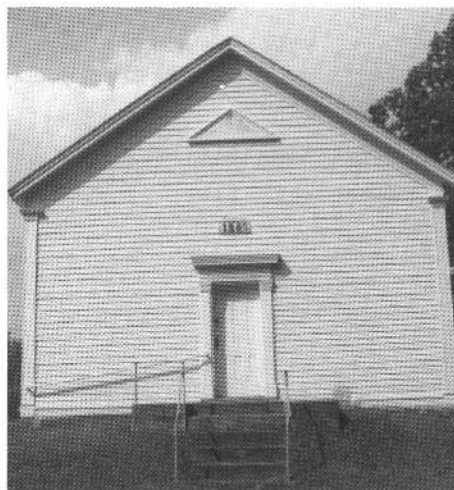
And Muir early on showed a genius for machinery. Many days, after five hours of sleep in the Hickory Hill farmhouse, he would go the the cellar to work on his inventions. He built things from scraps of metal and from scraps of wood, things like

pyrometers, hygrometers, water-wheels and clocks. He built a sawmill, and scrap from an old wagon ended up a thermometer that was so sensitive it detected a man's body heat from four feet away.

He was also an accomplished whittler, which led to a number of inventions, and in 1860 a neighbor suggested John take some of his inventions to the Wisconsin Agricultural Fair in Madison. After a lot of soul searching, he decided to travel to Madison. He was 22 years old and left home with \$15 in his pocket and his hickory wood inventions in a wagon. His brother took him to Pardeeville to catch the train to Madison.

Muir was the hit of the fair, making headlines in the *Wisconsin State Journal*—"An Ingenious Whittler". Interestingly, the State Fair was held where we all now watch the Badgers play football—Camp Randall on the UW-Madison campus.

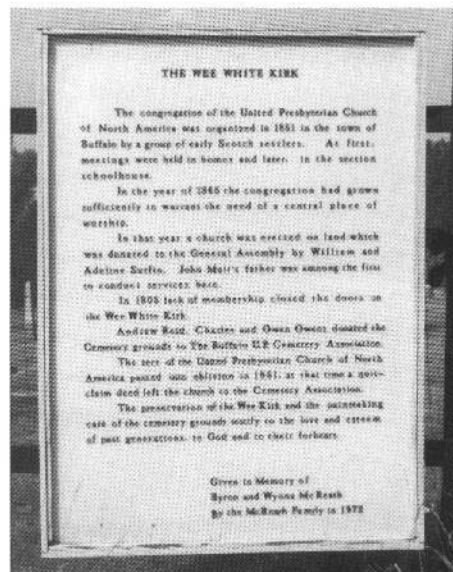
Two things happened to Muir while in Madison: he found a job in
(Continued on page 35)



The small Presbyterian church where Daniel Muir, John's father, was a frequent preacher.



The Kearns family has had the Muir family farm—Hickory Hill—for over 100 years.



Historical sign next to cemetery and "wee kirk".



Observatory Hill, one of Muir's favorite places near his home.

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Prairie du Chien, which meant he wouldn't be going back to the family farm at Hickory Hill. And, like so many before and after him, he fell in love with the University of Wisconsin campus in Madison. John worked in Prairie du Chien for about three months, and on February 6, 1861 he enrolled at the great State University of Wisconsin.

He was interviewed by Dr. John Sterling, a professor and namesake of Sterling Hall. Since the school was only 13 years old, John had the unique opportunity to become familiar with men whose names are now legendary—Barnard, Lathrop, Carr and Sterling. He lived in the northeast corner of North Hall—still in use today on Bascom Hill overlooking Lake Mendota. He quickly fell in love with this beautiful large lake, the same one I look at nearly every day from my golf course on its south shore or from my house on the north side of it.

Muir never forgot the University or Lake Mendota. He swam in it frequently and made countless walks along its shores, looking for bluebirds and robins and bobolinks and thrashers—"gushing, gurgling, unexhaustable fountains of song..." Many times lately, while at our pump station or at the marina, I have wondered if John Muir made it down this far on Lake Mendota's shoreline, probably about a mile from the western edge of the campus.

It was on campus Muir learned the large black locust trees were botanical brothers to the small pea plant, a discovery that led him to become a fanatical botanist the rest of his life. To him it was incredible that both plants were legumes.

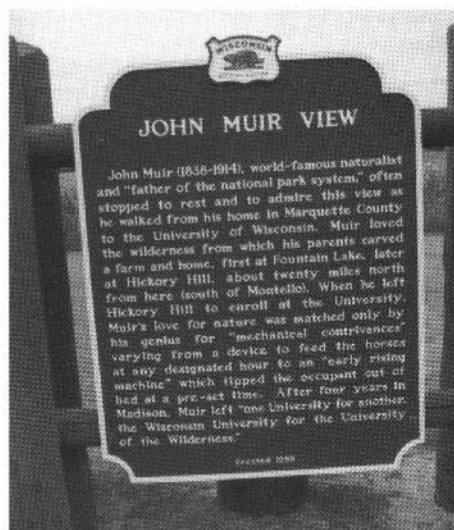
Muir stayed at the UW-Madison until his junior year and then dropped out at age 25. From a hilltop on campus near Lake Mendota, "with streaming eyes I bade my Alma Mater farewell." Thirty-four years later John Muir returned to Madison to receive an honorary degree from Wisconsin.

Muir left Madison to make history like few other natural scientists ever have, or ever will for that matter. His legacy includes authorship of many many books, the founding of the Sierra Club (he was its first president), the Muir Woods north of San Francisco, and the John Muir Institute. He started the National Parks system and was a friend and advisor to presidents. A glacier is

named for him, as is a mountain peak. Books have been written about John's awesome and monumental accomplishments. And even though he was decades his senior, Ralph Waldo Emerson said few inspired him like Wisconsin's John Muir.

Yet to the end, he remained a simple man, often giving advice that rings especially clear for golf course superintendents like you and me:

"Keep close to Nature's heart, yourself; and break clear away, once in awhile, and climb a mountain or spend a week in the woods. Wash your spirit clean..."



John Muir View roadside marker south of Pardeeville.



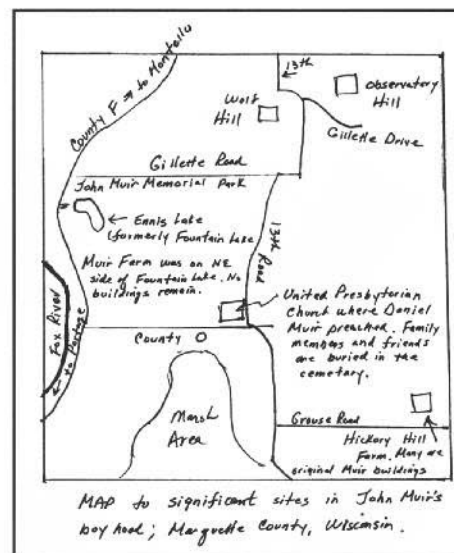
The John Muir view outside of Pardeeville.

If you don't have a week to "wash your spirit clean", take a few hours and go to the Montello area and visit Muir Park, see the old Presbyterian church (a kirk, as the Scottish call it and as the sign above the door says) his father preached in, walk around Fountain Lake (now Ennis Lake) and drive past the Hickory Hill Farm. You can climb Observatory Hill like John did many times in his youth (ask permission first) and sit a bit and read his words and contemplate what this Wisconsin boy has meant to mankind.

You won't be the same after you do. 🌿



Daniel Muir built the Hickory Hill farmstead in the center of his land to save time walking to the fields.



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