



# A VISIT TO WALDEN POND

By Monroe S. Miller

Henry David Thoreau was one of the first environmentalists. Maybe in his time the word "naturalist" was more accurate. Either way, he observed and wrote about man's relationship with the world he lives in. That is probably what inspired me to first visit Walden Pond many years ago. I've been there several times since, once with Cheryl and most recently last fall.

Sensitivity to environmental issues, as I look back over my career, is one issue that has grown immensely. It is at the point now where it is a part of the very fabric of a career as a responsible golf course superintendent. In that context, men like Thoreau, John Burroughs, John Muir and Aldo Leopold are even more impressive. Thoreau was generations ahead of his time.

Thoreau's willingness to live a spartan existence and to spend time as an observer and a thinker pushes him into the arena of philosophy. I have read several of his books and many of his essays and willingly admit he treads on ground I don't always want to share when he talks about civil disobedience, government and any number of other subjects. But, from a purist viewpoint, his thinking about man and nature is close to the mark.

Henry was born at the place most of us consider the birthplace of our freedom in America—Concord, Massachusetts—and he lived there most of his life (1817-1862). It was a rich time in that small New England village; Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, the Alcotts, Ellery Channing and Margaret Fuller also called Concord home during Thoreau's life. Even though the man loved solitude, he didn't live in a vacuum and knew these intellectuals and writers well.

By training at Harvard University, he was a teacher. But he didn't last long in that career because of his

unwillingness to execute the strict discipline on students required by the school. After odd jobs around Concord from 1837 to 1845, he arranged with Emerson to build a small cabin on Emerson's land at Walden Pond.

Walden Pond is south and a little bit east of Concord village by about a mile and a half. The site Thoreau chose for his small house was above the lake level on a slope north of a cove that now carries Thoreau's name. Although it is relatively close to town, I can testify that you have a sense of remoteness at the home site.

Starting with site clearing in March of 1845, Thoreau began his shelter.

He borrowed an axe, cut and hewed the timber he would need. With other borrowed tools, he shaped studs and rafters, cut mortises and tenons and roughed frame members he needed. He dug the cellar, laid stone piers for a foundation that supported the sills.

By mid-April, the house was framed. He built a chimney and hearth on one end, and with \$8.035 he purchased used shanty boards to cover the roof and frame. He moved in on July 4, 1845 and worked until mid-November on windows, plaster and shingles. When he was done he had "a tight shingled and plastered house, ten feet wide by fifteen feet long, and eight-foot posts, with a garret and a closet, a large window on



Thoreau's final resting place is in Concord...



on Authors Ridge. The small stone on the left marks where he is buried.



The site of Thoreau's cabin was found in 1945, one hundred years after he built it.



A volunteer chestnut growing from a deceased tree stump in Walden Park. Notice foliage already has infection.



The site of Thoreau's cabin; note the chimney foundation in the back.

each side, two trap doors, one door at the end and a brick fireplace opposite."

All for \$28.125!

Over the months he fitted his small dwelling with the bare essentials of furniture he already owned, as well as cooking utensils.

He didn't work hard (which he readily admitted) and therefore didn't eat much. Fishing, some hunting and gardening provided the food he needed. He cut wood for fuel and grew beans for cash. Occasionally, he did odd jobs in Concord for money when he needed it. At the end of 1845, his income amounted to \$23.44 and his total expenses (other than the shack) were \$14.725!

Thoreau had brought some books about surveying in 1840, as well as some basic instruments. In time he became very proficient at surveying (remember, he was self-taught) and in 1848 was named the village surveyor-in-chief. He was exacting in his work and had projects as far away as New Jersey. One interesting thing he did was map Walden Pond, including a depth profile. The Walden Pond project and much of his other work has been checked with the most modern instruments, as recently as 1970; all studies confirm the accuracy and near perfect correctness of Thoreau's work.

HDT lived at Walden Pond for two years, two months and two days (July 4, 1845—September 6, 1847). I guess in that time he figured he had extracted about as much from the experience as he could. He moved from Walden to Emerson's home to house sit while RWE was lecturing in Europe. After that he moved to his parents house and lived there until he died at the young age of 44 of tuberculosis.

In his life, mostly after Walden, he did a fair amount of travelling—to the Maine Woods (read the book sometime), Cape Cod, the White Mountains in New Hampshire, Canada, and even to Minnesota. Don't you wonder if his trip to our neighbor to the north and west took him across Wisconsin? Where did he stop? Did he stay overnight while here?

He ran the family pencil business until he died in 1862. But he spent a lot of his time after Walden writing. If one looks long enough, there always seems to be a personal connection, even if it is by a mere slender thread.



The stone pile built from rocks carried there by pilgrims to Walden.



The replica of Thoreau's cabin in the park, along with a bronze statue of HDT.



Tranquil, peaceful Walden Pond, taken last fall.

Here is the one I discovered for myself. I learned that Thoreau's book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* was published in 1849 by the Boston publishing firm of James Munroe and Co. Some research revealed that James' great great grandfather (George Munroe) and my seven great grandfather (William Munroe) were brothers! Both are buried in the cemetery near the village green in Lexington, Massachusetts.

*Walden* was published in 1854 and except for a few years between the first and second printings, it has never gone out of print. In fact, it has been translated into dozens of languages. It is a book that most of us have read.

Thoreau visited Walden Pond for the last time in his life in September 1861 and died the following May.

When Thoreau left his house after two years, two months and two days, he gave it to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson, in turn, sold it to his gardener. It was moved some distance away. After that it was again moved and finally used for scrap lumber in 1868.

Over the years, the site of Thoreau's cabin became overgrown and lost. Walden, after his time, became a very popular public place, and it remains so yet today.

In November of 1945, a hundred years after Thoreau moved to the

(Continued on page 35)

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(Continued from page 33)

slope above the pond's prominent cove, an amateur historian and Thoreau enthusiast named Roland Wells Robinson discovered and excavated the foundation of the Thoreau chimney. In July of 1947, the Thoreau Society dedicated an inscribed fieldstone to mark the hearth site. And in 1965 the National Park Service designated Walden Pond a registered national historic landmark.

Today, near the parking area for the park, you can visit a replica of Thoreau's house before you hike to the cabin site itself. If you plan to visit this touching place, take with you a stone from your yard or your golf course and place it with others carried there from all over the world as a tribute to this visionary. I have done it each time I have visited.

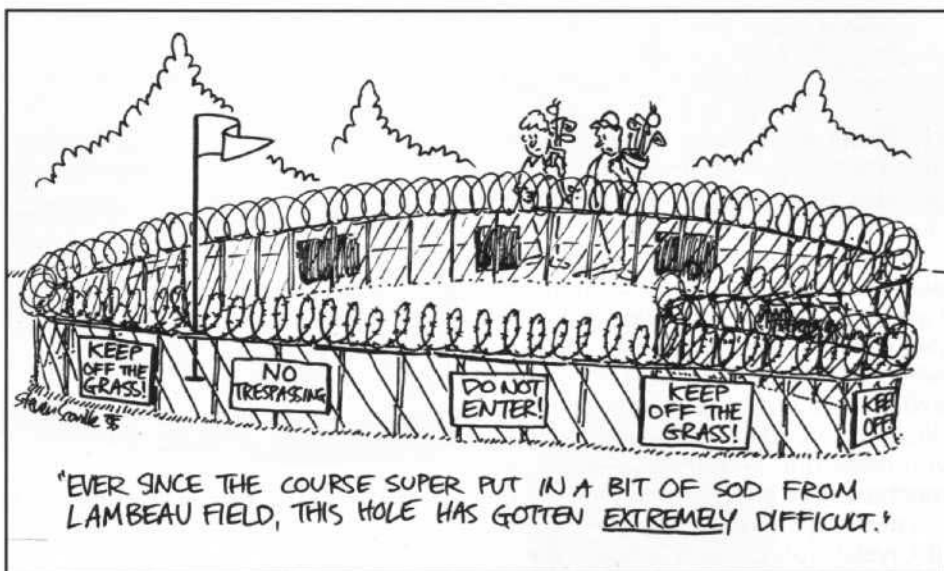
Nature to Henry David Thoreau wasn't just a background to man's life; rather, he believed it to be a part of each of our lives. It was not raw material to use and use up, but something that was essential to our inner being. I have to believe that for those of us who work so closely with

nature, in the very midst of it, such a philosophy is felt and (hopefully) believed.

You can easily, today, go to a library or your favorite bookstore and begin reading books by Thoreau and about him. I think you will appreciate them and find them interesting and even inspiring. And if you are even close to Boston sometime, try to visit

Walden Pond. A part of the pilgrimage should include a stop at the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord; Thoreau is buried in a peaceful spot called "Authors Ridge" near the Alcotts, Nathaniel Hawthorne and his good friend and mentor R. Emerson.

It is unlikely you would remain untouched by seeing these very special places. 🌿



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