



JOHN BURROUGHS

By Monroe S. Miller

Sit down some time and make a list of all the things that make you proud to be part of the profession we are in. My list would be very long. And if we compared those lists among ourselves, there are many characteristics and features that would appear on everybody's list.

Chances are good we all take pride in our land stewardship. Golf courses offer open spaces, wildlife habitat, healthy recreation, green spaces and more than I have room to repeat here. Their role is even more special in the many urban areas where so many are found.

Land stewardship long ago piqued my interest in nature and landscapes, even as a farm kid. And isn't it interesting that two of the foremost environmental thinkers and natural writers — John Muir and Aldo Leopold — lived so close, especially to those of us in south central Wisconsin. The parallels, a generation apart, are astonishing. Muir grew up near Portage and attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Leopold bought a farm in the sand country near Portage and was a professor at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Historians add a third albeit lesser known name to these two naturalists — historian Frederick Jackson Turner.

Is it an accident — pure chance — that three notables arose from a Wisconsin neighborhood? Why is our state seen in the forefront of environmental issues?

There is a theory that it isn't accidental, that our ancestors had wisdom in combining our land grant agricultural college on the same campus as the liberal arts college, while some states chose to separate them. On the Madison campus, professors from varying disciplines raise environmental questions, and students from varying majors ponder them from their own unique points of view. In our state, still an agricultural and rural

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On the porch at Woodchuck Lodge.



View of the Catskills from Woodchuck Lodge at the turn of the century.



Woodchuck Lodge and barn at the turn of the century.



Riverby from the orchard.



John Muir and John Burroughs, Pasadena, California.



John Burroughs and John Muir in the Yosemite.

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one, people have ties to the land and the landscape. There are no great mountain ranges or breathtaking deserts. Citizens are a part of the land ethic because they can relate to the land, just as we do everyday of our working lives.

Muir and Leopold are especially interesting not just because they were our citizens and such notable natural scientists, but because they were such talented and distinctive writers. And when it comes to writings by naturalists, few have been better than one of America's earliest and greatest naturalists, John Burroughs.

John Burroughs was a contemporary of John Muir and, in fact, a good friend of Muir's. Burroughs traveled widely around the world, including a trip to Yosemite with John Muir and a trip to California to visit him. But he spent most of his 85 years near where he was born and raised in New York State. I did substantial reading of Burroughs essays and books and spent time with books written by his biographers, especially his secretary in the later years of his life and his biographer, Dr. Clara Barrus. I found a first edition 1914 copy of her book *John Burroughs — Our Friend* on a dollar cart in a used book store here in Madison. It is a treasure, and a few of the photos here are from that book. After I left Frank Rossi's farm last fall I went in search of the earthly places of John Burroughs and his writings. What a rewarding day and a half.

He was born in 1837 on a farm in the hills, the Catskills, near Roxbury, New York in Delaware County. The farm is at the foot of a mountain named, at least on the map I used, Old Clump. I had business in Amsterdam, New York, and drove down State Highway 30 from there to the Roxbury area. The Burroughs place is located on Burroughs Memorial Road, a half-paved, half gravel road just off Highway 30, due west of the village of Roxbury.

Most of New York is quite rural, and this part of the state is indeed rural. Burroughs started school at the age of five and despite his obvious intelligence only went in the winter months after the age of 12; there was farm work for farm boys to do. His youth reads like Muir's — up late at night, reading by candlelight. His father thought him odd and never sympathized with his literary work.



Woodchuck Lodge from across the road. Burroughs wrote here and in the haymow of the barns in the summers later in his life.



The primitive construction of Woodchuck Lodge is evident from close up.



Woodchuck Lodge is a national historic landmark.



The view of the Delaware county, NY, Catskills from Burroughs gravesite.

Interestingly, especially at this time of year, the only type of farm work Burroughs enjoyed was sugar making from the maple woods on their farm. He sold the sugar in Roxbury, the first money he made.

On a Sunday in May, when Burroughs was only seven or eight as he recalled, he was in the woods with his brothers, searching for winter-

green. He spotted a small, bluish bird with a white spot on each wing. He was enthralled and when asked the two brothers if they knew what the bird was, of course they did not. But Burroughs had fallen into a deep interest of the nature around him. There were no reference books on birds or a bird identification book for him to use and it was nearly 20 years

later that he figured out the bird was the black-throated blue warbler.

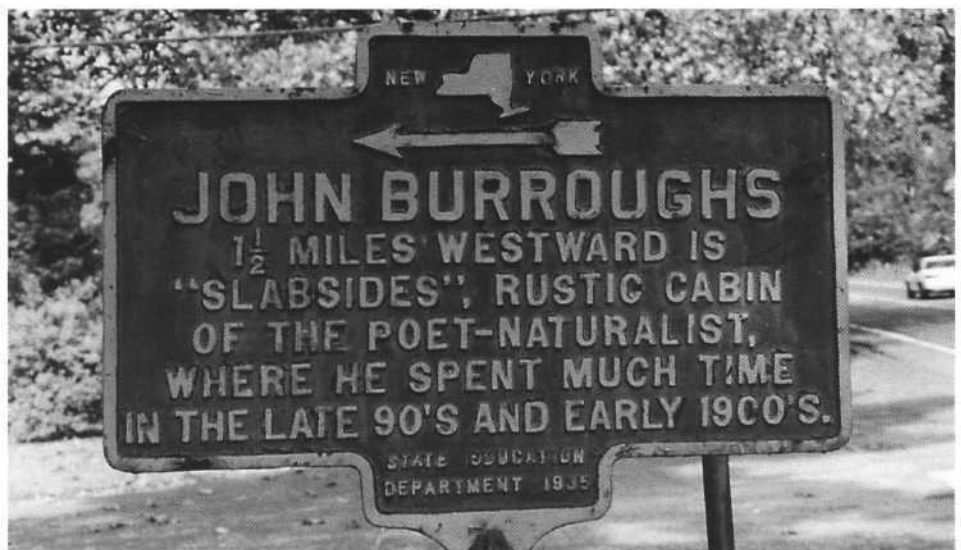
Burroughs was later to write of the enormous flocks of passenger pigeons of his youth, of his willingness to hunt — he often “forgot” to shoot — and his wild imagination of what the world was made of. He was curious and alert and collected insects and honeycombs. Emerson and Thoreau and Wordsworth influenced his thinking and he craved nature articles in journals like *Atlantic Monthly*. He had a love of nature at an early age and it was with him until he died.

He stayed at the home farm until he was 17, when he became a teacher at a one-room school at Tangier, New York. He saved nearly all his salary from six months’ work and used it to study at the Heeding Literary Institute in Ashland, New York. It was a school of 200 students located what is today a short distance from Roxbury, probably a dozen miles or so. One more season in a country school preceded his enrollment at the Cooperstown Seminary, the village now famous for the baseball hall of fame. The three months there ended Burroughs’ formal education. But it was those two years that inspired him to write, and to write in a style “without affection and make-believe and dead wood.”

Burroughs married in 1857, taught one term at a school in Buffalo Grove, Illinois and terms in various schools in New York until 1863. Summers were almost always spent helping with the work on the home farm near Roxbury.

In the spring of 1863, while teaching at a school near the Army Military Academy at West Point, New York, he visited the library at the Academy. He came upon a book by John James Audubon that included artwork by the famous ornithologist. Burroughs was taken over by them. A new world opened to him, and he discovered the identity of that small bird he watched as a seven year old youth. He wrote his first paper, “The Return of the Birds,” that fall while he was in Washington, D.C.

Burroughs lived in D.C. for ten years, from age 27 to age 37 and worked in the Quartermaster General’s Department (Comptroller of the Currency). The nature of the work — he was a clerk — left him the leisure time to do what he really wanted to do — write. His writing



Slabsides is a source of pride for West Park, NY.



A view not unlike that seen by John Burroughs from the porch at Slabsides.



“Rustic” is an understatement when describing Slabsides. It is a walk into the woods from the road.



John Burroughs’ Slabsides, a couple of miles from his home at Riverby, along the Hudson River.

grew in quality and strength and gained recognition for him.

Burroughs met Walt Whitman in Washington, D.C. and he became a good friend and advisor to Burroughs. His first book, “Notes on Walt

Whitman, Poet and Person,” was published during 1867. Four years later his first nature book, “Wake-Robin,” was published. Walt Whitman selected the title.

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In 1873, Burroughs purchased a small fruit farm on the Hudson River and named it Riverby. He wrote many books and essays there, many from observations made on this small farm. One, "Fuss and Feathers," was about observations he made in his yard about wrens and a nesting box he built for them.

He hadn't lived at Riverby very long before he decided he needed a place of quiet and solitude for writing and observation. Part of the need for this "home away from home" was his hospitality; many people came to visit for extended periods by his generous invitation, of course. His brother Hiram, John's only son Julian, and John built a rustic cabin a couple of miles from Riverby and named it Slabsides. It is a two story, rough house covered with slab wood. As I discovered this past fall, both Riverby and Slabsides are in good shape. Slabsides is maintained by the John Burroughs Association, headquartered in New York City at the American Museum of Natural History. Burroughs' granddaughter lives at Riverby.

Over the years many famous Americans visited Burroughs at Slabsides, including President Teddy Roosevelt. One of the first visitors was, of course, John Muir. Among naturalists of that time, John Muir was known as "John-o'-Mountain" and John Burroughs was known as "John-o'-Birds." Roosevelt and Burroughs on an afternoon at Slabsides would contest to see who could find more birds in the area around the cabin. It was a thrill for me to sit on the same porch as these famous men did a hundred and more years ago.

In the summer of 1908 Burroughs bought the farm that adjoined the old home farm. It was a half-mile from the homestead and when he bought it, it was in rough shape. He named it Woodchuck Lodge, and it became his summer home from 1909 until his death. He called it Woodchuck Lodge because of the many woodchucks in the neighborhood. The animals bothered his garden, to the point he tried to keep the population down by shooting them. He even had a coat made from the skins! It was to no avail, as he said "when I shoot one, seven come to the funeral."

John Burroughs' gift to the world was 25 books and hundreds of

essays and articles in magazines like *The Century*, *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and many others. More than a million and a half books authored by Burroughs were sold before they went out of print. He was not a wealthy man and once told a friend that if he had even gotten a dollar for every SET of books of his sold, he would have been well off. Things were different then.

He wrote of common place things, animals and birds and landscapes and weather and everything natural around him. He clearly connected with John Muir that way. Muir traveled constantly. John Burroughs studied, literally, his own backyard and his farm. John wrote pieces a hundred and fifty years ago that yet today make great reads.

I listed some of the titles that themselves are inviting to a reader: *Winter Sunshine*, *Locusts and Wild Honey*, *Leaf and Tendril*, *Birch*

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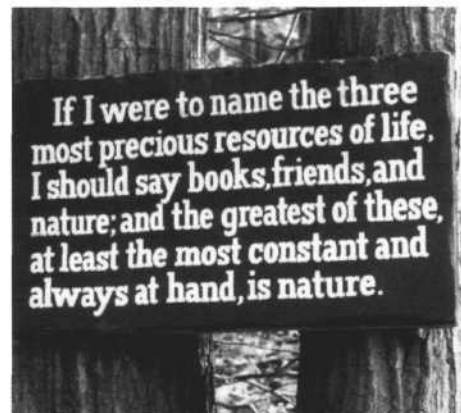
The bronze casting identifying John Burroughs grave.



Burroughs Memorial Field near Woodchuck Lodge.



John Burroughs' final resting place, on the hill above Woodchuck Lodge.



Wisdom from John Burroughs.

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Browsing, The Snow-Walkers, Our Rural Divinity, The Divine Soil, The Flight of the Eagle, The Long Road, and Maple Sugar Days.

The essays I like best are of the seasons. "Spring - Nature's Door Ajar," "Summer - Nature's Door Wide Open," "Autumn - Nature's Invitation to Rest," and "Winter - Nature's Door Closed." All are nature writing at its best.

The peaceful trip along Burroughs Memorial Road takes you past Woodchuck Lodge. I was there on a beautiful fall day and not a soul was around. I registered, sat on the porch and took a photo of the view of the Catskills that Burroughs undoubtedly enjoyed countless times.

A little way down the road west is the John Burroughs Memorial Field. I pulled off the side of the narrow road — there isn't much room — and walked up the hill to read the outdoor display of the historical sites. From there, with camera and coffee and solitude I walked up the hill further, to the east, and stopped when I arrived at Burroughs' humble grave. It is on a field on his farm, and the grave is surrounded by a low, dry laid wall of flat, weathered stones gathered from there. The fall color was spectacular and from the old photographs I have studied it was easy to see how much of the land has been given back to the woods.

I left after an hour or so, drove on west for a half mile or less, past the original Burroughs farm, around Old Clump Mountain he has written about exploring in his youth, back down Hardscrabble Road (parts of which are a rough dirt road), and back to Highway 30.

When I finally left the area I took Highway 30 to Highway 28, 28 to 187 and went south to an exit to West Park. To find Riverby I had to go to the Post Office for information on how to get to Riverby Lane. It is a private home — his granddaughter lives there. Directions to Slabsides were easy and on signage on the main street in town. My visit was again alone — not a soul around. The pictures here show clearly how rustic and remote it is.

While we were in California to attend the GCSAA conference, Oscar Peterson and I made a quick trip to Martinez, California where John Muir had a ranch and farm and where his final resting place is. We were on a

self-guided tour of the house. Upstairs, on the mantle above the fireplace in his study and library, was a picture of his friend and colleague and contemporary, John Burroughs.

For me, the circle was complete. 🌿



Riverby today, from the road.



Although located on the Main road through West Park, Riverby is hard to find.



Notice the two pictures of John Burroughs on the mantel of a fireplace in the library of John Muir's home in Martinez, California.

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