

A Sand County Visit

By Neal McLain

In July 2011, Ed Barrios and I attended the *Conserving the Future* conference in Madison, Wisconsin.^[1] On the day before the conference began, we were invited to join a bus tour to the Aldo Leopold Center, in Sauk County, an hour's drive from Madison.

The following article is reprinted from the August 2011 issue of *Chapter News*.

Aldo Leopold

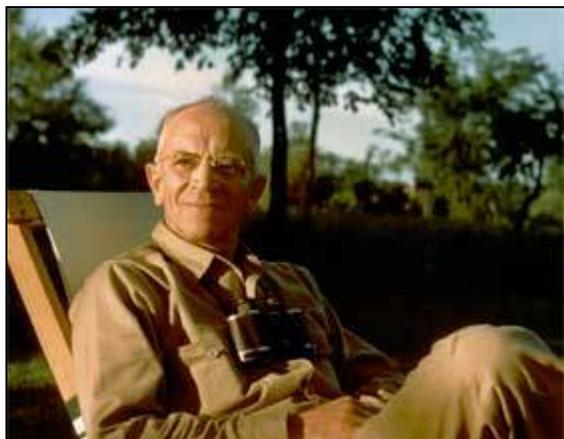


Photo: Aldo Leopold Foundation

Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) is one of the founders of the environmental conservation movement in the United States. He is best known as the author of *A Sand County Almanac*,^[2] one of the seminal writings in environmental studies.

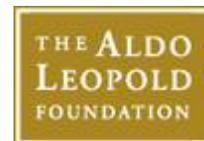
During his lifetime, Leopold served as forest assistant for the USDA Forest Service, where he developed the first comprehensive management plan for the Grand Canyon and wrote the Forest Service's first game and fish handbook. In 1924, he transferred to the U.S. Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, and became an associate director. In 1933 he was appointed Professor of Game Management in the Agricultural Economics

Department at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the first such professorship of wildlife management.

After moving to Madison, Leopold purchased an eighty-acre farm near the Wisconsin River in the Sauk County, Wisconsin. Although the family continued to live near the UW campus in Madison, they spent many weekends at the farm, living in a small frame building called "the shack." During their stays at the farm, the family farmed the land, planted trees, and restored wetlands. Among other species, the family planted numerous pines, many of which stand to this day.

After Leopold's death in 1948, the Sauk County property remained in the family, and was closed to the public. The property was well known locally, but visits were available only by special permission.

Through the efforts of The Aldo Leopold Foundation, an independent non-profit corporation, the property is now open to the public. The Foundation has stabilized the shack, cleaned and mowed the grounds, and cleared pathways. The foundation's headquarters is in The Leopold Center, a newly constructed building on the property about a mile from the shack. According to the Foundation's website:



"Opened in 2007, the Leopold Center was built using pines the Leopold family planted in the 1930s and '40s and implements a wide spectrum of green building techniques and technologies. The Leopold Center begins to demonstrate the many ecological, economic, and cultural harvests we may begin to reap when we commit to caring for land."^[3]

The Leopold Center

Our visit The Leopold Center began with a bus trip—on a Badger Bus of course.



We headed northwest from Madison toward Sauk County, through rural farmland. The corn was indeed "knee high by the Fourth of July."



When we arrived, we were split into two groups. One group visited The Leopold Center while the other group visited the shack. After lunch, we traded places. Ed and I joined the group that started at The Center.

The Center consists of five buildings arranged around a central courtyard. The buildings include exhibit space, meeting rooms, and staff offices.

The Leopold Center's Executive Director, Buddy Huffaker, welcomed us and described the history of the Center and its efforts to restore the property. He also described the Center's "commitment to land stewardship." ^[4] The Leopold Center is claimed to be first carbon neutral building certified by LEED—meaning annual operations account for no net gain in carbon dioxide emissions.



Photos: Neal McLain

The Leopold Center exhibit and staff office building.

The Leopold Center: Exhibit Space



Photo: Aldo Leopold Foundation



Photo: Neal McLain

Executive Director Buddy Huffaker welcomes our group to the exhibit space.



Photo: Aldo Leopold Foundation

Aldo Leopold's youngest daughter Estella Planting pines with her pet squirrel "Poco."



Photo: Neal McLain

Above: "The Outlook" - bronze relief sculpture
 Right: Artist's statement

The Outlook
Homer Dahn

The last sentence of Aldo's essay "The Land Ethic" – the last part of A Sand County Almanac – is called "The Outlook." Looking ahead, Leopold called upon his readers to join him as members of a "thinking community" that demonstrated "love, respect, and admiration for land and a high regard for its value."

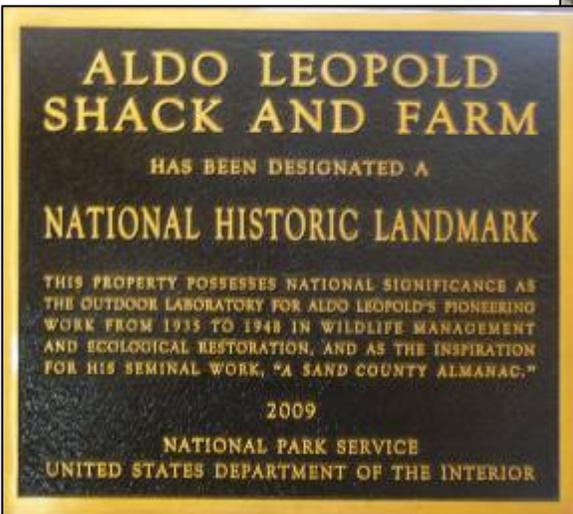
I chose this image of Leopold looking out from the Shack for this piece because it seemed to capture so well the thoughtfulness he himself demonstrated in facing the future.

I am grateful for Leopold's vision, for the sincere commitment of those who sponsored this work, and for the opportunity to present it here in this place of inspiration.

The Leopold Center: Structures

Right: The office building. Note the solar panels on the roof.

Below: The fireplace, constructed of sandstone recycled from a building formerly located at Dane County Regional Airport. Note the design of the benches. We'll see benches of the same design at the shack.



Above: Native plants in the courtyard

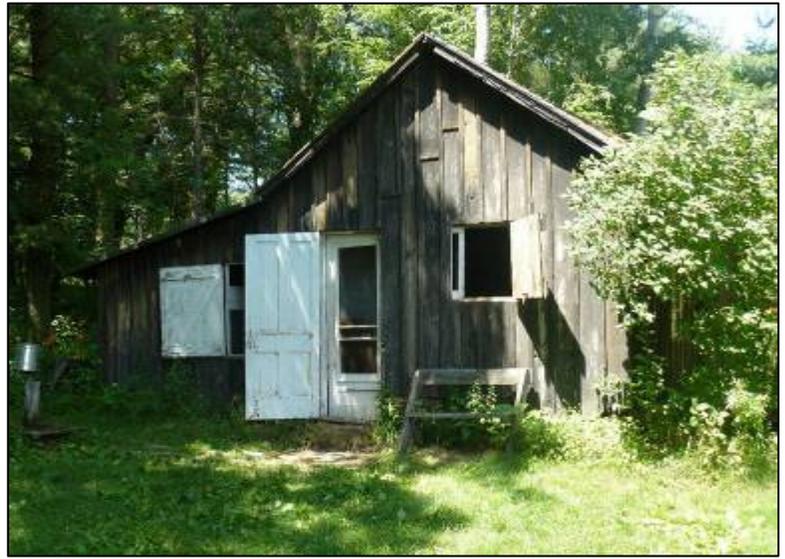
Right: Staff breakroom, offices beyond



Photos: Neal McLain

The Leopold Center: The Shack

The shack is a one-room building with dining, kitchen, and sleeping areas surrounding a central fireplace.



Photos: Neal McLain

The Leopold Bench

The Leopold Center: The Land

The Leopold family farm lies near southern bank of the Wisconsin River in Sauk County, one of several central Wisconsin Counties collectively known as the "sand counties" in recognition of the local soils: sand.



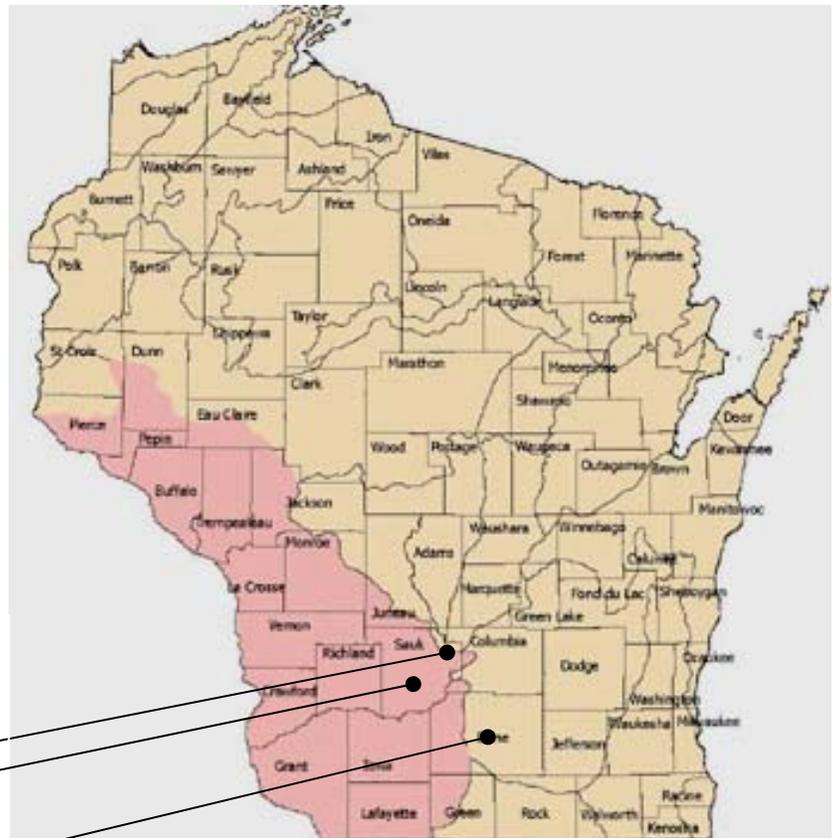
Photo: Neal McLain

For the explanation of why these sandy soils exist, we have to go back 20,000 years, to the last Ice Age. As the western margin of the Green Bay Lobe of the North American Ice Sheet advanced across present-day Wisconsin, it encountered a huge quartzite formation known as the Baraboo Hills. There it stopped. Lands to the southwest of the Baraboo Hills, now known as the "driftless area," were not glaciated.

During the subsequent warming period, the glacier began to melt, creating a huge lake, known as Glacial Lake Wisconsin, across a vast area in what is now central Wisconsin. For hundreds of years, sand deposits built up in the lakebed.

About 18,000 years ago, the waters of Glacial Lake Wisconsin began to spill over the receding glacier. Eventually, the lake catastrophically emptied through what is now the Wisconsin River Valley and the Mississippi River. As it cascaded downstream, it deposited enormous quantities sand and gravel.

Areas affected by these deposits, both in the lakebed and in the river valleys, are today's "sand counties."



Right: Map of Wisconsin showing driftless area. Source: Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources [5]

Driftless area

Leopold property
 Sauk County
 Dane County (Madison)

The Wisconsin River

The catastrophic draining of Glacial Lake Wisconsin profoundly altered the downstream landscape. The cascading water scoured out the great valley that would become the Wisconsin River valley, and blasted its way through limestone bedrock to create the vertical canyon walls of the Wisconsin Dells.

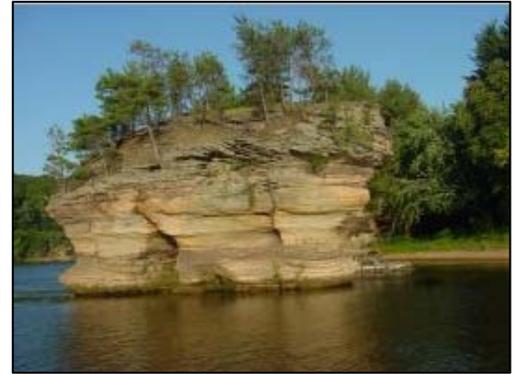


Photo: Pete and Nicky

Above: The vertical walls of an island in the Wisconsin River at the Dells

Below the Dells, the river today spreads out, becoming a wide, braided, lazy stream, riddled with islands and sandbars. The Leopold farm lies in this valley several miles downstream from the Dells. We visited the river as part of our tour of the shack, led by Steve Swenson, Leopold Foundation staff ecologist.



Above: Steve Swenson (center) with our tour group.
Left: Steve (orange cap) points out easements.



Photos: Neal McLain

In addition to his work as staff ecologist, Steve appears to be the resident expert on conservation easements. He works with local landowners, serving as adviser, discussing the pros and cons of easements, and helping guide them through the process.

In the accompanying photo, Steve points out several properties where easements have been created, and describes his work with neighboring landowners.

Conservation easements were a recurring theme at the Conference. ^[6]

The Legacy



At this point, you're probably expecting me to write that Aldo Leopold named *A Sand County Almanac* after the sand counties.

It didn't happen that way. At the time of his death, what eventually became *Almanac* was a collection of essays titled *Great Possessions*. Oxford University Press had agreed to publish, but Leopold died of a heart attack before it was published.

Leopold's son Luna, working with family members and others, edited the essays for publication. In the process, they renamed it *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*.

Nevertheless, Leopold was a prolific writer, with numerous articles and essays to his name. Other authors have published book-format collections of his writings. These books are available at the Aldo Leopold Foundation's bookstore. <http://www.aldoleopold.org/books/default.asp>.

The Foundation also holds a large collection of primary source materials including writings, unpublished manuscripts, journals, correspondence, sketches, photographs, and farm implements. <http://www.aldoleopold.org/AldoLeopold/archives.shtml>

Of course, The Aldo Leopold Foundation itself is the lasting memorial to Aldo Leopold's life. <http://www.aldoleopold.org/>



Photo: Neal McLain

Design for an office window.
Aldo Leopold Center, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

Endnotes

[1] *Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation*. Madison, Wisconsin, July 11-14, 2011. <http://americaswildlife.org/>

[2] Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. New York: Oxford UP, 1949, 1966. New York: Ballantine Books, 1970. xvii+295.

[3] The Aldo Leopold Foundation. *The Foundation: Fostering the Land Ethic through the legacy of Aldo Leopold*. The Aldo Leopold Foundation website. Accessed 25 July 2011. <http://www.aldoleopold.org/About/foundation.shtml>

[4] The Aldo Leopold Foundation. *Welcome to the Leopold Center!* The Aldo Leopold Foundation website. Accessed 25 July 2011. <http://www.aldoleopold.org/Visit/leopoldcenter.shtml>

[5] Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. *Driftless Area Prairie and Savanna Habitat, 2009-2011 LIP Funding Focus Area*. Accessed 25 July 2011. <http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/er/wlip/driftless.htm>

[6] During the conference, we heard two talks about conservation easements:

- Steve Swenson, staff ecologist, Aldo Leopold Foundation, Baraboo, Wisconsin, as reported above.
- Jim Stone, Owner, Rolling Stone Ranch, Ovando, Montana. Jim spoke to us at the General Session on July 12, 2011. He has created conservation easements for his own properties, and has encouraged his neighboring landowners to do the same.

Stone is the 2007 recipient of the Wetland Stewardship Award granted annually by the Montana Wetlands Council. The citation reads as follows:

Jim Stone, Rolling Stone Ranch, Ovando Montana

Jim Stone and his family are recognized for their long history of extensive wetland and watershed restoration beginning in 1992 and continuing through today. Jim has restored over 375 acres of wetland, enhanced 135 acres, and restored more than two miles of streams on their ranch. The Rolling Stone Ranch has placed more than 2,400 acres into perpetual conservation easement, removed seven fish barriers, integrated weed management on 2,400 acres, and enhanced grazing systems on more than 2,200 acres of the ranch. The Rolling Stone Ranch is a model of private land stewardship.

Source: *Wetland Stewardship Awards*. Montana Department of Environmental Quality. Accessed 25 July 2011. <http://deq.mt.gov/wqinfo/wetlands/stewardshipawards.mcp>

A YouTube video of Stone's talk is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rt5oCJI1VM8>