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Trigger Itch:
Aldo Leopold and the Evolution of a Sportsman Ethic

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Introduction

"There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. These essays are the delights and dilemmas of one who cannot." -Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

The Aldo Leopold story is one that every hunter and fisherman can relate to, whether they realize it or not. A born sportsman, Leopold grew to become a figure as prominent as Teddy Roosevelt or John Muir in the field of conservation. Best known for his *Sand County Almanac*, Leopold's writings are among the most influential in conservation and natural history. To this day, his detailed phenological observations are used to study changes in the Earth's climate.[1] An extremely accomplished and gifted man, Leopold blended his sportsman background with progressive conservation. An Iowa native, Leopold came from a wealthy family who was able to give him an excellent education. He attended Yale University and graduated as one of America's first foresters. After joining the U.S. Forest Service, Leopold began the process of creating and progressing the field of wildlife management. In 1924, Leopold moved to Wisconsin and began his work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It was during his time at Madison that he purchased an old chicken coop on a depleted and battered piece of land. Through hard work, this coop was transformed into a weekend home that he affectionately referred to as "The Shack." It was here that Leopold developed his idea of a Land Ethic. The Land Ethic was the idea that we should strive to live in harmony as part the land, rather than on it. In Leopold's eyes, "There is as yet no ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it... The land-

[1] Curt Meine, interview by author, 15 August 2012, Baraboo, WI.

relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations."[2] This systematic destruction of the land was what he fought against throughout his life.

How is it that a man born into such an environmentally unethical world was able to emerge heroically as a champion for the land and creatures that are unable to defend themselves? Today, every sportsman who has shot a deer or caught a fish knows the internal struggle between right and wrong. When is it "right" and "wrong" to shoot that buck? It comes down to personal perspective. The author of this essay has more than once caught his limit of walleye and been challenged with the decision to try for one more. To shoot or not to shoot? That truly is the question. It is for advice on this internal conflict that I originally turned to Aldo Leopold. Surely he would be able to guide me to the right balance. Upon further research however, I learned that Leopold was only human as well. He made his fair share of unethical sportsmanship choices too. There are some points during his life that one may wonder whether or not the same Aldo Leopold is in question. In 1948 at the age of 61, Aldo Leopold died of a heart attack while fighting a brush fire at a neighbor's farm. In such a short life, how was Leopold able to undergo such an immense transformation from trigger-happy hunter to champion of ethical sportsmanship practices? It was from this disconnect that this research was born.

Leopold was not born with strong wildlife ethics. Like many Americans, he was born with an innate curiosity for the outdoors, but no concrete moral guideline to follow. It was through a lifetime of trial and error that he developed his own personal code of sportsmanship ethics. These ethics cannot be listed by bullet point nor recited however.

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[2] Leopold, Aldo, *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation from Round River,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, 238.

In Leopold's own words, "The ethics of sportsmanship is not a fixed code, but must be formulated and practiced by the individual, with no referee but the Almighty."[3] The legacy that Leopold left behind is an expanding movement of sportsman who are capable of looking beyond the individual animal to see the health of the entire ecosystem. Just because the law allows a fisherman to keep three walleye on a certain body of water does not necessarily mean that it is environmentally ethical to do so.

By the end of his life, Leopold had created a code of ethics that he was able to call his own. It was a code that made him happy because he felt it was responsible and respectful to the environment. But when did he develop this ethic? Was it when he graduated from Yale? Was it when he was hired at UW-Madison? Was it when he bought the shack? Absolutely not. There was no defining moment, no instantaneous enlightenment that changed Leopold's life. There were obviously momentous milestones along the way that engrained themselves in his psyche, but no one moment can be found that defines this shift. Instead, what we see is an evolution; a gradual change from boy to man during which a trigger-happy child becomes the leader of a global movement. There were many along the way who helped Leopold on this journey, and there were times when he had to blaze his own trail. But when the choices became difficult, how did he make these ethical decisions? Today, hunters and fisherman are viewed by some as a ruthless crowd focused only on taking the lives of helpless animals. Leopold stands in stark contrast to this allegation. Leopold was able to become a leader of the conservation movement *because* of his sportsman background, not in spite of it. It is the belief of this author that Leopold's love for hunting and fishing was the

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[3] Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 232.

fuel for Leopold's drive. Leopold's love for the hunt combined with his intellect is what made him the timeless figure he became. Without Leopold's hunting and fishing experiences, there would be no personal engagement with nature and therefore no passion. Without his passion, Leopold would be just another name lost to history. It was the combination of great intellectual capacity and unrelenting passion that made him special and unique. This research is my best attempt to track the relationship between Leopold, his enduring idea of a land ethic, and the sportsman lifestyle that fueled his endless curiosity. I hope to add to the existing pool of Leopold historiography by explaining the role his sportsman background played in the development of his professional and personal life. Many of his revolutionary ideas were conceived in the field while hunting or fishing. How did these ideas influence his views and thoughts as a forester and professor? In turn, how did he apply these professional ideas to his own personal code of ethics? This is the question that I have attempted to answer.

Setting the Stage: Aldo's Youth

The late 19th and early 20th centuries have been remembered as a period of great economic, industrial, and technological expansion. It was a period during which lumber, oil, and steel barons carved their fortunes out of the rich lands of the American Midwest, Great Plains, and beyond. The resources seemed endless as the possibilities. The World Columbian Exposition in Chicago of 1893 was a glimpse into the future for thousands as they walked through the magnificent White City and rode the largest ferris wheel ever constructed. An ever expanding power grid supplied more Americans every year with the joys and amenities of electricity. It was a truly thrilling time, and in the minds of many Americans the future had already arrived. However, this incredible rate of expansion and production was not fueled by hopes and dreams. It was fueled by the forests, waters, soil, and natural resources of this great country. With an ever rising demand for more "stuff," our land and its resources were being pushed harder than ever before. In the last few decades of the 19th century, environmental regulations had yet to be conceived, and rash harvest of the forests and animals had already taken a great toll.

Today, many remember it as a dark time for American game animals. Passenger pigeon and bison populations had already been decimated and the American frontiersman was on a warpath to ensure that deer, wolves, and beavers met the same fate. There were no restrictions or regulations on what animals might be harvested or how many a hunter might take. The only restriction was how many the hunter was able to successfully shoot or trap and how many they were able to carry home. In many cases, even the latter made no difference. Skilled hunters made their living as "market

hunters," supplying restaurants and stores across the nation with fresh fish, waterfowl, and large game.[4] As populations began to plummet, there were a select few who chose to alter their hunting activities accordingly.

It was into this world that Aldo Leopold was born on January 11th, 1887. Born in Burlington, Iowa, he was of the third generation living in the family house. Aldo's grandfather, Charles Starker, had moved to Burlington from Chicago in 1850 chasing work. Originally a German immigrant, he planted his stakes in southeastern Iowa and set the stage for one of America's most important families.[5] Aldo's father, Carl Leopold, was a strong role model and provided the family with a good standard of living through his lucrative manufacturing business. Perhaps more importantly, he instilled his children with an undying love for the outdoors. Carl was one of the few who recognized the over-harvest of game animals in the 1890's as a problem, especially waterfowl. Burlington has always been at the heart of the annual Mississippi River duck migration. Therefore, it was a honey hole for mass slaughter as the birds flew south for the winter and back again in the spring. Carl abided by many self imposed hunting rules that he felt were necessary. For example, he only used a double-barreled shotgun to ensure he had a second shot at a wounded bird. Although pump and semiautomatic shotguns were available, he felt that these were too powerful and they encouraged hunters to shoot at game beyond their range. Carl never hunted before the sun came up and ended his hunts as soon as it set. He set his own personal bag limits, stopped hunting during the spring migration, and even gave up hunting certain species all together. Despite all

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[4] Curt Meine, *Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work,* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 18.

[5] Ibid, 7.

these self-imposed rules, Carl never bound his children to these regulations. He felt it was best for them to learn on their own. When Aldo began hunting, he was about twelve or thirteen.[6] He was given a single barrel shotgun and permission to hunt rabbits.[7] With only one shot, Aldo quickly learned to shoot carefully in order to make each shot count. The lesson must have worked given that Aldo would quickly grow to become a very talented sharpshooter.

Leopold's passion, love, and obsession for hunting and fishing was instilled in him at a young age. It was part of his DNA as much as race, hair color, and gender. From birth, he was destined to roam the earth with an unquenchable thirst in search of all things wild. Even in his later years, after he had already developed his notion of land ethic, he still looked back on his hunting adventures as a young boy with unmistakable fondness.

During his time in Iowa, Leopold rarely passed up an opportunity to explore and hunt the lands around his house. On one winter morning en route to a favorite rabbit patch, he noticed that a small lake, while normally frozen over, had developed an air hole through the ice. Although the ducks had already migrated south, Leopold hypothesized that if there were any ducks left in the area, eventually they would find this small pool of open water. Postponing his rabbit hunt, he sat on the frozen banks of the lake and waited. It was not until sunset that a lone black duck came sailing in from the west. "I cannot remember the shot; I remember only my unspeakable delight when my first duck hit the snowy ice with a thud and lay there, belly up, red legs kicking." he

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[6] Ibid, 18-19.

[7] Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 128.

recalled.[8] It was around this time that Aldo was also challenged with his first ethical hunting dilemma. While his bird dog was skilled at treeing partridge, Leopold knew that shooting a perched bird was against moral code. To this day, it is widely regarded as unsportsmanlike to shoot a bird unless it is in flight. While he knew that shooting a partridge in a tree was a guaranteed kill, he managed to refrain from doing so with great restraint. “Compared with a treed partridge, the devil and his seven kingdoms was a mild temptation.” he remembered.[9] After two years of failed partridge hunting and countless wasted shotgun blasts, Aldo finally connected. As a large bird roared up to his left, hell-bent for the nearest cedar swamp, Leopold took a swinging shot and hit. The bird tumbled dead in a shower of brown feathers and golden leaves.[10] This story, told in *A Sand County Almanac*, was written in Leopold’s later years as a happy memory. This narrative suggests an apparent comprehension of “sportsmanship” at a young age. More than that, it is clear that Leopold looks back on these days with a certain desire to return. Although he is “enlightened” to the ways of man-land harmony, he still sees these early hunting expeditions as rewarding, important, and above all, un-apologized for.

Although there is a humble level of sportsmanship exhibited by young Leopold, the groundbreaking ideology that he held in maturity was still far from present. During his days in Burlington, he would spend hours on end seeking, observing, and studying birds. He had a great love for bird watching, so much that he saw himself as no mere bird watcher, but as an “amateur ornithologist.” Considering he was able to accurately

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[8] Ibid, 129.

[9] Ibid, 129.

[10] Ibid, 129.

identify 261 species of bird, this was a fitting title. To Leopold, out of this list of 261, there were two categories; those birds whom he favored, and everything else which threatened them. Hawks, crows, squirrels, and sparrows were all fair game to Leopold as he saw them as a threat and nuisance to his favorite birds.[11] Throughout his years in Burlington, many of these animals and birds would meet their demise. At this young age, he did not yet understand the idea that all creatures play an important role in the ecosystem. There were few who did. Like many sportsman, Leopold saw certain species as a threat to the game animals he loved. Leopold was not unique in that sense. In mainstream American culture, the crow has long been seen as a dirty pest. Therefore it is understandable that a young boy looking for target practice would scratch his itchy trigger finger at the expense of an unsuspecting crow.

When Leopold moved to New Jersey to finish out his high school education, he continued to wage war against these "sable armies of the sky." In the words of Leopold's biographer Curt Meine, "Aldo could hardly have been credited with a general reverence for life."[12] Interestingly enough however, March of 1905 saw a more mature Leopold, at least for the time being. In a letter home, he told his mother he had no desire to kill crows despite the favorable opportunities. He said that simply exploring the swamps and experiencing the natural beauty was enough to keep him content. He stood by his words a week later. While out on a bird watching adventure, he spotted a crow's nest high in an oak tree. Although he was able to climb high enough to come within egg-snatching range, he chose to leave the eggs in the nest.[13] A sense of ethical

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[11] Meine, *His Life and Work*, 27-29.

[12] Ibid, 40.

[13] Ibid, 40-41.

responsibility is clearly exhibited here by eighteen year old Aldo. It must be made clear that this is not a light switch moment during which Leopold became the Father of Land Ethic, but it certainly does demonstrate a sense of awareness and accountability that would continue to evolve up to the day he died.

Leopold the Greenhorn

In 1891, the Federal Government took its first serious steps towards controlling the systematic abuse of America's natural resources through the Forest Reserve Act. This act granted President Benjamin Harrison authority to establish forest preserves to be overseen by the Department of the Interior. President Harrison set aside thirteen million acres of forest and watershed land in with west with another five million added by President Grover Cleveland. In 1905, the Transfer Act was signed by President Theodore Roosevelt transferring responsibility of forest preserve land from the Department of the Interior to the Department of Agriculture. The bureau was soon renamed the United States Forest Service. The need for trained experts in forest management fueled Yale University to begin the first graduate forestry program in America.[14] Leopold enrolled at Yale and emerged with his college degree. He soon moved west to work at the Apache National Forest for the newly formed United States Forest Service.

When Leopold first arrived, he was anxious to make an impact. In college, he had expressed growing concern over the continuing systematic slaughter of migratory birds and other game. Armed with a new degree, he quickly assimilated to the cowboy culture and began working to protect the land. Donning a pair of cowboy boots, jeans and a ten-gallon hat, he would rise early each morning to mount his new stallion, Jimmy Hicks.[15] With pistols on his hips and spurs on his boots, he did what he could to adapt to his new environment. It was during his time working here in the southwest that Leopold

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[14] Ibid, 75-77.

[15] Ibid, 90.

seems to have met a peak in tension between his inner ethics and the exterior pressures put upon him by society.

Green Fire vs. The Varmint Question

In 1909, Leopold was out in the field with his crew eating lunch on the side of a cliff that overlooked a river in the gorge below. In the river, the group thought they had seen a doe fording through the current to the other side. However, upon closer inspection, they realized it was a mature wolf. Soon, half a dozen pups arrived on the scene, jumping and playing with each other. Leopold and his coworkers began shooting and unloaded every round they had into the pack of wolves. When the rifles were empty, a pup was limping to safety while the mother wolf was down, but not yet dead. When they finally reached the old wolf, they arrived just in time "to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes... I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view."[16] Although this seems to be the watershed moment through which Leopold became enlightened in the ways of environmental harmony, this is not the case as is evident by his essay, "The Varmint Question" written six short years later.

Published in *The Pine Cone,* the Albuquerque Game Protection Association's newsletter, "The Varmint Question" called for a very superficial approach to game management. By modern standards, it could hardly be considered "game management" at all. In it, Leopold addressed a problem that had plagued cattlemen and ranchers for decades, a surplus of predatory animals. Certain animals, mainly wolves, frequently attacked farm animals killing a herder's livestock and profits. Leopold suggested that reducing populations of these animals would be the best option. Wolves, mountain lion,

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[16] Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 138-139.

coyote, bobcat, fox, and skunk were among those animals on the extermination list. “Reduction in the predatory animal population is bound to help the situation,” he wrote.[17]

It is important to note that the story of the mother wolf, “Thinking Like a Mountain,” is included in *A Sand County Almanac* and was written many years after the event in the 1940’s. It was a memory in the mind of a man who had learned, lived, and matured. Yet it is still puzzling that he specifically referenced that his thinking had changed despite his call for the systematic elimination of wolves a few years later. Leopold expresses his sorrow very genuinely when remembering the mother wolf’s death. Is he lying to us, suggesting that this was the moment that he became the Aldo Leopold we remember today? Unlikely. Among his many talents, Leopold was a gifted writer and was skilled in writing in an engaging and eloquent fashion. It is quite possible that he romanticized this experience to make it more exciting, significant, and memorable. Or it may be that in hind sight, he remembers this hunt as a sad, yet necessary fiasco. In his later years, it is likely that Leopold would have acted differently in the same situation. At the time however, it was the status quo to shoot every wolf in sight. “In those days, we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf,” he wrote.[18] Leopold was also under great pressure from local cattlemen to take action against the high wolf populations. In this context, it is no wonder that Leopold would have called for heavy wolf extermination. Whatever the reason may be, the green fire incident was a memorable experience and one that surely played a vital role in his growth, but it was not the watershed moment in which everything changed.

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[17] Leopold, Aldo, *The River of the Mother of God: and Other Essays by Aldo Leopold.* Edited by Susan Flader and J. Baird Callicott, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, 47-48.

[18] Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac,* 138.

In the Field: Hunting and Fishing Expeditions, 1922-1929

In his younger years, Leopold spent spare time exploring Burlington and the surrounding countryside with the curiosity of Meriwether Lewis. He spent his later years in Wisconsin; a large portion of this time was spent at The Shack in Dane County. It was during the 1920's and 1930's when he was in peak physical condition however that Leopold's exploring took place on a much larger scale. He took wonderfully exciting trips far beyond his backyard to truly wild places. On these hunting and fishing trips, Leopold kept detailed daily journals that tell the story of these wild adventures. These journals tell the tale of the daily hike and harvest totals, but also the story of Aldo's maturation. Even at age 35, Leopold still seems to have had his fair share of "trigger itch."

In 1922, Leopold took a three week canoe trip to the Colorado River Delta. During this trip, Leopold and his brother Carl killed an impressive number of animals. During the three week vacation, the duo combined for a total of 16 ducks, 31 dove, about 80 quail, and eight geese. What is more alarming is the number of non-edible animals bagged including two bobcat, three raccoons, three avocet, a coyote, and even a peregrine falcon.[19] Surely this type of reckless hunting would not be expected from a conservation leader. While an argument could be made that a full grown man needs more than one or two dove for a sufficient meal, the numbers are still surprising. Roughly 140 birds between two men on a twenty day trip plus the coyote, bobcat, and countless sheepshead raise serious questions about Leopold's devotion to ethical

[19] These numbers pulled from Leopold's journals may be skewed slightly due to terminology such as "we caught several..." or "shot a mess of..." These numbers were estimated to the best of the authors ability.

hunting practices.[20] Leopold and his crew shot at nearly everything they saw. It is important to remember the values of the time, however. These numbers may have not been alarming by 1920's standards. Today, if a duck hunter were to stumble across a bobcat, it is unlikely he would pull the trigger for a number of reasons. In Leopold's case however, bobcats were seen as a nuisance, he was on a trip specifically to hunt, and it would have seemed foolish to pass up a good pelt. The two bobcat taken during the trip were likely unexpected, yet welcome bonuses on a vacation where all animals were "fair game." It is difficult to assess Leopold's level of sportsmanship, but it is indisputable that he was not abiding by the same code of ethics that he used in the 1940's.

On his 1922 trip to the Colorado delta, Leopold may not have been the progressive figure that he would eventually become, but he certainly was not a heartless poacher either. He was just unrefined. Two years later in 1924, Leopold took a trip to Canada with his son Starker and two brothers, Fritz and Carl. The goal of this trip was much different than the expedition of two years ago. "We have had two ambitions-seeing moose and catching trout," he wrote.[21] Leopold and his crew were much more interested in experiencing the great Canadian wilderness than shooting animals. It is worth noting that Leopold took many more pictures on this vacation than on most others. This particular trip lasted fourteen days during which the men spent most of their time fishing and canoeing. Leopold was a fine shot with a rifle, but he was equally dangerous with a fishing pole. Throughout the trip, the group of four caught dozens of

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[20] Leopold, Aldo, *Round River: From the Journals of Aldo Leopold.* Edited by Luna B. Leopold, New York: Oxford University Press, 1933, 11-30.

[21] Leopold, *Round River*, 39.

trout, walleye, bass, and northern pike.[22] Unlike the trip to the Colorado River delta however, the majority of the creatures that came into contact with Leopold's crew were safely released. Many nights, the group would only keep a couple trout for dinner when they had the opportunity to keep many more. It is important to consider Leopold's motivation for his catch-and-release mentality. Clearly, he did not see it necessary to kill more than he needed, the mark of a responsible sportsman.

When comparing the Canadian expedition to the previous Colorado delta trip, there is a clear disconnect in ethics. Fisherman are capable of practicing "catch and release", but hunters are unable to "shoot and release." Is it possible that Leopold was concerned first and foremost with the thrill of the hunt at this point in his life? Was the fate of the animals and fish a secondary interest? Quite possibly. In fact, when Leopold returned for a second trip to Canada in 1925, he did not even bring a rifle with him. In the early 1920's Leopold was not yet refined in his hunting ethics, although he does seem to be well intentioned. It was a time when he was young, bold, and still full of that pesky "trigger-itch."

In 1927 Leopold went to New Mexico with a friend, Howard Weiss, for a deer hunt. Two years later, he returned in 1929 with his brother Carl and son Starker. The goal of these two hunts was to bag deer and the Leopold journals address little else. Besides bagging a few squirrels and missing some turkey, Aldo and his crew remained focused on white-tail. It is also important to note that Leopold's weapon of choice on this trip to the Gila National Forest was not a gun, but a recurve bow.[23] This is an incredibly

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[22] Ibid, 34-56.

[23] Ibid, 96-105.

important detail. A standard deer hunting cartridge is easily accurate up to two hundred yards. The power of popular hunting rounds such as a .270 or a .30-06 have more than enough power to give the hunter some freedom when it comes to shot placement. Arrows, on the other hand, require the hunter to get in closer to the game and shots must be placed more carefully. Even with today's advanced compound bows and sights, most hunters will not take a shot unless they are within forty to fifty yards. Additionally, factors such as an obstructed shooting lane and wind become more problematic with a bow. Why would Leopold choose an obsolete bow when instead he could have brought a rifle which would have proven much more effective? His choice of weaponry is another piece of evidence that suggests a maturing ideology. To Leopold, the thrill of the hunt was more important than the harvest itself.[24]

Considering only one buck was taken between both years at the Gila National Forest, it is a good thing Leopold enjoyed the hunt more than the harvest. Coincidently, the one buck was killed by his brother, Carl, with a rifle.[25] These two trips speak to the enduring nature of Leopold's growing sportsmanship ideology. Despite two separate hunts without bagging a buck and watching his brother shoot a trophy eleven pointer, Leopold's weapon of choice continued to be his homemade bow.

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[24] Richard L. Knight and Susan Riedel, *Aldo Leopold and Ecological Conscience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002)

[25] Leopold, *Round River*, 115.

Riley Game Cooperative, 1931-1939

In his spare time, there is nothing Aldo Leopold loved more than to be in the forests hunting, fishing, and observing. Leopold and those like him were constantly searching for new hunting lands. Rich hunting property was sometimes difficult to come by, however. So difficult in fact that Dane County farmers often found hunters on their land illegally despite the “No Trespassing” signs. It was on a 1931 summer day that Leopold met a local farmer named Reuben Paulson and a solution to both their problems was found. It was decided that a group of troubled farmers, working with a group of responsible sportsmen, offered the best defense against trespassers, and also the best chance for building strong game populations. It was from this agreement that the Riley Game Cooperative was born.[26]

By 1939, Riley consisted of eleven farmers and five hunters. The farmers had an interest in restoring the health of their depleted land and the local townsmen were searching for strong game populations to hunt. The farmers provided the land, fencing, grain, and most of the labor while the hunters provided the operating funds and also pitched in on the work. When it came time to hunt, all members received equal opportunity.[27]

Shortly after the creation of the Riley Game Co-op, a new law quickly impacted its future. The Shooting Preserve Law, passed in 1931, authorized the Wisconsin Conservation Commission to license private land as pheasant shooting preserves on which special bag limits and seasons were instituted. Instead of the typical ten day

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[26] Leopold, Aldo, *For the Health of the Land: Previously Unpublished Essays and Other Writings.* Edited by J. Baird Callicott and Eric T. Freyfogle, Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1999, 175.

[27] Ibid, 175-192.

season, hunting on the preserves was allowed from October through January. Also, instead of the typical two rooster/day limit, preserves were allowed to shoot 75 percent of the number of pheasants it artificially released, regardless of sex.[28] The logic behind such a plan was that after the preserve was stocked annually, pheasants would have the chance to naturally reproduce. Although caretakers of the preserve had the option to shoot up to 75 percent of the number of stocked birds, natural reproduction would drive up populations to stable levels. Along with this, many of the birds would likely venture beyond the boundaries of the preserve into neighboring public lands. Thus, the entire region had potential to hold pheasant.

Riley was licensed as a preserve in 1931 and began stocking efforts. With an optimistic attitude, the group began purchasing eggs which were tended by the farmers' wives. Once the chicks hatched, they were weighed and banded by the warden. It was with these bands that the group was able to distinguish farm raised birds from wild ones.[29]

In 1933, when Leopold was appointed to the Chair of Wildlife Management at UW-Madison, Riley became even more important as a petrie dish for various experiments. Beginning in 1936, a graduate student was assigned each year to Riley and took charge of various experiments, planting, feeding, banding, and censuses. Without the additional assistance and expertise from these students, it is possible that Riley would have collapsed. In its initial years, Riley was an effort to increase game populations through simple techniques such as restocking and feeding. However, when

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[28] Ibid, 176-177.

[29] Ibid, 37.

it became a university project, it expanded its goals to foster a wide range of wildlife through more complex methods such as planting cover. Leopold wanted to prove that depleted land could be restored through the combined efforts of farmers and sportsmen without large monetary burdens.[30]

In the first year, the Co-op stocked the land with 24 new birds. Since the group was to be awarded tags for 75 percent of their stocked birds, they were give 18 tags by the warden to divide up as they saw fit. The following year, they released 70 birds scoring them an allotted 56 tags. However, it is interesting that between those two years, only 18 of their 74 tags were filled.[31] It was not from lack of skill, but from a conscious interest in the land and the wildlife populations that the birds were spared. Leopold was very careful when choosing members of the Co-op. They were all friends and "of the sort whose game pockets contained no quail feathers in pheasant season."[32] The men were all more concerned with establishing a strong pheasant presence than they were about game harvest. In fact, the only year the group filled more than 60 percent of its tags was in 1939 when populations were doing exceedingly well.[33]

Throughout 30s, Leopold and the Riley Co-op took great care in the field to be selective shooters. At no time did any of the hunters desire to shoot an immature pheasant, and the vast majority of harvested birds were male. Although they were all free to shoot a hen, they were of the belief that it was better to return home empty handed than to shoot a female. It is also worth noting that Leopold specifically notes

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[30] Ibid, 178.

[31] Ibid, 184.

[32] Ibid, 34.

[33] Ibid, 184.

that no predator management was necessary, a view that he may not have held in his younger years. The abundance of rabbits kept the owls and hawks occupied, the fox and mink posed no real threat, and the farmers wanted the skunks left alone to manage the June bug populations.[34]

In the process of building pheasant populations through land management, many other species flourished as a side effect. Bobwhite quail, hungarian partridge, cottontail rabbit, and waterfowl populations all increased in conjunction with the pheasants.[35] From Riley, Leopold was able to gain valuable insight into the interconnectedness of the complex ecosystem. Along with this, he learned much about population management and stocking methods. While the original goal of Riley was to establish a hunting refuge for local hunters, it soon became much more. His original inspiration came from his hunting background, while the progressive nature of the project was fueled by his intellect. This fusion of ecological consciousness with hunting instinct begin to manifest themselves in Leopold's actions and writings more and more. By the end of the 1930s, Leopold has undergone an incredible transformation from his days in Burlington. His essays had become poetic, powerful, and timeless. It was around this time that he began his most memorable work of all, *A Sand County Almanac*.

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[34] Ibid, 37-39.

[35] Ibid, 187-189.

The Days of *A Sand County Almanac*

In the days that Leopold wrote his famous *Sand County Almanac*, he was an experienced man who had seen the world change in great ways all around him. During his childhood, America was still recovering from the wounds of the Civil War, and he lived just long enough to see the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In his own field of conservation, he had had the opportunity to live in a number of different areas, test his own ideas, and write a few books. He had become wise through experience. During the early 1940's Leopold was still a well respected professor at UW-Madison. However, with the world in the merciless grips of World War II, many of his students had gone to the front lines to fight "The Good War." This gave Leopold time to finally sit down and write his thoughts, feelings, and experiences.[36] Although the book was published posthumously, it is within the covers of *A Sand County Almanac* that the matured views of Aldo Leopold can be found.

The book is broken into parts, each with its own message and goals. Part I is most commonly known by the casual Leopold reader. Month by month, Leopold recorded his observations and thoughts about life and conservation from The Shack. He carefully observed seasonal changes in wildlife behavior and weather and reflected upon these changes. From January to December, Leopold wrote about what he saw from a critical and a personal point of view.

Part II is more or less a memoir of Leopold's life. Here, essays such as "Thinking Like a Mountain" and "Red Legs Kicking" can be found. These memoirs and reflections demonstrate his true love for nature and the respect that he had for the land.

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[36] Susan Flader, *Thinking Like a Mountain: Aldo Leopold and the Evolution of an Ecological Attitude Toward Deer, Wolves, and Forests* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974), 33-34.

In part III, *The Upshot*, Leopold challenges readers to wrestle with some philosophical questions that many would rather ignore. In it, he addresses some important problems that America faced concerning land management. He then gives readers a path by which we "may get back in step" with ethical land practices.[37]

It is within *A Sand County Almanac* that Leopold's self-actualized ideas are found. In many cases, these newfound ethics challenged him in ways he never would have imagined. For example, hunting woodcock was a favorite activity of Leopold's during the time he spent at The Shack. The woodcock is a small bird, about the size of a robin, with a long beak. Its small size coupled with its lightning-quick speed makes it a challenge for any hunter, including Leopold. In his essay "Sky Dance," Leopold writes about the joy he and his family received from watching the magnificent show male woodcocks put on every summer as part of their mating ritual. He writes in great detail about their whirling flight up into the sky, and their decent like a crippled plane back to the sandy soil. Every detail of this dance is recorded from start time to flight tendencies. Leopold enjoyed the show so immensely that he chose to stop hunting woodcock almost completely. He confessed, "No one would rather hunt woodcock in October than I, but since learning of the sky dance I find myself calling one or two birds enough. I must be sure that come April, there be no dearth of dancers in the sunset sky."[38] To give up one of his favorite activities, Leopold must have had a genuine love for the woodcock's show. A younger Leopold may not have felt the same way.

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[37] Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, xviii.

[38] Ibid, 36.

Although he clearly modified his own practices throughout his life, Leopold did not stand idly by waiting for others to change theirs. He was an outspoken critic of those who chose to break commonly accepted sportsmanship practices. In another essay, “Wildlife in American Culture” Leopold addressed the problem of “selective tagging.” Although less common today, this practice consists of hunters shooting a deer but choosing not to tag it because it does not live up to trophy expectations. According to Leopold, Wisconsin hunters in the late 30’s and early 40’s killed and abandoned at least one fawn, doe, or spike buck for every two legal bucks harvested. This means that about half of Wisconsin’s hunters were willing to kill the first deer they saw, regardless of size and sex, until they harvested a legal buck. Many times, these “undesirable” deer would be left to rot where they dropped. Leopold made it very clear that this is an unacceptable and embarrassing practice.[39] Although Leopold encouraged each hunter to construct his own code of conduct and realized that there would be a wide range, practices such as this were entirely void of ethics all together. Throughout his life, he preached the importance of the individual land owner and individual hunter. He believed that real change could not be legislated and could not be accomplished through any other motive than a real, individual, intrinsic desire to help the land.

At this time, Leopold was not the perpetual hunter that he once was. However, that does not mean that he was completely abandoning his sportsman roots. He still believed that hunting and fishing was an important part of the human experience. Evidence of this thinking can be found in “Goose Music.”

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[39] Ibid, 213.

"A man may not care for golf and still be human, but the man who does not like to see, hunt, photograph, or otherwise outwit birds or animals is hardly normal. He is supercivilized, and I for one do not know how to deal with him. Babes do not tremble when they are shown a golf ball, but I should not like to own the boy whose hair does not lift his hat when he sees his first deer. We are dealing, therefore, with something that lies very deep."[40]

Leopold believed that the desire to hunt and fish is ground into human DNA. In the same essay, Leopold explains that this desire to explore the wilderness is as unalienable of a right as liberty. While it is true some people are able to lead normal lives without frequent contact with nature, he points out there are others who can live without work, play, or love. In Leopold's mind, the right to flush a pheasant from tall prairie grass is a God given gift. He went on to explain that when an apartment is erected on the last vacant city block, it can be torn down should society decide it wants a playground instead. However, what is to be done when the last flock of wild geese is gone? "It is easy to say that some of us, afflicted with hereditary hunting fever, cannot live satisfactory lives without them," he claimed.[41] A constant theme throughout this essay is one of uneasiness for the future. He was worried for the sake of those like him who "cannot to live without wild things."

Once again, it is important to remember Leopold was born in horse and buggy times and was writing these essays during WWII. He had seen incredible advances in technology and incredible devastation to the natural world. "Goose Music" was the manifestation of these worries. It was a cry for awareness and reason. To live in harmony with the land was Leopold's enduring code of ethics. To use the natural

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[40] Ibid, 227.

[41] Ibid, 228.

resources we have been given in a responsible way was his wish. It was an ideology that took a lifetime to fully understand and invest in. It was a lifestyle that was formed through experience, education, error, success, and undeniable passion.

Why Aldo?

Although it is seldom disputed that Leopold was one of the most important leaders of the conservation movement, the question that arises is why him? What made Leopold stand out among his peers as this iconic figure? Surely there must have been other men and women fighting for the same goals. While this is true, there are some key factors that allowed Aldo Leopold to claim his place in history.

The first of these is the simple time and place in which he was born and lived. The late 1800's was a time of great technological expansion at the expense of the American environment. The term "conservation" had not yet been coined in relation to forests and rivers. The stage was set for Leopold to make a difference simply because there was an issue that needed to be addressed. When Leopold was a young teenager, Teddy Roosevelt became the 26th president of the United States after the assassination of William McKinley in 1901. As a boy with a never ending curiosity for nature, Roosevelt was a larger than life role model. During the formative years of Leopold's life, Teddy Roosevelt ran the country with an assertive presence while placing a high priority on this nation's woodlands and prairies. Roosevelt's policies, along with the values of the Progressive Movement as a whole, nurtured Leopold as he was preparing to set out on his own.[42]

It is important to remember the other side of the "nature v. nurture" debate because Leopold's family played an equally important role in his development. A descendent of immigrants, Leopold's Germanic heritage was a part of everyday life. The family held tight to German traditions and was very proud of who they were. They had a

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[42] Curt Meine, interview by author, 15 August 2012, Baraboo, WI.

great appreciation for the sciences, education, and public service. When Aldo moved and began working in the southwest after college, he had extended interaction with the various Native American populations. They held very different beliefs from mainstream America when it came to land management. Leopold's wife, Estella, was of Hispanic descent which came with its own set of values and beliefs. When Leopold married her, those values became part of his world as well. The life Leopold led was anything but socially homogeneous. He had a wide variety of views from many different cultures, and he would use these connections to examine the world in new ways.[43]

Beyond his cultural connections, Leopold also had connections with other people with similar interests and goals. No one person is capable of changing the world completely by himself. Even a man such as Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of the "home team" throughout the Civil Rights Movement. He could not have done it without the home team. Leopold had his own home team. As a graduate of Yale and a professor at UW Madison, Leopold was close friends with some of conservation's greatest minds. Some of these men and women helped Leopold advance the field, but equally important, some helped him remember where he came from. In particular, Al Hochbaum played this role especially well. One of Leopold's students, Hochbaum could be considered the second author of *A Sand County Almanac* in a sense. During the writing process, Leopold was embarrassed to admit some of his past mistakes, such as the wolf incident in "Thinking Like a Mountain." This piece was not originally to be included in the *Sand County Almanac* collection of essays. However, with great perseverance, Hochbaum convinced Leopold that readers needed to hear about his failures as well as

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[43] Ibid.

his triumphs.[44] Hochbaum was just one of many individuals and organizations that played critical background roles in the Aldo Leopold drama. Without the support of the conservation community around him, there would be no Leopold legacy.

Despite all the extrinsic factors that helped form Leopold into the leader he became, the majority of the credit is owed to his unmistakable passion and undeniable motivation. A pheasant was more than just a bird to him. When flushed from the tall grass, it represented that essence of wilderness which would rather be dead than tamed. Leopold referred to himself as someone who could not live without wild things. He needed to hunt and fish. He needed rivers and sunsets and the yelps of a coyote as much as he needed food or water or love. He had a personal attachment to his work, and this is what allowed (or forced) him to invest so much into his conservation efforts. Combined with his incredible intellect, Leopold was able to make contributions that others were incapable of. In the words of historian and biographer Curt Meine, "He had a capacity for continual intellectual and emotional growth that set him apart."[45] In conjunction with the extrinsic factors that Leopold lived with, his love for the land propelled him to the top of the conservation world.

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Curt Meine, interview by author, 15 August 2012, Baraboo, WI.

Conclusion

The Aldo Leopold story may be misunderstood by those who are causal readers of his essays. As is the case with many historical figures, we mistakenly remember Leopold as he was during the most “important” time of his life. It is true that his message of compassion rings true through the present day, but it is important to understand how he reached that existence. It was not an easy journey, and his ideas certainly were not innate. During his many hours in the field, Leopold had time to think, reflect, and speculate on society and his own beliefs. In the words of Curt Meine, “He grows with these experiences, and through them.”[46] Leopold’s passion for wilderness, fueled by the thrill of the hunt, is what provided the motivation for a long career in a difficult field. This shift can be found in his essays, actions, and practices. Even subtle changes, such as the use of the term “wildlife management” instead of “game management” suggest a shift towards a more liberal understanding of complex ecosystems.

In his youth, Leopold had an unmistakable compassion and interest in nature and all its inhabitants. He held tight to those feelings throughout his life despite the many external factors he faced. However, what does seem to have changed is the way those feelings manifested themselves. Through a combination of experience and education, Leopold reached a sportsman’s code he was comfortable with. In his last few years, it seems almost as though Leopold was equally intent to watch a flock of waterfowl as he was to fire upon them. On one particular morning goose hunt, the hunting experience overshadowed the hunt itself. As the goose came in, he missed the shot, “but miss or no miss, I saw him, I heard the wind whistle through his set wings as he came honking out

[46] Curt Meine, interview by author, 15 August 2012, Baraboo, WI.

of the gray west, and I felt him so that even now I tingle at the recollection."[47] He still loved to hunt and fish, but it was a secondary activity behind simply enjoying the great outdoors. This is the legacy he left behind. Leopold wanted us to learn to enjoy the land responsibly and use its resources sparingly. It was not is not wrong to shoot a deer, but it is taboo to waste it.

In today's fast paced world where everyone seems to be caught in the race to the top, Leopold's message is especially relevant. Even hunters and fishermen, the ones who are supposed to know how to relax and enjoy nature, are locked in a constant battle to see who can catch the heaviest bass or shoot the biggest whitetail. We would do well to remember Leopold's advice; a person should not be judged by the number of ducks they bring home, but by how many they harvests in an ethical manner.

America has a long and proud tradition of sportsmanship in the fields and woods, yet there is a small minority who tarnish that reputation for the rest. It is my hope that those individuals will someday formulate their own code of ethics as Leopold did, one that they can honestly be proud of. In a broader sense, America too needs to reconsider its relationship with the land. With hope for the land, maybe one day America will be able to develop its own land ethic as Leopold did.

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[47] Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac,* 229.

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Leopold's most famous piece of work, *A Sand County Almanac* provides an excellent look at Leopold's beliefs toward the end of his life. The book addresses seasonal changes, natural observations, and social commentary. Widely regarded as one of the most important works in the field of natural/conservation history.

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Susan Flader, *Thinking Like a Mountain: Aldo Leopold and the Evolution of an Ecological Attitude Toward Deer, Wolves, and Forests* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974)

This book focuses on Leopold's life in relation to deer restoration in the southwest. It covers Leopold's beliefs and actions as he grew to understand the complexity of wildlife management.

Richard L. Knight and Susan Riedel, *Aldo Leopold and Ecological Conscience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002)

This book is broken up into chapters by topic. Each chapter is devoted to a different facet of Leopold's life. Examples include Leopold as a biologist, his beliefs on the value of education, and Leopold as a conservationist and hunter.