

## The Leopold Bench

I have always wanted to own an Aldo Leopold bench. I've become rather familiar with them on several occasions over the years at the Leopold Reserve located along the Wisconsin River not far from Portage. Resting a moment on one while walking with a guide on the paths in the reserve; or sitting in front of the Leopold Shack with people who were following in Leopold's environmental footsteps, both literally and figuratively; or leaning against the backrest on a Monday evening by the campfire when attending an environmental seminar.

Aldo Leopold lived from 1887 till 1948. During his varied career he served with the United States Forest Service, was associate director of the Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, and was later named by the University of Wisconsin to chair its newly established Department of Game Management.

When Leopold bought a worn out sand county farm along the river the Leopold family made regular weekend treks from Madison during April through October. They stayed in the only building still standing on the farm--an old chicken coop, which they made more habitable each time they came.

The whole family pitched in to nurse the land back to health, back to its native state. They planted native trees and flowers and noted the activities of the animals and birds, as well as a host of other things. As Nina Leopold Bradley put it: "We grew to appreciate the interconnectedness of living systems." She realized that the family enterprise was "one one of the earliest attempts at ecological restoration." Today that farm is the site of the Leopold Reserve. The mature landscape is thriving and a thing of beauty.

Leopold has long been noted for his A Sand County Almanac, published in 1949, wherein he eloquently described season to season events at the farm. To this day the volume's descriptive passages inspire us to a greater appreciation of our native landscape and the need to preserve it.

It was at the farm where Aldo constructed his famous wooden benches used at the Shack, probably out of wood found along the Wisconsin River. People still love to use Leopold benches and aficionados have continued to construct them, patterning them after the originals. Kelly Bleich of Randolph is one of them. He even gives workshops on building these wooden classics.

Kelly is a Leopold enthusiast and researcher par excellence. He recently invited me to attend a meeting of genealogists at the Portage Library where he gave a colorful presentation of Leopold's life and work. From the pre-cut sections he had brought and propped against the wall, he then demonstrated how he puts a Leopold bench together. The wood was from the old German Methodist Church in Madison.

I couldn't believe it when, at the end of the session, he called me to the front and presented the bench to me. He turned it around and I saw the words carved into the backrest: "The Heart of John Muir Country."

Kelly managed to maneuver the bench into the back seat of his car and our little procession of two cars proceeded to my country home on the Marquette County line--Kelly, his wife Karen, and I. There, he unloaded the precious item and placed it by my front door.

He later wrote: "Leopold bench building is an activity that leaves my hands dirty, body tired, and spirit rejuvenated. The bench building utilizes "found" lumber whenever possible. It is one of those activities in the life of Aldo Leopold, that he wrote 'create their own satisfaction with no attrition of land or life.' The finished product is an heirloom quality useful seat in which to view the the splendor around us."

On April 14, 1948 Leopold wrote to the director of the Wisconsin Conservation Department and elaborated on his idea to commemorate the life of John Muir with a state park in Marquette County where the father of our national parks had spent his youth. However, he did not have the opportunity to follow through. Exactly one week later, on April 21, the 110th anniversary of Muir's birth, Leopold died of a heart attack while helping his neighbor fight a grass fire.

As it turned out, both naturalists are memorialized in our area of Wisconsin. Leopold with the Leopold Reserve educational institution where students learn to protect our natural heritage under the dedicated guidance of Leopold's daughter, Nina Leopold Bradley. John Muir is memorialized at places where he spent his youthful years--John Muir Memorial Park and Observatory Hill State Natural area.

As for me, I have the best of both worlds. I can sit on my Leopold bench in my own corner of the earth with its fields and woods and enjoy the beauty of nature's passing seasons. I live in the heart of John Muir country and not far from the heart of Aldo Leopold country.

Millie Stanley, author of The Heart of John Muir's World and

member of Writers at the Portage.