

We went up to visit Aldo Leopold's "shack" the other day because Marion Moran couldn't believe I had never visited it.

Marion, as I've written elsewhere, is a grandmother in chino pants who is regarded by many people as the finest naturalist-teacher now working in our state. Much of her reputation is based on her widely acclaimed *Walks on the Wild Side*, the strikingly creative series which she conducts throughout the state for University of Wisconsin-Extension.

I don't think "strikingly creative" is overstating it.

There aren't too many teachers around who have you pressing an ear up against birch trunks and *listening to trees*.

Or who have you hunkering down in the middle of a deep night in a deep woods, listening to the words of Chief Seattle, the Taos Pueblo and the early people who loved this land as few of the later people have.

Marion was going to be taking a class to the Leopold shack, and first, as is her custom, she would be "pre-flighting" it: walking the trails, checking for "mud and moisture," noting the game trails, the advance of the season, the places most appropriate for seeing birds, or hearing Indians.

So we went to experience what Aldo Leopold called his family's "refuge from too much modernity: 'the shack.'"

"On this sand farm in Wisconsin," Aldo

North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

wrote, "first worn out and then abandoned by our bigger-and-better society, we try to rebuild, with shovel and axe, what we are losing elsewhere. It is here that we seek—and still find—our meat from God."

First, we visited with Nina Leopold Bradley, who, with her husband Charles, lives only a short, winding walk from the old shed that her father made world-famous.

"In all the photographs," Charles said, "over all the years, the shack is always the same. It doesn't seem to change. But in the background, Nature has changed everything, is always changing everything."

For the Tamarack Press edition of *Sand County Almanac*, Nina Leopold Bradley had recalled that wintry February day in 1935 when her father hauled the family out to share the joy of his new purchase: 80 acres (at eight dollars an acre) and a tumbledown shed filled with frozen cow manure and chicken droppings.

What did my father see in this place, his daughter asked, that put the sparkle in his eyes?

Did Aldo Leopold truly visualize the

deep pine-and-oak forest that now, 40 years later, shelters deer and provides drumming logs for grouse? Did he visualize the lush native prairie with its big bluestem grass as high as I can reach, its myriad flowers blooming in succession from spring to autumn? Did he see the return of the sandhill cranes that now dance in the big marsh? Did he anticipate the battle now being waged to prevent the aspen and dogwood he planted from taking over his prairie and marsh? Did he see a family that would never again view land casually? What did he see on that cold winter day in 1935?

Nina gave us the key to the shack and said we were welcome to start a fire in the fireplace. That seemed a practical idea, because the day was turning gray and blowy, the kind of day ducks come in low and skittering, and the whole marshland seems to be drifting and moving.

Marion took the binoculars.

I carried the pack-sack with our lunch.

Once in the woods, there was less wind. The trail was wet with standing water in the lowspots. I was struck by the number of dead trees, standing and unchopped, the oblong holes of pileated

woodpeckers high and prominent, bright in the grayness.

"They make holes that shape," Marion said, "when they're feeding. Where they nest, the holes are round."

I know folks, who, if they owned this land, would have long since had the chain saws out and there wouldn't be any dead trees. There also wouldn't be any live pileateds.

We abuse land, Aldo Leopold wrote, *because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man....*

It was hard to tell there had been a farm here at all.

Nature, as Charlie Bradley had said, had changed everything. And that was precisely why everything seemed so wild and unchanged. The land had gone back—not to what it had been, but to something akin to what it had been. Something wild. Something unmechanized.

Aldo Leopold was not here, and yet, as we neared the shack, his presence was very much here. I almost felt we were going to encounter him around the next turn.

We encountered, in his place, a huge red-tail hawk, rising lazily from the edge of a clearing where all wise hunters sit.

We encountered, in his place, a Great Blue Heron, frozen into place by our approach, its head peering above the river-bank like some watchful periscope.

We encountered, in his place, three plump deer, their white tails flying, their movement without sound or fear.

The highest use of wilderness, Aldo Leopold once said, is to simply: *Let it be*.

We unlocked the shack, got a good fire going to take the chill off, and ate our lunch. I didn't get the feeling Aldo was inside, watching the fire. I got the feeling he was outside, watching the sky. •