In this excerpt from his new book Living a Land Ethic: A History of Cooperative Conservation on the Leopold Memorial Reserve, Stephen Laubach examines the ownership history of the “Shack,” the property forester and conservationist Aldo Leopold purchased in 1935 and restored.

REVISITING “GOOD OAK”

THE LAND-USE HISTORY OF ALDO LEOPOLD’S FARM

In his essay “Good Oak,” Aldo Leopold wrote about how he and his family made a literal and figurative cut through a fallen tree near their now-famous “Shack.” This essay from Leopold’s Sand County Almanac is perhaps the most widely read account of the environmental history of Sauk County, Wisconsin. Yet part of his story, about a bootlegger who stripped the land of fertility and then “disappeared among the landless anonymities of the Great Depression,” leaves many unanswered questions. What crops did he and other previous landowners grow? How did these settlers’ agricultural practices influence Leopold’s ideas about conservation and land health on private land? How did land use following European settlement compare with that of earlier periods? Although scholars have researched the recent history of this land, few have closely scrutinized the legacy of those who lived there prior to the Leopold family.

I find that examining previous inhabitation of the area allows for a better understanding of the human story behind one source of inspiration for Aldo Leopold’s land ethic. He proposed with this concept that the boundaries of ethical behavior be expanded beyond interactions among humans to also include humans’ interactions with “soils, waters, plants, and animals, or, collectively: the land.” Leopold called for a change in societal attitudes, from viewing land as a commodity to seeing it as something to be cherished and respected. Events in his life, particularly his experiences with landownership and ecological restoration at the Shack, played an important role in shaping his views on stewardship of privately owned land.

I also use federal and state agricultural census data for this property to show shifts in farming practices that matched regional patterns in American agriculture. As for many farms in the area, agriculture on this parcel changed from a small, mixed-use operation in the 1860s to more specialized farming by the 1920s. These and other records indicate that the “bootlegger” described in “Good Oak,” Jacob Alexander, farmed the land as best he knew and in keeping with common practices, especially in the face of challenging economic and climatic conditions.

NATIVE AMERICAN SETTLEMENT OF WISCONSIN

To fully understand the history of land-use change around the Leopold Memorial Reserve and how these events influenced Leopold’s views on conservation ethics, one must start well before the bootlegger’s time, with what we know of its use by Native Americans. The proximity of the Shack property to the plentiful food supply and transportation networks of the Wisconsin and Fox rivers helps explain its long history of human settlement. Paleo-Indians first arrived in the region at the end of the most recent glacial period, some 12,000 years ago. Charcoal and pointed

BY STEPHEN LAUBACH
chipped-stone artifacts have been found 20 miles to the southwest of the Shack in a rock formation that gives Natural Bridge State Park its name. These remains suggest that the state’s earliest inhabitants lived in small groups and traveled great distances to obtain sparse food in a subarctic climate. During the next 7,000 years, the warming climate led to an increased food supply, larger and more permanent settlements, and expanded trade. Approximately 4,500 years ago, Early Woodland Indians near Baraboo left behind pottery and fired clay.3

Around 500 BCE, Native Americans constructed some of the first conical burial mounds that later became common across the Upper Midwest. The presence of grave offerings, such as shell beads, bear canine teeth, copper artifacts, and pottery from the mound culture of the Middle Woodland Indians, suggests the emergence of larger Native American settlements and trade networks in the area between 800 BCE and CE 400. The Late Woodland Indians continued this rich tradition of burial mounds through CE 1200 but expanded on the practice by constructing more extensive mounds in a variety of shapes, including round, linear, and animal silhouettes called effigy mounds. Many of these effigy mounds have been lost to agriculture and development, but some remain on the land; close to the Leopold Memorial Reserve a noteworthy mound in the shape of a human is located at Man Mound Park.4 Although mounds from this period occur elsewhere in the Midwest and beyond, they are especially abundant in Wisconsin, which had at least 15,000 prior to European settlement. Sauk County alone was thought to have 1,500. Only 100 remain in the county today, and of those, only a few dozen are in good condition. The meaning of the mound shapes has been subject to considerable debate, but recent scholarship indicates that the effigies were connected with clan-system beliefs in spirits of the upper, middle, and lower worlds.5 Examination of the shape and contents of the burial mounds thus reveals extensive information about the lives and beliefs of the Woodland Indians.

The Late Woodland and Mississippian civilizations in the Upper Midwest collapsed between 1200 and 1300 CE for unknown reasons. Some hypotheses include overpopulation, conflict with other groups, and a prolonged cooling period. At this time a third group, the Oneota Indians, thought to be descendants of the Late Woodland Indians but whose customs had changed drastically with new agricultural practices, emerged in two settlements: one near Lake Winnebago and Green Bay to the northeast, and the other near La Crosse in the southwest. First referred to as the Winnebago Tribe, in Wisconsin the members now use the name Ho-Chunk Nation.6

NATIVE AMERICAN CONTACT WITH EUROPEANS
By the time white explorers and fur traders arrived in the 1600s, the indigenous population in the state had dropped dramatically, perhaps because of warfare or infectious diseases spread by the
During this period, a coalition of French and Ho-Chunk forces drove out the recently arrived Fox and Sauk Indians from the Green Bay area, and the ousted groups settled in present-day Sauk County. Fur trading thrived in the latter area because of its rich supply of game and its proximity to the Wisconsin and Fox rivers at the present-day city of Portage. The north-flowing Fox River’s connection to the Atlantic Ocean via the Great Lakes and the south-flowing Wisconsin River’s connection to the Gulf of Mexico via the Mississippi River helped connect the area’s fur products to global markets. Early European explorers described this part of the Wisconsin territory as “affording excellent hunting grounds, abounding in deer, elk, and moose and very rich in bears and beavers.”

Just after the Revolutionary War, the Sauk and Fox tribes abandoned the area for unknown reasons, leaving the Ho-Chunk as the only Native Americans in the vicinity. One early white pioneer, Edward Tanner, wrote in 1818, “The Winnebago [Ho-Chunk] Indians inhabit the country bordering on the tributary streams on both sides of the [Wisconsin] river… Their territory extends from the Mississippi to the vicinity of Green Bay, and the number of their warriors is seven hundred.” Of the location near Portage where the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers nearly meet, he continued, “The two rivers might be united by a canal of only one mile in length…. At this prairie the Fox River does not exceed sixty feet in width, and is usually from three to ten deep, has little current,
and is full of a thick growth of wild rice. It abounds with some geese and an immense quantity and variety of ducks.”

Such abundance made this land highly desirable and led to growing conflicts between the white settlers and Native American inhabitants. These conflicts included a skirmish in 1827, which helped prompt the U.S. government’s construction of Fort Winnebago, near Portage, in 1828. Officials at the new Fort Winnebago Indian Agency mediated disputes between white settlers and Indians. After failed attempts to coexist, in 1832 the U.S. Army drove out returning Sauk Indians from the region during the Black Hawk War. Following his capture, Chief Black Hawk explained his reasons for participating in the uprising that had led to the war:

“I have determined to give my motives and reasons for my former hostilities to the whites, and to vindicate my character from misrepresentation…. My reason teaches me that land cannot be sold. The Great Spirit gave it to his children to live upon, and cultivate, as far as it is necessary for their subsistence…. Nothing can be sold, but such things as can be carried away.”

Black Hawk’s words had little effect, however, on policies that encouraged the sale of land in the region to the growing number of white settlers. After the Ho-Chunk signed an 1837 treaty ceding the tribal lands east of the Mississippi to the United States, the federal government opened up much of Wisconsin and other parts of the Northwest Territory to white settlers. Meanwhile, government officials forcibly relocated the Ho-Chunk tribe to Minnesota and, later, to Nebraska. Some members, however, resisted the treaty, remained and were later recognized as rightful owners of their ancestral lands in south-central Wisconsin.

The arrival of land surveyors and settlers

The presence of so many new settlers in the 1840s signaled a new era in the state’s history. The local, state, and federal government documents from this period provide insights into the settlement of specific locations, including the site where Leopold’s Shack now stands. Land surveyors in particular took detailed field notes during this period. Teams of surveyors, their work mandated by the 1785 Land Ordinance Act and 1787 Northwest Ordinance Act, reached eastern Wisconsin in 1833 and took until 1866 to complete the project statewide. They described the future Shack property along the Wisconsin River as a mixture of open oak savanna, marshland, and forest, with the land occupying a floodplain forest and oak opening. Red, white, burr, and black oak trees grew best in this landscape, which was kept open and savanna-like by regular fires, with one early surveyor describing the land as “third rate rolling, sandy; oak—barrens” and “marshy.” The only European settler present at that time, the surveyor noted, was “a Norwegian named Anderson.”

Around the time of the Civil War, the federal government began conducting the ten-year agricultural census in Wisconsin, and officials collected more extensive information about people living in the newly surveyed region on the edge of the western frontier. Agricultural census data from 1860 reveal that little of the area’s expanses of oak savanna and woodland was under plow. The new owners of the future Shack property, William and Caroline Baxter, farmed less than 25 percent of their land. Census data for the land, however, indicate that grain production and animal husbandry steadily rose during the early years of farming.

In one firsthand account of the area from this period, the founder of the Sierra Club, John Muir, wrote a vivid description of this sparsely settled land in the early days of white settlement after he and his family had moved to Wisconsin from Scotland in 1849:
Wisconsin land surveyor J. E. Whitcher's notes about the land that would become the Leopold Memorial Reserve, from 1845. The sentence near the top reads, “The Wisconsin is very high indeed, the flats are all overflowed, could not set ¼ post.”

“This sudden plash into pure wilderness—baptism in Nature’s warm heart—how utterly happy it made us! Nature streaming into us, wooingly teaching her wonderful glowing lessons, so unlike the dismal grammar ashes and cinders so long thrashed into us.” Although Muir’s adolescence as a family laborer on a pioneer farmstead in Wisconsin included many hardships, he clearly reveled in the chance to live in a new, wild area far removed from the dreary city life of his early years in Scotland.

As more land in the area was cleared and put into production, yields on the Baxter farm increased over the years despite the low quality of their sandy floodplain property. In the Baxters’ first two decades there, they grew mainly corn, wheat, and oats, perhaps to sell to an influx of settlers attracted to work in a Wisconsin Dells pinery that was new to the lumber industry at that time. The Kilbourn Dam, just upstream and among the earliest of several dams that eventually dotted the river, had been completed in 1859 to help regulate water levels for logs being floated downstream. On the Baxter farm, the most dramatic increase of crop production in the early years was in corn, which went from none in 1860 to 500 bushels by 1880. Other crops, such as potatoes, apples, barley, buckwheat, and molasses, were also sources of income and subsistence to the Baxters and other nearby farm families. In 1880, for example, the Baxters had 15 apple trees that produced 40 bushels, and some of these trees may have formed the orchard just west of the Shack “at the foot of the sandhill,” which Leopold refers to in his “Good Oak” essay.

After the chinch bug, an insect pest, arrived early in the Baxters’ years on the farm, wheat farming collapsed throughout Wisconsin. In Sauk County, hops quickly took wheat’s place as a cash crop, but its duration was also brief. As an ingredient in beer, this crop’s appearance in the agricultural records corresponded with a “hops craze” in the area during the 1860s and 1870s. According to one account, “preachers and temperance men even went into hop raising, quieting their consciences with the rationalization that the hops would be used for tanning. In fact, a meeting was held in the county courthouse one evening to discuss the matter: “The arguments were many and the house was filled. The argument of big profits . . . seemed to be sufficient for most of them.” Another observer wrote, “When you saw a farmer in 1867, the peak year, with an expensive driving team and a fancy buggy you just assumed that he was a hop grower. In that year Sauk County raised more than a fourth of all the hops grown in the state, and they brought up to 65 cents a pound.” But the arrival of another insect pest, the hop louse, put an end to many get-rich-quick farming schemes.

A more lasting enterprise for the Baxters was their animal husbandry, which increased notably in their first two decades. They began with a small dairy operation, making 100 pounds of butter from three cows in 1860; by 1880 their butter production had risen to 500 pounds. Sheep, swine, and poultry were nonexistent in the 1860 census but had increased by 1880 to between 10 and 30 of each. The Baxters and other area farmers most likely chose to sell butter, wool, and eggs because such products were less subject to the vagaries of the weather and less likely to spoil in transport than field crops or milk. The combined increase in animal husbandry, corn, and other products provided the Baxters with a comfortable income even as they withstood economic challenges such as the demise of wheat and hops. Over the next several decades, they and their children remained in the area and expanded their landholdings.

The Beginning of the Modern Agricultural Era
Wisconsin agricultural census data from this land in the early twentieth century paint a very different picture than the one just 45 years earlier. Area farmers began to shift from raising a diverse mix of animals and crops toward a monoculture more similar to what has become common on twenty-first-century farms. The relationship of these farmers to the Wisconsin River also changed dramatically. Beginning in the late 1800s, federal, state, and local agencies constructed levees starting just east of the Baxter property and extending downstream to the flood-prone city of Portage, and the Kilbourn Dam upstream was rebuilt. The improved flood regulation made the land less susceptible—but never immune—to inundation. During their years of ownership, from 1915 to 1935, Jacob Alexander and his wife Emma moved away from livestock toward row-crop agriculture. They ceased raising sheep but maintained a small number of cows, pigs, and hens—the last being the source of the knee-deep chicken manure the Leopold family removed from the Shack upon its purchase. Among the grain crops, wheat production remained low following the end of Wisconsin’s period of high-volume wheat production a few decades earlier, but the Alexanders had about the same acreage in corn and oats as was recorded in the 1880 census.

As European farmers returned to work after World War I, more commodities supplied from overseas reduced the global demand for American agricultural goods, and consequently prices
began to drop. Furthermore, increased mechanization accompanying the advent of gasoline-powered tractors, as well as higher yields from new crop varieties, made life more difficult for small farmers unable to afford the technology. In this economic climate, a depression began in the agricultural sector that preceded the national economic collapse of 1929. Farming on the Alexander property no longer provided sufficient income, and in the 1930s state records show that Jacob Alexander was unable to pay his property taxes. Like farmers across the country, Alexander may have been striving to increase production to offset debt from low prices: he nearly doubled the amount of land farmed in an effort to compensate for commodity prices that had in some cases dropped roughly 85 percent from World War I highs. In 1933, his last year on the property, he farmed his third-highest total acreage, which suggests a last-ditch attempt to overcome his dire financial troubles.

During the drought years of the 1930s, however, the weather did not cooperate with Alexander’s hopes for a bumper harvest. Although the Wisconsin droughts were not as dramatic as those in the Dust Bowl to the south and west, Wisconsin did experience a local dust bowl during these years. Unable to receive enough income from his withered crops to keep up with new developments in agriculture, and being recently widowed after his wife Emma’s death in March 1933, Alexander gave up on farming, abandoned his land, and went to live with his sister Ida in California. He did not sell the land at this time, however, most probably because the severe economic depression gripping the country would have made it difficult to find a buyer.

Alexander returned to Wisconsin in the spring of 1935 to live with his brother George near Baraboo, and he began farming again at the age of sixty-five, on land rented from George’s neighbor. County records indicate that he was saddled with a debt of $548 in unpaid property taxes on his abandoned farmstead. Taking care of unfinished business from his last attempt at farming and perhaps glad to be rid of the reminder of a failed business venture, he signed a warranty deed on May 17, 1935, transferring this land to Aldo Leopold. Free of the burden of unpaid taxes, he was now set to return to full-time farming. Before he was able to realize this dream, though, Alexander died, in January 1936.

The collapse of the agricultural sector in the United States that began after World War I lasted well through the 1940s and claimed the livelihoods of many small family farmers like Jacob Alexander. These events also forced the surviving farmers to examine more seriously the ideas of Aldo Leopold and other national leaders, such as Hugh Hammond Bennett, Paul Sears, and J. I. Rodale, who were involved in the “permanent agriculture” movement of the 1930s to 1950s. Proponents advocated smaller-scale farming that worked within ecological limits instead of pushing for maximum production at all costs. The message of permanent agriculture even reached beyond farmers to the broader public. According to the historians Randal Beeman and James Pritchard, “adherents had some initial success in promoting the concepts of societal longevity, ecological interdependence, and the utopian possibilities of the new farming. Perman­ent agriculture’s many
The deed for the sale of land from Jacob Alexander to Aldo Leopold, dated May 17, 1935.
precepts circulated through the late 1940s, reaching Americans of all stripes with their infectious promises of health, wealth, and prosperity. Reeling from the disastrous effects of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, farmers and city dwellers alike were hungry for new ideas about how to grow food without destroying the soil.

LEOPOLD’S EVOLVING VIEWS ON CONSERVATION

When he wrote “The Good Oak,” Aldo Leopold considered the history of his small farm in central Wisconsin. Although he never specifically mentioned indigenous land-use practices in this essay, he implicitly compared the area’s robust land health during pre-settlement times with events from the 1860s onward, such as the extinction of the passenger pigeon, the disappearance of elk in the state, and the widespread drainage of marshland for farming. As for his immediate predecessor’s land-use history, Leopold referred to Jacob Alexander as a bootlegger who had carelessly burned down the property’s house. There is no evidence to suggest that he knew Alexander personally, however, and it is clear from government records that Alexander was, if indeed a bootlegger at all, also a legitimate farmer. It is possible, too, that a trespassing bootlegger or squatter inhabited Alexander’s abandoned house and burned it down sometime between late 1933 and early 1935. Yet Leopold’s further description of the bootlegger as a farmer who “skinned” the land of its fertility suggests that Leopold’s criticism of Alexander is grounded, to at least some degree, in actual events on the land. Overall, the bootlegger character in the Sand County Almanac may have been part composite sketch of previous dwellers and part fictional character.

Regardless of the true identity of the bootlegger, this description and the events noted in “The Good Oak” serve as a useful metaphor for major problems in the agricultural sector of the United States, thus advancing Leopold’s literary goals. The problems that started in the 1860s and came to a head in the 1930s—declines in land health and economic well-being—were clearly outside the control of the individual farmers, who had property taxes, mortgages, and equipment debts to pay amid drought, industrialization, and wildly fluctuating prices for their crops. The economic challenges of the Great Depression, which began earlier in the agricultural sector than in the rest of the country, pushed farmers like Alexander to pursue poor practices on marginal farmland. In the earliest years of the Depression, critiques of agricultural practices by Leopold and others were ahead of their time and therefore unknown to farmers like Jacob Alexander.

Aldo Leopold went on to connect his appraisal of farming practices to a broader assessment of conservation responsibilities of society as a whole. While working for the U.S. Forest Service, he regularly suggested that public agencies expand or reimagine their conservation mission. In 1924 he successfully lobbied for the establishment by the Forest Service of the Gila Wilderness in New Mexico, the first such publicly protected land in the country. He also criticized federal policies that offered a bounty for killing large carnivores like wolves and grizzly bears, policies that he himself had once supported. He often interacted with private landowners, as when he mediated policy disputes between the Forest Service and local ranchers who were using a mix of private and public grazing lands. Between 1928 and 1932, while working on game surveys as a consulting ecologist, he witnessed firsthand the poor condition of wildlife habitat in the Midwest.

By the time Leopold bought the Shack, he was more keenly aware of the challenges to conservation posed by individual landowners than he had been in his days with the Forest Service. He became involved in outreach to landowners to set up projects in wildlife, forest, and watershed management. Experimenting on his own property as he pioneered the idea of restoring degraded farmland to its pre-European settlement condition deep-
ened his thinking about the role of private landowners and provided fertile ground for ideas later articulated in *A Sand County Almanac*. In “The Land Ethic,” he noted: “There is a clear tendency in American conservation to relegate to government all necessary jobs that private landowners fail to perform.” The solution, Leopold went on to suggest, lay in “a land ethic, or some other force which assigns more obligation to the private landowner.” This gradual turn in his thinking influenced the conservation strategies advocated by Leopold later in his life. Inspired by his interactions with private landowners and his own efforts to restore a worn-out farm near Madison, he concentrated for much of the remainder of his career on the responsibilities of private landowners in conservation.

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**NOTES**


15. 1845 surveyor account of J. E. Whitcher for external survey of Sauk County, sections 32–36, T13N and R7E. Available online through the Wisconsin Board of Commissioners of Public Lands and the UW–Madison Digital Collections Center at http://libtext.library.wisc.edu/SurveyNotes/. The term “third-rate” was used by surveyors to refer to land with limited potential for agriculture; “first-rate” had prime agricultural potential. Information about the agricultural potential of land is from a conversation with landscape historian Rob Nurie on 25 May 2011.

16. Agricultural data for 1860, 1870, and 1880 are from the United States Bureau of the Census, located in the archives of the Wisconsin Historical Society (hereafter, WHS), “United States Census Schedules for Wisconsin—Productions of Agriculture,” series 1676 (box 7, shelf 4/33/P5), 1677 (box 7, shelf 4/33/P6), and 1678 (box 7, shelf 4/33/O6), respectively. Data is also available from 1850 in series 1675, box 2, shelf 4/33/O4. Copies of warranty deed records showing the year of purchase by Baxters were originally obtained by Konrad Liegel from the Sauk County Register of Deeds; copies of Liegel’s report are located in the Aldo Leopold Foundation archives at the Leopold Center, shelf “Graduate Fellows.” These records show that the property had been owned by seven other landowners, starting with J. A. Noonan in November 1849. Most of these periods of ownership may have been speculative since they were often brief, with one as short as nine months. The Baxters, however, lived on this property between 1858 and 1912.


21. The end of Wisconsin’s wheat craze in the 1860s is documented in Lange, *County Called Sauk*, 67–68.

22. Ibid., 67.

23. After 1880, all agricultural data were collected by the state rather than the federal government. The data for the Alexanders are from the WHS archives, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, “Annual Enumeration of Farm Statistics by Assessors,” microform, 1924–35. State agricultural census data from before 1922 were destroyed by fire.


25. Tax information is located at the Wisconsin Historical Society in the Sauk County Treasurer Tax rolls (microform), 1935, reel 19, AP 98-0075.


28. Alexander was one of five siblings. Details about his life between 1933 and 1936 are from his obituary in the *Baraboo News-Republic*, January 10, 1936. This as well as other documents from the time of his death are included in his probate records in the Sauk County Historical Society.


32. For Leopold’s advocacy on behalf of the Gila Wilderness Area and for information about his work studying game populations, see Curt Meine, *Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 196–226, 268.