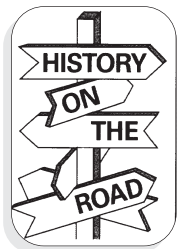


# HISTORY ON THE ROAD

## JOHN MUIR AND ALDO LEOPOLD IN WISCONSIN

By Thomas J. Straka and James G. Lewis



Forest and conservation history enthusiasts and practitioners traveling to the Madison, Wisconsin, area often make a 46-mile pilgrimage north to Baraboo to visit Aldo Leopold's Shack. The small cabin is where Leopold and his family experimented with restoring exhausted farmland while he worked up his ideas into what became his land ethic, articulated in *A Sand County Almanac*. The site is well documented and worth visiting, as is the wonderful visitors center.

But another famous conservationist also had his formative experiences in Wisconsin, though he is not usually associated with the state. Just northeast of the Shack (15 miles as the crow flies, about 30 miles by car) is the farm site where John Muir spent most of his childhood and where he began to develop his naturalist's skills and an appreciation of wilderness. Just as the sand county property spawned an environmental philosophy, a small farm property helped inspire a passion for preserving things natural. Aldo Leopold wrote

about the connection in *A Sand County Almanac* while describing the "good oak" as a means to survive a February blizzard:

*The saw now severs 1865, the pith-year of our oak. In that year John Muir offered to buy from his brother, who then owned the home farm thirty miles east of my oak, a sanctuary for the wild flowers that had gladdened his youth. His brother declined to part with the land, but he could not suppress the idea: 1865 still stands in Wisconsin history as the birthyear of mercy for things natural, wild, and free.*<sup>1</sup>

Leopold wrote a letter to the Wisconsin Conservation Department just one week before he died (on Muir's birthdate, April 21, in 1948) proposing that the Muir homestead at Fountain Lake be made the state's first natural area. It did not become the first state natural area, but most of the homestead is now protected.<sup>2</sup>

John Muir was 11 when his family moved from Scotland to Wisconsin in 1849. He spent nearly eight years at Fountain Lake and another four years at their second homestead, Hickory Hill,

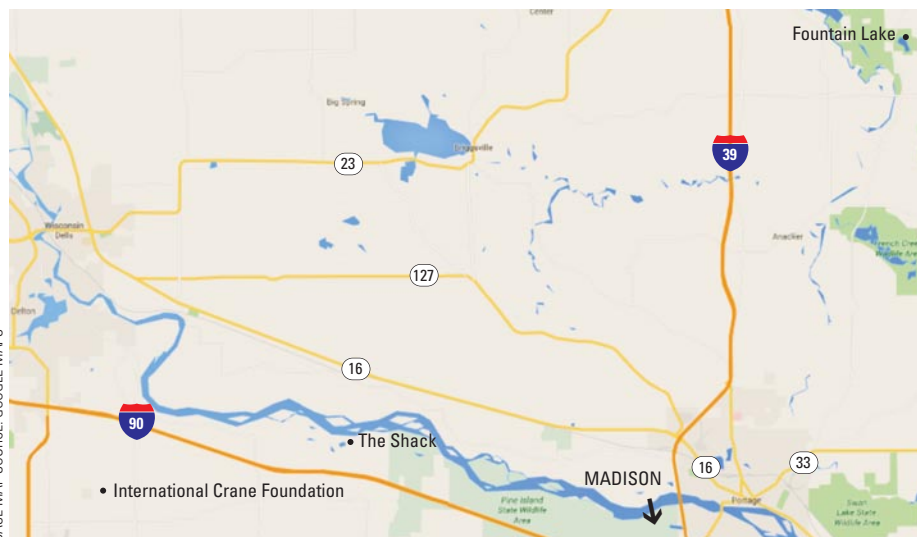
about four miles southeast, before leaving to spend nearly three formative years at the new university in Madison.<sup>3</sup> The foreword to one of the best books on John Muir's Wisconsin days recommends it "for the kind of reader who likes to get to roots, to cause, to influences, to the core."<sup>4</sup> Likewise, this road trip is for someone who desires to get to the heart of John Muir.

His first vision of the Wisconsin wilderness was one of awe and wonderment:

*This sudden splash into pure wildness—baptism in Nature's warm heart—how utterly happy it made us! Nature streaming into us, wooingly teaching her wonderful growing lessons, so unlike the dismal grammar ashes and cinders so long thrashed into us. Here without knowing it we were still at school; every wild lesson a love lesson, not whipped but charmed into us. Oh, that glorious Wisconsin wilderness! Everything new and pure in the very prime of the spring when Nature's pulses were beating highest and mysteriously keeping time with our own! Young hearts, young leaves, flowers, animals, the winds and the streams and the sparkling lake, all wildly, gladly rejoicing together!*<sup>5</sup>

The land where Muir was baptized (literally) and into the experience of wilderness is only 50 miles from Madison. Fountain Lake, now called Ennis Lake, still answers to Muir's description.<sup>6</sup> The first homestead was on the north side of the lake; the meadow he tried to protect was near the homestead; his swimming hole (where he almost drowned) was a small basin at the south end of the lake.<sup>7</sup> The original house is long gone, but the lilacs and silver maples planted by the Muirs are still there.<sup>8</sup> A trail around the lake lets you view the entire property. Muir said of Fountain Lake,

*Our beautiful lake, named Fountain Lake by father, but Muir's Lake by the*



*The sites relating to John Muir and Aldo Leopold outside Madison are a short drive from one another but not close enough to visit all in one day. The Muir sites can be seen in one day.*

neighbors, is one of the many small glacier lakes that adorn the Wisconsin landscapes. It is fed by twenty or thirty meadow springs about a half mile long, half as wide, and surrounded by low finely-modeled hills dotted with oak and hickory, and meadows full of grasses and sedges and many beautiful orchids and ferns. First, there is a zone of green, shining rushes, and just beyond the rushes a zone of white and orange water-lilies fifty or sixty feet wide forming a magnificent border. On bright days, when the lake was rippled by a breeze, the lilies and star-spangles danced together in radiant beauty, and it became difficult to discriminate between them.<sup>9</sup>

Close by is Hickory Hill, the second homestead, still a working farm in private ownership. Visiting Hickory Hill takes special arrangements, but the red barn Muir helped build and the well he dug through 80 feet of sandstone are still there.<sup>10</sup> Many of his adventures took place on nearby Wolf Hill and Observatory Hill.<sup>11</sup> Observatory Hill is a state natural area with a hiking trail to the top. There you can rest on the same boulders where John Muir sat as he first pondered the glaciated landscape around his farm, with its terminal moraine, kettles, and glacial lakebeds.<sup>12</sup> Muir gained an early knowledge of the action of glaciers that proved valuable later in his role as a naturalist and geologist. A United Presbyterian church, with graves of family members and friends, is close by, and Knights Lake, where the Muir children were baptized by their father, is not far from Hickory Hill.

From 1861 to 1863 Muir attended the University of Wisconsin for six terms. If one walks to the end of State Street from the state capitol, the walk will end at the foot of Bascom Hill with a view of Bascom Hall. To the immediate right is the Wisconsin Historical Society. Inside, at ground level in a display case, is Muir's famous desk that he used for studying.<sup>13</sup> Muir described his desk:

*I invented a desk in which the books I had to study were arranged in order at the beginning of each term. I also made a bed which set me on my feet every morning at the hour determined on, and in dark winter mornings just as the bed set me on the floor it lighted a lamp. Then, after the minutes allowed for dressing had elapsed, a click was heard*



COURTESY OF PATRICIA STRAKA

*The view from Observatory Hill today, where a young John Muir first pondered the glaciated landscape around his farm.*

*and the first book to be studied was pushed up from a rack below the top of the desk, thrown open, and allowed to remain there the number of minutes required. Then the machinery closed the book and allowed it to drop back into its stall, then moved the rack forward and threw up the next in order, and so on, all the day being divided according to the times of recitation, and time required and allotted to each study.<sup>14</sup>*

Muir lived in the North Hall dormitory at the university. North Hall is still there at the top of Bascom Hill to the right (north) as you look up the hill. His room was in the northeast corner of the first floor, according to university sources.<sup>15</sup> A little farther north, just across the road from the north end of the building, is Muir Knoll with a granite marker by a black locust tree. This may be a clone of the black locust from which Muir obtained his first botany lesson.<sup>16</sup> It would be where he stood as a fellow student handed him the flower from a locust and asked him to identify the family of the tree. Muir replied, "I don't know anything about botany." To that, the inquisitor said it did not matter: "What is it like?" Muir responded, "It is like a pea flower." Muir was correct, but



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*While a young man in Wisconsin, John Muir invented several items, including this clock-desk, which can be seen at the Wisconsin Historical Society. Note that the legs are made to look like drafting compasses.*

objected, “How can that be when the pea is a weak, clinging, straggling herb, and the locust a big thorny hardwood tree?” Apprehending that both had the same essential characteristics and thus belonged to the same family was the beginning of a lifetime of botanizing. “This fine lesson charmed me and sent me flying to the woods and meadows in wild enthusiasm. Like everyone else I was always fond of flowers, attracted by their external beauty and purity. Now my eyes were opened to their inner beauty, all alike revealing glorious traces of the thoughts of God, and leading on and on into the infinite cosmos.”<sup>17</sup>

If instead of the interstate you take U.S. 51 North out of Madison to visit the Muir farm sites, just south of Poynette you will find a state historical marker on the west side of the highway; it marks the “John Muir View.” He’d often stop here to admire the view on the long walk to and from Madison.<sup>18</sup> If you’d like to see where Muir did much of his botanizing in Madison, a wonderful trek is the Lakeshore Path from Muir Woods to Picnic Point (the peninsula jutting out into the lake, about a two-mile one-way trip). In 1863 Muir left the university to continue his life’s journey, writing, “I bade my blessed Alma Mater farewell. But I was only leaving one university for another, the Wisconsin University for the University of the Wilderness.”<sup>19</sup>

The original Muir farm is 50 miles north of Madison. From Interstate 39, take Exit 87 at Portage and State Route 33 for about four miles to County Road F, and then turn left and proceed north for about 10 miles to the John Muir Memorial County Park, the farm site. The Observatory Hill State Natural Area is north of the park; it has a trail that leads to a superb observation point where John Muir sat and pondered. In 1906 a local resident found “J. Muir 1856” carved into the limb of a cedar tree on the hill. John was assigned to help build a corduroy road (built with tamarack logs) through a marsh in 1854; today that section is part of 13th Road, downslope from the United Presbyterian church cemetery.<sup>20</sup> If one wants to walk in the steps of young John Muir, this would be the road trip; those steps can even be on a road that John Muir helped build.

### UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN ARBORETUM

While in Madison, you can also walk in the footsteps of Leopold.<sup>21</sup> A stop at the U.S.



COURTESY OF PATRICIA STRAKA

*Muir Knoll, located on the campus of the University of Wisconsin, marks where John Muir received his first botany lesson. It is located across from North Hall, where he lived.*

Forest Service’s Forest Products Laboratory, where Leopold spent four years as assistant director after transferring from the Southwest, is interesting in its own right but not instructive about the man. Noting he was a forester directing engineers and scientists, one colleague characterized him as a “fish out of water.”<sup>22</sup> Rather, the University of Wisconsin Arboretum offers an opportunity to better understand Leopold’s work at the Shack. The arboretum was established about the time Leopold became a professor at the university, and he was an early enthusiast of using it as an ecological restoration project.<sup>23</sup> As one of the speakers at its dedication in 1934, he gave his vision for what it would be: “Our idea, in a nutshell, is to reconstruct, primarily for the use of the University, a sample of original Wisconsin—a sample of what Dane County looked like when our ancestors arrived here during the 1840s.”<sup>24</sup> On his way to the Shack each July, Leopold would watch for a country cemetery whose fence protected a remnant of the long-gone prairie. Every summer it

would produce “a man-high stalk of compass plant or cutleaf Silphium, spangled with saucer-sized yellow blooms resembling sunflowers.”<sup>25</sup> The arboretum influenced his work at the Shack, and vice versa. He participated in establishing the Curtis Prairie, a former horse pasture that is now the world’s oldest restored prairie.<sup>26</sup> The Leopold Pines represent his idea to create a northern Wisconsin pine community on the arboretum. You do not have to drive up to the sand counties to see Leopold’s footprints; they are close by at the arboretum.

### INTERNATIONAL CRANE FOUNDATION

The two conservation icons both wrote of cranes, especially sandhill cranes. Muir wrote that when he visited the meadows, he would return with “wonderful stories of the great long-legged birds.”<sup>27</sup> Leopold wrote in *A Sand County Almanac*,

*To the residual lagoons came the cranes, bugling the defeat of the retreating winter, summoning the on-creeping host*



Both John Muir and Aldo Leopold wrote of sand cranes. The International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, Wisconsin, works to preserve cranes and their habitats and flyways around the world.

of living things to their collective task of marsh-building. Floating bogs of sphagnum moss clogged the lowered waters, filled them.... The lagoons disappeared, but not the cranes. To the moss-meadows that replaced the ancient waterways they returned each spring to dance and bugle and rear their gangling sorrel-colored chicks, but colts. I cannot explain why. On some dewy June morning watch gambol over their ancestral pastures at the heels of the roan mare, and you will see for yourself.<sup>28</sup>

Continuing, he asks, “How can management restore the shrinking species, like prairie grouse, already hopeless as shootable game? How can management restore the threatened ratites, like trumpeter swan and whooping crane? Can management principles be extended to wildflowers?<sup>29</sup>

Only seven miles west of Leopold’s Shack is the International Crane Foundation, which attempts to answer those questions.<sup>30</sup> It was founded in 1973 to restore wild populations of crane species and to sustain the places where cranes live. It is worth the side trip to see something that was important to both Muir and Leopold. Guided and self-guided tours and exhibits introduce visitors to issues affecting crane populations, like flyway conservation, watershed management, ecosystem restoration, cultural connections, and conservation leadership. One emphasis is saving the whooping crane from extinction.

Aldo Leopold said of the cranes in Sand County that if you “gambol over their ancestral pastures... you will see for yourself.”<sup>31</sup> Here, as in Madison, are nearby places to gambol. □

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## NOTES

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4. Tim Hirsch, Foreword, in Stanley, *The Heart of John Muir’s World*, xi–xii.
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6. H. E. Cole, “Little Journey to the Boyhood Home of John Muir,” *Baraboo Daily News*, September 23, 1919; Wyman Smith, “Fountain Lake and John Muir,” *Dearborn Independent*, August 6, 1921; and Floyd S. Van Vuren, “Pioneer Days in Wisconsin with John Muir, Naturalist,” *Milwaukee Sunday Journal*, March 7, 1926. These and other articles may be found by

searching under “John Muir” on the Wisconsin Historical Society website at <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org>.

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9. Muir, *Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, 117–18.
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