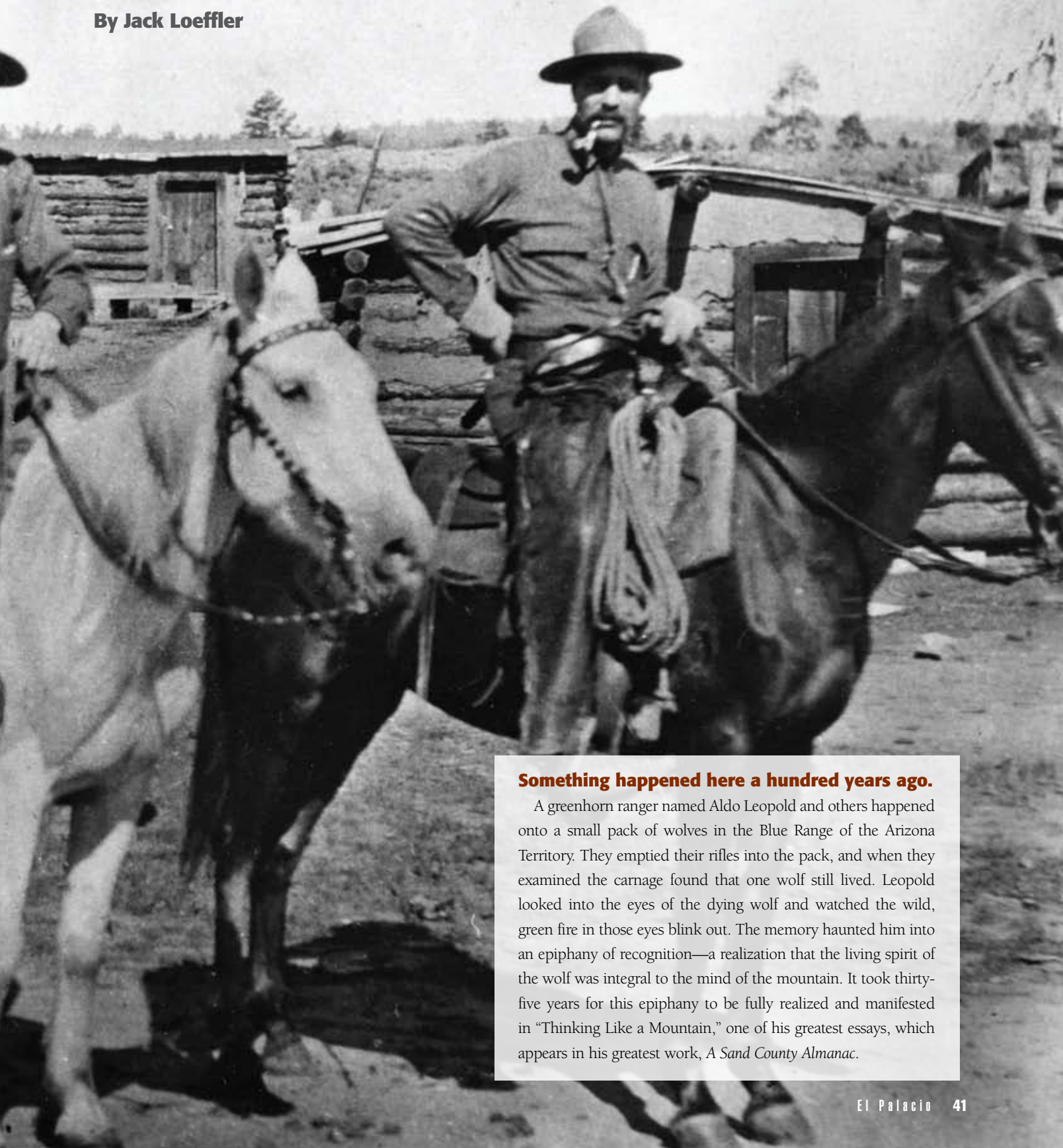


Officers of Carson National Forest,
from left, Deputy Forest Supervisor Aldo Leopold,
Forest Assistant Ira T. Yarell, and Forest Supervisor
Harry C. Hall, 1911. Courtesy of the Aldo Leopold
Foundation.

Aldo Leopold

The Southwest's Essential Man

By Jack Loeffler

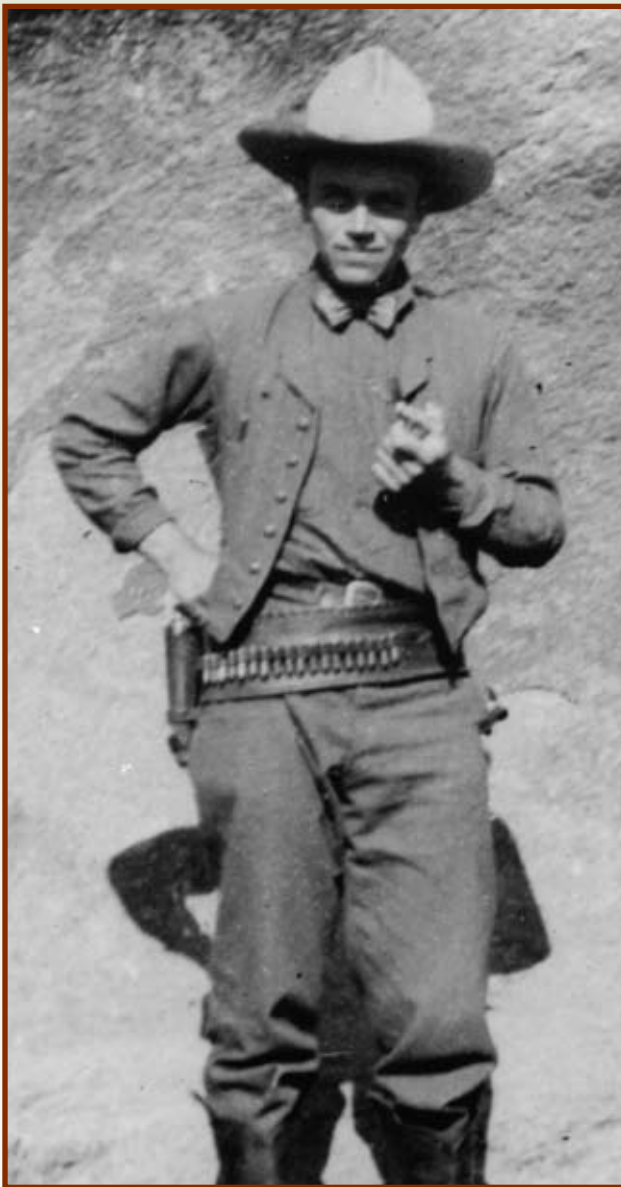


Something happened here a hundred years ago.

A greenhorn ranger named Aldo Leopold and others happened onto a small pack of wolves in the Blue Range of the Arizona Territory. They emptied their rifles into the pack, and when they examined the carnage found that one wolf still lived. Leopold looked into the eyes of the dying wolf and watched the wild, green fire in those eyes blink out. The memory haunted him into an epiphany of recognition—a realization that the living spirit of the wolf was integral to the mind of the mountain. It took thirty-five years for this epiphany to be fully realized and manifested in “Thinking Like a Mountain,” one of his greatest essays, which appears in his greatest work, *A Sand County Almanac*.

I have watched the face of many a newly wolfless mountain, and have seen every edible bush and seedling browsed, first to anaemic desuetude, and then to death. . . . Such a mountain looks as if someone had given God a new pruning shears, and forbidden Him all other exercise.

—Aldo Leopold, *Thinking Like a Mountain: Wolves and Deforestation*



Aldo Leopold, upon joining the United States Forest Service in 1909.
Courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Foundation.

“He, of all the environmental thinkers I’ve read, put together perhaps the most cohesive view of the natural world,” said author and environmentalist William de Buys, himself in the vanguard of a cadre of conservation-minded activists, “and he did it in a way that is more accessible and more persuasive than anyone else has done. So I see him as the essential man, the touchstone to whom we all go back, no matter our disagreements with him. He is a giant, and no one has given us a more complete view and a better expressed view than Aldo Leopold.”

Indeed, Aldo Leopold was a giant whose influence continues to spread like a blaze fanned by the wind. He was born in Burlington, Iowa, in 1887 and died of a heart attack in 1948 while fighting a grass fire. The singed pages of a journal that he always kept with him were found in his pocket.

Leopold grew up in a house that overlooked the Mississippi River. He attended the Yale School of Forestry, graduated with a master’s degree in 1909, and at that point made a move that would change his life and his mind: Aldo Leopold came to the American Southwest. It was here that his thinking was refined by the rough and tumble reality of this arid landscape then sparsely populated by Indians, Hispanos, and ranchers, all of whom took their survival cues from the flow of Nature.

In those days, many recalled the Indian wars that had dominated the nineteenth century. The ranchers and rangers who rode the rangeland considered shooting bears, bobcats, cougars, and wolves to be their contribution to taming the West. Young Aldo was no exception. There are photos of him astride his horse, the very image of the pistol-packin’ hero of cowpoke mythology.

Leopold’s first job was in the Apache National Forest in the Arizona Territory, where he became deeply attached to the landscape. In 1911 he was transferred to the Carson National Forest in northern New Mexico, where he achieved his ambition to become the supervisor of a national forest. During this period he met Estella Luna Bergere, a lady born into one of New Mexico’s

oldest and most distinguished families. They fell in love, were married in 1912, and together built their first home, a rustic hand-hewn cabin situated in Tres Piedras, New Mexico.

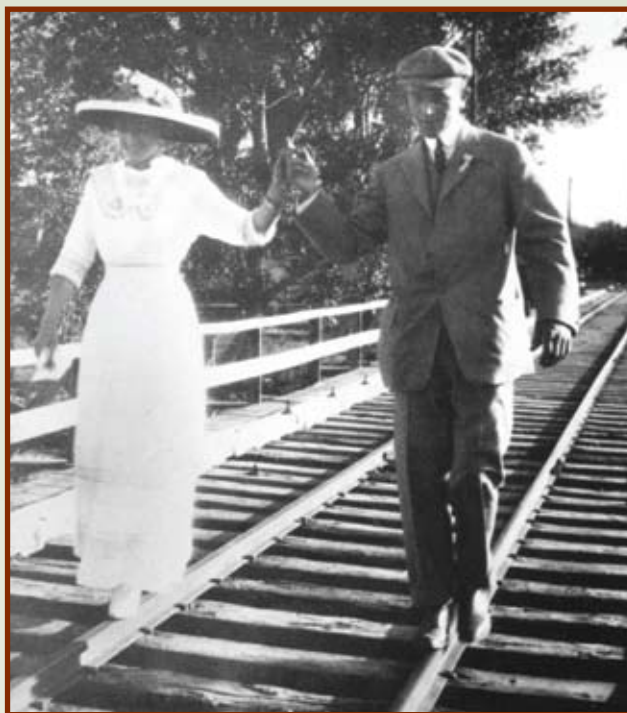
The Carson National Forest spread across different ranger districts spanning an immense landscape, and Leopold spent much of his working life on horseback. At one point, while he was returning from a trip to Durango through the Jicarilla Ranger District, harsh weather overtook him. His daughter Estella, now eighty-three and associated with the Department of Biology at the University of Washington in Seattle, recalled that her father “was sick for two years flat after he had ridden across a pass and a snowstorm fell on him. Everything was wet, and he had to sleep in that wet bedroll for a couple of nights. By the time he made it to Mother, to home, he had a bad kidney infection, or condition, and it knocked him out for a couple of years. It was terrible.”

Once well enough to work again, Leopold took a position as the executive secretary for the Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce. During this period he befriended Clinton B. Anderson, a young insurance executive and fellow Midwesterner, a meeting of minds with extraordinary significance. As Stewart Udall recalled in a speech given at the Sixth National Wilderness Conference in Santa Fe in 1994, “Anderson developed a love affair with the natural world. He acquired many of his conservation convictions as a result of a friendship he formed with Aldo Leopold . . . on trips they made into nearby mountains.”

Leopold returned to the US Forest Service after World War I and was assigned the position of assistant regional forester in charge of operations for some twenty million acres within the Southwest. He revisited areas he had first seen ten years earlier and was deeply aware of how the lands had eroded.

Courtney White, the author of *Revolution on the Range* and cofounder and executive director of the Quivira Coalition in Santa Fe, an organization dedicated to ecologically sensitive ranch management, said that Leopold “saw tremendous gully-ing, deep arroyos in these landscapes that he suspected were not natural as he was taught. He began to make connections between grass and soil and rain and slope and overgrazing, principally by cattle. He wasn’t anti-grazing, but he certainly was anti–bad management.

“Leopold wrote an amazing essay called ‘Pioneers and Gullies’ published in *Sunset Magazine*, of all places—one of the popular magazines—in 1924, where he decries the pioneer attitude towards land and how they just had come in, taken a European way of living in a wetter environment with certain kinds of agricultural practices, put it in an environment that he called



Aldo and Estella Bergere Leopold, Santa Fe, New Mexico, ca. 1912, holding hands as was their custom throughout their married life. Courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Foundation.

a ‘hair-trigger ecological environment,’ meaning the desert Southwest—and not understood the effects.”

Leopold scholar Susan Flader, a board member with the Aldo Leopold Foundation in Baraboo, Wisconsin, advanced the notion that this concept became the basis for his celebrated essay, “The Land Ethic,” which appears as the final piece in *A Sand County Almanac*.

It was in the Jicarilla Ranger District of the Carson National Forest that Leopold had seriously ruminated on cattle-wrought erosion—the same ranger district where he had been stricken with the near-fatal kidney malaise, and where I much later served as a fire lookout atop Caracas Mesa. Few cattle ranged there during my time, but evidence of cattle, sheep, and horses remained. The Old Spanish Trail had meandered through this forest during the Mexican period in the nineteenth century, when caravans of traders wended west to California, where sheep were sold, and New Mexican trade goods were swapped for horses that were driven back to New Mexico. A herd of wild horses still ranged throughout the Jicarilla landscape when I was there in the 1960s, and I once witnessed a *curandero*, Felipe Madrid, slowly walk up to one of these wild horses and gently slip a lariat over its neck to then lead it peacefully back



Aldo Leopold fishing for carp in the Rio Grande near Albuquerque, ca. 1915.
Courtesy of the University of Wisconsin–Madison Archives.

to his place in the village of Caracas near the banks of the San Juan River.

Camped beneath that open sky for months at a time, looking out over a vast landscape, listening to the wind pass through the ponderosa pines bearing occasional choruses of wild turkeys and coyotes, visiting with deer and bobcats, watching eagles hover, and savoring the night, when no light of human provenance intruded, I came to know my own kinship with the wild, to recognize that an ethical relationship to homeland comes from within, and that Aldo Leopold had hit the mark as he clearly articulated his own deep wisdom that was to influence generations as yet unborn.

“There is a concept that he got from Ouspensky,” Flader argued, referring to the Russian philosopher and author of *Tertium Organum*. “Although he never credits Ouspensky directly with it, it’s the concept of the *noumenon* as distinct from *phenomenon*: *phenomenon* being the outward manifestation which you can easily see and understand, and the *noumenon* being the inner meaning, the essence of something.

“One of the first times that he wrote about it was actually in another unpublished manuscript. He was writing a book on southwestern game fields, and in one of the early chapters, he writes about the deer as the *noumenon* of the southwestern mountains. He says, ‘Without the presence of the deer or the possibility of seeing a deer in each new dip and bend in the hillside, the Southwest would be empty, a spiritual vacuum.’”

As Leopold perceived deer as the *noumenon* of the wild Southwest, later he regarded the wolf, which he and others had caused to be extirpated from the landscape, to be the *noumenon* of the wild. He would laud every attempt to restore the wolf to the Southwest so that the green fire of the wolf’s eyes could burn once again in the mind of the mountain. The presence of the *noumenon* embellished Leopold’s vision of the Spirit of Nature.

De Buys supported Flader’s hypothesis, saying, “One of the things that I think he glimpsed that is now sort of a cornerstone of ecological thinking is the idea of energy flowing through land: of water moving, of air moving, of nutrients moving, and so forth. He had this vision, this integrated holistic vision, of the flows through the ecosystem, and they took place often within the watershed unit. So he saw the watershed as being a primary unit for land management and even more for land understanding.”

In 1922 Leopold formally proposed that part of the Gila National Forest of southern New Mexico be administrated as a wilderness area, off limits to vehicular traffic, mining, timbering, and heavy machinery. His proposal was accepted by the Forest Service in 1924, and thus the Gila Wilderness became the first such wilderness area in the United States. Forty years later, the Wilderness Act was passed into federal law during Stewart Udall’s tenure as secretary of the interior.

Udall recalled that Anderson and Leopold “used to discuss the national forests, and Leopold convinced Anderson that the Wilderness Bill was a good idea and there should be a law protecting wilderness. Anderson became a congressman and . . . became a senator in 1948, and he became chairman of the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee in 1960, right after Kennedy was elected. He went to the White House and he told Kennedy to sponsor a wilderness bill, and he handed him a copy of his bill, Senate Bill 5. He said ‘Call for the enactment of a wilderness bill.’ Kennedy agreed and put it in his conservation message. . . . Lyndon Johnson signed it (the Wilderness Bill) into law.”

Thus the trail was blazed for protecting wilderness for its own sake.

Aldo Leopold twice journeyed into the Río Gavilán watershed in northwestern Mexico and there stepped into what he regarded

Mia Casita

By Benjamin Romero

The cabin once occupied by Aldo and Estella Bergere Leopold was but a fading memory of the man who revolutionized our nation's wilderness ethic, until a congressional appropriation, a team of dedicated volunteers, and the determination of Carson National Forest personnel converged on the Tres Piedras site.

In celebration of the 100 years of public lands conservation by the Forest Service since 1905—and in time for the centennial observance of Leopold's arrival in the Southwest in 1909—the exterior of the Aldo Leopold House was restored and the interior rehabilitated for use in a proposed “conservation-in-residence” program.

Leopold himself drew the plans for the cabin he shared with his wife, Estella Bergere Leopold. He positioned the house to face the Sangre de Cristo Mountains; nestled the building site amid the granite boulders for which Tres Piedras is named, and took care that the living area would have the large fireplace Estella wanted.



Photograph of an original crayon-and-ink drawing by Aldo Leopold of the Forest Service house at Tres Piedras, New Mexico, ca. 1911. Courtesy of the University of Wisconsin–Madison Archives.



The refurbished “Mia Casita” of Aldo and Estella Bergere Leopold, 2006.

Photograph by and courtesy of Benjamin Romero, Tres Piedras District Ranger, Carson National Forest.

The two named their home “Mia Casita.” It was theirs until March 1913 when Leopold, while on forest-service business, became ill from exposure and the couple had to move to Santa Fe and then Albuquerque while he recuperated.

The significance of Aldo Leopold House evolved from Leopold's presence there during the early years of his career when he began to form his conservationist views on ecology, ecosystems, land use, and the environment. It is fitting that the Carson National Forest Leopold once supervised took the opportunity to preserve this element of his past and adapt it as a center for conservation study and reflection.

Refurbishment of the site was accomplished in part by skilled and semi-skilled labor drawn from institutional groups, experienced and interested individuals, and volunteer groups.

Once start-up funding is secured to begin the self-sufficient, in-residence program, the ranger station will become a place for seminars and study. There, small groups or individuals will be able work in quiet, while enjoying a setting made historic by Aldo Leopold. ■

Benjamin Romero is Tres Piedras District Ranger, Carson National Forest. For tours of the Aldo Leopold House and more information about plans for the ranger station, contact Romero at 575-758-8678 or bromero@fs.fed.us.



Estella and Aldo Leopold photographed shortly after their wedding, in 1912, outside the home they called “Mia Casita.” The house, sited by Leopold himself, was built among the rock formations that gave Tres Piedras, New Mexico, its name. Courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Foundation.

as true, unsullied wilderness for the first time. He perceived that earlier people had lived in this watershed and fashioned terraces and check dams where small plots of land had once been transformed into gardens long since abandoned to the deer and other wild creatures. In his provocative essay “Song of the Gavilan,” he reflected on how humans had lived in harmony with this habitat. His essay clearly reveals the nature of his mind and intuitions: “On a still night, when the campfire is low and the Pleiades have climbed over rimrocks, sit quietly and listen for a wolf to howl, and think hard of everything you have seen and tried to understand. Then you may hear it—a vast pulsing harmony—its score inscribed on a thousand hills, its notes the lives and deaths of plants and animals, its rhythms spanning the seconds and centuries.”

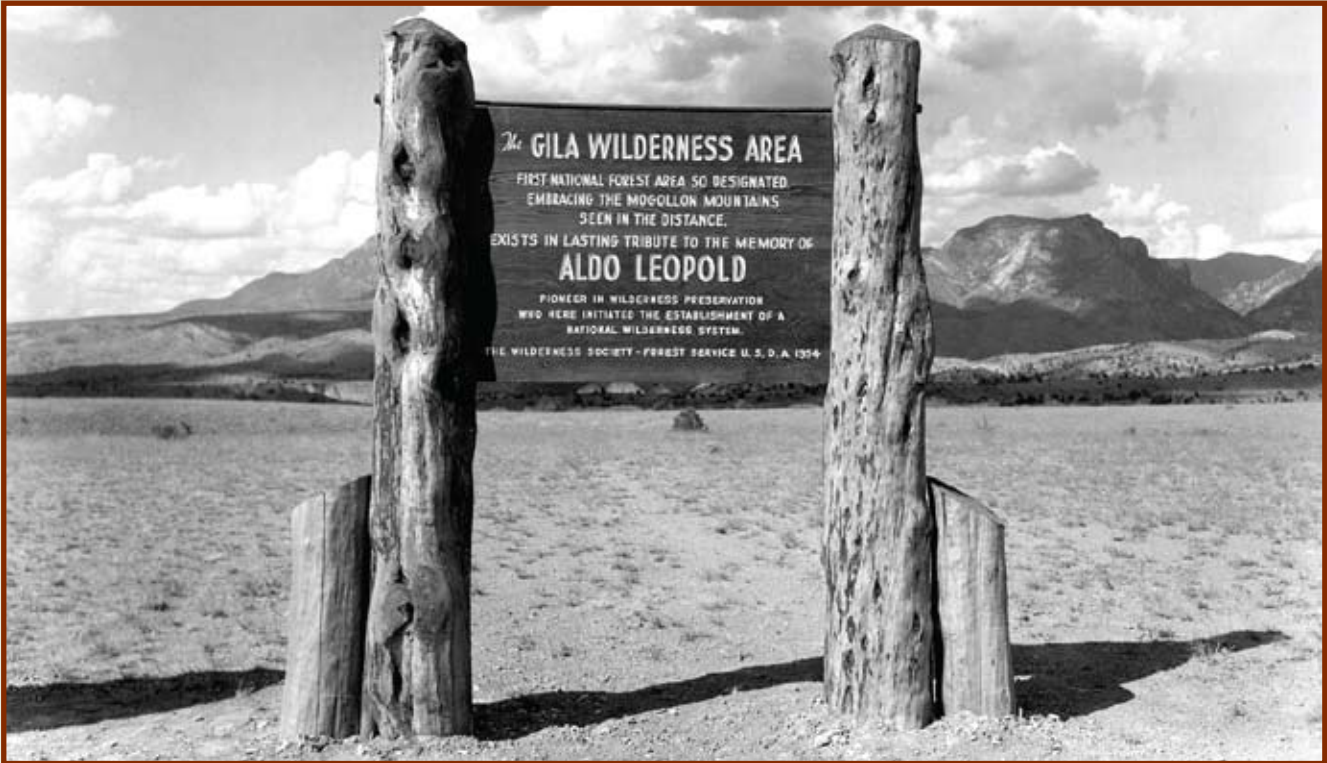
Author Gary Paul Nabhan, one of America’s great natural historians, said, “You know, I’ve been meditating on Aldo Leopold’s second trip in the Río Gavilán in the Chihuahuan borderlands that he took with his brother Carl and his son Starker and a number of friends from both New Mexico and Chihuahua. It was ostensibly a hunting trip, but what he harvested there was far more than venison or quail or bear meat. What he found

there was the concept of ecosystem health that we now use. He called it ecological health. That concept included rather than excluded land-based cultures. And after living in New Mexico with the Luna family, after growing up in Iowa among many land-based ethnic cultures, he had [the understanding] that stewardship of the land, whether it’s done by hunters and gatherers or whether it’s done by farmers and ranchers, can stabilize, enhance, or restore the diversity of depleted places and does not inextricably mean that humans will deplete that diversity.”

The Leopolds were true stewards of the land, whether in the Southwest or the Midwest. In Sand County, Wisconsin, the family purchased a soil-starved farm and rebuilt what they called the Shack into a home where Leopold and his wife, Estella; their sons, Starker, Carl, and Luna; and their daughters, Nina and Estella, lived for many years. Over weekends for the rest of his life, Leopold and his tightly knit family worked to restore the wasted land to wildness.

Their daughter Estella recalled, “Mom was wonderful. And they were very, very close. Dad came home every noon for lunch and walked in the door and mother would greet him with her apron on and they would hug and he would say, ‘Estella, the house looks so beautiful. How do you do it?’ and sit down and have lunch and hold hands, which was great. They were very warm and she was, of course, very supportive.” Estella added that in the evenings, throughout their marriage, Aldo and Estella would sit at the dinner table and hold hands.

Their daughter Nina Leopold Bradley, now ninety-one, recalled that though her father had a wonderful sense of humor, “There was never any small talk around Dad. It was always very, very serious. But if something really captured him, he would just dissolve. I remember one time my sister was late in arriving at the Shack. We were all there for the weekend. So she took the train and her bicycle and her pet—her pet squirrel—and took the train to Baraboo and then rode her bike in to the edge of the marsh, and then she had to swim across the marsh. My father and I, we just happened to be out taking a walk and Dad saw this creature swimming along with this squirrel on her head, and I thought he was going to collapse in laughter. He just absolutely broke down.”



The Gila Wilderness Area marker gives tribute to Aldo Leopold—“pioneer in wilderness preservation who here initiated the establishment of a national wilderness system”—ca. 1970. Courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Foundation.

It took years, but the Leopold family brought their land in Sand County back into a state of balance and harmony, actually practicing restoration ecology, the concept which had germinated in Leopold's mind during his years in the Southwest as he gazed out over cattle-burnt lands. He wrote *A Sand County Almanac* in Wisconsin from ideas honed in the Southwest, having come to understand independently what John Wesley Powell had realized half a century earlier, that the watershed is the basic component within a mosaic of watersheds in the arid landscape of the American West.

“He was invited to give the John Wesley Powell address to the Southwestern Division of the American Association of Science,” said Flader, “and took as his title, ‘The Conservation Ethic.’ That was the first published version of what would later, after several other principal addresses over the years, be combined in his seminal article, ‘The Land Ethic,’ which is the capstone of *A Sand County Almanac*. It has seemed to me that his concept of the land ethic grew very much out of his concern for the southwestern watersheds and the problem of soil erosion.”

For generations, America and western culture have been dominated by an economic paradigm founded largely on turning habitat into money. Decades ago Aldo Leopold came to

understand the folly and error of that thinking. One hundred years ago, he saw that we as a species are but a single species within the community of life on our planet, and that indeed we are rooted in Nature. At this point in time, it is imperative that we heed the heart of his message in this final essay from *A Sand County Almanac*: “A land ethic, then, reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity. . . . Quit thinking about land-use as solely an economic problem. Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” ■

Jack Loeffler, a writer and aural historian, has produced audio components for the New Mexico History Museum and the Van of Enchantment. Some of the material in this article was drawn from a sound collage he produced for KUNM to mark the centennial of Aldo Leopold's arrival in the Southwest. Centennial celebrations continue throughout New Mexico and the region. Visit www.LeopoldCelebration.org for information.