

## Wilderness House Literary Review 15/1

Dan Kriesberg  
**Backyard County Almanac**

*"I am here to record some of the many lessons I have learned in my own woods."*

On January 12, 1935 Aldo Leopold visited a run-down farm in Sauk County, Wisconsin. He fell in love. With his family, he transformed the chicken coop into a weekend retreat from city life. At the "Shack" he planted thousands of trees and worked to rehabilitate the land from years of neglect. He took walks, watched the natural world and shared his observations in a series of essays that became *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*

My experience in land owning began in 1992 when my wife and I bought a small house in Bayville, Long Island. Our 1/8 acre sits on a peninsula sticking into Long Island Sound. Mill Neck Creek is at one end of our block and the Sound at the other.

A rereading of *A Sand County Almanac*, inspired me to look closely at my own backyard. I took inspiration from the fact that while Aldo Leopold learned a great deal from his work and adventures in the wilderness of the Southwest, his knowledge and understanding of the land deepened when he settled down at the "shack." I was determined to strengthen my awareness by settling down.

"The months of the year, from January up to June, are a geometric progression in the abundance of distractions."

For Aldo Leopold, January is the time to follow tracks. Snow reveals many secrets. Now, I know that the raccoons rumble into the yard under the fence behind the garage. There is an understanding. We supply the garbage and he eats it. If I happen to interrupt his work I get a stare that makes me glad looks do not kill. Once a raccoon ran across the yard and tried to leap over our wire fence. The fence wobbled and the raccoon fell off. He tried again, again, again and finally on the fourth attempt he flopped over and plodded off, perhaps just a little embarrassed. The raccoon has adapted to suburban life, there is a lesson in that.

"Our saw was biting its way, stroke by stroke, decade by decade, into the chronology of a lifetime, written in concentric annual rings of a good oak."

The only tree growing on our property is a 60 foot Blue Spruce. I am guessing it is about 100 years old. It leans over at a nerve trying angle. To go further into the past I look at the giant red oak in our neighbor's yard. It has been there for at least a hundred and fifty years. When the oak was a sprout there was no bridge connecting Bayville to Oyster Bay, there was only one way into town and it was much easier to cross the street. The land was covered with asparagus farms, 11,000 bunches shipped to New York each year. As the tree grew so did Bayville, the asparagus farms faded into summer resorts and cottages. The tree grew. The resorts became year round homes. The oak was spared. I'd love to hear what the oak's parents had to say. There was a time when wolves howled in my

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backyard before a ten shilling bounty was imposed in 1661 for their heads and claws. The Matinecocks left behind piles of clam shells and raccoons picked through their garbage too.

“One swallow does not make a summer, but one skein of geese, cleaving the murk of a March thaw, is the spring.”

I'd hate to tell Aldo Leopold, but it is hard to accept Canada geese as truly wild these days. Too many of them have stopped migrating and live on golf courses, city parks and football fields year round. Some still fly with the seasons and when they honk across the sky in a perfect “V,” It is a reminder that the sound of the north woods still flies over. It is also a reminder of Long Island before it became the perfect habitat for the growing middle class and geese. A wet snow falls and sops the ground. Winter makes a last attempt to come back but is betrayed by bird song and chipmunks. Spring is here when the sun warms the air enough for cardinals to whistle from tree tops.

“It is fortunate, perhaps, that no matter how intently one studies the hundred little dramas of the woods and meadows, one can never learn all of the salient facts about any one of them.”

It should be a simple enough to understand a place as small as my backyard. The years has provided only a few answers and many more questions. What lives in the hole next to the compost pile? Where do all the birds that come to the feeder spend the night in the winter? Who made that nest in the bird house? What is that plant growing next to the basement window? Are they the same birds each year? Why do all those swarms of ants suddenly appear on the patio? What is the name of the big bush next to the house?

“Whoever invented the word ‘grace’ must have seen the wing-folding of the plover.”

Being a Midwesterner Aldo Leopold probably did not see many terns or he would have had to add to his definition of grace. Gulls fly, but terns dance on the wind all the while chattering and diving for fish. The gulls can only chase them and hope the terns drop their meal. Their arrival from thousands of miles of flying means summer is right around the corner.

“I sit in happy meditation on my rock, pondering, while my line dries again, upon the ways of trout and men.”

In June, I wander down to the creek more often. At high tide, millions of silversides swim through the spartina. One evening my friend, Dave and I took out his canoe. The water boiled with bunker as they leapt into the air to escape the bluefish. I tried to picture the violence. Bluefish are basically swimming teeth. From above terns, great blue herons and ring-billed gulls feasted. There was no escape, but somehow enough bunker survive. Before all these houses surrounded the creek, before even the Matinecocks lived here the bluefish, terns, herons and gulls feasted on bunkers. I am glad they are still here.

“Keep cow, plow, and mower out of these idle spots, and the full native flora, plus dozens of interesting stowaways from foreign parts, could be part of the normal environment of every citizen.”

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My idle spot is home to weeds or wildflowers depending on one's point of view. The plan was never to mow the spot and let nature take its course. My role was to simply sit and watch. So far my "visual diet" is up to twenty plus species. In July the blooms are at their peak. For someone that yearns for wild places seeing a chaotic mix of goldenrod, chicory, garlic mustard, pokeweed, lady's thumb, clover and other plants makes it a little easier to wait for the next camping trip. It is also my symbolic protest to all new houses being built.

"I know a painting so evanescent that it is seldom viewed at all, except by some wandering deer. It is a river who wields the brush, and it is the same river which, before I can bring my friends to view his work, erases it forever from human view."

The water that paints the pictures here is the Long Island Sound. I am learning about the beauty of open water. The pictures are painted in the sky and tides. The view of Connecticut shifts with the light from clear to fog. Watching the tides change still surprises my inland state of mind. The Sound can paint a peaceful picture. Some days the water is a sheet of glass. The sun slips under, drowning in reds, oranges, purples and yellows. The stars battle city lights for their rightful place in the sky. The sound can paint a violent picture. When conditions are right: full moon, high tide and heavy northeast winds the Sound becomes the ocean. Waves crash over the dunes. One year a flood covered Bayville, our house became an island, our backyard the Sound. I like to go out during the storms. Small rocks fly against my face. The Sound's voice tells me of the force that shaped my new homeland.

"By September the day breaks with little help from the birds."

The birds are busy with other business, and so am I. My year begins in September, school starts, summer travels are done, time to settle down. The birds know it is time to make plans and prepare. The wind blows out the humidity turning Virginia creeper leaves red, oak leaves brown and the maples yellow. The brown thrashers, robins, catbirds, Carolina wrens and mockingbirds eat the berries. The first day in our new home I sat among unpacked boxes and watched the feast. There was connection in knowing that our backyard will be a rest stop on their journey. The Virginia creeper grows on a dead snag of our neighbor's locust tree. I hope she doesn't get any ideas about chopping it down.

"I regard a phalanx of young tamaracks, their golden lances thrusting skyward. Under each, the needles of yesterday fall to the earth building a blanket of smoky gold."

Aldo Leopold loved trees; one of his favorites was the tamarack. Me too There is a moment when the alchemy of dwindling water and sun turns the tamaracks from green to gold. A tamarack grew on our property until I cut it down to make room for a new window. I said a little prayer asking for forgiveness and tried to plant some seeds, but none sprouted. I did find other tamaracks in a nearby preserve. Each October I check hoping to be there the exact moment when autumn sun shines through and a breeze blows golden needles to the ground. Some years I'm too late. All that is left is a golden blanket under the tree. The moment is gone until next year.

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“The wind that makes music in November corn is in a hurry.”

In bed I listen to the wind. No matter where, wind carries a touch of wild. It reminds me to put up the bird feeder. I believe in homemade feeders. This year’s model is made from a cut out milk carton given to me by a friend’s four year old daughter. It took less than a day for the birds to find the feeder. Watching them brings wildness to the backyard. Chickadees, tufted titmice and white-breasted nuthatches take turns at the feeder in their own hierarchy. Song sparrows, white throated sparrows and house sparrows scrounge the ground for any fallen seeds. Every morning a red-bellied woodpecker shows up at the same time. Instead of bird listing, I bird observe trying to notice patterns and learn a little of how their world works.

“Acts of creation are ordinarily reserved for gods and poets, but humbler folk may circumvent this restriction if they know how. To plant a pine, for example, one need be neither god nor poet; one need only own a shovel. By virtue of this curious loophole in the rules, any clod hopper may say: Let there be a tree-and there will be one.”

Winter arrives on the tails of juncos. I go out to check our baby spruce. It is an immigrant from Maine, planted last summer after a trip to see Karen’s uncle. Aldo Leopold’s father planted a tree to celebrate his birth. I plan to follow the tradition. The weathermen scream about a possible storm and dangerous wind-chill. There is no milk left in the stores. The animals and plants know how to handle winter. Canada geese hunker down with snow on their backs. Gulls stoically sit on the ice facing the wind, all it takes to lift off is open wings. The tree is patiently waiting for some summer sun. Planting a tree is a good response to the power of the axe.

Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1949

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