

Contemplating conservation, Aldo Leopold

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the publication of *A Sand County Almanac*, and 61 years since Ames resident Lotus Miller learned about conservation from "The Professor" himself.

Miller was a student in the last class taught by Aldo Leopold, whose beloved essays were published a year after his death in 1948. A professor at the University of Wisconsin, Leopold died at age 61 from a heart attack while helping a neighbor fight a late-spring grass fire near his family's now-famous "Shack."

Miller and 60 other central Iowans gathered at the Ames Public Library on March 7 to hear Leopold's essays read aloud. The readings, accompanied by images of Leopold's family and scenes from nature, were part of the Second Annual Ames Reads Leopold event. The Aldo Leopold Foundation supports similar celebrations, which have spread to include more than two dozen communities across Wisconsin and other states. The Leopold Center was among local sponsors of the program.

"He was known as 'The Professor' and people just loved him," Miller recalled. "He was such a decent person, very down to earth. I don't think he would have liked to have all the attention focused on him personally."

Miller was in her second year at the University of Wisconsin, where she was working on a master's degree in zoology and botany. Her roommate was one of Leopold's graduate students, and the professor's death mid-semester had a "tremendous effect" on everyone.

"He did not have many prerequisites for his classes because he wanted farm kids to take them, too," Miller said. She enrolled in Leopold's introductory wildlife ecology course. "He knew that if we were going to save wildlife we would need farmers on the land to understand these things. It's a real tribute to his foresight."

Miller said she enjoyed Leopold's lectures, which he presented without notes. "It was all in his head, he knew what he wanted to say," she said.

She said she appreciated Leopold's ideas and his poetic observations of the natural world. "Some of his essays he read to us in class," Miller said.

Leopold had been in stable health, although he suffered from nerve and eye problems that caused a great deal of pain. His death on April 21 was only a week after he learned that Oxford had agreed

to publish his book of essays, then called "Great Possessions." An assistant, Joseph Hickey who had studied under Leopold, handled Leopold's teaching duties for the rest of the semester.

Miller grew up in Oregon, and her interest in science began at an early age, cultivated by a father who was a naturalist and photographer. After getting her master's degree, she started doctoral work studying the habitat range of the meadow mouse at Wisconsin and later at the University of California-Davis. She and her husband, Wilmer, moved to Ames in 1962, when he accepted a position in the ISU zoology and genetics department.

Leopold's conservation teachings have stayed with Miller throughout her 84 years. She co-founded the Ames Conservation Council that worked to save the 27-acre prairie behind Ames High School, helped the League of Women Voters on a study that led to building the Ames Resource Recovery Plant, and volunteered in the effort to preserve the Ledges from flooding caused by Saylorville dam.

Retired ISU wildlife specialist James Pease said the March event provided time to reflect on Leopold's ideas and what they mean personally. "Do we yet have a land ethic and if so, can you define it?" he asked the group in a discussion after three hours of readings. "If not, how do we get from here to there?"

Miller shared this observation: "Leopold wrote at a time when he was very discouraged with conservation efforts in Wisconsin," she said. "But he always maintained a steady, scientific approach and showed that each of us could do something. Today I'm very encouraged about conservation because the interest has continued."



Ames resident Lotus Miller was in the last class taught by Leopold.

Photo by Natalie Askren