

Chapter 1: Introduction

Aldo Leopold entered The Lawrenceville School in January 1904, halfway through his junior year in high school. Intent on pursuing one of the only careers at the time that would allow him to make a living while working outdoors, Aldo set his sights on becoming a forester. To do so required getting into the one forestry school in the country, the newly created School of Forestry at Yale University. Upon the advice of his mother, Aldo transferred to Lawrenceville, hoping that this decision would improve his chances of acceptance to Yale.

During his time at Lawrenceville between January 1904 and June 1905, Leopold wrote home prolifically, as demonstrated by the 175 remaining letters that he wrote home in that brief span.³ The oldest of 4 children, he must have felt a duty, as the first child to leave home, to write to his parents, Clara and Carl, and to his siblings Carl, Marie, and Frederic. Moreover, he was thrilled to share his experiences in a new land that the rest of his family had not visited. The letters leave no doubt that his favorite places to visit were the open lands and woods that surrounded Lawrenceville, where Aldo routinely went on 10 mile hikes observing his surroundings while identifying plants and animals. Leopold was not content, however, to set out on his hikes without bringing a pen and notebook to record his observations.

For Leopold, a lifelong passion for writing down his observations of nature began in his home state of Iowa at the age of 14 when he kept his first field notebook and ornithological journal. These written notes of his journeys allowed him to look for patterns in nature and to describe the organisms he saw in order to identify them upon returning home. In Burlington, Iowa, near the banks of the Mississippi River, Aldo extensively explored nearby wetlands, fields, and woods.

In addition to his own wanderings in a state on the edge of the western frontier, he developed a particularly sound knowledge of the seasonal changes of Iowa's wildlife through hunting trips with his father, Carl. Perhaps due to this hunting background, the process of noting the cycle of occurrences in the natural world had become ingrained in Leopold as a child. This study of nature's cycles - such as the arrival of ducks, the mating season of deer, or the first blooming of plants - is referred to as the study of phenology, and Leopold, like many naturalists, was an avid phenologist. By noting, for example, when and where a particular species of plant first emerged in early spring, he was able to predict in future years what species he would see, and when he would see them, as he walked about the countryside. As a phenologist, Leopold also learned the basic process of the scientific method – observe, question, predict, and assess prediction – using the outdoors as his classroom. Though a fairly simple concept, keeping track of phenological records facilitates understanding the natural world and ecology. Questions about animal habitat can begin to be addressed by comparing the arrival of migratory birds to a location over a period of many years. Questions about how the process of ecological succession unfolds can be addressed by comparing several months' and years' worth of plant records from the same area.

Leopold went on from Lawrenceville to a distinguished career in several related fields - including forestry, ecology and conservation - working for the newly established US Forest Service (1909-1928), on his own as a consulting wildlife biologist (1928-1933), and as a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (1933-1948). His ideas continue to influence those who manage ecosystems at the

³ This total does not include a semester's worth of missing letters from September through December of 1904, and he probably wrote close to 250 letters.

public and private level, as well as others interested in environmental issues. Leopold's accomplishments were the result of years of developing his abilities as an observer of nature, beginning as a child and as a student at Lawrenceville.

Soon after he founded what is now called the Department of Wildlife Ecology at UW-Madison, Leopold purchased 80 acres of degraded farmland along the Wisconsin River near Madison. On weekend visits there, Leopold conducted his own experiments in prairie and forest restoration with the help of his family - wife Estella and children Starker, Luna, Nina, Carl, and Estella. The only remaining structure on the land, an old chicken coop, was converted into the family's living quarters while visiting, and the structure came to be known affectionately as the Shack. Because of this land's importance in shaping Leopold's ideas about prairie restoration, and Leopold's subsequent importance to the field of ecology, the Shack has been designated as a National Historic Landmark.



"The Shack" in a 1935 photo



Aldo and wife Estella planting pine trees as part of a habitat restoration at the Shack, 1936 (left); Leopold later measuring the growth of one of the same pine trees, 1946 (right).

*Perhaps Leopold's most lasting career achievement was the publication of his book *A Sand County Almanac* in 1949. Though he died unexpectedly the year before at the age of 61, he had completed a draft of the book by that time, and it was published the next year after final edits by his son Luna. Only a few thousand copies were sold initially, but as the environmental movement gained momentum in the 1960s, this unassuming, relatively short text was rediscovered and has since sold over a million copies in several languages.*

The letters and journal entries that follow provide us with an understanding of how Leopold developed his observational and analytical skills that served him well later in life. Not only were these skills useful from the practical standpoint of establishing a career, but they also allowed him to contemplate the relationship between humans and their environment with a fuller understanding of the ecological complexity of that relationship.

Included in this introductory chapter are two letters - one that provides some background about his transition to Lawrenceville in January 1904, and another from April 1905 that focuses mainly on a track meet against Central High in Trenton, as well as on the school community's observance of Easter the following day. In addition to providing a glimpse into his development as an individual, these letters provide historical context for the school and the surrounding community.

Lawrenceville School
Lawrenceville N.J.

Kennedy House
January 9, 1904.

7:00 P.M. Saturday.

My dear Mama:

I have received five letters from home since I arrived, also one Hawkeye. The fire must have been very bad, have read carefully the accounts in the Hawkeye and a Gazette which Kenneth very kindly brought to me.

I have moved from Room 17 to No. 29, which I like as well or better than the other. In answer to your question, I have the room to myself. It has one window, facing south, and contains a bed, a table, a dresser, and two chairs, and has a clothes closet with shelves. I will have a washstand soon, am now using the top of a set of drawers in the closet, which is of ample size.

Here are a few miscellaneous facts which you may want to know.

There are fire escapes on the house. Lights are electric, one per room, and are out at 9:30 P.M. Furniture, woodwork, etc. are varnished pine. Walls and ceiling are papered. We rise at 7 A.M. but may rise earlier, which will suit me next summer. Meals are good. We have dinner in the evening. Dining room contains about five tables, as sit at one with Mr. Henry, one of my favorite teachers. Kennedy House is three-storied, I am near the head of the staircase, third floor. The house is covered with English Ivy, which grows thickly around my window. It (the house) is made of brick. Bell is ringing, have a lecture tonight, "Roman Boy," must go.-

9:15 P.M. Lecture is just over, was very good, illustrated by lantern slides. There is a large hall for lectures in Memorial Hall. After the lecture was over, Dr. Mcpherson spoke to the school on smoking that was going on against the rules. About one third of the boys smoke on the sly. The light will go out in a few minutes, so I will wait till tomorrow to finish this letter.

Sunday 8:30 A.M.

From now till Church time we may do what we like, so I will write you about my tramp yesterday afternoon. It was a fine sunny day, just warm enough to soften the snow, which is about 8 inches deep. I did not get started till about two o'clock, as I had to move to another room (29) after lunch. I went north, across the country, about seven miles, and then circled back towards the west. Here every farm has a timber lot, sometimes of fifteen or twenty acres, so it is as fine country for birds. It is about like Iowa high prairie, but the timber is more like the Michigan hardwood, the commonest trees being Oak, beech, ash, hickory, chesnut, red cedar, and some elm. In some places, notably old orchards, young red cedars cover the ground. Nearly all the undergrowth in the woods is saplings and briars. There is little indiscriminate chopping of timber here. The entire country here is drained by ditches; there must be a great deal of rain in summer. There seems to be a great deal of wind at some time of the year, as all isolated trees in exposed locations are stripped of many branches.

I saw quite a number of birds. Flocks of tree Sparrows were common, and crows flew overhead by thousands. Before I left, a pair of bluebirds were sunning themselves near my window, while the day before I saw a flock of purple finches in the back yard. In nearly every woodlot there were quail, mink, and what I thought might be partridge tracks (the snow was melting) while rabbits seemed common. In the first grove I saw a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and in a clump of cedars nearby a few golden-crowned Kinglets. About seven miles out I came upon a pair of goldfinches, in their winter plumage. In one

grove were about twenty Tufted Titmice, feeding with a couple of chickadees, while with them in the trees were two common Nuthatches and a Brown Creeper. The Titmice were feeding on some berry, where the snow had been brushed away by grazing horses.

On the way back I saw a Sparrow-Hawk, and after supper some Screech Owls were calling around the house. Altogether I had a very pleasant trip, and am more than pleased with the country.

Here is a copy of my schedule, which you might want to see.

Monday

Bible 8:20
Algebra 10:10
English 2:00
Cicero 5:05

Wednesday

English 8:20
Algebra 10:10
German 11:00

Tuesday

English 8:20
Elocution 9:10
Algebra 10:10
German 11:00
Cicero 5:05

Thursday

Algebra 8:20
Algebra 10:10
German 11:00
Cicero 5:05

Friday

Algebra 8:20
Algebra 10:10
English History 11:00
Cicero 5:05

Saturday

Algebra 8:20
English History 10:10
Latin Composition 11:50

I like the work and most of the teachers very well. But there is one exception. Our English History Text Book is "bum." I have not yet failed in any recitations

I will start in the gymnasium Monday. Have been over to see it, the swimming pool is fine. The ice on the pond is now covered with snow, so there is no skating.

I am having a little trouble in catching up in Algebra, as I have not had it for two years. I think I will get along though. I must stop writing soon, as it is almost time for church.

I forgot to say that when I went to Mr. Bronson for my test in German, he spoke to me a while, and then said he thought I could make the Fourth Form German. I am glad of this for two reasons: first, I can take both Physics and Chemistry next year if I am through with German, second, I will have Mr. Henry for teacher, whom I like very much. But I will not be too sure, as I have no recitation in it until next Tuesday, and may not be able to do it.

I have invested in a fountain pen, which you probably can tell by my scrawly writing; I am not yet accustomed to it.

Well, to sum up, I can say that everything suits me very well, and will not be homesick if I hear from you as often as in the last few days. With love to you all I remain

Your Aldo.

P.S. I will mail you my old catalog today, as will not have time to get a new one yet.

A.L.

[PM 4-24-05]
Easter Sunday
Lawrenceville N.J.

My dear Papa:-

It is now just about the hour of our former annual search for Easter-eggs in the fresh grass of our good old place, so you can well imagine where my thoughts are at this moment. I think of it the more because of the glorious weather of the last two days. Friday ended with cold rain and a violent wind-storm, so that the prospects for yesterday's meet were anything but bright. According to my experience at least, the track man asks for only one thing at a meet, and that is the chance to do his best. Mud and rain, therefore, are more formidable opponents than a team of champions. So when yesterday dawned calm and cloudless, the sunlight gratefully warm without being sultry, there was rejoicing in the hearts of the track team.

To sum up before starting out, it was a glorious day for Lawrenceville. I had recitations all morning, all of which were prepared Friday, so that the morning passed very quickly. At noon we of the track and baseball teams were given a "training lunch" of eggs, chops, and toast, much to the envy of the other fellows, who stood at the windows and looked on with anticipation of getting the same, only to be regaled on beans and milk when their turn came. The Baseball game with Pennsylvania University Freshman began right after lunch, and our team beat them in a hard fought game by 10-2. Meanwhile the Central High track team had arrived, and at 3:30 the meet began.

By the enclosed program you may see what happened in most of the events, - their famous team being beaten most heartily. We of the two mile had to tackle their champion, Hunter, first. It was a hard race, although we of course had no show in this special event. The first lap was a veritable quarter-mile, which is a favorite stunt of Hunter's to exhaust his opponents. By the end of the second lap he and Meyung were close together and thirty yards ahead of us, keeping the same killing pace. In the third lap they began to draw away from us, and by the end of the fourth were a half-lap ahead. This hard mile and a quarter began to tell on even the leaders, so that at the end of the fifth the rest of our team dropped out, Markley being unfortunately in not very good shape. In this last lap Hunter and Meyung had gained nothing, neither did they gain any more until the seventh and last lap was finished. I had at least that satisfaction, for up at Princeton he gained a full lap on me. When the two approached the tape, Hunter did a very white thing. He, of course, has a whole chest-full of medals, cups, and letters, whereas Meyung had not yet even his C.H.S. So in the last few yards he dropped alongside and pushed Meyung over the line first, himself taking only the silver medal of second place. Of course the crowd were much pleased, and rightly, over this favor to his schoolmate. Thus ended the second race of the year, and I have never enjoyed one more, i.e. after it was over.

Truly Hunter is a wonder, a human machine. After having run this two-mile, with scarcely half an hour between, he went into the mile race, and actually won it! Miller Brooks came within a foot of getting second place, and indeed, would have had it, had not his opponent "blocked" him. Technically this is keeping just in front of a fellow at the sprint for the finish. It is entirely within the rules, but I should never care to practice it. Miller ran his very best, however, and everyone realized that he deserved second place. Henry McCord also ran splendidly considering his week's lay-off on account of sickness. He worked pluckily and was only about forty yards behind. I prophesy that he will qualify before the season has passed.

Our famous sprinter, Rector, equaled the school record of ten seconds in the hundred yard dash, and some say that he broke it in 9 and a large fraction. Of course he won easily, and made remarkable

time considering the condition of the track. The giants Andrus and Waller easily won the weights, while our two stars Ingersoll and Rhinehart each did their quota of work, so that we finished far ahead. In the evening a good lecture with remarkable illustrating pictures ended as interesting a day as I have ever experienced.

The joy of Easter's Resurrection is today symbolized in as fine a day as ever was given to an unappreciative world. The first Sweet White Violets are blooming, and a beautiful flower they are- unsurpassed for the delicacy of their perfume. Bank Swallows have arrived and are skimming merrily over the pond all day long. In the woods is a handsome big Towhee, quite alone so far, who arrived Friday. Chimney Swifts are already abundant, the first ones having appeared late on Thursday afternoon. Truly May is drawing near if these birds have already appeared, and I look forward ever with increasing anticipation to this wonderful season of increasing delights. The Black Cherry trees are already well in bloom, and made a very beautiful decoration combined with Palms and Easter Lilies in the chapel this morning. The Doctor's Sermon was excellent, as even the chronic "kickers" admitted, and I am now sure brought to everyone a much needed increase of appreciation of what the fact of the Resurrection really means. I wonder if the Holy Land is blessed with such a Resurrection of Nature as occurs with us here at this season. For surely it is the most eloquent of all Easter-day sermons to breathe the Spring-breeze laden with the warmth of sunny skies, the essence of April flowers and the joy of a thousand bird-songs, and then to realize that countless centuries would not have prepared such an abode for us if we terminated our existence in the grave. For that indeed would action without an object, and such is not the way of the universe, as we have only to look about us to see.

But the shadows on the Campus are lengthening, and it is time for Vespers. I trust that you all have been given as glorious an Easter-day as this, and I know that if such is the case we are all given the endless satisfaction of enjoying it. In fact, I don't see how people get along who take no interest in the weather, perhaps they deserve extra credit for keeping afloat at all. Hoping that our fickle but rich and generous old Iowa climate, whom we have all learned to love long before this, has been kind to you all this day, and that all are well and happy, I am still

Your Aldo