

Aldo Leopold's Good Oak

Sauk County

Aldo Leopold is now recognized as one of the country's pioneer conservationists, the father of the profession of wildlife management, and the first to poetically enunciate the land ethic. Leopold was a professor of game management at the University of Wisconsin–Madison when he acquired an 80-acre farm in Sauk County in the late 1930s. The Shack, the only building on the place, sheltered the Leopold family on their weekend trips to the farm to undertake one of the classic adventures in ecological restoration.

In *A Sand County Almanac*, his beloved account of bringing this corned-out, abandoned, sandy-soiled failure to an ecological balance, a place of beauty, a laboratory for study, and a “weekend refuge from too much modernity” (as Leopold biographer Susan Flader describes it), Leopold told of planting and living off the land. His description of felling an old oak tree for firewood is one of the most memorable passages in Wisconsin (or any) literature:

It was a bolt of lightning that put an end to wood-making by this particular oak. We were all awakened, one night in July, by the thunderous crash; we realized that the bolt must have hit near by, but, since it had not hit us, we all went back to sleep. Man brings all things to the test of himself, and this is notably true of lightning.



Aldo Leopold

Robert A. McCabe (1946)

Excerpted from *Every Root an Anchor: Wisconsin's Famous and Historic Trees* by R. Bruce Allison
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Next morning, as we strolled over the sandhill rejoicing with the coneflowers and the prairie clovers over their fresh accession of rain, we came upon a great slab of bark freshly torn from the trunk of the roadside oak. The trunk showed a long spiral scar of barkless sapwood, a foot wide and not yet yellowed by the sun. By the next day the leaves had wilted, and we knew that the lightning had bequeathed to us three cords of prospective fuel wood.

We mourned the loss of the old tree, but knew that a dozen of its progeny standing straight and stalwart on the sands had already taken over its job of wood-making.

We let the dead veteran season for a year in the sun it could no longer use, and then on a crisp winter's day we laid a newly filed saw to its bastioned base. Fragrant little chips of history spewed from the saw cut, and accumulated on the snow before each kneeling sawyer. We sensed that these two piles of sawdust were something more than wood: that they were the integrated transect of a century; 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 good oak.

Source: Robert McCabe, Madison