THE PEOPLE'S RECORDER

EPISODE 7: A VOICE FOR THE LAND

NEWS REPORT (ARCHIVAL): *Good morning farm friends. This is another day with trainloads of farm news. Combined production for all commercial… [trails out]*

HOST: For generations, ecology was an obscure science, closely tied to farming and not widely understood. It wasn't something that would fire up a passionate grassroots movement.

Then, an ecologist emerged who would change everything. Aldo Leopold, a professor in Wisconsin, realized that America was at a crucial turning point with its land. He saw that humanity had pushed nature just a bit too far.

ALDO LEOPOLD (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now, we face the question whether a still higher 'standard of living' is worth its cost in things natural, wild and free. Aldo Leopold.*

HOST: During the Great Depression, America was in turmoil socially and economically. This upheaval had an effect even on the land. In Wisconsin, Aldo Leopold was closely watching all of this when the WPA, a government jobs program, asked for his help.

Leopold's work for the WPA in Wisconsin paved the way for an awareness of the environment that serves as a blueprint for our survival today.

[Theme music starts]

HOST: This is The People's Recorder and I'm your host, Chris Haley. This podcast explores the work of the Federal Writers' Project, the 1930s agency that set out to document the United States. It ended up raising as many questions as it answered in its quest to hold up a mirror to America - questions that we still ask ourselves today.

In this episode, we explore how a naturalist's words shaped a bold new vision of land stewardship. Through his work on the WPA guide to Wisconsin, Aldo Leopold didn't just write about nature; he helped create a national movement to see and protect nature in a whole new way.

CURT MEINE: *Leopold is one of those rare figures conservation movement who is trying to make sense of the larger patterns…to try to help us see what a sustainable future might look like.*

HOST: That's Curt Meine. He's the author of Aldo Leopold's biography and an adjunct professor with the University of Wisconsin Madison.

CURT MEINE: *Leopold is part of a small handful of cutting-edge thinkers in conservation who are making those connections, who see the human dilemmas as not separate from those that are facing our relationship with the world around us.*

[News clips featuring environmental disaster headlines.]

REPORTER (ARCHIVAL): *We begin tonight with the extreme heat, severe storms, dangerous flooding…A dam here in the U.S. in imminent risk of failure. Tonight, more than 80 million Americans…*

HOST: Almost daily, we see headlines about wildfires and floods and melting ice caps, and it's really concerning. And here is a man who over 80 years ago was writing about man-made environmental disasters. His work is so relevant that it sounds like I could have seen it in a headline last week. And while the vocabulary isn't the same and he isn't using phrases like climate change, he is warning us. And we should be taking notes.

So, let's dive into our story at a time when American farming was hitting rock bottom.

WOODY GUTHRIE (singing): ***** *A dust storm hit, an' it hit like thunder. It dusted us over, an' it covered us under. Blocked out the traffic an' blocked out the sun. Straight for home all the people did run, singin' so long, it's been good to know yuh. So long…**

HOST: By the Great Depression, 20th century farming practices were wearing out America's farmland, creating an ecological disaster on a scale we had never before seen in North America and displacing hundreds of thousands of people.

[Archival Clip from the National Archives]

NARRATOR (ARCHIVAL): *In the Spring of 1934, the winds caught up the broken soil and a plague of dust descended on those who had treated the land with ignorance and contempt.*

HOST: When we think of environmental disasters in the 1930s, our minds probably go first to the Dust Bowl – to the dry and cracked earth, buildings buried in mountains of dust, farmers pushing against the wind in a fierce sandstorm. But America's ecological crisis looked different in other parts of the country, and the tragic results of soil erosion could take on distinctive forms.

Curt Meine.

CURT MEINE: *In the upper Midwest, the real crisis of the late 20s and early 30s involved soil erosion along the Mississippi River…very vulnerable to massive soil erosion, particularly here in Wisconsin in what's called the Driftless area.*

The Driftless area is unlike the rest of the Midwest. It's not as flat as your stereotypical midwestern landscape, right. It's actually quite a rugged area. And because it is such a rugged landscape full of hills and valleys, it was vulnerable to the effects of unwise agriculture practices since the settlement by Europeans. By the 1920s and early thirties, the landscape was in crisis. Farmers described entire farms being lost, in a single intense rainstorm.

HOST: Aldo Leopold was one of the first to see the problem. Born in rural Iowa, Leopold had studied forestry at Yale in the early 1900s when forestry was still a new field. After graduating, he played an important part in helping set up the national forest system. This work eventually brought him to Wisconsin. But he felt limited by the job, and in the late 1920s he left the Forest Service to focus on his real passion, wildlife conservation.

CURT MEINE: *For most foresters, their focus really was on the trees themselves, on the production of timber from the forests. Leopold, however, from the beginning of his career saw forests in a much more holistic way. He understood forests as not only the trees, but the soils, the water, the wildlife, the entirety of the forest as a community. Unless you understand the ecological foundations of how plants and animals, soils and waters work in the landscape, you're likely to run into trouble.*

HOST: Leopold saw that America was in deep trouble. The 1920s and 30s were a time of true crisis for nature in the country.

CURT MEINE: *That was a low point across the continent. Wildlife populations were depleted. Soil erosion was a crisis. Forests were leveled. And so, it was a turning point in the development of conservation as the deep ecological roots of these multiple crises, were coming to the foreground, and that's when Leopold really steps into his leadership role nationally.*

HOST: In those overlapping disasters, Aldo Leopold looked closely at what was going on at the level of the watershed.

Let's start by breaking down what a watershed is.

CURT MEINE: *A watershed defined in the most basic way is that area of land that drains into a single water course. So, think of the Colorado River as a large watershed in the American West. Or think of your own local river, wherever you live, as perhaps a smaller watershed.*

HOST: Aldo Leopold was putting these pieces together. Yet as he was working on his ideas to solve the problems of water runoff and erosion, he found himself among the millions of Americans affected by the Great Depression. He wasn't out on the street, but for a while he was out of a job.

CURT MEINE: *Leopold was like everyone else in the country facing a very uncertain future… He was unemployed for a period during the depths of the Depression, but he was always driven by his conservation, passion and vision. Even at that lowest point, he actually devoted himself to writing what would become the first textbook in wildlife conservation. It was called Game Management. It was a part of, a sort of culmination, actually, of that phase of his career, of trying to get this new field on the map. He was doing intensive field work. He was involved at the professional level. He was trying to gin up new policies statewide and nationally to promote this idea that we don't have to face the inevitable depletion of our wildlife. That in fact, using this new science of ecology, we can not only protect wildlife populations, we can restore them, or more accurately, we can manage the land in a way that allows wildlife populations to restore themselves.*

HOST: It's impressive that while struggling through his own hard times, Leopold was able to lay out a new vision for conservation. Its focus was an investment of people and communities in the health of the land and its wildlife. In his field, Leopold was getting recognition for seeing the bigger picture. He also managed to get a job at the University of Wisconsin and started working on environmental projects that were part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies to promote conservation.

CURT MEINE: *The New Deal is a transformative period in the evolution of conservation… Now, Franklin Roosevelt, of course, was no mean conservationist in his own right. He was well known for his passion for trees…*

DOUGLAS BRINKLEY: *Franklin Roosevelt had learned a lot from Theodore Roosevelt. I mean Theodore Roosevelt put aside 230 million acres of conservation land.*

HOST: Douglas Brinkley is a Presidential historian who has written a lot about President Roosevelt and the New Deal.

DOUGLAS BRINKLEY: *The federal government can do a lot. So, it's not a big leap to see FDR thinking, 'well we can do a WPA.' Government as an engine for innovation had been passed from Abraham Lincoln to Theodore Roosevelt to FDR and he seized it.*

FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT (ARCHIVAL): *We are going to conserve soil, conserve water, and conserve life. We are going to have a farm policy that will serve the national welfare. That is our hope for the future.*

HOST: One of the early New Deal conservation efforts was Roosevelt's Committee for Wildlife Restoration. The goal of the committee was to make recommendations for emergency funding to protect important habitats for wildlife. Leopold was one of the three people appointed to this Committee.

CURT MEINE: *Even though Leopold didn't always agree with the approaches of the New Deal, he participated in them, helped lead them, but he didn't always agree with the premises, actually. Leopold is fascinating, politically. He's impossible to pigeon-hole. You read some of Leopold, he's a very conservative person. You read other parts and say, wow, that's incredibly progressive. He understands the leadership role under times of crisis that Roosevelt had taken on. It was time to set aside qualms about this or that government program, and he saw in Roosevelt an opportunity really to advance the cause of wildlife conservation.*

FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT (ARCHIVAL): *We are helping and will continue to help the farmer to do those things through local soil conservation committees and other cooperative local, state and federal agencies of government.*

HOST: That's from one of Roosevelt's radio speeches, famously called his fireside chats. In it, we can clearly hear that his priorities for conservation mesh with Leopold's new ideas.

FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT (ARCHIVAL): *People are not afraid to use new methods to meet changes in nature and to correct the mistakes of the past. If certain wheat lands should be returned to pasture, they are willing to cooperate. If trees should be planted as windbreak or to stop erosion, they will work with us. If terracing or summer fallowing or crop rotation is called for, they will carry them out. They stand ready to fit, not to fight, the ways of nature.*

HOST: Roosevelt's New Deal team chose the Driftless region of Wisconsin as the first place to pilot this new approach to control erosion in a big way.

Leopold was key to that experiment. Throughout his career, he had gained a wider view of forests and wildlife ecology than what he'd been taught in schools. And now he got to test his ideas in the Driftless experiment. For the project, erosion experts worked with local farmers on long-term planting. The farmers would try different plowing techniques and rotate their crops more often. They would re-arrange fields, diversify crops, and retire steeper land as pasture or woodland. In turn, the government agreed to supply fertilizer and seeds.

CURT MEINE: *That process was the first watershed scale restoration project in the country and most people would say it was pretty darn successful.*

HOST: The Driftless project proved to be a triumph. It would have a big impact on how people thought about controlling erosion and saving the soil. In the disaster of the Dust Bowl, the Driftless experiment pointed to a solution.

CURT MEINE: *It actually did halt and begin to reverse the processes of degradation. This project in the Driftless area becomes an example. We have to work with local communities to come together to find the common ground, if you will, literally.*

HOST: Tim Hundt is a journalist who grew up in the Driftless area and has studied the history of floods there. In 2021, Hundt spoke with Wisconsin Humanities for their podcast, Human Powered.

TIM HUNDT: *The watershed was the birthplace of conservation work that really turned the Dust Bowl around. You know, as I went to college and later worked as a journalist, and I realized how those practices really dramatically transformed the country, and probably not exaggerating to say that they saved the country, because if those practices hadn't been tried and implemented, I don't know what would have happened with the Dust Bowl. It would just gotten worse and worse, probably.*

HOST: This success story for the land showed Leopold that new ideas -- about natural systems and people – could help communities tackle what was out of whack in our relationship to nature.

Leopold continued his involvement in New Deal efforts to halt erosion. He also worked with the Civilian Conservation Corps to build structures in other parts of the country, including small flood-control dams in New Mexico. And then the WPA and the Writers Project came to town with a new opportunity. But we'll pick up that story after this quick break.

[Break]

HOST: Leopold was lucky. He had found a job. But millions of Americans were still out of work. Roosevelt created a new agency to hire people for short-term jobs: the Works Progress Administration, or WPA. It was the New Deal's answer to rebuilding America's infrastructure.

A small part of the WPA called the Writers Project paid out-of-work editors and writers to report on their home state for a series of travel guidebooks. Each guidebook would be full of essays about history and culture put together with tour routes that pointed out what to see on a drive through the countryside.

Historian Douglas Brinkley:

DOUGLAS BRINKLEY: *Think about the WPA program – putting people to work, getting people to do things that mean something to America, was something very new and innovative.*

HOST: In Wisconsin, WPA writers were compiling loads of stories about the state and its history. They documented things like the short time that Pulitzer Prize winning poet Carl Sandburg worked for the Milwaukee city government. They gathered photographs of buildings designed by Wisconsin-born architect Frank Lloyd Wright. They even had a special section on the Northern Paper Mill, one of the largest of its kind in the country, producing 125 tons of paper every day - most of it toilet paper, which is why Green Bay eventually became known as the Toilet Paper Capital of the World. Basically, if it was about Wisconsin, WPA writers tried to find it.

Here's an excerpt where you can you hear them sifting through local accounts of famous gangsters in rural hideouts:

EXCERPT FROM THE WPA GUIDE TO WISCONSIN (VOICED BY AN ACTOR):
In the Northern Lakes Region, Joe Saltis, noted Chicago gangster of the prohibition era, came every summer to relax. Saltis took refuge in plain sight until he began fly-fishing for trout within the prohibited 500 feet below a dam. While urban police forces searched for him far away, the game warden and volunteer deputies captured the whole gang. Saltis appeared before a local magistrate and was fined and released.

DOUGLAS BRINKLEY: *The WPA guides are period snapshots of a moment in time. What it did is say the voices of every day Americans matters. Local history matters. Oral history matters. Any kind of little idiosyncratic nuance of your hamlet or your lake has history, has relevance, has importance.*

HOST: As the WPA guide to Wisconsin moved toward publication, they needed essays about the state's historic and natural context. Aldo Leopold stepped up and brought his own views to an essay on the state's natural history and the importance of conservation.

CURT MEINE: *I can imagine when the WPA came knocking that Leopold said, well, here's an opportunity to share with another audience my way of understanding land that isn't just the superficial scenic beauty of a place.*

HOST: Listen to an actor bring Leopold's words to life in the WPA Guide.

EXCERPT FROM THE WPA GUIDE TO WISCONSIN (VOICED BY AN ACTOR):
Studies are revealing the complex interrelationships of all aspects of conservation work – the delicate system of balances by which one natural resource sustains another. An important part of conservation work is forestry, for forests, in addition to their value for industry and recreation, shelter wildlife and hold soil and water.

CURT MEINE: *Leopold was always a writer. He understood that part of his work as a conservationist had to involve being a communicator. You begin to see the emergence of a new voice in Leopold's writing in the 1930s. I think it was connected to his recognition that we all as citizens needed to understand this new way of understanding the natural world and our relationship to it. He is writing for a broad public, broader and broader through the 1930s.*

HOST: Aldo Leopold saw that dysfunctional management was destroying the forests and rivers of Wisconsin, and he wanted to make the case for a new relationship clear to the public. The WPA guide gave him a platform to do that.

EXCERPT FROM THE WPA GUIDE TO WISCONSIN (VOICED BY AN ACTOR):
During the years of exploitation, the lumber industry steadily devoured itself, and by the 1930s Wisconsin's virgin timber, once thought illimitable, was virtually gone.

CURT MEINE: *He's trying to reach the heart. He understands that this new science can be complex and even daunting. Its vocabulary is unknown to the general public. So instead of using the terms like "food chains" or "ecological niche" or all these other technical terms from the science, he begins to tell stories. He draws on his vast experience to tell stories about how plants and animals and people are all interrelated in landscapes. And this is a new thing.*

EXCERPT FROM THE WPA GUIDE TO WISCONSIN (VOICED BY AN ACTOR):
Men still remember when virgin forest covered five-sixths of Wisconsin. Today these woodlands are all but gone. In many areas soil has been exhausted or eroded, water levels have shifted, and wildlife and natural beauty have departed with the timber. The effects of exploitation are being more and more widely understood, and public opinion stands back of almost any program that promises to restore what has been lost or maintain what is left.

HOST: Leopold was among the first to articulate this crisis and its devastating scale. And he put it in a guidebook of the state's travel attractions. For all the world to ponder.

EXCERPT FROM THE WPA GUIDE TO WISCONSIN (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *Great fires accompanied the reckless cutting. The history of almost every northern county records at least one great conflagration that overwhelmed settlements and ravaged forests. The annual destruction, according to the 1880 census, was about 400,000 acres. Buffalo, elk, wild turkeys, and other species fled or were annihilated…*

HOST: Leopold knew readers may be shocked to find this destruction in a book about their home state, but he felt a growing importance to bring this history to their attention. His contribution to the WPA guide helped hone a truth-telling voice, a part of himself he wanted to grow.

CURT MEINE: *He was always devoted to writing. And as a writer, you could track this all the way back to his boyhood and see what a precocious writer he was. There was always a special skill too, that you could recognize in his writing. And starting in the mid to late 1930s, he really consciously begins to bring this new voice forward. And it's not the voice of advocacy that he had been using before…*

HOST: The WPA Guide to Wisconsin, containing Leopold's Conservation essay, came out in April 1941, to strong reviews. The essay for the WPA Guide showed the start of a more informal, public voice in Leopold's writing. Leopold was growing, conveying his new sense of nature more directly in ways that everyday people could grasp.

Take this passage from his book, A Sand County Almanac.

ALDO LEOPOLD (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *Land is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through circuits consisting of soils, plants, and animals.*

CURT MEINE: *It's not the voice of science. It's the voice of, my gosh, poetry and lyricism.*

HOST: In his private journals, he was loosening up even more. Clearing his throat, so to speak, for a bigger audience.

ALDO LEOPOLD (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *My dog thinks I have much to learn about partridges. I agree. He persists in tutoring me with the calm patience of a professor of logic. Perhaps he hopes his dull pupil will one day learn to smell.*

CURT MEINE: *He had the gift for doing this in a way that was very accessible and even beautiful. And, um, they begin trickling out one by one. But the more he writes in this way, the more positive feedback he gets and the more encouraged he is.*

HOST: Aldo Leopold kept writing essays in the years that followed, testing out new analogies to connect readers with the land. You can hear it in this passage about music in nature, from his book A Sand County Almanac.

ALDO LEOPOLD (VOICED BY AN ACTOR) FROM A SAND COUNTY ALMANAC: *Song of the Rio Gavilan: the song of the waters is audible to every ear, but there is other music in these hills by no means audible to all. To hear even a few notes of it, you must first live here for a long time and you must know the speech of hills and rivers. Then on a still night when the campfire is low and the Pleiades have climbed over rim rocks, sit quietly and listen for a wolf to howl and think hard of everything you have seen and try 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 the centuries.*

CURT MEINE: *That was a <laughs> He walked through a door with that passage.*

HOST: Aldo Leopold continued honing his voice as a writer up to the day he died. His book, A Sand County Almanac, came out soon after his death in 1947. Its popularity spread. In time, it led to a sea change in people's thinking. That the soil was more than just something to be used.

CURT MEINE: *What made Leopold's book a phenomenon for the next couple generations was this ability that introduced the complexities of social and ecological relationships through the telling of these stories, personal, intimate, local, but having global implications, that we're still playing out with right now.*

[News Reports on flooding in Wisconsin]

REPORTER (ARCHIVAL): *We are monitoring river levels in Southwest Wisconsin. The Kickapoo River is expected to rise, prompting many to prepare for flooding.*

HOST: In recent years, floods in the Driftless have been getting worse again, for a different reason than during the Depression.

Tim Hundt has tracked this latest trend.

TIM HUNDT: *You know, people sometimes shy away from the term 'climate change' in these rural areas, because it's so politically charged even today. But even if you don't want to use that terminology, people out here know that something is drastically changed.*

2007 was the first major flood. A year after that, 2008, it was a record-setting flood, it was worse yet. In all of those communities through the Kickapoo Valley got hit even harder. Then, about every two years, another devastating flood. So far, the worst was 2018. Exceeded the other floods by a foot or two. Just absolutely devastating.

HOST: As Leopold showed, a flooding disaster is not measured only in inches of rainfall or crops not harvested, but also in meals lost, homes gutted, and families displaced. The current climate crisis calls to mind his warnings that we need to understand the connections between people's history and nature.

Thankfully, since Aldo Leopold's lifetime, many have taken up the idea of our obligation to the land. It has become a global movement.

CURT MEINE: *The culture of conservation that developed in this part of the world would go on to have ripple effects. Probably the best known of these ripple effects had to do with our later governor and senator, Gaylord Nelson, often referred to as the Father of Earth Day. He grew up in a small town called Clear Lake. How good is that? Huh? Clear Lake, Wisconsin, up in the northwest part of our state.*

HOST: Gaylord Nelson was Wisconsin's governor and longtime Senator in the 1960s and 70s. Here he speaks on the eve of the first Earth Day in 1970.

GAYLORD NELSON (ARCHIVAL): *It's tremendously encouraging to see all across this country the remarkable interest on an issue which is not only just an issue of survival but an issue of how we survive. I don't think there's any other issue – viewed in its broadest sense – which is as critical to mankind as the issue of the quality of the environment in which we live. You hear the word 'ecology' – that's a big science, not a narrow one. It's a big concept. It's concerned with the total ecosystem not just how we dispose of tin cans, bottles and our garbage… And it's concerned with all the ramifications of all the relationships of all living creatures to each other and their environment.*

HOST: Curt Meine sees a direct line of cultural connection between Leopold and his generation and succeeding generations of environmental activists. It's a diverse, young and committed group leading the charge today.

[Archival of Greta Thunberg]

INTERVIEWER (ARCHIVAL): *Greta – You have sparked the interest of millions, literally, of children around the globe demanding action for climate change. What's your message to world leaders today?*

GRETA THUNBERG (ARCHIVAL): *My message is that we'll be watching you.*

[audience laughter]

GRETA THUNBERG (ARCHIVAL): *This is all wrong. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!*

[applause]

CURT MEINE: *So, we're at a really, at an inflection point right now…Conservation has always been about the common good, but not everybody has always been included within that common good. So, part of the struggle is the coming to recognition of the full human community and its stake in the land, no pun intended there.*

HOST: Curt Meine sees this moment struggle as a key step in the journey toward understanding. And that nature itself – and our ability to recharge in its presence – can be part of that journey.

CURT MEINE: *It's up to all of us to contribute to that evolution. It's up to all of us to draw on all our diverse experiences, sources, texts, belief systems… So that's where we find ourselves now at this kind of fraught moment of intersecting crises and reckonings. We're at a point when we have to draw on all the sources of wisdom.*

But to understand those connections is part of our own resilience and our own wellbeing that we have to recognize. And that's what Leopold was all about, helping his readers, his students, his family to understand that in our work, by making those connections, we find wonder and beauty and we find a way to go forward the next day to continue the work.

HOST: Next time on The People's Recorder: Migrants in the West bring disruption and new ways to see the American Dream. And the system fights back.

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This episode also features the song Wisconsin by Madilyn Bailey.

The episode was produced by Spark Media. Follow us on social media @peoplesrecorder. This is Chris Haley. Thanks for listening.