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## Searching for Alder Fork

**A determined fly-fisher wades through time and place to find and fish the stream of his conservation hero.**

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The quest to catch a trout from a stream conservationist Aldo Leopold fished produced a chub and plenty of thought. © Don Blegen

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"Knowledge of the whereabouts of good hunting or fishing is a very personal form of property," Aldo Leopold wrote. "It is like rod, dog, or gun: a thing to be loaned or given as a personal courtesy." Accordingly, though Leopold visited a particular northern Wisconsin trout stream at least twice and wrote about his trip in the summer of 1931, the essay was first published almost 20 years later, in "A Sand County Almanac."

Leopold is best remembered for his writings and devotion to developing a new understanding of our relationship with the land. Fewer people know that he also enjoyed writing about hunting and fishing, sports he took up in childhood and continued throughout his life.

The trout stream Leopold called "Alder Fork" in his writings is thought to be Alder Creek, a small, brushy, spring creek in Iron County, near Hurley, close to the very small villages of Montreal and Iron Belt. A photograph of it is included in Michael Sewell's recent pictorial version of "A Sand County Almanac." It wasn't a great stream when Leopold fished it. It isn't mentioned in recent and numerous books and articles about Wisconsin trout fishing. But Leopold had fished it. He is on a very short list of my heroes, and he was a fly-fisherman, as am I. I wanted to fish that same stream and cast to a few of the descendants of the trout Leopold caught.

### Lessons on the journey

Pat Madden, my friend of 30 years and now a judge in Iron County, said he would help me check out the stream and give me a bed. So, on a humid August day, over 70 years after Aldo Leopold's trip, I drove to Hurley. On the way from Madison I fished beautiful Lawrence Creek, near Westfield. While the fish were small, they were the prize of Wisconsin's spring creeks, brook trout: fish so colorful they remind me of exotic African or South American birds.

I wanted to check out a couple of potential access places along the stream on the way to Pat's home in Montreal. Alder Creek follows State Highway 77 traveling southwest of town. On County E, below Iron Belt, the stream was dark, impenetrable and still, not a good sign. I drove upstream a couple of miles to Kimball Road only to find more dark, quiet water. I was losing light, and finally an hour before dark, I had a chance for one more look on a little stub of a road off County E. The end of that road had been a bridge that was destroyed apparently by an ice dam. A sign near the former bridge said, quite unnecessarily, "No Bridge." The 200-yard walk to the water was down an unused grass road, soggy with standing water from a recent rain. Frogs of several types were everywhere.

The stream here was wide, not moving, dammed by beaver, and looked deep. There were tiny insects in the air that I could not identify. Numerous small dimples appeared at the area where the bridge had been. I had brought my fly rod. I added a long section of thin, 6X tippet to my leader and a size 18 hair wing coachman, a favorite fly for brook trout. The first cast toward rising fish, brought an immediate strike. The fish was obviously small, but brookies are typically small. After a few seconds of struggle, the fish came to the surface near my feet. A six-inch chub!

Dimples continued to appear on the stream, but no longer looked so interesting. I thought I had better check the water temperature. Trout require clean, cool water with temperatures in the 50s and 60s. The thin red line on my thermometer kept slowly creeping upward until it reached 82 degrees, way too hot for trout. It was getting dark, and the heat and humidity had not relented. As I returned to the car, dozens of frogs splashed along side. It was late, but not too dark to take some pictures of frogs that ignored a camera lens only a foot or two away.

Aldo Leopold had a similar experience over 70 years ago on Alder Creek. He wrote, "We found the main stream so low that the teeter-snipe pattered about in what last year were trout riffles, and so warm that we could duck in its deepest pool without a shout. Even after our cooling swim, waders felt like hot tarpaper in the sun.

"The evening's fishing proved as disappointing as its auguries. We asked that stream for trout and it gave us a chub....But this, we now remembered was a stream of parts. High up near the headwaters we had once seen a fork, narrow, deep and fed by cold springs which gurgled out under its close-hemmed walls of alder. What would a self-respecting trout do in such weather? Just what we did: go up."

### Trying our luck upstream

My friend Pat introduced me to Charlie Zinsmaster, the Iron County Forester. Charlie suggested that we try to get access to Alder Creek near the entry of Cemetery Creek, a spring-fed tributary, further upstream. On my county map, he carefully showed the short, dead end road to take out of Iron Belt. Then you have to walk about a mile, he said, through the cross-country ski trail.

Shortly after light the next morning, Pat and I headed down the little grassy road. When it came to an end I put on my waders, got my camera and again, optimistically, rigged up my rod. We began to walk down the cross-country ski and snowmobile trail that, by late summer, was crowded with weeds and alders. As we walked, the trail got smaller and the brush got thicker, until it completely disappeared. Pat and I looked around and wondered exactly where we had come from and whether we could find our way back. We decided that Pat would stay where he was and I would keep going.

Pat served as my geographic positioning system. I trudged on into the underbrush without a hint of a trail. The alders got thicker and water began to appear. Every few steps brought the possibility of sinking to my knees in muck and water, and sometimes I did. Pat said later he thought I might be in trouble when I yelled, "Oh, oh!" but I struggled out of knee-deep muck and kept going. The elevation seemed lower every 50 feet or so. I could

see a tree line about a half-mile away and I knew there had to be a stream between me and that tree line, but I couldn't reach it.

Finally, I gave up and turned back. I kept yelling to Pat so he could call back to let me know where he was. I finally got back to him, drenched with sweat and covered with water, my camera so fogged that my pictures were worthless. After a few false starts, we found our way back to the car.

## My paper search

When I returned to Madison I obtained written Alder Creek reports from Jeffrey Roth, the DNR fisheries staff member responsible for that part of Wisconsin. I learned that I might have found trout in Alder Creek had I been able to get to the upper reaches, but fish would have surely been even fewer and smaller than during Aldo Leopold's time. Alder Creek has been changing since then and continues to change. Let me summarize the findings in a short space:

When Leopold returned to fish Alder Creek in 1931, he knew that he'd have to go upstream to find a tributary and a spring with cold, clean water, where trout can live.

The 1971 records show that DNR found 17 brook trout over 10½ inches in the creek, one of them 17½ inches. Even so, the record from 30 years ago reported problems: "A survey conducted in 1966 on Cemetery Creek reported a brook trout population of 116 fish per acre. However, during the recent survey only two trout were captured. This small number of trout being captured may possibly be a reflection of the dense alder covered stream bank and the fact that raw sewage from the Village of Iron Belt has been allowed to enter this stream."

The raw sewage discharge was eliminated in the early 1970s when the Village of Iron Belt installed a sewage treatment plant. However, the report concludes: "This stream, like many of its tributaries, has been, and is presently being seriously affected by the presence of numerous beaver dams. These dams, both active and inactive, have created a series of relatively small, shallow ponds with little velocity and flow, which has resulted in an increase of water temperatures and an invasion of aquatic plants. A general lack of trout spawning habitat in the main branch of Alder Creek has also resulted due to extensive siltation."

The recommendation? "All active and inactive beaver dams should be removed from these streams and an effort made to keep these waters free of beaver activity. Beaver control, along with new sewage treatment facilities at Iron Belt should improve the water quality of this stream system with an associated improvement in trout habitat and spawning area. Alder Creek could then be managed as an excellent trout stream."

In 1974, the DNR found that Alder Creek and its tributaries continued to be brook trout water, and that "...many beaver dams were no longer functional and the trout had access to move throughout much more of the stream."

However, by 1983 the DNR reported, "Eleven beaver dams were removed from a four-mile section prior to the survey and water temperatures were monitored at several locations during July and August. Temperatures as high as 86 degrees were recorded."

That study concluded, "...No young-of-the-year trout were observed, indicating spawning must take place elsewhere. During high water temperatures the trout undoubtedly seek out springs and tributaries with cooler water." It described access as "poor" from a walk-in trail over private land or a walk-in over Iron County forestland.

## What I netted

Roderick Haig-Brown, a fishing writer and federal judge in British Columbia, wrote that we never fish the same river twice. Every year the water is different. Rivers vary from season to season, even day to day. Since Aldo Leopold fished it over 70 years ago, Alder Creek has gone from being a spring creek with natural reproduction of many, relatively large brook trout to a stream that serves as a high quality habitat for beaver with little capacity to support trout.

What are we to make of this change? The creek can help us think about some important questions. We can begin with trout fishers. We lobby, through Trout Unlimited and other organizations to increase the annual DNR Trout Stamp fee so that, among other activities, the Department of Natural Resources can buy more dynamite and afford more staff to blow up beaver dams and restore what we believe to be the “natural” flow of these streams. Beaver, after all, no longer have as many trappers to keep the population in check. But what do these “improvements” mean for other animals that live in the forests of Iron County and the Northwoods? My visit confirmed that frogs thrive in slow moving water, and they were more numerous than I had ever seen anywhere. Great blue herons thrive on frogs. To the extent that I can divine the mental state of frogs, I must report that they were happy. Frogs are born, grow up, live, and sing in large numbers. They had lots of company.

What would Aldo Leopold say about his Alder Creek? Many of his writings about specific times and places focused on underlying principles that applied beyond those times and places. One of his articles published in 1940 identified species whose numbers had been greatly reduced or eliminated in Wisconsin because of trapping, settlement, human predation and fires. He regretted the loss of the “evicted” marten, fisher and wolverine “but for overtrapping and forest fires,” as well as reduced numbers of geese, ducks, swans, cranes and shorebirds due to hunting and loss of marshlands.

Some of these species are now thriving. Martens have been reintroduced in Northern Wisconsin and their numbers are stable. Fishers have been reintroduced to provide some control of porcupine that have damaged trees in the northern forests. The number of fishers has increased, and their range is expanding into Central Wisconsin. Geese are now so numerous that many people consider them a nuisance, and sandhill cranes, greatly diminished in Leopold’s time, now number in the thousands. Since their reintroduction in the 1970s, wild turkeys are thriving and number several hundred thousand. Even whooping cranes, almost extinct, are being carefully nurtured so that they have increased from fewer than 20 to over 400 in the United States.

Leopold does not discuss beaver in his article. Beaver were greatly reduced by trapping and by 1900 were almost eliminated in Wisconsin. Beginning in 1901, they were protected and are now thriving. Wolves have returned to Wisconsin and number about 350.

Much of the degradation of our environment and our treatment of the land that Leopold decried has continued. However, in northern Wisconsin I believe he would find reasons to be encouraged.

The intricate interdependence between people, wildlife and the land continues. “Conservation,” Leopold wrote, “viewed in its entirety, is the slow and laborious unfolding of a new relationship between people and land. Each seemingly trivial...is a part of this unfolding process. Each marks the birth or death of an aspiration, the beginning or the end of an experience, a loss or a gain in the vitality of that great organism: Wisconsin.”

We know the position that Leopold took when the deer population in northern Wisconsin became too large to be supported by the available winter browse. As a member of what is now the Natural Resources Board, he argued unsuccessfully for people to intervene, decrease the herd by increasing the number of deer that hunters could kill. With some degree of confidence, we can declare Leopold would have supported removing beaver dams, as is practiced today, in areas where beaver activity degrades brook trout stream habitat. His goal would

not have been the elimination, but some control of beaver. As he wrote in “A Sand County Almanac,” “The first job of the intelligent tinkerer is to save all the pieces.”

Leopold enjoyed his fishing trip, as did I, though I caught but a chub. He concluded his essay: “What was big was not the trout, but the chance. What was full was not my creel, but my memory; full of the stuff that fishermen’s dreams are made of.”

The next time I head north to visit my friend Pat, I’ll be sure to go early in the spring when the hiking is easier, and maybe I’ll find that cold water where there just might still be some trout.

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