



Pheasant tracks in the snow. According to Aldo Leopold, the Riley area was "devoid of pheasants" until the Riley Game Cooperative stocked it in 1931.

TRACKING ALDO LEOPOLD THROUGH RILEY'S FARMLAND

Remembering the Riley Game Cooperative

*By Bob Silbernagel
and Janet Silbernagel*

Four years before Aldo Leopold acquired the farm along the Wisconsin River that became incubator and inspiration for *A Sand County Almanac*, the great naturalist developed an interest in another swath of southern Wisconsin real estate. This land, however, Leopold did not purchase. He simply wanted a place to hunt birds and test his game-management theories.

One Sunday morning in the summer of 1931, while exploring the dairy country southwest of Madison, he stopped at the farm of Reuben Paulson and asked for a drink of water. The two men fell to talking, and something surprising transpired. “He needed relief from trespassers who each year poached his birds despite his signs,” Leopold wrote in 1940 in the *Journal of Wildlife Management*. “I needed a place to try management as a means of building up something to hunt. We concluded that a group of farmers, working with a group of town sportsmen, offered the best defense against trespass, and also the best chance for building up game. Thus was Riley born.”¹

By Riley, Leopold meant the Riley Game Cooperative, which he and Paulson formed in 1931 and in which they con-



Aldo Leopold Foundation Archives

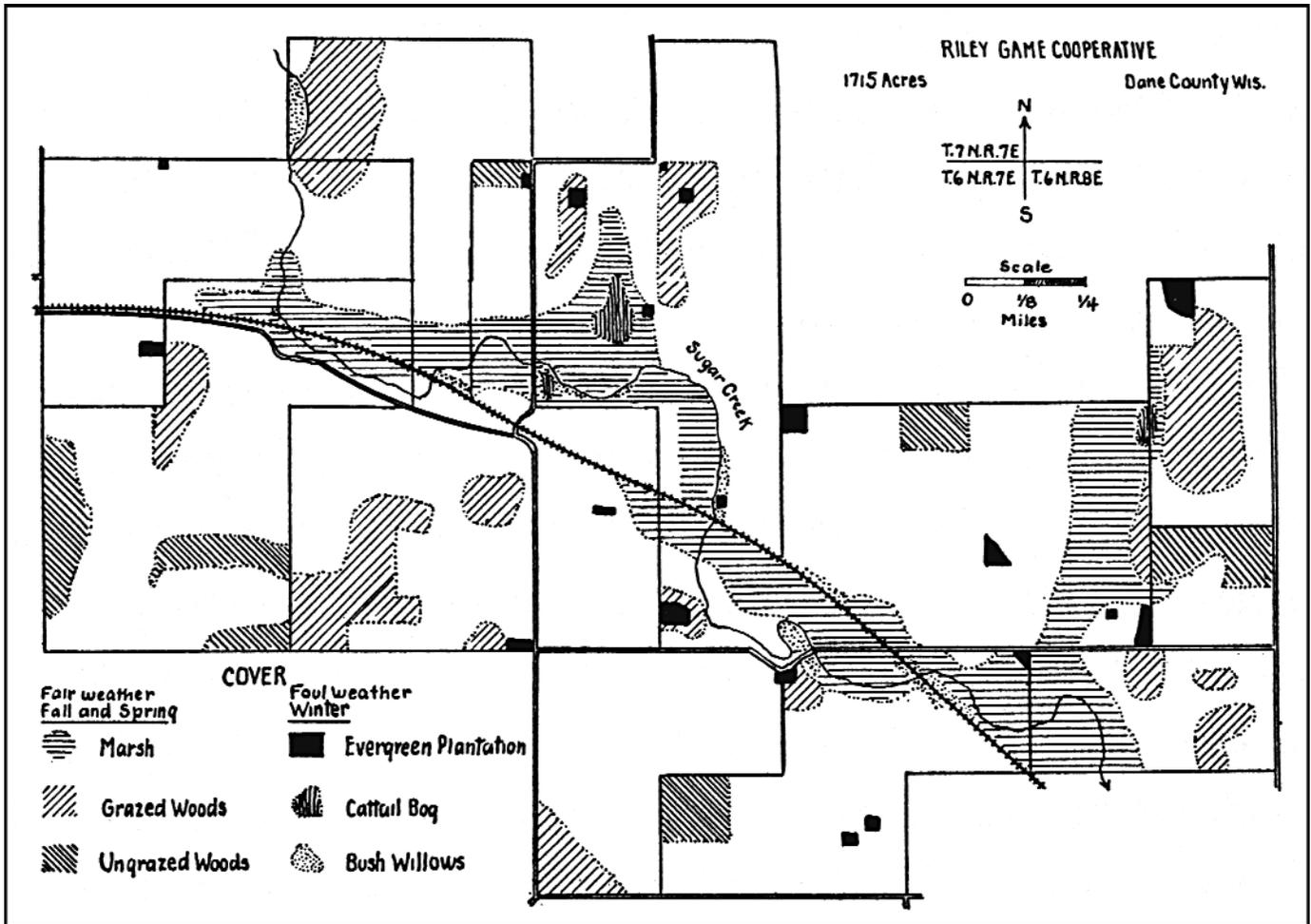
Aldo Leopold with a favorite hunting dog on unidentified property believed to be on the Riley Game Cooperative.

tinued to be involved for at least seventeen years. They were aided by a law that had just been passed by the Wisconsin legislature that authorized the creation of shooting preserves, the planting of game birds on those preserves, and the lengthening of hunting seasons on them.

The Riley Game Cooperative was centered in the small community of Riley, tucked into the steep hills that mark the terminal moraine country of southwestern Dane County. It is about equal distance between Mount Horeb and Verona, north of Highway 18. In 1931

Riley included a post office, general store, and railroad water stop. There were perhaps a dozen houses close by the railroad stop and almost as many farms within a radius of a couple miles.

One of those farms became the home—during the 1960s and 1970s—of the Silbernagel family, including the authors of this article. Although we reaped the benefits of the conservation work begun three decades before—hunted pheasant and squirrels on the farm; witnessed ducks and geese gliding into the Sugar River marsh; saw rabbits, fox, and even an occasional deer near the cover of the fencerow plantings that



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Aldo Leopold was an inveterate map maker, and this undated map of the Riley Game Cooperative is likely from his hand.

Leopold had helped engineer—we knew nothing of the Riley Game Cooperative growing up. We learned of it in *For the Health of the Land*, a 1999 book of Leopold essays not previously published in book form. It included two articles about Riley.

Those articles led us to dig deeper. We found that the cooperative, despite its longevity and its use by Leopold as a research laboratory for his students at the University of Wisconsin, was largely unheralded. Leopold wrote a few articles about it, and so have others since his death. But it did not achieve the same sort of conservation celebrity that attached to his Wisconsin River farm and the shack upon it after the publication of *A Sand County Almanac*.

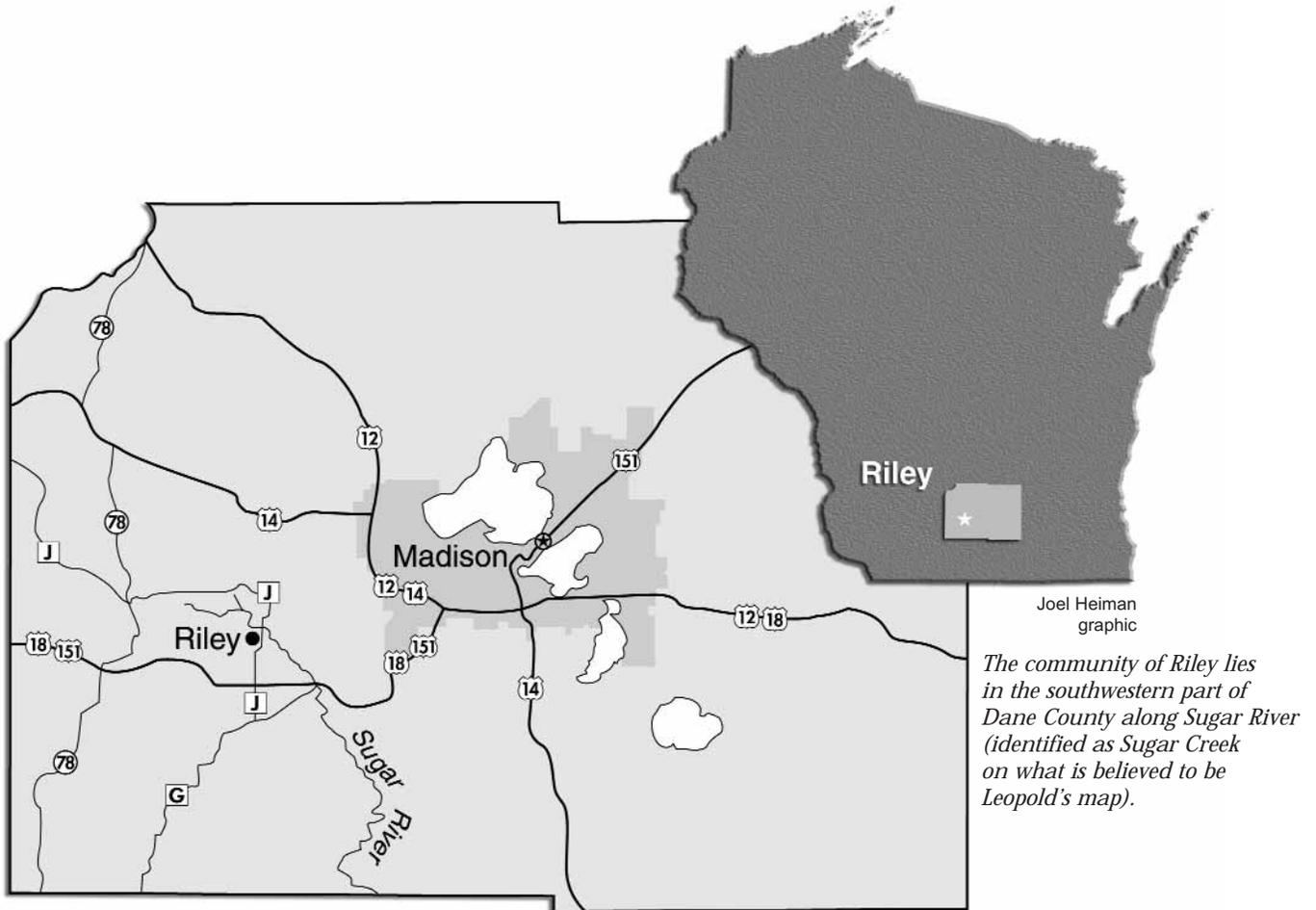
Still, Leopold did not ignore Riley. He left a stack of records about the Riley project, many of them in the archives at the University of Wisconsin. Among the things we discovered were correspondence between Leopold and Paulson about the organization of the cooperative, annual reports about the success of the hunts, and records of bird plantings.²

But it was the hand-drawn maps that grabbed our attention. It's been more than fifteen years since our parents sold the Riley farm, but the Leopold maps refresh our recollections and memories of the landscape.

There. That's the Sugar River slough. Bob and brother Carl floated a leaky dingy on it, searching the murky waters for turtles, crawdads, and carp. And there are the railroad tracks (today the Military Ridge Bike Trail). The tracks marked the southern end of the Sugar River marsh and our property. We slogged through the knee-deep muck of that marsh, swatting black flies and pushing heifers back to their pasture.

And here. That shaded zone the map describes as grazed timber on the J. L. Brannan farm is surely the same wood patch on the Silbernagel farm where shag-bark hickory trees mingled with oaks and elms. Horses and youngsters found summer comfort in their shade and snatched fruit off a wild apple tree. Along the fencerow beside the woods, we gathered hickory nuts and picked wild plums and grapes.

West beyond the crest of the hill, the woods were a different



world. Stinging nettles and blackberry brambles clutched at our legs. Sumac and poison ivy obscured trails. Raccoon, muskrat, and deer hid in the thick cover. It was a deep wilderness, at least for young explorers.

Here, on another map, is our old cornfield just north of the marsh, where we hunted pheasants and raced snowmobiles when winter snow lay deep enough. Nearby is the pasture where we galloped our horses and pastured the cows. And there, east of the farmhouse, is the hilltop hay meadow where a hot-air balloon unexpectedly dropped out of the sky one crisp autumn morning. Frightened horses raced for the cover of the woods.

While the documents from the Leopold archives elicit nostalgic and sentimental memories for us, they are not written in the lyrical style of his *Sand County* essays. They are more stenographic.

- “Summary of Winter Feeding at Riley, 1936–37.”
 - “Pheasants Killed on Riley Preserve—1938.” (A total of 65).
 - “Riley Quail Census—1936–37.”
- They chronicle the rapid growth of the cooperative, from

just three farms to eleven, covering more than 1,700 acres, and they record the increasing success of the conservation programs. But even in the secretarial style of his annual reports, Leopold could not keep his humor or opinions entirely in check. This is from a 1940 newsletter to the Riley Game Cooperative members: “There are several stray cats in the area which won’t do our nesting birds any good. Members are encouraged to invite these cats either to come back home, or to get underground where all cats behave.”

There are other stories, only glimpsed in the notes and newsletters. The low bird kill in 1945 had more to do with a shortage of gasoline and rubber than a shortage of pheasants. A Cooper’s hawk took a hen pheasant near Ken Cook’s feeder on February 1, 1941. And John Riley won the annual contest for the biggest pheasant of the season in 1945.

We decided to follow up on this last item since John Riley is not just a name on the old documents. The Riley community gets its moniker from his great-grandfather, Richard, who homesteaded there. And John Riley now lives about fifteen miles from Riley in Verona.

We called to test his memory.³

“I remember that pheasant. It was a snowy day,” Riley said. “I turned seventeen on Christmas, and it was right after that.” December 31, according to Leopold’s newsletter. “I was poking around in the woods near Paulson Road. I was by myself. I didn’t have a dog or anything. When the rooster went up I winged him. I had to track him in the snow into the thicket. How big did they say it was?”

The newsletter listed it at 1,500 grams.

“That’s right, they measured everything in grams,” John recalled.

For John Riley, memories of the Riley Game Cooperative are bright and pleasant: “Every year they had a big picnic in the spring. All of the farmers and their families would turn out, and all of the town members. It was a big thing. I remember one year we had it down at Paulson’s farm, and we played baseball in a big pasture. That’s all covered with brush now.”

Each year as well, the town members would host a banquet at a nice restaurant or club in Madison. The farmers and their sons would attend. “Everybody was all dressed up. It was quite a deal for us farmers,” Riley remembered with a chuckle.

John also remembered Aldo Leopold as “just the greatest man you’d probably ever want to be around,” some-



Joel Heiman photo

John Riley, whose great-grandfather provided the name for the community of Riley, hunted on the Riley Game Cooperative and remembers Aldo Leopold and much more.

one who never abandoned his teaching role, even when out on a hunt. “He’d tell you about anything you wanted to know,” John said. “He’d just take a stick and draw things out for you on the ground. Every year, he’d come out with two or three students from his class. They’d fix fences and clear unwanted plants from along the hedgerows.”

Gene Roark is a few years younger than John Riley, but he, too, remembers the later years of the Riley Cooperative, when his father was a town member of the group. A friend of Leopold, the elder Roark apparently met him when both were on the faculty at the Uni-

versity of Wisconsin.⁴

“I especially recall one hunt, with my dad and Leopold, when after I’d missed a hen Leopold told me, very softly, that I was ‘shooting from the hip,’” Roark said. “I felt humiliated, mostly because I knew he was right.” But Roark extracted a bit of revenge later in the day when Leopold’s bird dog, a shorthair that Leopold was very proud of, locked on point on a clump of marsh grass. “I felt I’d gotten even,” Roark remembered, “when a big yellow cat erupted from the grass and both the shorthair and Leopold looked as embarrassed as I’d felt.”⁵

For the farmers like John Riley and his dad, Wes, the Riley

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Game Cooperative wasn't a part-time effort. It became part of their everyday life. "Every farm had a feeding station on it for the birds," Riley said. "We furnished the ear corn. The town members would buy other feed for them. And we covered the feeders with cornstalks." Youngsters like John were enlisted as foot soldiers in Leopold's conservation army: "I used to have a copy of a book . . . a ledger . . . where I kept track of how many pheasants and other birds we saw on our farm. One year we had 160-some birds."⁶ John was just a toddler when the Riley Game Cooperative was founded, so he has no personal recollection of the natural conditions—the quality of habitat and game availability—prior to the cooperative. But, based on what his father and others have told him, it was poor.

Gene Roark also relied on the assessment of others and reached a similar conclusion: "Heavy grazing and erosion had reduced cover to bits and pieces, and game of any kind was scarce. Pheasants were nonexistent."⁷

Leopold described the situation this way: "Three years ago, when we first met, to flush a rabbit was the biggest adventure one might hope to fall upon in a day's hike on the Paulson farm." And this: "Like other outdoorsmen, both of us had listened patiently to the fair words of the prophets of conservation, predicting the early restoration of outdoor Wisconsin. We both had noticed, though, that as prophecies became thicker and thicker, open seasons for hunting became shorter and shorter, and wild life scarcer and scarcer."

But assistance came from an unlikely source: the Wisconsin legislature. "Now it so happens that in the same winter of our discontent . . . there emerged, as out of a cloud, all duly enacted, the 'Wisconsin Shooting Preserve Law,'" Leopold wrote. That law allowed land owners or those who controlled land to plant pheasants on the property and shoot three-quarters of the number of planted birds in an open fall season. Furthermore, the law prohibited trespassing on the property in question by people other than those involved in the shooting preserve.

Members of the Riley Cooperative were interested in many game birds, not just pheasants "and still less in shooting pheasants recently let out of a coop," Leopold said. The co-operative members, no doubt led by Leopold, quickly figured out, how-



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Reuben Paulson, cofounder of the Riley Game Cooperative, with a pheasant about to be released, presumably on his property.

ever, that while the new law restricted shooting of the domestically raised pheasants, it had applications to wild birds as well. "We saw in this a chance to build up a wild population, and to do our shooting on those wild birds, releasing sufficient tame ones to satisfy the requirements of the law," Leopold said.⁸

With that in mind, the Riley group applied for and obtained a shooting-preserve license, initially encompassing three farms in the area, and released twenty-five pheasant that first year. According to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR), there are approximately fifty licensed shooting preserves in the state now; the number fluctuates some as the licenses for the preserves come up for renewal each June 30. The shooting preserves are used primarily as hunting clubs or business retreats. They differ from game farms, of which there are about nine hundred licensed in Wisconsin today. The game farms can raise game birds and release them year-round



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The railroad tracks as they appeared running near the Riley community in the 1930s. Today the tracks are gone, and the railroad grade is part of the Military Ridge State Trail.

for hunters. The shooting preserves—unlike in Leopold’s day—cannot raise birds. They can only buy them and release adult birds for hunting from September through February.⁹

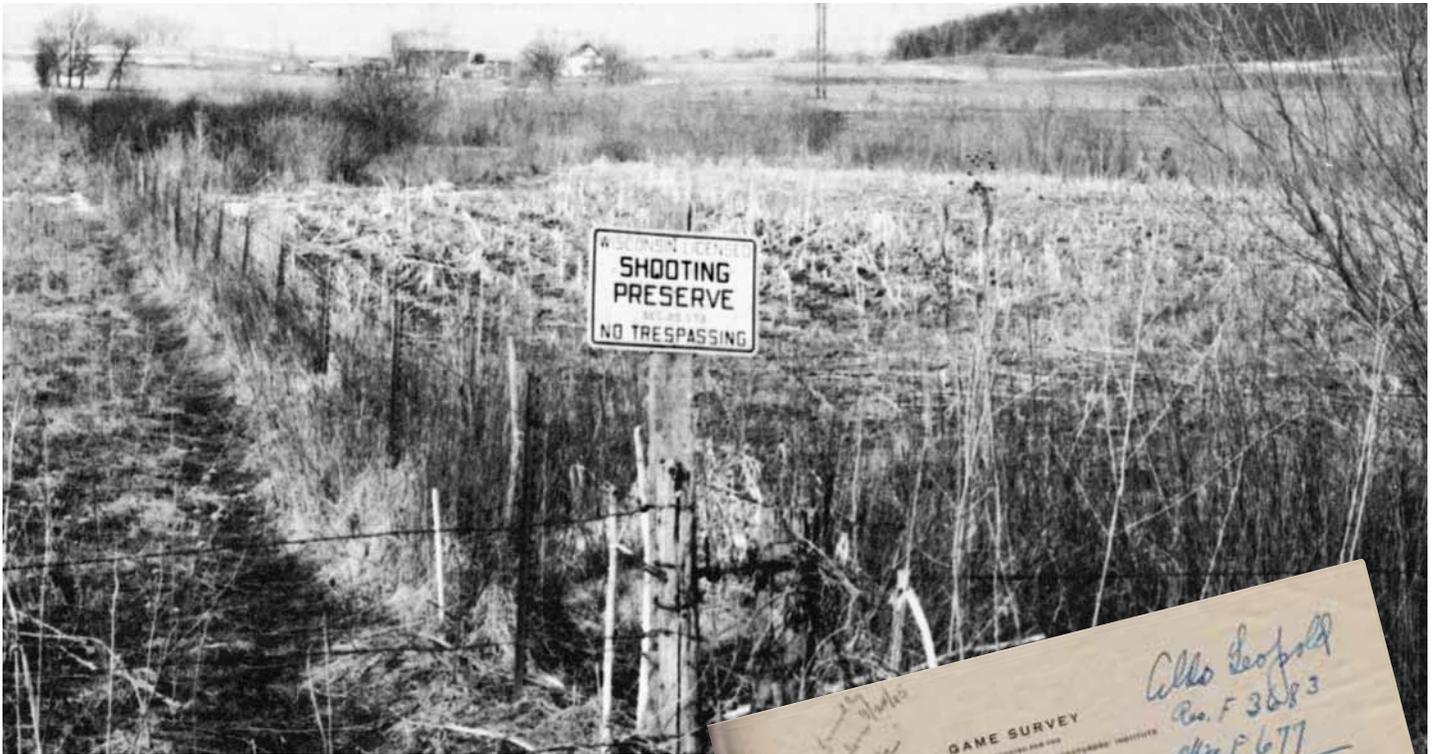
DNR records on the shooting preserves only go back to the 1970s, not to the days of the Riley Preserve. But, according to a letter Leopold wrote in September 1932, the Riley Cooperative obtained “Shooting Preserve License No. 4” on July 25, 1932.¹⁰ The Riley Game Cooperative was something much more than a gathering of sportsmen who liked to hunt birds. It became, through the direction of naturalist Leopold and farmer Reuben Paulson, a community endeavor.

It’s tough from a perspective seven decades later, to grasp how difficult life in rural Wisconsin was at that time. Farming was only beginning to be mechanized, and dairy farming in particular required long hours of tedious work. A sustained drought made farming even more difficult than normal. And, of course, money was scarce. When the Riley Cooperative began, there were as yet no agricultural support programs to help farmers ride out the tough times.

Yet somehow, Leopold and Paulson convinced other farm-

ers to join the cooperative—to voluntarily add to their workloads, give up part of their livestock feed, and eliminate portions of their precious pastureland. The Riley Game Cooperative began with just three farm members and five town members. According to the initial bylaws and letters from Leopold to Paulson, the farmers supplied land and feed for the pheasants, while town members supplied money—\$20 each, annually, in the first years—to purchase birds or eggs, to reimburse farmers for part of their corn, to provide signs to post the boundaries of the cooperative, and to cover the costs of the annual banquet for the members. Both groups provided labor to build winter feeders for the pheasants and plant pine trees and brush for cover. They all kept eyes out for trespassers and helped count birds.

And, of course, they hunted. Numerical records of those hunts are listed in the annual newsletters that Leopold dutifully wrote and mailed to all of the members of the cooperative. But they don’t capture the pleasure that members took in hunting birds in places where there had been little wildlife before. That pleasure is reflected in stories recounted by the likes of



Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Research Report no. 24, 1960-67.

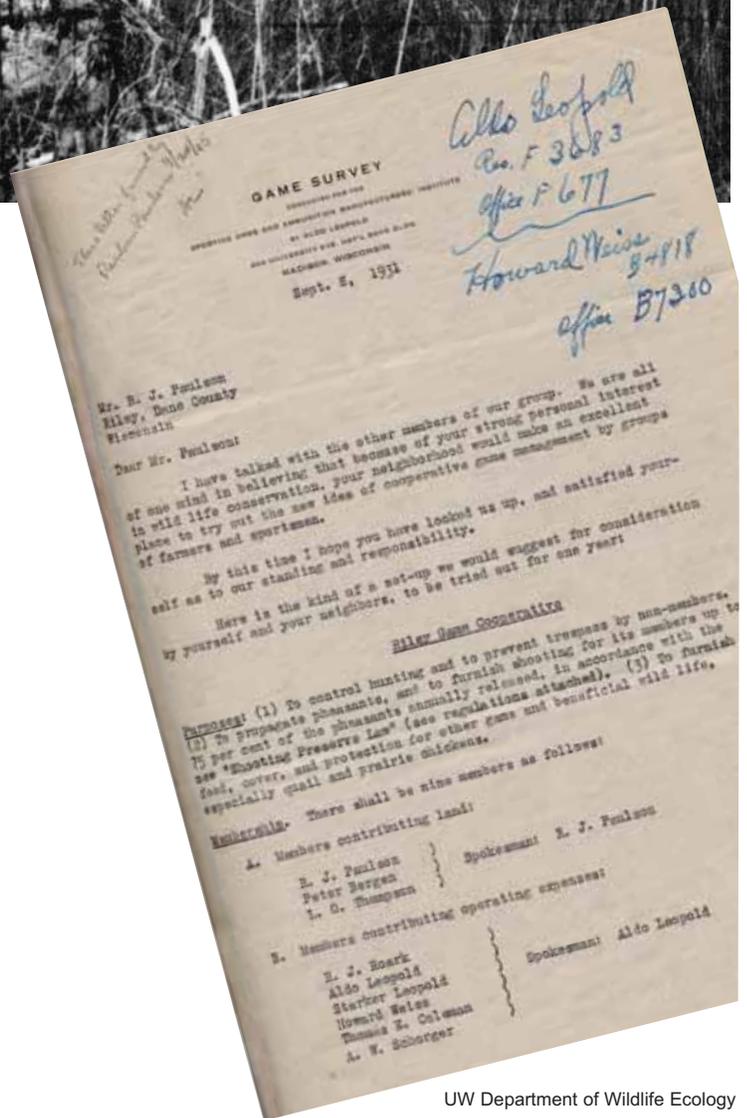
Around fifty licensed shooting preserves currently exist in the state.

John Riley and Gene Roark, who grew up hunting on the cooperative, and by Leopold's own, more literary accounts. "To kill one's first cock on one's own grounds is a memorable experience," he declared.

But it's clear from the archive record and individual stories that the cooperative also became more than just a group of hunters. It quickly developed into a communal affair that involved not only the men who hunted, but also youngsters and farm wives. Young people took feed to the pheasant feeding stations during the winter and made daily logs of the pheasants, quail, prairie chickens, Hungarian partridges, rabbits, and foxes they spotted. Reuben Paulson's wife was official keeper of the scales. When cooperative members shot a pheasant, they were to take it to Mrs. Paulson to have it weighed and recorded.

There were gatherings of the farm and town members to build the brush shelters that were to provide winter shelter for the birds and feeders where farmers or their sons could set out corn. "None of us for years had so enjoyed our winter Sundays," Leopold wrote of those gatherings.¹¹

Although Leopold and Paulson sought to keep the size of the cooperative small, so that all those involved would always know each other, it expanded rapidly on the farm side. By the late 1930s there were eleven farm members and more than 1,700 acres involved; this, despite the fact that Leopold sometimes hectored the farm members to do more conservation



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This letter from Leopold to Paulson dated September 3, 1931, outlines the purposes and lists the original membership of the Riley Game Cooperative.



Joel Heiman photo

Recent view of the Riley Game Cooperative area from Highway J south of Riley. At the center of the photo in the distance is a pine plantation on the corner of the Paulson property.

work. In a 1935 newsletter he urged each farmer that year to provide “at least one new cover area fenced against grazing” and “at least one food patch (or equivalent in shocked corn left in the field over winter).”

In 1937 the cooperative expanded in a new direction. That year, Leopold began using it as an outdoor classroom and research facility for his classes at the University of Wisconsin. “If you see a small army coming across your fields, it isn’t the Germans,” he warned the cooperative members in a 1940 newsletter. “It’s just Professor Leopold’s class in wildlife ecology, learning how farmers, town sportsmen, and birds all find ‘Lebensraum’ at Riley.”

When war came, the Riley Cooperative did not forget those who went abroad. Leopold provided extra copies of his newsletter to all Riley members so they could send them to sons in the military “whose hunting this year was not of the Riley variety.” The war also drained the cooperative of manpower. In 1942 there were not enough people to plant all the Norway pines the cooperative had ordered. In his newsletter,

Leopold offered the trees to any and all takers. Still, neither drought nor depression, war nor postwar boom brought the demise of the Riley Cooperative. In 1948, just a few months before his death, Leopold despaired at the high cost of pheasants to plant and the poor growing seasons the past three years. He wondered “whether the Riley enterprise should continue.” He was quickly reassured that the majority of Riley members wanted it to carry on.¹²

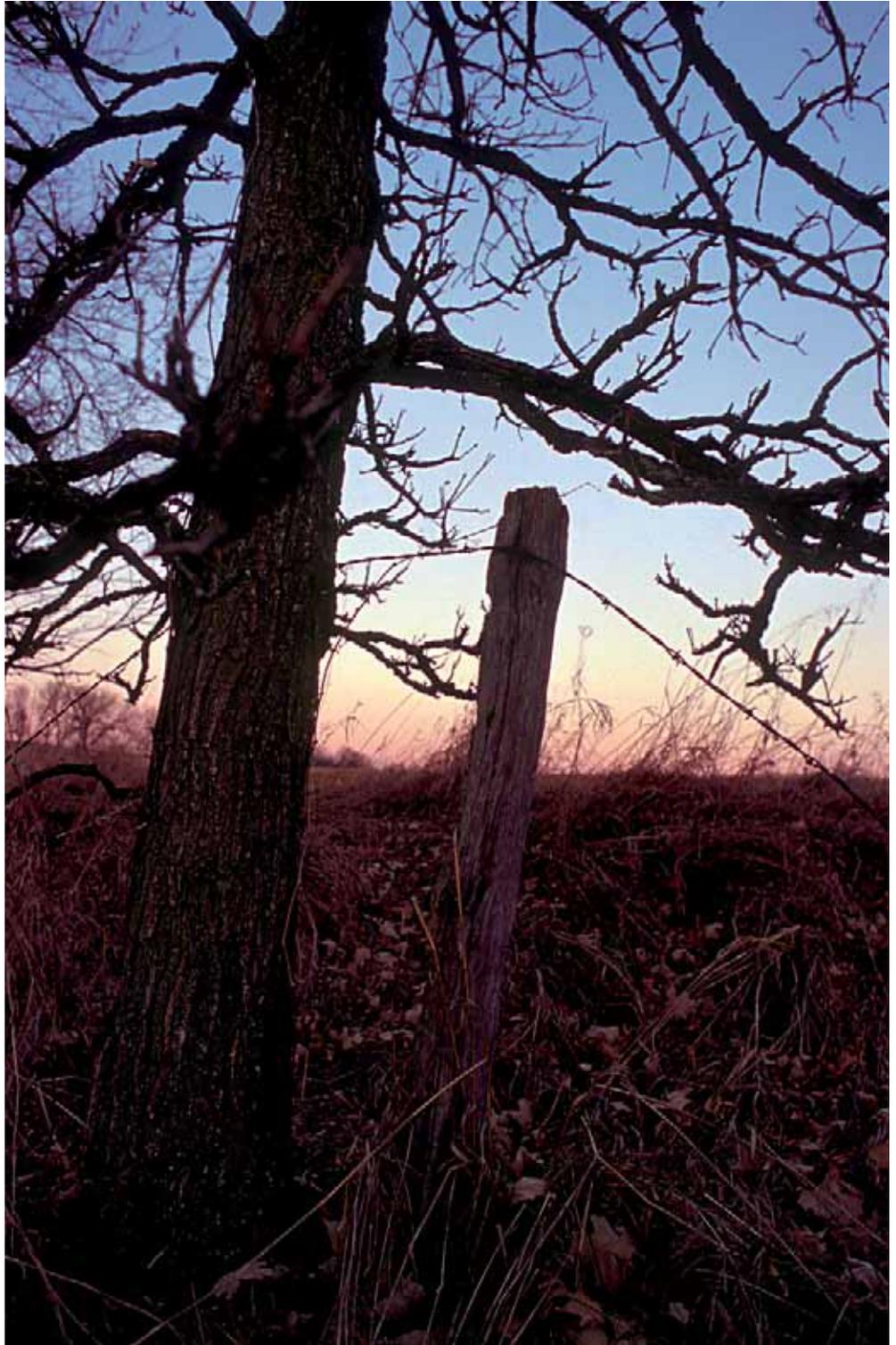
The cooperative changed the Riley landscape in a number of ways. For example, there were regular plantings of pheasants, carefully catalogued each year. But other game species, including quail, Hungarian partridge, ruffed grouse, and prairie chicken began to appear sporadically as cover improved. And cover improved largely under Leopold’s guidance. To overcome chronic overgrazing of most of the area, yet not seriously affect the farmers’ ability to take care of their cows and hogs, Leopold concentrated on what he called “foul-weather cover.” “It consists of cattail bogs

too soft for cattle to enter, bush willow along streams and railroad tracks, and grape tangles or plum thickets in fencerows."¹³ The members of the cooperative also developed plantings of evergreen trees, mostly red and Norway pine, fenced off from cattle.

They learned from painful experience. A severe drought in 1934 and 1936 cost them many of the plantings, and inadequate fences allowed animals to get in and destroy others. But they tried again, with assistance from the University of Wisconsin students and depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps crews. By 1939, when another drought hit, most of the plantings survived.¹⁴

Much of that work is evident today. Warren Exo, who has lived in the area since the 1960s, still picks wild plums along the Military Ridge Trail west of Riley each autumn. Grape tangles and other brush are still plentiful along many of the fencerows. The evergreen stands are the most noticeable. The red pines are now approaching seventy years old, and they tower thirty feet high and more. But the old stands are breaking up. Deciduous trees such as black cherry and box elder are creeping in under the pine canopies, preparing to replace the older evergreens.¹⁵

Those plantings were what attracted many of the farmers to the cooperative and kept them involved. "I know Dad really liked the plantings, the bushes along the fencerows and the stands of evergreens," Riley said.¹⁶ Over the years, the success of those plantings and of the game management efforts would help convince others to join. For instance, J. L. Brannan, who rented what would become the Silbernagel farm, was not listed as a farm member in any of the early Riley documents. By the late 1930s he was included in the list of members, however, and pheasant kills were record-



Joel Heiman photo

Original Riley Game Cooperative fence line along Paulson property.

ed on the Brannan farm.

The Riley Game Cooperative continued, largely through the will of Aldo Leopold, up until his death. The archives contain Leopold's final "Riley News Letter," dated April 8, 1948, barely two weeks before he died of a heart attack while fight-

ing a brush fire on a neighbor's farm next to his beloved Wisconsin River farm. That final newsletter is briefer than earlier ones, but it still contains a wealth of information: Twenty-four hens and five cocks were released in 1947, all with aluminum leg bands. Only ten birds were killed in 1947, the lowest number since 1933. Jay Henderson applied for five hundred red pine and white spruce trees to use as windbreaks. New state regulations for shooting preserves required all birds to be turned loose using the "gentle release system"—placing cages with open doors in the release area and allowing the pheasants to wander out as they chose.¹⁷

"Up until he died he kept it going," John Riley said. "After that it just fizzled. He was the only one from town who really worked to keep it going."¹⁸ Roark says that remnants of the cooperative continued until the early 1960s. "I don't know when Riley ceased to be licensed as a preserve, but as best I can tell, my last hunts were in '61 or '62."¹⁹

Although he moved off the family farm more than a half-century ago, John Riley hasn't entirely abandoned the community founded by his ancestors. He returns regularly. In the autumn of 2001, a deer hunt in the area provided Riley with a link to the past. On a fence along the boundary of O. Hub's old farm, he found a remnant of the Riley Game Cooperative. It was a small, yellow metal sign, about the size of an auto license plate that said "Wisconsin Licensed Shooting Preserve." Once those signs were ubiquitous throughout the Riley farm country. "I think people really respected them. They didn't trespass much when they saw those signs," John said.²⁰

Roark, too, has continued to visit the area, though he rarely hunts now. "Sometimes I wish I'd 'kept the faith' and made an effort to keep Riley going, if for no other reason than to honor what Aldo Leopold and Reuben Paulson had started," he



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R. J. Paulson with white spruce planted in Riley area, believed to be in 1936. In most letters and documents regarding Riley, Leopold referred to his friend as "R. J. Paulson," but in a few letters and one article, he is listed as "Reuben Paulson."

used the Riley Cooperative for an outdoor classroom sixty years ago, Janet is using it today for her landscape architecture students at the University of Wisconsin.

So the legacy survives as far more than some old metal signs rusting in the brush of hidden fences. It is in the fencerows themselves, and the brush that has maintained itself through the decades. It is in the tall pine groves, like that just to the east of the former Silbernagel farm. New homes now nestle among those stately trees. The cooperative's legacy is also in the descendants of those pheasants planted almost seventy years ago and all of the other species of wildlife that have found homes for generations in the cover Aldo Leopold created.

On a winter's hike around the Riley area, evidence of those animals is abundant. Tracks in the snow indicate that modern inhabitants include not only pheasants but wild turkeys, mice,

said.²¹ In the late 1980s Roark attempted a different means of preserving Riley, urging the Dane County Commissioners to consider much of the old Riley Cooperative farmland for land protection. His one-man crusade met with little initial success. But in the twenty-first century, it could reap big rewards, perhaps aided by a gift to the Dane County Parks Department to be in the Town of Verona or Riley area.

Jim Mueller, who retired in early 2002 as a Dane County Parks Department planner said a variation of Roark's proposal was adopted into the county's parks and open space plan in 2001.²² Since then, the Department of Landscape Architecture at the UW, where Janet Silbernagel teaches, has partnered with the Dane County Parks, Natural Heritage Land Trust, and local landowners to study the landscape ecology and land use of the Riley area, and to suggest conservation strategies that will protect the legacy of Leopold and the Riley Game Cooperative. Just as Leopold

rabbits, and coyotes. Ducks and geese still thrive around the creek and in the marsh. The tracks mark some changes, not only from Leopold's day, but also from when the authors grew up. Then, wild turkeys were unheard of. Red foxes were common, but coyotes were a rarity. Now coyotes are becoming the dominant predators.

But perhaps more than anything, the Riley Cooperative remains a living monument to Leopold's belief that conservationists can work with local landowners to preserve and restore the natural world. The Riley Cooperative, he wrote, "aims to prove that the downward trend of wildlife in the dairy belt can be reversed by the combined efforts of farmers and sportsmen, without large expenditures either of cash or land."²³ It is a pragmatic, let's-get-down-to-work statement of Leopold's ideas for the Riley Cooperative. But those ideas did not stray from his basic principles of people and land, as expressed in his foreword to *A Sand County Almanac*: "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."²⁴ 



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Releasing a trapped pheasant after banding.

¹Aldo Leopold, "History of the Riley Game Cooperative, 1931-1939," in *For the Health of the Land: Previously Unpublished Essays and Other Writings* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1999), 176. Originally published in the *Journal of Wildlife Management*, 1940.

²Riley Game Cooperative records, Aldo Leopold Archives, University of Wisconsin, Department of Wildlife Ecology.

³Telephone interview with John Riley, December 2001.

⁴Telephone interview with Gene Roark, January 2002.

⁵Gene Roark, "The Riley Game Co-op," Dane County Conservation League newsletter, January 1987.

⁶John Riley interview.

⁷Roark, "The Riley Game Co-op."

⁸Quotations from Aldo Leopold, "Helping Ourselves: Being the Adventures of a Farmer and a Sportsman Who Produced Their Own Shooting Ground," *For the Health of the Land*, 33-40. Originally published in *Field & Stream*, 1934.

⁹Telephone interview with Shirley Zwolanek, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, July 2002.

¹⁰Letter from Aldo Leopold to Mr. Paul Kelleter, whose title is given only as "Director of Conservation, Madison, Wisconsin." The letter is dated September 20, 1932, and in it Leopold amends the boundaries of the Riley Shooting Preserve. Riley Game Cooperative records, Aldo Leopold Archives, University of Wisconsin.

¹¹Leopold, "Helping Ourselves," 39, 35.

¹²Riley Game Cooperative records.

¹³Leopold, "History of the Riley Game Cooperative," 181-82.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Visit to Riley area with Warren Exo, December 2001.

¹⁶John Riley interview.

¹⁷Riley Game Cooperative records.

¹⁸John Riley interview.

¹⁹Roark, "The Riley Game Co-op."

²⁰John Riley interview.

²¹Roark, "The Riley Game Co-op."

²²Telephone interview with Jim Mueller, January 2002.

²³Leopold, "History of the Riley Game Cooperative," 180.

²⁴Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949).

The Authors



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Bob Silbernagel and his wife, Judy, abandoned their home state of Wisconsin for the mountains of Colorado thirty years ago but return annually to visit the Mount Horeb and Madison areas. After studying journalism at the University of Wisconsin, Bob began his journalism career in Vail, Colorado. He has been the editorial page editor for *The Daily Sentinel* in Grand

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