

The Aldo and Estella Leopold Residency



2020 Application

Giving Voice to Place

In the fall of 1912 Aldo Leopold, the newly appointed supervisor of the Carson National Forest, married Estella Luna Otero Bergere, a prominent daughter of Santa Fe, and together they moved into their new house, “Mi Casita,” in the remote village of Tres Piedras, New Mexico. One hundred years later, in the summer of 2012, the doors to Mi Casita opened to a new generation of writers, thinkers, and artists interested in exploring connections in our communities and cultures, and in our lives and landscapes. The Aldo and Estella Leopold Residency provides an inspiring retreat for writers and artists in the physical context of the Leopold’s first home, and in the intellectual context of land ethics. Our mission is to enhance the relevance and cultural awareness of Aldo Leopold’s ideas in addressing the pressing environmental issues and conservation opportunities of our time.

A Legacy of Transformation

For Aldo and Estella Leopold, Tres Piedras, New Mexico was a place of transformation. It was the first home of the newlywed couple, and although they lived there only briefly, in that short time everything changed. Professionally, Aldo Leopold’s career shifted from forest officer to Supervisor of the recently established Carson National Forest. Personally, Leopold found his voice, both as editor and essayist of “The Pine Cone”, the newsletter of the Carson officers, and in romantic letters to his wife-to-be Estella. Those letters, delivered seventy miles away to Santa Fe, led to their marriage and first home, designed by Aldo and named by Estella, beneath the granitic outcrops of Tres Piedras.

It was here that Aldo and Estella began their life together, and that Aldo found his footing as a leader in forestry and conservation. Gazing east from the wide, covered porch of Mi Casita, the Leopolds could look out at skies “ablaze with great masses of orange and crimson,” framing the 13,000-foot heights of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains above Taos. In summer, Aldo and Estella worked the tan and red soil into gardens awaiting the monsoon rains of the southern Rockies. In the fall, Aldo would ride his horse Polly north to the “great glory of bronze and gold” amid the aspens of San Antonio Mountain.

But another transformation came in April 1913 when Leopold suffered a near-death bout with acute nephritis after an epic, multi-day solo patrol through winter weather in the Jicarilla district, northwest of Tres Piedras. It ended the Leopolds’ short experience in home-making in Tres Piedras, and sent them back to Leopold’s home state of Iowa. From his parent’s house in Iowa, confined to a couch, Leopold read philosophy and literature, and wrote essays foreshadowing the influential “Land Ethic” that he would compose at the end of his life a quarter century later.

“We are entrusted,” he wrote back to his friends on the Carson, “with the protection... of the Timber, water, forage, farm, recreative, game, fish, and esthetic resources of the areas under our jurisdiction. I will call these resources, for short, ‘The Forest’.” Leopold’s life-changing twenty months in Tres Piedras encouraged him to think beyond the simple utilitarian conservation of his time and training, and to understand more broadly his work, community, and landscape. The very ideas that would help to transform conservation and environmental thought were in many ways born here, in Aldo and Estella’s Mi Casita.

Renewing the Legacy

Aldo Leopold once described conservation as “the slow and laborious unfolding of a new relationship between people and land.” The sponsors of the Aldo and Estella Leopold Residency aim to promote that transformative “unfolding” by inviting conservation-minded writers, artists, teachers, professionals, and practitioners to Mi Casita. The U.S. Forest Service restored the Leopold house in 2007 and has generously joined with the other residency partners to make it available for the Aldo and Estella Leopold Residency. Since its inception in 2012, the Residency has hosted Courtney White, John Hausdoerffer, Bonnie Harper-Lore, Leanna Torres, Gavin Van Horn, Priscilla Solis Ybarra, Andrew Gulliford, Maya Kapoor, Andrea Clearfield, Ariana Kramer, Ben Goldfarb, Matthew Barnes, Matthew Jones, Laura Pritchett, and Laura Paskus.

A Creative Setting

Tres Piedras sits on the high west side of the wide basin of the Upper Rio Grande, about eighty miles north of Santa Fe. To the east one looks out across the Rio Grande Gorge to the culturally diverse artistic community of Taos (thirty miles away) and the alpine peaks of northern New Mexico’s Sangre de Cristo Mountains. To the west lies the expansive backcountry of the Carson’s Tres Piedras Ranger District. Just outside Mi Casita’s door, one can hike the ponderosa forests, clamber among the granite towers, and wander the long ridges rising to the San Juan Mountains that Leopold himself patrolled.

Although intricately blending Southwestern and rustic cabin aesthetics that reflect Estella and Aldo’s complementary backgrounds, Mi Casita itself is as simple as it was when Leopold built it. Downstairs, Mi Casita offers a hand-built fireplace under exposed vigas, a historically restored kitchen and claw-footed bathtub, a main bedroom that looks out to the tall rocks hugging the cabin, and an open dining room that doubles as a seminar-style discussion space. Mi Casita now has a fairly reliable 3G service, and good WIFI at Chile Line Depot Café, which is nearby.

An Opportunity for Expression

Residents are invited for up to a one-month stay at Mi Casita during the months of May to October. Each year the Residency’s steering committee invites two writers (selected from a pool of applicants) to become residents. Each resident receives a stipend of \$500 to help defray travel and living expenses. In exchange each resident commits to offering a public presentation of their work in nearby Taos sometime during or immediately after their Mi Casita stay.

HOW TO APPLY

Interested applicants may submit a maximum two-page resume along with a maximum 500-word statement of interest describing how their work at Mi Casita will extend the legacy of Aldo and Estella Leopold and the land ethic. Please include in your statement of interest how you heard about the Residency. The deadline for the May to October 2020 season is 28 February with decisions made by 31 March. Please visit www.leopoldwritingprogram.org for more information. Please send application materials to Andrew Dennison (LWP Outreach Coordinator) at andrewdennison86@gmail.com. An application processing fee of \$20 is required to qualify for review. Please send application fee via PayPal through our website or by check to Leopold Writing Program / P.O. Box 40122 / Albuquerque, NM 87196.

