

Gulliford's Travels

Love stories at Tres Piedras: Aldo Leopold's cabin in New Mexico

by Andrew Gulliford

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“There are two things that interest me: the relation of people to each other, and the relation of people to land,” wrote Aldo Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac*.

As one of the 20th century's top conservationists and ecologists, Leopold and his legacy continue to influence the environmental movement. This summer, I wanted to learn more about his New Mexico roots. What I found was a love story that almost ended in tragedy.

Educated at Yale, Aldo Leopold became part of the first generation of young foresters. Leopold proved himself on the Apache National Forest in Arizona, and in 1911, he caught the eye of District Forester Arthur “Ring” Ringland who invited him to Albuquerque. The two handsome bachelors walked into a local drugstore only to be swept away by a pair of Hispanic sisters, who were leaving the store. What they said to each other is lost to history, but Aldo was invited to a fancy dance or cotillion by Estella Luna Otero Bergere. He went.

They danced, and she stole his heart. “Ring” Ringland saw sparks between the couple, and rather than assign Leopold to another Arizona forest, he assigned him as assistant supervisor of the 9,000-square-mile Carson National Forest, which stretches from north of Santa Fe to the Colorado state line. Headquarters for the Carson were in Antonito, Colorado, and Leopold regularly rode the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad between Santa Fe and Antonito. He called it “slower'n a burro and just as sorry.”

His job was to bring rules and regulations to abused and overgrazed forest lands where gullies “scissored across the landscape,” but always in his thoughts was the young Estella. She had a second suitor. He was also Yale-educated. Leopold said of attorney H.B. “Jamie” Jamison that, “Jamie's soul is like a silk-covered brick.” Their rivalry intensified and so did the need to stop overgrazing. On the Carson, established in 1908, stockmen requested 220,000 sheep be permitted. The new plan allowed for only 198,000.

By 1900, the Upper Rio Grande may have been the most heavily grazed watershed in the country with 220,000 cattle and 1.7 million sheep, making it the heart of public land sheep grazing. “The families that for three and four generations had run the sheep outfits there were among the wealthiest in the West,” wrote Leopold's biographer, Curt Meine. How ironic that Leopold, a young forester and conservationist, sought to marry into one of those families.

Estella Luna Otero Bergere was heiress to one of the great sheep empires in the West. Her grandfathers, Don Jose Luna and Don Jose Otero, trailed 50,000 sheep to the Sierras after the California Gold Rush. Worth 50 cents apiece in New Mexico, they sold their flocks for \$15 a head.

Estella wouldn't answer Aldo's letters, so Aldo took the train to Santa Fe and formally proposed. She attended Albuquerque's largest social event with her other suitor, but then that night, at 4:30 in the morning, she wrote Aldo and accepted. Marriage to Estella would be the most important event in Leopold's life. They would have five children, and three would be voted into the prestigious National Academy of Sciences.

In summer 1912, Leopold designed and built a bungalow for his new bride-to-be in Tres Piedras, New Mexico. Appointed the second supervisor on the Carson, he moved forest headquarters there. Paid for with “six-hundred-and-fifty large silver dollars, coin of the realm,” the house has a front porch with a commanding view. He affectionately called the bungalow “Mia Casita,” and down through the decades the nickname remains.

“He planned the house to face east over the thirty-mile-wide valley to the snow-capped Sangre de Christos. It had to be done right – simple, elegant, by necessity small, and set amidst the granite boulders and piñon pines of Tres Piedras. And, of highest priority, it had to have a great fireplace. He had only to stand on his porch to partake of a landscape as beautiful as any on the continent,” wrote his biographer.

They married in October and came to live in the new house. Estella, raised with servants, had never cooked. She learned. They read books to each other. By April 1913, she was pregnant and took the train south to Santa Fe, while he took it north to Durango to hire a horse and ride southeast into the remote Jicarilla Ranger District to settle disputes with sheepmen. He did, but Leopold also got caught in a cold, wet spring blizzard and slept out for two nights. An Apache man gave him shelter. The next day, Leopold rode on in the spring storm. His limbs began to swell, and he had to cut off his knee-high leather riding boots.

Finally, he made it to Chama, New Mexico, where a physician misdiagnosed him and gave him the wrong medicine. When Leopold returned to headquarters at Tres Piedras, his assistant demanded he seek a doctor in Santa Fe. Within four days, Leopold would have been dead. Rest and recovery from Bright's disease, a serious kidney ailment, took 18 months.

Aldo Leopold achieved a stunning career in forestry, wildlife management, wilderness preservation, landscape restoration and what we now call conservation biology and ecosystem management. But never again did he live in the bungalow he built against the pines. Instead, I have.

This July, I spent a glorious month in Leopold's Tres Piedras house as one of two senior scholars who received an Aldo and Estella Leopold Writer-in-Residency. Restored by the U.S. Forest Service in 2006, Leopold's house has wood floors, period leather furniture, a massive fireplace, a downstairs bedroom with plenty of light, extra beds upstairs and a broad front porch where I ate every meal. The residency program is a collaboration with the Carson National Forest, the Aldo Leopold Foundation, the Taos Land Trust and the Public Land Library. I was honored to be chosen for the fifth annual residency to work on my book manuscript on sheep and public lands grazing.

With no telephone, cell service, internet, radio or television, I felt like I'd entered a monastery. I'd write, walk my two dogs in a pine forest west of the house, write, eat lunch, write and walk the dogs again. In the morning, sunlight bathed the house. By 3 p.m. when summer monsoons arrived, huge banks of dark blue-gray clouds washed over the horizon with curtains of rain, or virga, not quite touching the ground.

Leopold would recognize Tres Piedras. It hasn't changed much. The D&RG's wooden water tower is still there, and you can get a good breakfast burrito at the Chile Line Depot. The road in front of the house is now U.S. Highway 285, but aside from that ribbon of asphalt, most everything is as it was a century ago. San Antone Mountain to the north rises above a sea of sagebrush that is now the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument and stretches across the Taos Plateau.

I soaked up Leopold's essence in the historic house he built for his bride. A friend did a bird count, finding 29 species of birds near the bungalow, including a pygmy nuthatch, plumbeous vireo, Hammond's flycatcher, Townsend's solitaire and a Western wood-pewee. At night, I wrote in my journal and read *Stories from the Leopold Shack: Sand County Revisited* (2016) by Estella B. Leopold, the youngest of the five siblings.

One evening with the windows open, both dogs barked and growled quietly. Probably a bobcat passing through. The next morning we hiked into the forest, seeing the occasional can scatter from decades ago, finding an old wagon trace running west, pine cones stacked in a dry stock tank. Flickers flew between tall trees. I heard the raucous calls of ravens and the soft call of mourning doves.

When I applied for the residency, I was the same age, 61, Aldo Leopold was when he died. I wanted to finish what he started – an understanding of sheepherding, sheepmen and their impacts on public landscapes. Leopold's time on the Carson National Forest deeply affected the future trajectory of his life and work. As a young, brash forester, he came west to change the land, but instead the land changed him. He wrote that the oldest task in human civilization is to live on a piece of land without spoiling it. Now, we have climate change. Migratory birds arrive and plants flower two weeks earlier.

Leopold's thoughts still guide us. His emphasis on a land ethic resonates across America with a new focus on eating local and organic farm-to-table products. For my final dinner in his house, my wife cooked elk shoulder roast from last year's harvest. In the twilight, we sat outside on the porch until stars came out above the Sangres. I wish Aldo Leopold could have been there. In a very real sense, he was.

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