

# Aldo and I west of the South China Sea

*I observed Leopold's words in the moonlight filtered through jungle canopy in A Shau Valley, Vietnam.*

*By Joel Nelson*

**I** have walked through many lives—some of them my own—and I am not who I was, though some principle of my being abides from which I struggle not to stray.”

Those are the first few words from “The Layers” by Stanley Kunitz, out of his book, “Passing Through.” It is especially significant here because of the life I was walking through

Often I would read by moonlight or write. That would happen after I had my five men sequestered in what we hoped would be a spot safe from discovery by the North Vietnamese Army regulars—the only other humans in the area—and after one man was set on outpost. We each took a two-hour shift with weapon in one hand and radio handset

through the canopy and we weren’t ambushing. I’d read.

I turned 24 and 25 in “The Nam.” I had my degree in forestry and range management, which, incidentally, was why the Southeast Asia hardwood forest was a fascinating place. I’d made a great friend, James H. Shaw, during my four university years, beginning with my first semester, and we lived together through our senior year. Our advisor, Dr. Harry Wiant, a Yale graduate, offered to write letters for us both which he said would guarantee our admission to the Yale School of Forestry. That idea fit Jim, but not me, so he went to Connecticut and I went to Nam (but all expenses paid). Those decisions led to over a year of corresponding.

Jim once sent me a bottle of Bacardi Light—not an easy item to locate on trails along the Laotian border. It found temporary residence in my rucksack, slipping out occasionally to lace a cup of hot tea or a mixture of instant coffee and instant hot chocolate from one of my C-rations; there were no MREs then. I carried enough for one meal per day.

Jim also sent books—good books—and my 14-month tour would not have had near the positive impact on my life had it not been for those books. “The Big Sky” by A.B. Guthrie—what an experience! Reading those pages was like being lifted out of a horrible dream (think Nam) to find myself wide awake and engulfed in a perfect fall morning in Jackson Hole (before the town). As I read Guthrie on those bright moonlit nights when we weren’t ambushing, this is what I would be

thinking: “This life I’m walking through right now here in Nam is probably the closest experience that modern man can have to the life of the fur-trade mountain man that A.B. Guthrie portrays. Maybe I’m not trapping beaver, but I’m living by my wits and my weapon ‘out here’ in mountains full of hostiles with no guarantee I’ll be alive come sunup.”

There were two books by Eric Hoffer: “The Passionate State of Mind” and “The Ordeal of Change.” They were small books with philosophical thoughts surrounded by lots of blank space where I’d respond to what I’d just read. Now when I read those responses (I still have the books) I’m sometimes amazed that I don’t agree with what I thought 50 years ago. Has that ever happened to you?

Now comes the fourth book that Jim sent,

PHOTOS COURTESY JOEL NELSON



“Some nights,” Joel says, “you get lucky and are able to stretch a hammock between two saplings with a poncho protecting you from the rain.” **RIGHT:** A few of the books Joel carried throughout his tour of duty. He says: “Nam is probably the closest experience that modern man can have to the life of the fur trade mountain man that A.B. Guthrie portrays. Maybe I’m not trapping beaver, but I’m living by my wits and my weapon ‘out here’ in mountains full of hostiles with no guarantee I’ll be alive come sunup.” **OPPOSITE:** One of Aldo’s early assignments was hunting and killing bears, wolves, and mountain lions that had a serious detrimental impact on the early livestock industry.



at the time this story began exactly 50 years ago. That walk through that life occurred along a network of jungle trails in the Annamite Cordillera, a 680-mile mountain range paralleling the South China Sea in Vietnam.

I was the leader and point man of a six-man team in Company E 1st of the 506th 101st Airborne Division. Sometimes I wonder, “Was the moon that much brighter there, or were my eyes just that much better then?”

to the opposite ear, volume very low. No one who snored was allowed on a team! Many of our nights were spent ambushing trails—no one slept then or read—and we compensated by hiding and sleeping days. During the monsoons we often had 24/7 rain and heavy winds, sleeping (or not) curled around a tree so we wouldn’t slide down the mountain—no reading then either. But some nights, when clouds opened and moonlight streamed

and the book that has become the inspiration for this little essay—this thing that *RANGE* editor C.J. Hadley has been wanting for five years or more. My friend Jim was a scholar and an intellectual—me, not so much. Every so often I might stumble onto something (remember the blind hog and the acorn?), but more often a friend has to help me out. And so, out of the Pony Express bag emerged “A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There” by Aldo Leopold. Published in 1949 by Luna Leopold, Aldo’s son, the year

The books stayed wrapped just under the top flap of my rucksack, so I had good men behind me—Eric, Aldo, A.B., and Pancho. They had my back. There may be a bit of irony here: The words I read from “The Big Sky” and “A Sand County Almanac” by moonlight had two very different affects. Both books transported me to places much more pleasant than the Annamites or the A Shau Valley (Google it!), and at the same time sharpened my senses

stock industry. Later on, his recollections inspired him to write: “We were eating lunch on a high rimrock, at the foot of which a turbulent river elbowed its way. We saw what we thought was a doe fording the torrent, her breast awash in white water. When she climbed the bank toward us and shook out

**Leopold recorded his thoughts eloquently, poetically, philosophically, heart-wrenchingly and lovingly, as though he’d picked up every word—polished and caressed it, set it beside the others, and then backed away to observe it from a distance to see if it really was the right one for the story. It always was.**

following Aldo’s death, this book has become, for decades, required reading in most universities geared toward degrees in forestry, wildlife ecology, or practically any environmentally oriented program. Leopold has been referred to by many as the father of the modern wildlife conservation movement. Another pioneer in the conservation field would be Gifford Pinchot, who graduated Yale in 1889, became the first head of the U.S. Forest Service and founded the Yale School of Forestry in New Haven, Conn.

Those were the books I carried. To ensure their survival I wrapped them tightly in plastic, along with a few special letters and photos. In addition to the PRC (prick) 25 radio that my RTO carried, one of my other four men carried a 23-pound spare because radios can fail. We also each carried a spare battery. They were wrapped in a heavy clear plastic bag and we never discarded a bag. My books lived in one.

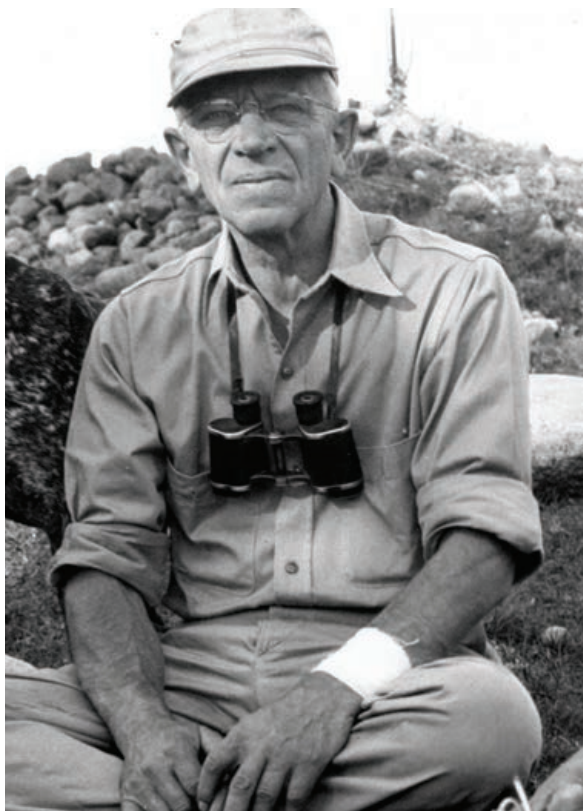
Anthony Quintana from Tucson, Ariz., was my “slack man” for nine or 10 months. I called him Pancho (how politically incorrect is that?). We mostly worked trails and the trails were not made by us. So my eyes were on the trail as we moved—from inches ahead to a few yards ahead, max. I never looked down the trail unless I stood still because I knew Pancho had that part covered from right behind me, watching over my shoulders. That’s how we did it and it worked for us—I don’t know about the guys down south in the rice paddies—a different war altogether there.

and made me acutely aware of every step I took on point.

The books and I came home undamaged except for some water stains and shrapnel. They are still on my shelves. I’ve read them in front of fireplaces, in range tepees, silently and aloud to friends, but only special ones.

One Saturday afternoon in 1997 when I was starting young horses on the Big Island, I decided to take the upper road to Kailua-Kona instead of the lower road. I loved dropping down into the valley full of blossoming jacaranda trees near the old Pu’u Wa’a Wa’a Ranch headquarters. I hadn’t been that way in a while and just above Kona was a recently completed Borders bookstore. That stopped me and on entering the foyer I ran into a whole stack of “Sand County Almanacs” on sale for \$3.95 each. I bought a bunch and passed them out to good friends. Everyone—no exceptions—should read this book, for you will close the back cover on the last page a better person, just like every cowboy who ever read “Log of a Cowboy” or “We Pointed Them North.”

Aldo Leopold, after obtaining his master’s degree in forestry from Yale University in 1909, spent the next 20 years with the U.S. Forest Service, with many of those years being in western New Mexico and Arizona. One of his early assignments was hunting and killing bears, wolves, and mountain lions that had a serious detrimental impact on the early live-



COURTESY ALDO LEOPOLD SOCIETY

her tail, we realized our error: it was a wolf. A half-dozen others, evidently grown pups, sprang from the willows and all joined in a welcoming melee of wagging tails and playful maulings. What was literally a pile of wolves writhed and tumbled in the center of an open flat at the foot of our rimrock.

“In those days we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf. In a second we were pumping lead into the pack, but with more excitement than accuracy: how to aim a steep downhill shot is always confusing. When our rifles were empty, the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impassable slide rocks.”

The Aldo Leopold I have come to know since my good friend Jim Shaw introduced us 50 years ago is a man I can relate to. I have also worked for the U.S. Forest Service marking and cruising timber in the Douglas Fir Western White Pine Forest of northern Idaho. We have both spent a lot of time in the saddle and leading packhorses and hunting. He loved the New Mexico/Arizona border country. So do I. He reached a point when he



could no longer shoot a wolf and likewise, I reached a point (for 25 years) when I no longer could shoot a coyote. That point ended about three years ago!

Leopold recorded his thoughts eloquently, poetically, philosophically, heart-wrenchingly and lovingly, as though he'd picked up every word—polished and caressed it, set it beside the others, and then backed away to observe it from a distance to see if it really was the right one for the story. It always was.

It is largely because of Aldo Leopold that our country has set aside huge chunks of

merely on agenda. A case in point: the spotted owl controversy. When “facts” indicated the northern spotted owl was declining in the Pacific Northwest, different people took the same facts to promote their own agendas. “Must be loss of habitat.” So the stop-logging agenda caught on. Logging operations dropped by 90 percent, devastating entire communities and thousands of livelihoods. Some wanted logging stopped out of actual concern for the owl. Some probably didn't know the owl, but were on the bandwagon of “save everything” (except people). Some

Occasionally we hear this question: “If you could pick anyone with whom to share dinner and a few hours of conversation, who would you choose?” Well, I'm not sure who I would choose (my wife, Sylvia, might be a smart answer), but I do know that Aldo and I could have a pretty memorable chat. We'd talk forest fires that we'd fought and how smoke jumpers came on the scene right before he died. We'd talk revolvers, rifles, saddle horses, and whether he liked sawbucks best or deckers. We'd talk fly-fishing and how the aoudads (Barbary sheep) had become such a nuisance in the West Texas mountains. Aldo might mention that the pronghorn antelope population had shrunk to around 13,000 in his lifetime and I'd be really excited to tell him there are twice that many just in Nevada and probably one million in the western states. He'd mention how upset he was that the grizzly population was only 6,000 when he died and most of those were in Alaska. I'd bring him up to speed with the information that Alaska is now a state with six times as many grizzlies (31,000) as in 1948. He might frown and say, “That still isn't enough,” but I hope he'd be a little encouraged.



*Joel is leading his teammates down a dry streambed near the Laotian border. “Our teams reconned trail systems, reported enemy movement and pulled night ambushes.” Joel kept his plastic-wrapped books just underneath the claymore mine in his rucksack. “We'd set the claymores along the trail we were ambushing and detonate them remotely, followed by grenades. The claymores were filled with C-4 explosive and 600 steel balls. We'd only fire shots to mop things up.”*

undeveloped land that we refer to as wilderness areas and others called wildlife management areas, or prairie preserves, or bison ranges, and/or a plethora of other designations. Some are federal projects; some are state; some are privately funded and managed. I'm sure there are dozens I've never heard of. I'm also sure there are some which attach Aldo Leopold's name to their resume just to establish some degree of credibility and clout. Some may not even know who he was. That brings me to the expression “question everything.”

Two humans, or two or more groups of humans, have an almost uncanny ability to take the same set of facts and interpret them two or more different ways. Some base conclusions on emotion, some on science, some

might not have cared a “hoot” about the owl, but just couldn't bear to hear a tree cry in pain and/or hated loggers. Turned out the facts were not complete. It was the barred owl that was moving in and driving out the spotted owl. Then the question turned to killing enough barred owls to ensure some isolated pockets for the spotted. Emotions ran pretty high and the controversy is ongoing.

I use this very brief and incomplete example because Aldo Leopold graduated from Yale School of Forestry and I graduated from the Stephen F. Austin School of Forestry. I'd be curious to know his comments on a controversy that began 40 years after his death. His comments, not those of someone who thinks he or she might know what he would have said.

Aldo seemed critical of the hunter who chooses to have a magnificent trophy head hanging on a wall, suggesting that a camera might be a more ethical way to preserve a memory. I would question that and answer that there is nothing wrong with either the photo or the mount. But the bull moose, bull elk, mule deer buck, Dall ram, Kodiak bear, or whatever, that is photographed will wander off to eventually become crippled, diseased, or just old and will die an agonizing useless death to be torn apart by carrion eaters instead of feeding an appreciative family. That is, unless it is killed by an ethical hunter who can then have a talented taxidermist produce a work of art that will be viewed as tribute to the beauty of creation and stir memories of a fulfilling hunt. There are sportsmen who save for half a lifetime for an experience of that sort. Walk into any Bass Pro Shop or Cabela's and in two hours' time view more beautifully preserved wildlife than the average person could see in

a lifetime of hiking the mountains.

This is one of Leopold's comments from "Thinking Like a Mountain": "The cowman who cleans his range of wolves does not realize that he is taking over the wolf's job of trimming the herd to fit the range. Hence we have dustbowls and rivers washing the future into the sea."

Now right about there is where our chatty little after-dinner conversation (possibly with an after-dinner tumbler of good bourbon) could become a bit strained. Hopefully I could respond (with a little more restraint than I ordinarily exhibit): "Look, Aldo, range management has come a long way since you were riding during the '20s, '30s, '40s. Today's educated and environmentally conscious cowmen can make their own decisions regarding a responsible stocking rate and regulate their numbers in a way that benefits the range and feeds a nation, rather than a wolf pack."

Leopold had a dream (most of us do, at least some sort of one) of a utopian, perfect balance in our world wherein every living thing from microorganisms to sequoias, marmots to muskoxen could coexist in a symbiotic relationship. I get the impression that he felt we're to blame for that not being the case, and maybe we are...partly. Aldo may even accept part of that blame himself and feel a little guilty for being "young then and full of trigger itch" on that rimrock above the wolf pack. But my question-everything tendency causes me to wonder: "Was there ever that balance, and if so, for how long? Did not Lewis and Clark in their journals mention invader species (prickly pear cactus) on seriously overgrazed bison range?" That was at a time when our wolf population and wolves natural range was what Aldo would have thought optimum.

The balance in nature that Leopold felt there was such a need for and for which he worked so hard to achieve will probably never occur, because people will never reach a consensus on what balance is. A seesaw can only be in balance when it is perfectly level and motionless, and in nature, especially when we step into the scene, nothing is ever static. The gray wolf reached near extinction when Aldo was living, and he became dismayed by that. For some that was viewed as a good balance. Today the wolf is doing quite well. Some say too well.

When I began reading "A Sand County Almanac," I observed Leopold's words in the moonlight filtered through jungle canopy. As I have reread his ideas over the last half century, I've found myself filtering the words them-

selves through my own canopy of game management and cattle-raising experience, and my own best efforts at ethical land use and stewardship. There will never be just one answer to any situation (remember the owl). Aldo said, "An ethical obligation on the part of the private owner is the only visible remedy for these situations." With that I agree.

The complexion of our rural scene in this



*Sgt. Joel Nelson in Vietnam after graduating from college in Texas. At 25, he was "the old man of the outfit," often with a team of 17-, 18- and 19-year-olds. On his webgear are fragmentation grenades, 20-round M16 magazines, canteens and one white phosphorus grenade. The rucksack carried rations for one or two weeks. "One meal per day, hungry all the time. I was 145 pounds going in to Nam and 130 coming home. Hard and wiry, the best shape of my life. We got pretty hard."*

country regarding ranching methods, wildlife management, forestry, public land use, and private land use since Leopold's observations over 70 years ago has changed so much that he'd hardly recognize it. I can't help thinking that some of his opinions might have changed too if he could be here to see. Mine have changed in the 50 years since I scribbled thoughts on Eric Hoffer's pages. I would feel compelled to ask during that imaginary after-dinner conversation: "Aldo, after seeing how things have evolved in the last three-quarters of a century, do you think still more wolves are necessary? And do you think grizzlies along the San Francisco and Monterey coastline are really needed?" I wishfully almost hear

him saying, "Maybe I need to give that a little more thought."

I certainly do not wish to offend, and I mean absolutely no disrespect to followers of and descendants of Aldo Leopold and their dedication to preserving his legacy and carrying it forward. He most certainly is deserving of that. But, in my unlearned opinion, to disregard the passage of time and circumstance would be akin to unrolling a 75-year-old blueprint that specified material and technology from the period when it was drawn and beginning construction.

Again, regarding the wolf and the grizzly there are places they can fit and places where maybe they don't belong—kinda like one-room schoolhouses. There are places where they don't cause much trouble and places where they are very undesirable—kinda like outhouses, only worse.

"A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There" is still, after 50 years, the greatest and most inspirational book (except one) that I've ever read, and I know I'm not done reading it. And now we're finished with that imaginary dinner and visit, and we will swallow that last sip of bourbon. I'll thank him for helping me through all those nights in Vietnam's A Shau Valley. Shaking hands, I'll say: "Hey Aldo, do you remember? There were only 16 whooping cranes when you died—only 21 when I was in grade school. Now we have 500 wintering in Texas. Adios." ■

*Joel Nelson, a cowboy, writer and poet, lives with his wife, Sylvia, on the Anchor Ranch near Alpine, Texas. He's been cowboying full time since he got out of college, "except for Vietnam," and spent lots of years starting young horses for various big outfits from the Parker Ranch in Hawaii to the King Ranch in Texas. "I consider the cow a tool for developing a good horse." Recently the Ranching Heritage Center in Lubbock, Texas, named Joel "Working Cowboy for 2020." In 2009, he was honored with a National Heritage Fellowship for poetry by the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C. He recited poetry at the Performing Arts Theater in Bethesda, Md., then "did poetry on the docks in New Bedford, Mass., the whaling capital of the world. Wallace McRae and Glen Orhlin are two other recipients of that National Heritage award." He has spent a lifetime taking care of cattle. "I think a cow should be treated with the same respect and courtesy that a cowboy would his grandmother. Most good cowboys have respect and tend with the least amount of disturbance. I can't handle abusing a cow."*