

# For the first time, trees chopped in Leopold's forest

By Tim Eisele  
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**BARABOO** – “I have read many definitions of what is a conservationist, and written not a few myself, but I suspect that the best one is written not with a pen, but with an axe. It is a matter of what a man thinks about while deciding what to chop.

“A conservationist is one who is humbly aware that with each strike he is writing his signature on the face of the land.”

-Aldo Leopold,  
in his essay “Axe in Hand”

Leopold's writing is an apt definition of a conservationist, written by the man who is widely considered to be the fathers of modern wildlife management.

His book, “A Sand County Almanac,” is responsible for awakening the dormant interest in the natural world within many.

Cutting down a tree is a major decision for many people, as well it should be.

The science of forestry (silviculture) calls for cutting of trees at the right time, which is why the Aldo Leopold Foundation set about a historic cut two weeks ago, the first comprehensive thinning of the stands on its namesake's land. The trees that were harvested were large red and white pines, known as the “Leopold pines.”

The pines are located on the property that once was the “abused and degraded farm” that was purchased by the late Aldo Leopold in 1935. He turned an old chicken coop into a shack where he and the family spent many weekends restoring the worn-out land to health.

The Leopold family planted pine seedlings in the late 1930s through 1940s, and some of those were harvested and will be turned into fine milled boards to be used for several special purposes – including a new building to house the Aldo Leopold Foundation. The new Legacy center is to be built one mile east of the Leopold Shack. The will become the new offices for ALF and a resource center for the public.



Other uses for the harvested Leopold pines include:

- Paneling and trim will be milled at Samuel's Sawmill in Hancock for use in the building.
- Poles, mostly from small-diameter trees, will be made into trusses for the roof. The U.S. Forest Products Laboratory in Madison is developing plans to sub-standard whole logs in the round to support a roof.
- Pulp that will be produced by Domtar, a Canadian processing company, for paper making. In addition, the Forest Products Laboratory will make a special supply of pulp that UW-Stevens Point will turn into paper to print a special edition of A Sand County Almanac.

Steve Swenson, ALF ecologist, said that Leopold wrote in his journal that they planted about 1,000 white pine, 1,000 red pine, and 1,000 jack pine each year. Many died due to drought, but some plantings grew.

"We are not thinning out 225 white pine and 225 red pine, and the reason was for the health of the trees," Swenson said. "The trees were competing, and the red pines were slowly declining and dying."

Swenson said the AFL called in an expert. Dan Pubanz from Shawano, who said the trees were in a critical stage and needed thinning – or else whole stands would be lost.

Swenson, a native of Marshfield, admits that the whole experience has been emotional and unique.

"This was an incredible odyssey. Trying to find ways to use this material has been an amazing challenge and yet very rewarding," Swenson said. "We have been working with excellent foresters and loggers, the Forest Products Lab, grading agencies, and others."

The logger, Fike Forest Products of Necedah, was used because of its reputation for low-impact logging. The wood must be certified by the Community Forestry Resource Center for the Forest Stewardship Council, assuring that it is from a sustainable forest.

"Some of the questions when we were developing this plan was, 'What is the appropriate use of this wood, and can we come up with a plan that is worthy of this wood?'" Swenson said. "When I think of Leopold's essay on the Land Ethic, the timelessness of that and how this collective harvest can transcend time and literally put a roof over the land ethic, as the Foundation goes about its work, is a wonderful use for this wood."

Fred Clark, of Clark Forestry in Baraboo, said this is the first comprehensive silvicultural thinning in the Leopold pines. The growth was stagnating, he said, and he was concerned about the trees' health and mortality.

"We'll retain trees here as long as they are biologically healthy, and if we can escape insects and diseases, the white pines can grow to a couple hundred years olds," Clark said. "We want to maximize the life of the stand."

Dan Pubanz, of Wolf River Forestry, adds, "It was an immense honor to work with the pines that Leopold planted. Given the historic importance of these trees, great care and forethought went into every stage of implementing this thinning.

"I believe that with his philosophy, had Leopold lived longer, he would have overseen the first thinning of these pines in the 1960s, and would have approved of subsequent thinnings to maintain their vigor."