

Zach's News

April 13, 2012

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Environmental Historians met in MILD, MELLOW(sort of) Madison, Wisconsin.

April 13, 2012

JoEllen Broome, Info Services Librarian, recently attended the American Society for Environmental History (ASEH) Conference in downtown Madison, Wisconsin from March 28-31. She has written a narrative of her experiences at the conference to share with us. Her report is available below.

“Sandwiched between the 2012 World Champion Cheese Contest in early March and the April Dairy State Cheese and Beer Festival, 399 Environmental Historians and 1 Academic Librarian met at the annual ASEH (Am. Society for Environmental History) Conference in downtown Madison, Wisconsin from March 28-31.

It was held at the Hilton Hotel and Monona Terrace Convention Center. The latter was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1938 but not built until 1997!! There is a glass-encased scenic sky-walk that connects the hotel to the convention center. This is after all America’s North Country and an end of March blizzard is not uncommon. Until this year. There wasn’t a snowflake in sight. Tulips and apple trees blossomed everywhere. Spring had arrived —sunny, spectacular and unseasonably early. Climatologists and other members of the local scientific community and yes, environmental historians— who gladly shed the parkas and “galoshes” they packed— found the warmth welcome, yet disturbing.

A critical mass of notable persons nurtured at the nearby University of Wisconsin plus important anniversaries for Environmental History made Madison the perfect pick for the 2012 ASEH conference.

Let the name dropping for these Big Four stewards of the planet begin:

Rachel Carson who is the lone example in this line up of a female and an author/scientist (marine biologist) had no ties to UW. Her beautifully written books about the sea touched layman and scientist alike. Carson’s status as a best selling author, allowed for financial independence and time to investigate, document and then warn Americans about aerial spraying of food crops with lethal chemicals.

She became a central figure in the early environmental movement due to her most famous book. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the 1962 publication of *The Silent Spring*. It caused a major uproar in the pesticide industry. She drew a connection between the heavy, often indiscriminate use of pesticides/DDT and the noticeable decline in animal life, birds especially. Human health was threatened by the chemical warfare waged in farmers’ fields too.

Frequently, she was described as delicate and birdlike. But Rachel C. was TOUGH. An entire industry attacked her personally, and tried to discredit her scientific findings often based solely on her gender. JFK appointed a special committee to investigate her charges. She testified before that committee while fighting breast cancer. The disease would take her life two years later in 1964. Her research and conclusions were largely vindicated. She now belongs to the ages and to the world. The major sponsor for the Thursday evening Plenary Session devoted entirely to her and held in a packed theater at UW Union South, was the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, LMU Munich, Germany. Christof Mauch, a co-director for RCC, commented that her “David and Goliath” story is timeless and instructs us still. It was the most moving of all of the general sessions that I attended.

Aldo Leopold famed author of *A Sand County Almanac* (there is no Sand County only sand country said the tour guide) and Professor of Forestry at UW until his untimely death fighting a brush fire in 1948, is number two of the fabulous foursome. 2012 is the 125th anniversary of A. L.’s birth in 1887 in Burlington, Iowa. The above book of essays was inspired by his personal reclamation project. He bought an abandoned farm and with the help of his wife and five children

began to restore a neglected, abused tract near the beautiful Baraboo Hills. They planted thousands of pine trees purchased cheaply from the U.S. Government during the Depression Era. While working there on week-ends and spring-summer vacations, the family bunked in an old chicken coop fondly referred to as the “shack.” I joined a Friday afternoon field trip to this storied place. The shack is lovingly maintained by the foundation named in his honor. It was a delight to learn how his sophisticated family adapted to this primitive space and turned it into a magical retreat after hard work by day with campfire sing-alongs at night. Something quite special occurred here because all of the children became successful scientists and conservationists. Until quite recently, the shack served as the beloved summer reunion site for generations of Leopolds. Now with only one of Aldo’s children remaining, the family has bequeathed it to the world. As we were leaving, some of us heard the evocative calls of Sandhill Cranes. They’ve returned to nearby marshlands that re-emerged beside the Wisconsin River as the International Crane Foundation began sponsoring habitat restoration projects.

About a mile from the shack, we stopped for a tour of the Leopold Legacy Center. Part of the foundation’s mission was to sponsor the construction of the LLC to host sustainability/stewardship awareness sessions for public lands managers and private landowners who are interested in current day best practices. At the time it was completed (April 2007), the LLC received the US Green Building Council’s LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) platinum certification. The wood used, and the river rocks for the fireplaces all came from the Leopold land. Solar panels provide the power for lighting and computer stations. A light carbon footprint indeed. “It represents a 21st century take on a respectful relationship to land.”

A new documentary film about his life and work, entitled “Green Fire,” will be released nationally in April. The title comes from a beautiful and painful passage in his book about watching the green fire fade from the eyes of a dying female wolf. She was shot by foresters. It was the accepted, animal control practice of an earlier era. Leopold would reflect on this moment many years later as he and other scientists, and government lands managers began to acknowledge the importance of wild predators to healthier ecosystems in our national parks.

John Muir is most familiar to us as the great explorer and savior of California’s magnificent Yosemite Valley. It achieved National Park status that protected it from commercial exploitation through his valiant efforts. In fact, 2012 is the 100th Anniversary of the publication of his book by that title, Yosemite. He was a scientist (geologist), writer and friend of President Theodore Roosevelt plus an influential circle of powerful businessmen/conservationists at the turn of the century. He was a gifted wordsmith who authored a slew of books and articles on preserving the wilderness that was fast disappearing in his adopted homeland.

The focus on him at the ASEH conference was the time he spent as a farmboy in Wisconsin and later as an enrollee at UW where he studied geology and botany. The book to read about this period of his life is entitled, The Story of My Boyhood and Youth. The most important takeaway is that his ground breaking theory of glacial formation was inspired by childhood jaunts where he observed Wisconsin’s glacial striations. His geologic leanings were further encouraged by discovering rhyolite outcroppings and petroglyphs in the Badger state too. California and Scotland lay claim to him as well. If you have time and some discretionary dollars do visit Yosemite and his birthplace in Dunbar, Scotland.

Gaylord Nelson is not as well known as the other three, but his best idea, Earth Day (April 22, 1970), certainly is, especially on campuses throughout our country and in countless cities around the world. 2012 marks the 42nd year of celebrating. He was a long time U.S. Senator from Wisconsin who authored legislation like the bill to enhance the 2,100 mile Appalachian Trail System. He co-sponsored several key pieces of environmental legislation such as the Clean Air and Water Acts and the Environmental Protection Act. After learning about Rachel Carson’s work on the effects of DDT, he successfully advocated banning its use in Wisconsin and then the country! Upon leaving the Senate, he became a longtime counselor to The Wilderness Society. He was born and bred in Wisconsin and graduated from the UW Law School. He served as its

governor in the 1950s. His great grandfather was a founder of the state Republican Party and once, as a child, he heard Robert M. LaFollette, a famous Progressive Party leader, speak. Though Nelson did switch parties, he credits RML as the main inspiration for entering politics and building an outstanding career as a servant of the people. The Gaylord Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies at UW was named in his honor.

Please note that all of the books mentioned above are owned by Zach S. Henderson Library plus an e-book called, *Beyond Earth Day: Fulfilling the Promise* by Gaylord Nelson. It was published in 2002, three years before he died.

This conference was so jam packed with great sessions not just focusing on dead, but still relevant heroes like those spotlighted above but featuring live, enthusiastic historians, urban planners, political scientists... at both ends of the career spectrum who had wonderful ideas to share. How do we involve our electronic device-happy students in conversations about the natural world? Well, have them read and discuss an essay entitled, "Being Prey" by Val Plumwood. He relates his experience of being attacked by a crocodile at the Kakadu National Park in the Northwest Territories, Australia. It's a gripping-true read that offers a flip of perspective. Students cannot STOP talking about it. (*Utne Reader*, July/August 2000, needs ordering through ILL). I learned about a wonderful organization called, "the rural studio" (all lower case) at Auburn University in Alabama. Architecture students live in poor communities and design private homes and community projects that are innovative, sustainable, respectful of local traditions and cost less than the wretched, unhealthy trailers that FEMA gave to Hurricane Katrina victims in New Orleans!! How inspiring is that?

I must thank GS's Dr. Kathleen Comerford, proud graduate of the University of Wisconsin's famed Department of History, who provided a list of eateries and independent bookstores (there was not a Books-a-Million or Walden's in sight!) to explore during free time.

Madison is a cool place. The city is bursting with energy, activism and anger too. The decline in prosperity for this once bountiful, heartland state is regrettable. Yet, in that town exotic restaurants (Thai and Tibetan for example) manage to stay in business to serve nearby hungry hordes of UW students, state legislators, Big Ten football fans... Political ferment abounds. The governor might be recalled which has to be unsettling. "Occupy Madison" lives in a rainbow mix of tents at the edge of the city. But, during this tense time, everyone was friendly and polite to the conferees, even the homeless folks who approached us as we hiked around the stunning and super-sized capitol complex that sits on an isthmus between two lakes!!

My library career intersected nicely with my membership in the ASEH because I served as an editor for RCL Web's Environmental Studies Section for many years. Matters environmental and sustainability related have always been of interest to me. It was my farewell conference and it turned out to be the most exciting and stimulating academic gathering EVER for me. What a privilege to be part of it. Thank you."

Filed by JoEllen Broome, Info Services Librarian

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Hot Doc: 1940 Census: What's the big Deal?

April 13, 2012

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<http://govbooktalk.gpo.gov/2012/04/11/1940-census-goes-digital/>

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