

EDITOR'S NOTE

by James G. Lewis

I was recently preparing a flowerbed at our house for the coming season. It had been so long since I last got my hands dirty that I had forgotten how the soil feels in my hands and under my fingernails. And although I can be found running in Duke Forest nearly every weekend—an activity that connects me to the land in one way—there is no better way to truly connect to the land than to literally take hold of it, working with it until my fingers are the rust-colored hue of the soil.

Based on what I've seen over the previous eight growing seasons, I have a vision of what the flowerbeds will look like in the coming months—how the daffodils will announce the arrival of spring with a flourish before fainting and retreating for the year, how the Bradford pear trees explode with blooms (and god-awful stench) before they leaf out for the summer, how the shade garden awakens with Lenten roses and purple columbine. And then in September, if the summer sun hasn't baked them to death, the white Montauk daisies take over to close out the show. That vision also includes the less welcome presence of weeds and grass in the flowerbeds and in the backyard juniper bed.

Along with a vision for the future of this small plot of land, I have my land ethic to guide my management decisions. Whether it's the lawn or a plant bed, I prefer to remove as many weeds by hand as possible and allow those that outsmart or outlast me to stay—I figure they've earned it. With children and pets constantly in the yard and a storm retention pond out back that is home to cattails, frogs, birds, muskrats, and snakes, among others, I am reluctant to spray chemicals.

My homeowners association and I do not share the same vision for how the yard should appear, nor do we share the same land ethic. The association wants the weeds in the lawn not merely removed from sight but eradicated, so that green space around my house conforms to their vision, which is one of uniformity. In the past the association has demanded that residents use chemicals to achieve this uniformly green, grassy state. A few years ago a neighbor learned he had to spray "pre-emergent" on the lawn. He didn't know what that was and asked an association employee to explain the term. The employee didn't know either—he could only tell my neighbor that it should be purchased and used soon or he'd face a fine. No discussion, no appeals process, and—my neighbor felt—little choice. Me, I pick my battles, work toward my vision, and use my ethics to guide me. And I use a comfortable pad to kneel on while pulling weeds and pray I stay ahead of them.

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Land ethics have been on my mind quite a bit lately. I've been meeting with colleagues in the Durham area every week or so to discuss the viability of Aldo Leopold's land ethic in the twenty-first century, here and in other parts of the globe. (We've drawn no conclusions yet, but the conversations are great fun.) Coincidentally, when we were talking about organizing this group, historian and Leopold scholar Susan Flader contacted me concerning an article she had written about Leopold, who had famously laid out his land ethic in *A Sand County Almanac*. In **Searching for Aldo Leopold's Green Fire**, Susan writes about the quest to find the epiphanic place where Leopold shot a wolf and watched the "green fire" go out of its eyes, an episode that helped shape his land ethic. Her search for evidence of Leopold's smoking gun offers some insight into the work of a historian—how it can be like that of a detective or investigative journalist. And you can now see it on film: investigating the mystery of where the shooting occurred provided the framework for the documentary *Green Fire*.

Jordan Marché II explores another history mystery—one of international intrigue. In 2002, ash trees in the Detroit, Michigan, area were dying in droves. A decade later, things have only gotten worse. A killer the length of a human fingernail threatens an entire tree species and is wanted dead in eighteen states and two Canadian provinces. Jordan probably wore out some shoe leather interviewing those who unmasked the emerald ash borer. But don't wait for the movie; instead, read **Fool Me Twice, Shame on Me**. It's not only a mystery, it's a cautionary tale about the impact of poor communications and the globalized economy.

Lou Romero, who spent the last third of his career in the same region where Aldo Leopold got his start with the Forest Service, tracks down the origin story of the agency's slogan "**Caring for the Land and Serving People**." But there is no mystery about our other articles—other than, perhaps, why these great stories haven't been told before in our pages. Steve Arno takes a fresh look at the reports produced by the men he calls **The Forest Explorers**—those sent by the U.S. Geological Survey in 1897 to examine areas proposed as new national forests. What they recorded is still impressive in its accuracy and, Steve suggests, could be used to inform land-management decisions today. Some thirty years after those surveys began, a group of men looked at a piece of forest land in rural Arkansas and decided to turn it into the Crossett Experimental Forest. Don Bragg discusses those men in our **Biographical Portrait** column and how that land has changed over the centuries in our **History on the Road** column.

I am grateful to all the authors for cultivating these intriguing stories and for indulging my weeding of their words. I hope that what we've planted here will flourish this season and beyond. □