

REMARKS BY SPENCER BLACK TO THE NATURAL HERITAGE LAND TRUST AT THE CELEBRATION
OF THE PURCHASE OF FOUNTAIN LAKE FARM

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Over a century ago, in 1903, then President Teddy Roosevelt disappeared from public view for several days to go hiking with John Muir in the area that is now Yosemite National Park. It was a different era. Roosevelt took no presidential entourage, no secret service detail, no executive aides. Just Muir and Roosevelt. They spent three days hiking together and three nights camping out, even waking one morning to 5 inches of newly fallen snow on their blankets. Muir had said that it was his hope that during his adventure with the President that he could "do some good freely talking about the campfire."

And indeed some good he did do. He lobbied Roosevelt to protect Yosemite, the Sierra Nevada and the Grand Canyon. John Muir was apparently a very persuasive guy although he clearly had a willing audience. Roosevelt returned from that trip and used his power to protect Yosemite Valley and much of the Sierra range.

Roosevelt's outing with Muir had a lasting impact on the President. In part due to Muir's urging, Roosevelt eventually protected the Grand Canyon and designated 5 national parks, 18 national monuments, 55 wildlife areas, and 150 million acres of national forest. Such was the influence of John Muir.

He truly changed the perception of much of the American public through his writings and advocacy. He convinced many Americans to value wilderness. And he did so at a time when most Americans were hell bent on all out development and the notion of protecting land for its natural values was essentially alien to the American consciousness. Our countrymen in the last half of the 19th century were dead set on settling the west and taming the wilderness. Muir countered that by spreading what he called "the gospel of nature."

John Muir is probably the most influential environmentalist in history, helping move the nation to value pristine wilderness for its own sake and not for its development potential. Through his voluminous, impassioned and persuasive writings, speeches, and advocacy, he jumpstarted the environmental movement and helped create our National Park System. While Muir is most closely associated with California, he grew up in Wisconsin and you can still find many signs of his presence here.

Of course, there is the farm where he was raised, the protection of which we celebrate tonight. On a recent bike ride, I was surprised to discover a small sign near Paoli indicating the site of the former one room Lake Harriet schoolhouse where Muir once taught.

For many years, the centerpiece of the lobby of this very building was the timed study desk that John Muir invented and built which would open and close each of his books for a specified amount of time. In fact, John Muir first achieved a modicum of fame at the Wisconsin state fair

as a youthful inventor. He also invented a "tipping bed" to wake him up at an appointed hour, an interesting and rather rude variant on the alarm clock.

And North Hall, just up Bascom hill, was where he was one of the earlier students at UW. He spent 2 years studying at North Hall, the first building on this campus. While he apparently received good grades, he was eclectic in his choice of courses, and school records report him as an "irregular gent" But his love of the outdoors got the best of him and as he put it he "left the University of Wisconsin for the University of the Wilderness."

While he achieved fame vividly describing and fighting to protect the Sierra range and other lands out west, he always credited his love of nature to his upbringing in Wisconsin. Muir's childhood was hardly idyllic. His father was a strict fundamentalist who required him to work long hours on the farm and to spend much of his non work time memorizing the bible. Muir under strict discipline memorized almost the whole of both the Old and New testaments. But nature was his escape. The land around Fountain Lake farm was the landscape that inspired his life's passion.

After leaving Wisconsin, he in time set out on a 1000 mile hike to Florida, as he put it -- "by the wildest, leafiest and least trodden way I could find."

My wife Pam and I were surprised to come across the route of his hike a couple of years ago when we were hiking in Northeastern Tennessee along the south Fork of the Cumberland River. After reaching Florida, Muir set sail for California. When he arrived in San Francisco he immediately lit out on foot for the mountains and was totally taken by the beauty of the Sierra range.

He settled in the Yosemite Valley running a sawmill and started his writing career describing the plants and geology of the Sierra Nevada. He soon gained a reputation for his writings and there were many -- eventually over 300 magazine articles and 12 books. Describing Yosemite Valley and the surrounding mountains, he gained a national following as an outdoor writer. It might be hard to appreciate today the impact of his magazine articles, but in a time before television, radio and the internet, his writings expressing his love of nature and detailing his crazy adventures enthralled the nation.

He gained a wide and enthusiastic audience and changed the way many Americans saw wilderness. His writings were so successful because they combined vivid descriptions of nature and exciting tales of his outdoor exploits with a strong spiritual dimension. While he rejected the strict Cambellist teachings of his father, he retained a strong sense of the divine.

Muir said his task was not to just record nature but in his words "to illuminate the spiritual implications of those phenomena." He called the Sierra Nevada "God's mountain mansion" and said the natural world was "the conductor of divinity."

It was the threat to the Yosemite Valley by commercial interests that moved Muir from a writer to an activist. He teamed up with the publisher of the Century Magazine, one of the most popular publications of the time, to lead a campaign to protect Yosemite. And it was the Yosemite victory that led Muir to two of his most lasting achievements: advancing the establishment of a system of national parks to preserve our nation's special places and the founding of the Sierra Club.

John Muir constantly battled those who would desecrate our country's natural heritage for profit and he soon realized an organization was needed to fight to protect the wilderness. In 1892, he founded the Sierra Club and served for 22 years as the Club's first President. When Muir started the Sierra Club he said "Let us do something to make the mountains glad." The Sierra Club has since become the nation's largest and most influential environmental group. The Sierra Club was started to foster both the enjoyment and protection of our wild places and that remains its mission to this day. Muir would lead annual "high trips" to take Club members to explore the Sierra. By all accounts, they were great fun, often highlighted by Muir's story telling and advocacy. Last year when I was hiking in Kings Canyon National Park, I came across the rock along the King River that Muir used as his podium -- you might say his pulpit -- to preach to his fellow "high trippers" about the need to protect that special place.

Galen Rowell, the renowned wilderness photographer and mountaineer, while climbing in the Alps with a European colleague asked him why the mountains in Europe had so much development compared to many of our American ranges. The European mountaineer replied simply: "You had Muir"

Here in Wisconsin, he can indeed be proud that "We had Muir." And now thanks to the good work of the Natural Heritage Land Trust, we all have, protected for posterity, the landscape that inspired John Muir to protect our wild places.