

BONNIE SKLARSKI

Elegy, 1997
oil on canvas, 36 x 58 in



courtesy the artist

JERRY LAWRENCE

Aldo and Me

A Park Ranger Reflects on the Legacy of Aldo Leopold

Four o'clock in the afternoon. One hundred four degrees. In an hour it would be a hundred six in Modesto, California, where I was one of a group of young boys swimming at an irrigation canal drop near a tranquil county road called McHenry Avenue. It was 1948. The irrigation water in the Central Valley was as clean as when it had run in the streams of the nearby Sierra Nevada mountain range a few weeks before. The sound of water cascading over the drop brought back memories of a mountain stream. It was one of my earliest recollections, and has influenced how I have lived my life.

Meanwhile, in central Wisconsin, Aldo Leopold was dying of a heart attack while fighting a wildland fire near his home. He was sixty-one years old. His concept of a “land ethic” would also influence my life.

I'm thinking of this in 2013 as I'm attending a high school reunion breakfast. It's a Thursday morning, and we are assembled in the banquet room of one of the many restaurants along a now-busy McHenry Avenue. I maneuver into an empty chair at a long table.

On my right is Ed, a former classmate. “I got lost,” I tell him. “Wasn't there an irrigation canal around here somewhere?”

“It was piped underground. They built on top of it.”

“Too bad—that canal was a recreational godsend when we were kids. It was way out in the country then.”

Old classmates are getting reacquainted. “What about the little towns around here? Manteca, Turlock, Patterson? What's happening to them?” I ask Ed.

“It's the same all over.”

After the meeting, an old basketball teammate walks over and sits beside me. He had transferred to our school as a sophomore in 1955. He was from the South, and his drawl and humor had made him a minor celebrity among us. He was known as “G-Lee” (short for General Lee), and he and I had become good friends. He asks if I have retired.

“Twelve years ago; how about you?”

“Three years ago,” he replies. “I was a judge.”

“A judge? Not a likely occupation for someone with your checkered past.”