

RE-MEMBERING THE LAND

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Once you have lived on the land, been a partner with its moods, secrets, and seasons, you cannot leave. The living land remembers, touching you in unguarded moments, saying, "I am here. You are a part of me."

—Ben Logan, *The Land Remembers: The Story of a Farm and Its People* (1975)

The writer Ben Logan grew up on a hilltop farm on the western rim of the Kickapoo River valley, about fifty miles west of this year's Farm/Art D'Tour. Born one hundred years ago, on September 9, 1920, Logan in his youth saw dramatic changes come over his home landscape. Hybrid corn and mechanized farm equipment. Destructive soil erosion and dust storms. Economic depression and world war. Five decades later Logan revisited his boyhood experience in *The Land Remembers*, his classic memoir of life on a small

farm in southwestern Wisconsin.

Published in 1975 and in many editions since, *The Land Remembers* has captured for hundreds of thousands of readers, in Wisconsin and far beyond, a world that in many ways has vanished, but that in other ways endures and constantly renews itself. Logan's intimate portrait of his family's farm included facets of daily life that are now remembered only by our oldest relatives and neighbors. Midwestern agriculture has evolved in ways that we can fully appreciate only in retrospect, and that has left it both

incredibly efficient and highly vulnerable to economic and environmental change. Our traditional dairy farms in particular are buffeted by forces that have been in play for decades, but that are now hitting home acutely.

And yet there is also so much that is timeless in the word pictures Logan painted. Springtime seeds that "entered into some mysterious partnership with soil, water, air and sun and began to grow and become part of the living land." The "sweet, clean smell of hay drying in the hot sun." Autumn days "full of windless smoky warmth, the sky deep blue and cloudless, the sunshine brilliant." Such scenes lodged deep in Logan's memory. By the time he wrote his book, Logan had earned two degrees at the University of Wisconsin, survived wartime trauma, traveled the world, and lived a busy professional life in New York. Yet, however removed Logan was from western Wisconsin, the land never stopped calling to him. Eventually it called him home. Ten

years after he published his book, Logan and his wife purchased the original family farm and retired back to the Kickapoo Valley.

The Land Remembers was an unlikely and unexpected best seller. Most remarkable, even to its author, was how readers far removed from rural Wisconsin life responded to his stories. Once, while riding the subway in New York City, Logan was amused to find the young woman sitting next to him reading *The Land Remembers*. When she chuckled, he asked her, "Good book?" "Yes," she replied, "a very good book." The reviewer for *Time* magazine marveled that, somehow, there was "some collective memory that says this is all familiar, that we ourselves have experienced it."

Logan himself realized that such familiarity emanated from the land itself, and that his words simply provided the other part of the partnership. We connect because we are connected. No matter how removed from our living roots we may seem or imagine ourselves to be, we are still of the land. We are earthbound, always. As we come and go. As we emerge and return. As we overlook and remember.



The land cradles all life. It outlives us all. We are all bound together with it into an immense circle of life. It forever remembers us and writes an epitaph for the good and evil we do to it. —Ben Logan

Every place remembers, and is remembered, differently. Every terrain holds a unique trove. Every landscape is layered with particular stories and meanings.

This year's edition of the Farm/Art DTour takes in a generous portion of southern Sauk County, between the Baraboo Hills and the lower Wisconsin River. The land remembers a lot here. The memories are as layered as the sandstone formations—the Wonewoc, Tunnel City, and St. Lawrence, the Jordan, Oneota,

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and St. Peter—that poke out above the croppped and pastured valleys.

The land here remembers time even older than the sandstone: Precambrian seabeds now bound tight in the hard pink quartzite of the Baraboo Hills.

The land remembers how the Wisconsin River, once upon a time, flowed the other way, channeling the ancestral Mississippi eastward.

The land remembers being on edge, with glaciers advancing and stopping and melting back, repeatedly over two and half million years. To the east, the land was blanketed with transported boulders, gravels, sands, and clay—the glacial *drift*. To the west, the land is *driftless*. A north-south ridge traces that edge across Sauk County.

The land remembers the last advance of the Big Ice twenty thousand years ago. It recalls the epic, week-long flood a few thousand years later that drained Glacial Lake Wisconsin from the sand counties further north, hewed out the Wisconsin Dells, and scoured the river valley all the way down to Wyalusing.

The land remembers successive arrivals and departures of animals and

plants, fungi and microbes. It served as stage for forests and oak woodlands, wetlands and prairies, in a constant dance with the climate, responding to long-term changes in temperature, moisture, fire, and drought.

The land remembers ancient people first coming into the land at least

twelve millennia ago, their lifeways evolving to meet new hardships and opportunities. It could see itself in the effigy mounds that the late ancestors built in the shape of animals and water spirits and, occasionally, humans.

The land remembers its Native peoples. It bears the blood of 1832, when the war chief Black Hawk led his mixed band of Sauk, Fox, and Kickapoo across the Wisconsin River valley, in retreat before the pursuing United States militia. Crossing the river near Sauk Prairie, they made their way overland to the Mississippi River before being massacred at Bad Axe.

The land records the trauma of the Ho-Chunk Nation's removal—and the triumph of Ho-Chunk resistance and resilience.

The land remembers the arrival of Europeans and Euro-Americans from the east, in search of furs and land, freedom and wealth. It saw the obliteration of the 14,000-acre Sauk Prairie, and all else that was lost and gained in the process.

The land remembers sons marching off to Civil War in the distant South and East.

The land remembers their daughters enacting the right to vote one hundred years ago, in the summer of 1920.

The land remembers the attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. entry into World War Two, and the rapid removal of eighty farm families from the former prairie, to build the Badger Army Ammunition Plant. There, now, the Ho-Chunk Nation has reclaimed a portion of their ancestral homeland. It is *Maa Wákačqk*—Mah-wah-kun-chunk—Sacred Earth.

The land holds more recent memories of shuttered farms and expanded fields, spreading highways and houses, more frequent floods and restored prairies. The land shows a new and different human face every morning—every moment—as its people are birthed and pass on, move out and arrive, visit and stay home. As people change.

And now, for a brief time, the land hosts even more art than usual. Art to help us make meaning of it all, see ourselves in it, focus our eyes on its beauty and its specialness. Art to challenge our memories of land, and to make something new and fresh of them. Art—and music and dance and food and stories—to bring people and land together and celebrate our connections.



There is no neat and easy way to tell the story of a farm. A farm is a process, where everything is related, everything happening at once. It is a circle of life, and there is no logical place to begin a perfect circle. —Ben Logan

In time, the land will remember, too, what we do to it, with it, and upon it. It will mark our own passing through.

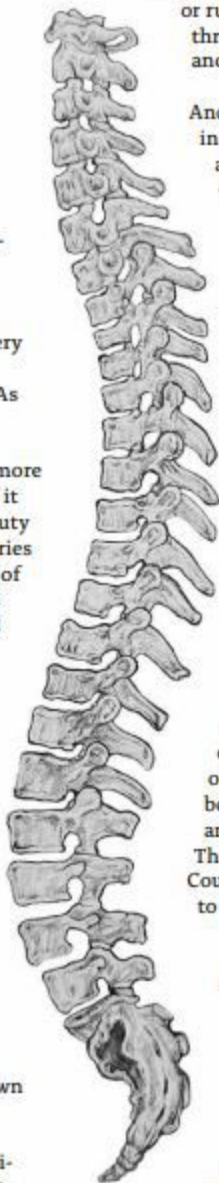
Aldo Leopold, who taught Ben Logan at the university in Madison in the early 1940s, once wrote that “The landscape of any farm is the owner’s portrait of himself.” It takes no great leap of logic to extend Leopold’s observation. The landscape of Sauk County, of Wisconsin, of the nation, of the continent, is

our collective portrait of ourselves—of who we are, who we have been, and who we have the potential to be. Whether farmers or consumers, engineers or artists, city-dwellers or rural residents, we create this shared portrait through the choices we make, the policies we adopt, and the values we recognize.

And it is revealing no great secret to note that we live in a time when the land reveals our deep divisions as much as our cherished connections. We find ourselves in a troubled layer of land-time, amid a global pandemic, economic upheaval, and a historic reckoning with justice in our national life. Now the land seems not only to remember many pasts, but to ask unavoidable questions about the future. How shall we find common ground between our urban and rural communities? How do we create stronger, mutually beneficial connections? How can we honor all the relationships needed to ensure health—from the bugs and microbes in the soil to the living diversity of our landscapes, from our own personal well-being to the resilience of our communities and our planet? What may we find in ourselves in this place, at this time?

In her 2015 book *Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape*, geologist and writer Lauret Savoy wrote, “We may find that home lies in re-remembering—in piecing together the fragments left—and in reconciling what it means to inhabit terrains of memory, and to be one.” Farmers, like artists—like all of us, really, in one manner or another—piece things together as best we can to create sustenance and beauty, wonder and meaning. Our daily bread and daily dreams. The folding bluffs and level valleys of southern Sauk County are as good a place as any—as all—to look and to remember who we are. 

Curt Meine is a conservation biologist, historian, and celebrated author. In addition to his work with the Center for Humans and Nature, Meine serves as Senior Fellow with the Aldo Leopold Foundation, Research Associate with the International Crane Foundation, and a Fellow with the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts & Letters. He is Adjunct Associate Professor in the Department of Forest and Wildlife Ecology at UW-Madison, and active as a founding member of the Sauk Prairie Conservation Alliance.



Backbone, Vertebral Column, by Lexi Ames