

IMAGES OF THE WISCONSIN IDEA

By Curt Meine, senior fellow at the Aldo Leopold Foundation and adjunct associate professor at UW-Madison

While preparing for a lecture last fall on the history of conservation and the Wisconsin Idea, I asked Andy Kraushaar of the Wisconsin Historical Society a question: If you had to choose one image that illustrates the Wisconsin Idea, what would it be? Andy curates the vast photo collection of the WHS and so probably has more pictures of Wisconsin history in his mind than any other person in the state.

We tossed around a few nominees. We agreed that the short list had to include a 1930 image of The Ingenues, a popular all-woman jazz band, squeezed in among the stalls in the University of Wisconsin's Dairy Barn. The flapperish girls are playing for a herd of bemused Jerseys in an experiment to determine if the cows would produce more milk when exposed to music. A far stretch, it might seem, from the more sober expressions of university instruction, research, and extension. But something in those eyes—of the cows and the musicians—speaks in fact to the cultural creativity and openness to innovation that marks the Wisconsin Idea at its best. (And, truth be told, there are a lot of Wisconsin dairy farmers who play music for their cows!)

Andy nominated another image of about the same vintage. A hundred mostly younger men sit on the ground and in folding chairs, splayed out around a makeshift plywood stage under a canopy of elms. They are participants in the university's farmers' short course. On stage an instructor holds their attention on what could have been any of a hundred possible topics, from crop rotations to veterinary science to farm accounting methods. The short courses date to 1886—the first agricultural courses offered in the state, open to any Wisconsin student over sixteen. Andy's choice made eminent sense. The short course exemplifies still the commitment to connecting knowledge, education, and opportunity for all the citizens of Wisconsin.

My own top choice was a photo I have long used in lectures about Aldo Leopold. Leopold and one of his students are visiting a farm in rural Dane County. It is a hot day (likely in 1938); Leopold's sleeves are rolled up and one of the farmer's sons is shirtless. Leopold was a few years into his UW career, breaking new ground in wildlife management research and practice. The farmer is Reuben Paulson. He and several neighbors had been collaborating for several years with Leopold. A dominant theme for Leopold in these years was encouraging wildlife on the farm, and involving farmers, other landowners, hunters, students in the process and in research.

Why does this image stand out for me? I suppose I like the notion of the farmer and the professor—who just happened to be one of the world's leading experts in wildlife conservation—having access to and working with one another. Somewhere in the portrait of their conversation I find the essence of the Wisconsin Idea: listening, cultivating relationships, sharing knowledge and experience, and always keeping the next generation in mind.



Aldo Leopold and graduate student Lyle Sowls meet with farmer Reuben Paulson and his boys in Riley, Wisconsin (1938). Image courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Foundation.