

Reading the Driftless at the Little Brown Church

By Curt Meine

For the last two years, I have been crisscrossing the Driftless Area of southwest Wisconsin and adjacent Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota with a book in hand. The book is *The Driftless Reader*, a collection of readings about and from our distinctive region, published by the University of Wisconsin Press in 2017. I and my coeditor, Kickapoo Valley native Keefe Keeley, have carried our book to bookstores, libraries, college campuses, conference rooms, banquet halls, museums, and coffee shops. We have narrated our landscape, reading the words of Native Americans, explorers, scientists, poets, historians, novelists, essayists, and farmers. We have shared images made by mound-builders and mapmakers, painters and sculptors and photographers. We have had the honor of convening conversations that carry the echoes of history and visions of the future.

Not until coming to Bear Valley this last June, though, did the voices of *The Driftless Reader* resonate inside a church. I read our opening selection, Patricia Monaghan's poem "Getting to Black Earth." It offers a creation story of the Driftless and, like that of Genesis, it begins with the firmament and the face of the waters:

Start with ocean. A shallow sea, populous
With plankton, and giant fish that feed upon it.
Let storms and sunlight flash across the sea,
As bodies die, let them drift down to mud.

I recited from a story of exile, spoken by Ho-Chunk chief Hoowaneka at Prairie du Chien in 1829:

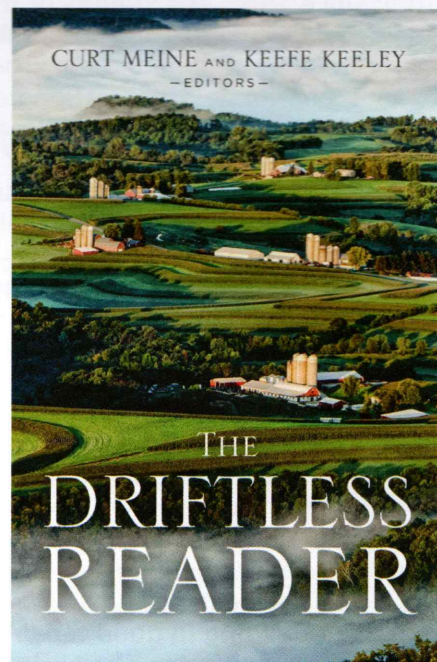
You ask us to sell all our country, and wander off
into the boundless regions of the West. We do not
own that country, and the deer, the elk, the
beaver, the buffalo, and the otter, belong not to
us, and we have no right to kill them. Our wives
and our children now seated behind us, are dear
to us, and so is our country where rest in peace
the bones of our ancestors.

I chose a bit from the autobiography of Frank Lloyd Wright, whose father William Carey Wright is buried in the Little Brown Church cemetery.

...I wanted a *natural* house to live in myself. I scanned the hills of the region where the rock came cropping out in strata to suggest buildings. How quiet and strong the rock-ledge masses looked with the dark red cedars and white birches, there, above the green slopes. They were all part of the countenance of Southern Wisconsin.



Curt Meine is a conservation biologist and writer affiliated with the Aldo Leopold Foundation, Center for Humans and Nature, International Crane Foundation, and University of Wisconsin-Madison. His many books include *Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work* and *Wallace Stegner and the Continental Vision*.



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I invoked August Derleth, sitting along the Wisconsin River, pondering the sweep of history in his poem "Old Man Fishing":

One old man, as all old man before him,
sitting at the river's edge, eyes to the west,
with the glacier at his back (centuries on the rim),
an old cane pole held up against his breast—
all Midwest America unfolding here
before his rheumy eyes, going past anew
down river—

The Little Brown Church, with links to so many of the places and people and stories of *The Driftless Reader*, was an especially fitting place to bring those voices and others to the pulpit. Situated in the landscape in between Richland Center and Spring Green, Bear Valley was an important byway for Native peoples and early settlers alike. With its deep roots in Wisconsin's history of farming, the abolition movement, and political reform, the church could be the subject of a "reader" all its own! Mark Lefebvre is a friend who contributed significantly to the making of *The Driftless Reader*. He and his wife Marian, whose family farm is nearby, were married in the church and contributed to its restoration. As so often happens in the Driftless Area, the connections we have to the land and to one another seem always to be just one conversation away.

When the restored Little Brown Church reopened in 2006, my friend Julie Zajicek invited me to contribute a bit of music to the celebration program. I was honored to do so—and even more pleased when I discovered what wonderful acoustics the building provided! That first impression proved accurate in the several opportunities that I have had since to return. And it was reaffirmed in coming back to share the voices of the Driftless this last spring. They reverberate well there.

One of writers represented in *The Driftless Reader* is David Faldet, who teaches at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. In his book *Oneota Flow*, Faldet shared the words of his friend Pete Fee, a member of the Ioway/Baxoje tribe:

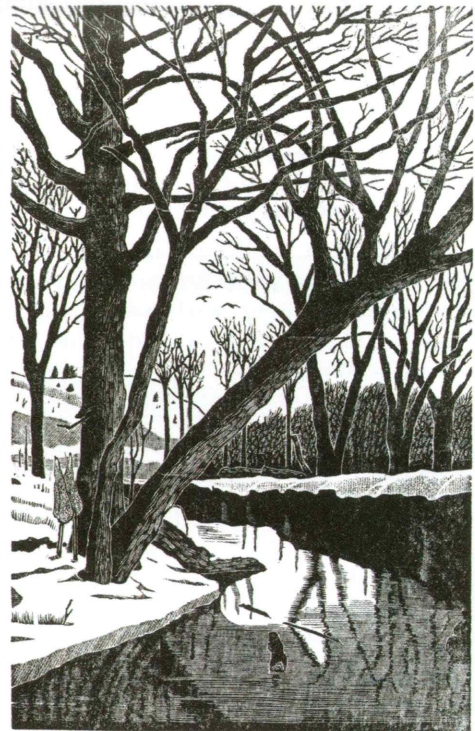
"To me it's all about relationships. If you keep those old stories coming down, then you understand how we are related, not only to each other but to God, to the earth, to all that we know about. You know we have to be related. That's what's missing today, everywhere. We've forgotten how we're connected."

The Little Brown Church is a place to remember, and to reconnect.

My thanks to Julie Zajicek for inviting me to return to Bear Valley with *The Driftless Reader*; and to Dan Miller at Ocooch Books and Libations in Richland Center for making available copies of the book.



Keefe Keeley, a native of the Kickapoo Valley, is executive director of the Savanna Institute, working with farmers on sustainable agro-ecosystems in the Upper Midwest.



Untitled wood engraving, Frank Utpatel (1966). Used with permission of Stanton & Lee Publishers