

# **Thoughts and observations about Luna Leopold**

## **by Eric W. Larsen**

**These notes are from an Interview conducted on February 25, 2013  
by Ruth Ostroff with  
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After retiring from the U.S. Geological Survey in 1972, Luna Leopold became a professor in the Department of Geology and Geophysics and the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley (UCB). Eric Larsen, already a student of stream functions and processes, lived in nearby Mill Valley, CA, during that time. One day in 1984 he drove to the University to meet Luna. “It was like finding an old friend” said Eric. He left the meeting “giddy”, and knew that he wanted to work with Luna as his apprentice. Even though Luna wasn’t Eric’s major professor, (Luna had convinced Eric to study in the Civil Engineering Department, Environmental Water Resources Division) he certainly mentored Eric in the true sense of the word. They spent thousands of hours together, meeting on a daily basis, and they became great friends.

About a week before school was out during the year they met, Luna said “Get yourself ready to go to Wyoming, because we do field work in the summer”. So, they put their field gear in the Volvo station wagon and drove to Luna’s house in Pinedale, Wyoming, in the Wind River Range area. Luna had a cowboy streak in him. He loved horses and wore a cowboy hat when he was in Wyoming. Eric had grown up in Colorado and was also comfortable in the rugged west.

Luna also had a cabin above Fremont Lake in Wyoming. An interesting bit of trivia about his cabin is that it was originally built in the 1800’s in a different location. Luna had it dismantled and moved it piece by piece to the Fremont Lake site where it was put back together. He respected the cabin’s pioneer heritage by not allowing any items less than 100 years old to be used as furnishing or for heating or cooking within the structure. The saddle belonging to his father, Aldo Leopold, conspicuously hung on the wall of the single room cabin. During that first summer and subsequent summers, Luna, Eric and others lived in rustic conditions, cooking over campfires using Dutch ovens, sleeping in tents at the study sites, and sometimes staying at the cabin. He believed in the “old world way” of passing crafts on. He was extremely generous with his time and skills. For example, one year for Eric’s birthday, Luna made him a “chuck kit” comprised of a wooden box, complete with leather handle, and packed full of items they used when camping. Luna was a “people person”. He enjoyed socializing, as well as working hand in hand with others, and he even entertained his friends with his master storytelling at times. He enjoyed companionship and camaraderie very much.

Luna would often say "Pick a field site!" It became one of his mantras. During his 22-year career in the Water Resources Division of the U.S. Geological Survey in Washington, he built an unbeatable, well trained, team of people. He would tell them, "I expect you to do some field work in the summer because that's what I'm doing". He spent 3 to 4 months in the field each year.

Eric met the "pick a field site" challenge by selecting one in Mill Valley, Ca, where he lived when going to graduate school. Luna met him there and assisted with stream observations, surveys, and mapping. Eric admired the way that Luna intimately studied stream systems with his whole body - his feet, his hands, and eyes, as well as his brain. For example, he walked in streams to learn about them first hand, constantly drawing and measuring as he walked (without the use of a tape measure). Luna drew and sketched maps very accurately. He emphasized that if you are very observant and understand the length of your pace and a few other techniques, you can make a very accurate map, even with topo lines, just by walking and looking. He would say that the information goes through your feet, your eyes, and your hands onto the paper. According to Eric, "People felt a sense of confidence and mastery when around him". When not in the field, he brought his work home...literally. At home, Luna had a stream study site in his backyard. He kept a telescope in his bedroom and used it to read the gauge he had placed in the adjacent stream.

Luna's conservation contribution can be summed up this way: He truly did respect the way things in the natural world worked, rather than imposing his own interpretation on systems and trying to make them fit. The extension of his loving the natural world was to try to understand it and support it as it exists. In doing this, he naturally wanted to conserve it.

**Other thoughts:**

Luna taught a class and co-authored a book with Tom Dunne having the same title: "Water in Environmental Planning". He used his talent as a draftsman to illustrate front papers of the book. He was also responsible for publication of *A Sand County Almanac*, written by his father, Aldo Leopold. When Aldo died, the book was still in manuscript form. Luna brought it to print.

All five of Aldo Leopold's children became respected scientists and conservationists in their own right, and three – Starker, Luna and Estella – were elected members of the National Academy of Sciences.