

CHAPTER ONE

Out of the Midwest

Leopold and Ricketts shared a midwestern upbringing. Rand Aldo Leopold was born on January 11, 1887, in Burlington, Iowa, to first cousins Carl and Clara Leopold. Aldo was the eldest of four Leopold children; Marie was born in 1888, Carl Jr. in 1892, and Frederic in 1895. His father began his career as a traveling salesman, selling barbed wire to western ranchers, before settling down to run the Rand and Leopold Desk Company. And although “Carl had hardly ever used a desk, much less built one,” he was “a businessman of the highest integrity. His approach was as simple as it was risky: he wanted to build the best desk that he could, and if he could make a profit at it, so much the better.”¹ The company made roll-top desks constructed of cherry, oak, and walnut, known for their enduring quality. The company’s motto, emblazoned on its stationery, was “Built on Honor to Endure.”

Edward Flanders Robb Ricketts was born on May 14, 1897, in Chicago, Illinois, to Abbott and Alice Ricketts. Ed was the eldest of the three Ricketts children; his sister, Frances, was born

in 1899, his brother, Thayer, in 1902. His father made a modest income as an accountant and a salesman. In her journal Frances noted, “most of their paternal relatives were ministers, while many in their mother’s family were storekeepers. Not a really poor person on either side . . . I wonder what is the matter with our branch of the family in this generation?”²

Both Leopold and Ricketts showed early the promise of the men they would become. Young Aldo was “a precocious student, interested in many things, and good at most everything he was interested in.”³ Leopold’s interest in the natural world reflected his family’s activities, and growing up along the Mississippi River and its waterfowl flyway gave him every opportunity to explore and, later, hunt. Curt Meine writes, “The early observer atop Burlington’s bluffs gained an eyelevel view of one of the most spectacular wildlife displays the continent has ever offered. The hunter in the marshes below gained one of its most promising shots.”⁴

In order to provide relief for the hay fever that Aldo’s mother suffered, every August the Leopold family traveled to the north end of Lake Huron, spending six weeks or so on Les Cheneaux Islands. It was “land rich in the raw material of adventure, and wild enough to inspire the imagination.”⁵ Aldo’s youngest brother, Frederic, recalled, “In our young minds, we imagined that we were at the jumping off place where to the north an endless wilderness extended to Hudson Bay and the arctic.”⁶

In high school, Aldo was introduced to the “disciplined natural science that he would eventually make his life’s work.”⁷ In the process he honed his considerable artistic ability by making detailed maps and anatomical drawings. From his English teacher, Miss Rogers, he learned a deep appreciation for the written word. Leopold also developed an interest in forestry, and at the time the only

school of forestry in the country was at Yale University. In 1904 he shipped off to Lawrenceville Preparatory School in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, where he spent an academic year and a half laying the foundation for an Ivy League education, although he noted, “The instruction in English and History is much inferior to that of the [Burlington] High School.”⁸

Ed Ricketts was “from birth, a child of intelligence and rare charm. . . . He began speaking very young and began using whole but simple sentences before he was a year old.”⁹ His family lived in a rough section of Chicago, and their worried mother sheltered them. His sister wrote, “We spent hours at home in pre-school days with our noses pressed against the window pane looking out.”¹⁰ Under these conditions all the Ricketts children became enthusiastic readers. As Ed recalled much later, in a letter to Harcourt, Brace, “At the age of six, I was ruined for any ordinary activities when an uncle who should have known better gave me some natural history curios and an old zoology textbook. Here I saw for the first time those magical and incorrect words ‘coral insects.’”¹¹

Ricketts’s parents were devout Episcopalians, and Ed was a choirboy.¹² When he was ten, his father accepted a job in Mitchell, South Dakota, and moved the family there. They stayed only a year before moving back to Chicago, but for young Ed it was a crucial year. He spent his time outdoors and “collected and studied birds, insects and every other form of life he encountered.”¹³

In school, Ricketts was known as “the walking dictionary.” Though not athletic, he was strong and compact, “hardening himself” by taking cold morning “plunges” and exercising in the evenings. His sister Frances wrote, “By the time he was 11 or 12 he also slept outdoors on the ground in our back yard much of

the time rolled in blankets, without ‘even a tent,’ until winter. . . . It was part of his program to sleep out, even during storms. Our parents were pleased when they were able to bribe him to sleep indoors during the coldest weather.”¹⁴ In high school, Ed enjoyed and excelled in both science and humanities courses, and began making the cross-disciplinary connections that would characterize his thinking for the rest of his life.¹⁵

Despite these similarities, there were deep personality differences between the two youths. Leopold was shy, especially when it came to interacting with girls; among his closest companions were the family dogs. In high school “Aldo remained solitary in his ways, not antisocial, not social.” His brother, Frederic, noted, “He did not think he was cut from common cloth, and he wasn’t.”¹⁶ In contrast, Ricketts was outgoing and charming; people were drawn to him. “Revered among his friends as a talker—some called him the Buddha or the Mandarin, both because of his habit of sitting cross-legged on his bed, quietly nodding and smiling in response to whatever nonsense was going on in the room at the time, and when he spoke his words were wise.”¹⁷ Women were attracted to him, and he was attracted to women. Ricketts always thought of himself as a common man, and several of his later associates were bums and prostitutes (Ricketts’s motives with these women were not related to their profession, and he did not “befriend” them through the usual method of transaction fees).

Leopold and Ricketts attended first-rate universities, but as with their personalities, college life could not have been more different for the two young men. In September 1905, Leopold began his studies at Yale.¹⁸ In 1900 an endowment from the family of the nation’s leading forester, Gifford Pinchot, had allowed Yale to establish the first graduate school of forestry in the United

States. "The school promoted Pinchot's doctrine of scientific resource management and what Samuel Hayes has characterized as the Progressive Era's 'gospel of efficiency.'"¹⁹ Leopold excelled at Yale—the rigor, formality, and status of the program suited him—although in February 1908 he was put on probation for skipping classes.²⁰ He put the reprimand behind him and graduated that spring with a bachelor's degree. Leopold returned to Yale that fall, and in 1909 graduated with his master's degree in forestry. That March, Leopold and all thirty-four classmates boarded the SS *Comus* in New York and steamed to New Orleans on their way to Texas for a final assignment and their civil service exams.²¹

Ricketts enrolled at Illinois State Normal University, outside Bloomington, in 1915.²² He took courses that academic year but left school to gain some space following an affair with an older, married woman.²³ He traveled, finding work as a bookkeeper at a country club in El Paso, Texas, and as a surveyor's assistant in New Mexico. In September 1917, despite having flat feet, Ricketts was drafted into the army and served back in Illinois at Camp Grant, as a clerk in the Medical Corps. He was discharged after the Armistice in March 1919. That summer, Ricketts enrolled at the University of Chicago, where he concentrated on biology courses.

Ricketts was never concerned with the formal requirements for graduation; he simply wanted to be exposed to knowledge and to new forms of thinking. At the University of Chicago he became a part-time student while working at the Sinclair Refining Company. He left school to escape another romantic predicament during the summer and fall quarters of 1920 and "put on a little knapsack and . . . walked through Indiana and Kentucky and North Carolina and Georgia clear into Florida."²⁴ As Joel

Hedgpeth observes in a footnote, “It was characteristic of Ed that when he read about John Muir’s selection of the cemetery as the safe place to spend the night in superstitious regions he immediately followed suit.”²⁵

Ricketts returned to the University of Chicago in 1921, where he was to be forever inspired by Warder Clyde Allee, best known for his 1931 book *Animal Aggregations*.²⁶ Allee was Ricketts’s favorite teacher, and for the professional Ricketts, everything began with Allee. The student made an equally strong impression on the professor. Even twenty-nine years later, in an interview with Hedgpeth, Allee remembered Ricketts as “a member of a small group of ‘Ishmaelites’ who tended sometimes to be disturbing, but were always stimulating.”²⁷

After the fall quarter of 1922, Ricketts left the University of Chicago without formally withdrawing. He had gotten married on August 19 to Anna Barbara Maker, who had moved to Chicago from Pennsylvania, and “impending fatherhood obliged him to consider more reliable ways of making a living.”²⁸

After college, Leopold and Ricketts continued their separate career paths. When Leopold graduated from Yale, he went to work for Pinchot in the U.S. Forest Service. Leopold was “one of an elite corps of scientifically trained professionals who would develop administrative policies and techniques for the fledgling agency charged since 1905 with responsibility for managing the national forests.”²⁹ Leopold was assigned to the new Southwestern District, embracing Arizona and New Mexico territories. In 1923 Ricketts and his former college roommate, Albert E. Galigher, arranged to move to Monterey and, with Galigher’s money, set up a biological supply business. Ricketts postponed departing Chicago until his son, Ed Jr., was born.