

# What is Sense of Place?

## Rethinking Place

To understand the concept of sense of place fully, we must conceive of place as more than a physical location. People remember places as backdrops for experiences, not as places in and of themselves. So while geographic context provides a basis for an understanding of place, the experiences that contribute human significance to that setting are the key part of the definition. When people think back on a place, they recall events that occurred, relationships that formed, and sensory experiences. People experience places to which they have never traveled through the lens of another person's experience. The primary way to communicate the spirit of a place is to convey human experience that involves that place, or a perception of it. Place is remembered as the experience of being in a place rather than as an empty landscape. This holistic definition of place is the foundation for understanding sense of place.

## Place as Identity

The places to which a person feels strongly connected contribute significantly to his or her identity. If a person has spent a lot of time in one place, he or she will have a large body of experiences with that place as the background. Place is part of personal history and, therefore, identity.

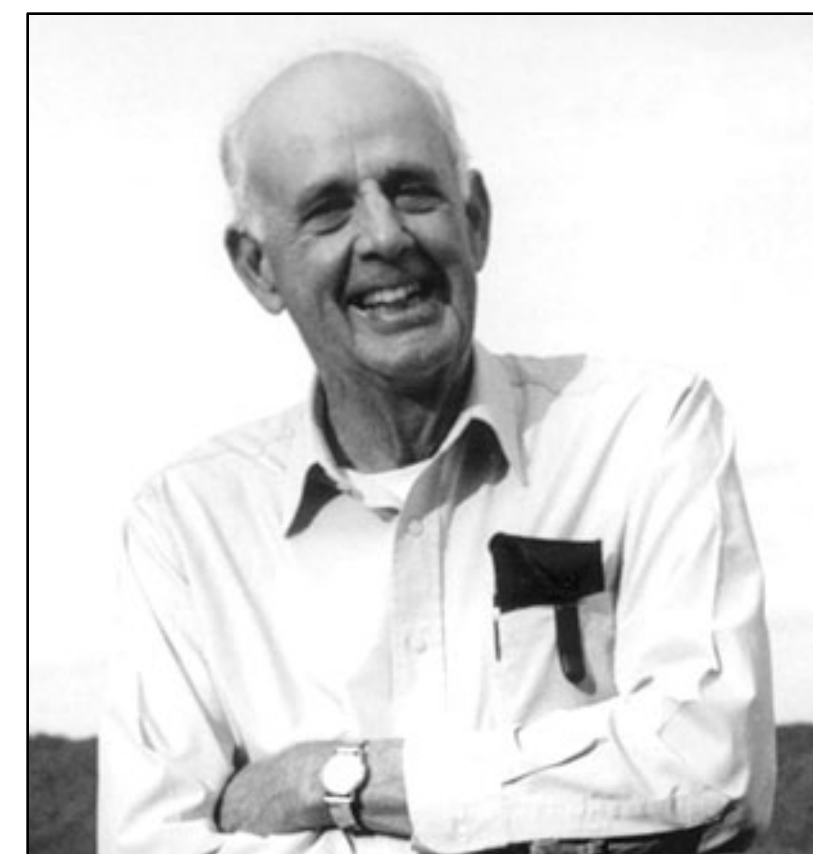


Figure 1: Photo of Wendell Berry (<http://newsinfo.iu.edu/asset/page/normal/8972.html>)

*"If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are."*

-Wendell Berry

## Sense of Place as a Relationship

A sense of place can be thought of as a person's perception of his or her relationship with a specific place. As explained above, interactions that contribute to the development of this relationship do not necessarily occur directly between person and place; they can take the form of interactions between two or more people in a place. The more positive interactions a person has in a particular place, the stronger a connection the person will feel to that place. Meanwhile, the more negative interactions a person has in a particular place, the more he or she will try to distance himself or herself from that place. Sense of place is a fluid concept that changes as a person collects new experiences over time.



Figure 2: Photo of Wallace Stegner (<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/jacketcopy/essays/page/2/>)

*"Some are born in their place, some find it, some realize after long searching that the place they left is the one they have been searching for. But whatever their relation to it, it is made a place only by slow accrual, like a coral reef."*

-Wallace Stegner

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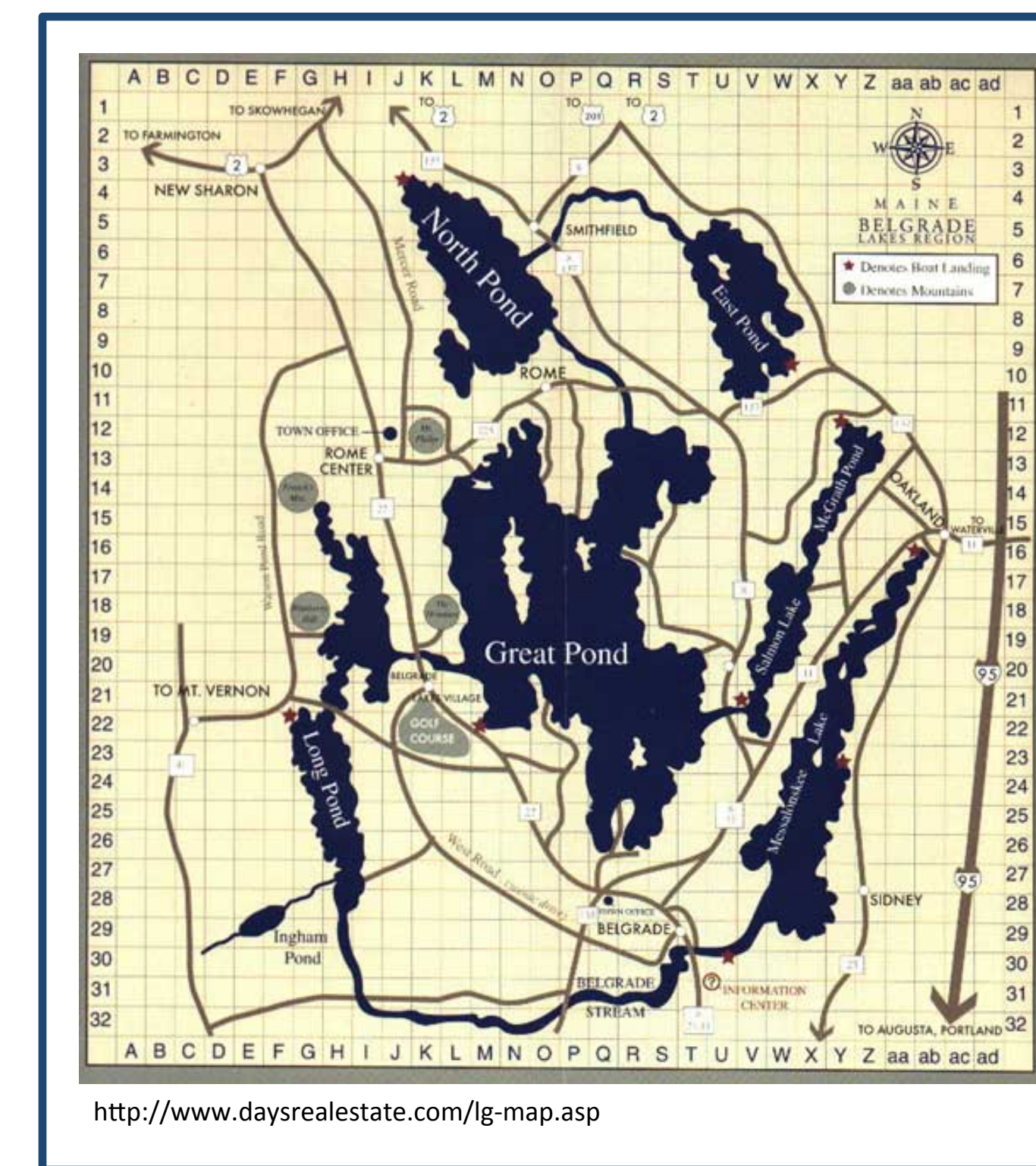
# Recording a Sense of Place in the Belgrade Lakes Region

By: Erin Love '14

## Oral History Interviews

### Oral History

Allan Nevins and Louis Starr, the fathers of oral history worked together on the Columbia University Oral History Project, one of the first major oral history projects in the States. Nevins described oral history as "a systematic attempt to obtain, from the lips and papers of living Americans who have led significant lives, a fuller record of their participation in the political, economic, and cultural life of the last sixty years" in his essay *The Gateway to Oral History*. Starr, a journalist by training, commented on the interdisciplinary potential of oral history, saying, "oral history bids fair to reflect the myriad interests of a pluralistic society—its ethnic groups, its cultural pursuits, its political leadership, its institutions and occupational groups—so far as limited resources but apparently limitless enthusiasm permits."<sup>1</sup>



<http://www.daysrealestate.com/lg-map.asp>

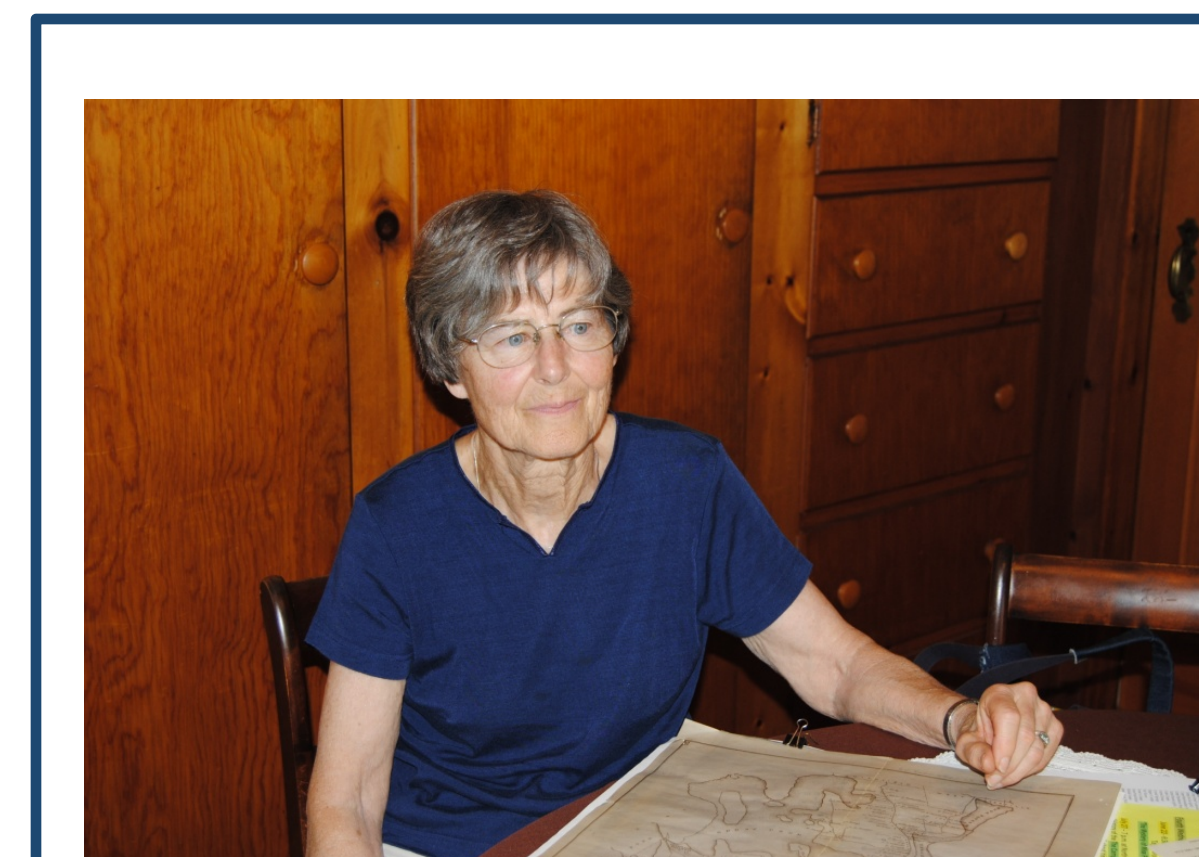


A View from Long Pond

### Interview: Rick Watson, President of the North Pond Association

"[My childhood sense of place] would have to be in and around the lake. There, behind my cottage, were hundreds and hundreds of acres all the way into Norridgewock of woods, and at that time, you did not need permission from the landowners, so I grew up hiking and biking and camping and all that with friends that I made up and down the lake. "

"People, I think, don't think their fifty foot lot or hundred foot lot impacts the lake, and you know, maybe it's septic, maybe it's runoff, maybe it's the driveway, maybe it's washing their cat or dog or kids in the lake with shampoo. You know, whatever, dumping gas, spilling gas when you fill something up. You know, all that matters."



Nan Mairs, President of the Belgrade Historical Society at her home in the McGrath Pond area

### Interview: Nan Mairs, President of the Belgrade Historical Society

"It's a struggle for a town to maintain its identity, I think, and there are too many different views of what our identity should be and who's got it right. Well, everybody's got it right because it's whatever they want it to be...There are advantages [to having a single, agreed-upon identity] because everybody will work together better if they have a unified hope or dream for their town...But I don't know whether people are too independent to set aside...the trivial things they don't agree about to really focus on 'Where do we want to go from here?'"

# The Questionnaire as a Tool

## The Questionnaire

One tool being used to gather information about sense of place in the Belgrades is a questionnaire that was developed to accompany Professor James Fleming's keynote address at the Maine Congress of Lake Associations (COLA) Conference. The questionnaire touches on childhood and current sense of place, as well as the connection between sense of place and community building. Attendees of that conference as well as members of the Belgrade Regional Conservation Alliance (BRCA) have filled out the questionnaire. The continued collection of data at the Maine Lakes Resource Center (MLRC) is expected.

## Current Connection to Place

Local artist Matt Russ on how painting in the Belgrades has contributed to his sense of place:

*"My exploration of the Belgrade Lakes region, particularly the Kennebec Highlands, has grown in geographical area and personal significance over the years. The more I discover about the landscape, the more I seem to discover about myself. I search for treasures in the form of images but invariably come away with more. I have an undying respect for the place and its transforming power."*



Matthew Russ, View from Blueberry Hill #1, 2010, Oil on Canvas, 20 x 40 in.

## Questionnaire Excerpts

**How can a sense of place serve as a resource for community building?**

- Emotional connections to a place suggest an urge to preserve it, making it more feasible to harness the efforts of individuals to take action.

- [It] can provide a focal point for individuals to identify feelings & concerns they may share, which could lead to shared objectives & action (i.e., conservation, protection, appreciation, planning).

- Places are inherently shared I think, especially those places which are freely accessible (parks, trails, shops even, libraries, sidewalks) and these serve as great settings for interacting with other members of the community.

References  
1. Dunaway, David K. and Willa K. Baum, eds. *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 1996.