The Yale Review, a literary magazine, turned down this most poignant of Leopold's wilderness essays. It remained in his desk as a yellowed, slightly edited typescript evoking the mystery of unknown places.

I am conscious of a considerable personal debt to the continent of South America. It has given me, for instance, rubber for motor tires, which have carried me to lonely places on the face of Mother Earth where all her ways are pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.

It has given me coffee, and to brew it, many a memorable campfire with the dawn-wind rustling in autumnal trees.

It has given me rare woods, pleasant fruits, leather, medicines, nitrates to make my garden bloom, and books about strange beasts and ancient peoples. I am not unmindful of my obligation for these things. But more than all of these, it has given me the River of the Mother of God.

The river has been in my mind so long that I cannot recall just when or how I first heard of it. All that I remember is that long ago a Spanish Captain, wandering in some far Andean height, sent back word that he had found where a mighty river falls into the trackless Amazonian forest, and disappears. He had named it el Rio Madre de Dios. The Spanish Captain never came back. Like the river, he disappeared. But ever since some maps of South America have shown a short heavy line running eastward beyond the Andes, a river without beginning and without end, and labelled it the River of the Mother of God.

That short heavy line flung down upon the blank vastness of tropical wilderness has always seemed the perfect symbol of the Unknown Places of the earth. And its name, resonant of the clank of silver armor and the cruel progress of the Cross, yet carrying a hush of reverence and a murmur of the prows of galleons on the seven seas, has always seemed the symbol of Con-
quest, the Conquest that has reduced those Unknown Places, one by one, until now there are none left.

And when I read that MacMillan has planted the Radio among the Eskimos of the furthest polar seas, and that Everest is all but climbed, and that Russia is founding fisheries in Wrangel Land, I know the time is not far off when there will no more be a short line on the map, without beginning and without end, no mighty river to fall from far Andean heights into the Amazonian wilderness, and disappear. Motor boats will sputter through those trackless forests, the clank of steam hoists will be heard in the Mountain of the Sun, and there will be phonographs and chewing gum upon the River of the Mother of God.

No doubt it was "for this the earth lay preparing quintillions of years, for this the revolving centuries truly and steadily rolled." But it marks a new epoch in the history of mankind, an epoch in which Unknown Places disappear as a dominant fact in human life.

Ever since paleolithic man became conscious that his own home hunting ground was only part of a greater world, Unknown Places have been a seemingly fixed fact in human environment, and usually a major influence in human lives. Sumerian tribes, venturing the Unknown Places, found the valley of the Euphrates and an imperial destiny. Phoenician sailors, venturing the unknown seas, found Carthage and Cornwall and established commerce upon the earth. Hanno, Ulysses, Eric, Columbus—history is but a succession of adventures into the Unknown. For unnumbered centuries the test of men and nations has been whether they "chose rather to live miserably in this realm, pestered with inhabitants, or to venture forth, as becometh men, into those remote lands."

And now, speaking geographically, the end of the Unknown is at hand. This fact in our environment, seemingly as fixed as the wind and the sunset, has at last reached the vanishing point. Is it to be expected that it shall be lost from human experience without something likewise being lost from human character?

I think not. In fact, there is an instinctive human reaction against the loss of fundamental environmental influences, of which history records many examples. The chase, for instance, was a fundamental fact in the life of all nomadic tribes. Again and again, when these tribes conquered and took possession of agricultural regions, where they settled down and became civilized and had no further need of hunting, they nevertheless continued it as a sport, and as such it persists to this day, with ten million devotees in America alone.

It is this same reaction against the loss of adventure into the unknown which causes the hundreds of thousands to sally forth each year upon little expeditions, afoot, by pack train, or by canoe, into the odd bits of wilderness
which commerce and "development" have regrettfully and temporarily left us here and there. Modest adventurers to be sure, compared with Hanno, or Lewis and Clark. But so is the sportsman, with his setter dog in pursuit of partridges, a modest adventurer compared with his Neolithic ancestor in single combat with the Auroch bull. The point is that along with the necessity for expression of racial instincts there happily goes that capacity for illusion which enables little boys to fish happily in wash-tubs. That capacity is a precious thing, if not overworked.

But there is a basic difference between the adventures of the chase and the adventures of wilderness travel. Production of game for the chase can, with proper skill, be superimposed upon agriculture and forestry and can thus be indefinitely perpetuated. But the wilderness cannot be superimposed upon anything. The wilderness and economics are, in every ordinary sense, mutually exclusive. If the wilderness is to be perpetuated at all, it must be in areas exclusively dedicated to that purpose.

We come now to the question: Is it possible to preserve the element of Unknown Places in our national life? Is it practicable to do so, without undue loss in economic values? I say "yes" to both questions. But we must act vigorously and quickly, before the remaining bits of wilderness have disappeared.

Like parks and playgrounds and other "useless" things, any system of wilderness areas would have to be owned and held for public use by the Government. The fortunate thing is that the Government already owns enough of them, scattered here and there in the poorer and rougher parts of the National Forests and National Parks, to make a very good start. The one thing needful is for the Government to draw a line around each one and say: "This is wilderness, and wilderness it shall remain." A place where Americans may "venture forth, as becometh men, into remote lands."

Such a policy would not subtract even a fraction of one per cent from our economic wealth, but would preserve a fraction of what has, since first the flight of years began, been wealth to the human spirit.

There is a current advertisement of Wells' Outline of History which says "The unforgivable sin is standing still. In all Nature, to cease to grow is to perish." I suppose this pretty accurately summarizes the rebuttal which the Economic American would make to the proposal of a national system of wilderness playgrounds. But what is standing still? And what constitutes growth? The Economic American has shown very plainly that he thinks growth is the number of ciphers added yearly to the national population and the national bank-roll. But the Gigantosaurus tried out that definition of growth for several million years. He was a quantitative economist of the first water. He added two ciphers to his stature, and a staggering row of them to his numbers. But he perished, the blind victim of natural and "economic" laws. They made him, and they destroyed him.
There has been just one really new thing since the Gigantosaurus. That new thing is Man, the first creature in all the immensities of time and space whose evolution is self-directed. The first creature, in any spiritual sense, to create his own environment. Is it not in that fact, rather than in mere ciphers of dollars or population, that we have grown?

The question of wilderness playgrounds is a question in self-control of environment. If we had not exercised that control in other ways, we would already be in process of destruction by our own ciphers. Wilderness playgrounds simply represent a new need for exercising it in a new direction. Have we grown enough to realize that before it is too late?

I say “too late” because wilderness is the one thing we can not build to order. When our ciphers result in slums, we can tear down enough of them to re-establish parks and playgrounds. When they choke traffic, we can tear down enough of them to build highways and subways. But when our ciphers have choked out the last vestige of the Unknown Places, we cannot build new ones. To artificially create wilderness areas would overwork the capacity for illusion of even little boys with wash-tubs.

Just what is it that is choking out our last vestiges of wilderness? Is it real economic need for farmlands? Go out and see them—they contain no farmlands worthy of the name. Is it real economic need for timber? They contain timber to be sure, much of it better to look at than to saw, but until we start growing timber on the eighty million acres of fire-gutted wastes created by our “economic” system we have small call to begrudge what timber they contain. The thing that is choking out the wilderness is not true economics at all, but rather that Frankenstein which our boosters have builded, the “Good Roads Movement.”

This movement, entirely sound and beneficial in its inception, has been boosted until it resembles a gold-rush, with about the same regard for ethics and good craftsmanship. The spilled treasures of Nature and of the Government seem to incite about the same kind of stampede in the human mind.

In this case the yellow lure is the Motor Tourist. Like Mammon, he must now be spelled with a capital, and as with Mammon, we grovel at his feet, and he rules us with the insolence characteristic of a new god. We offer up our groves and our greenswards for him to camp upon, and he litters them with cans and with rubbish. We hand him our wild life and our wild flowers, and humbly continue the gesture after there are none left to hand. But of all offerings foolish roads are to him the most pleasing of sacrifice.

(Since they are mostly to be paid for by a distant treasury or by a distant posterity, they are likewise pleasing to us.)

And of all foolish roads, the most pleasing is the one that “opens up” some last little vestige of virgin wilderness. With the unholy zeal of fanatics we hunt them out and pile them upon his altar, while from the throats of a
thousand luncheon clubs and Chambers of Commerce and Greater Gopher Prairie Associations rises the solemn chant "There is No God but Gasoline and Motor is his Prophet!"

The more benignant aspects of the Great God Motor and the really sound elements of the Good Roads Movement need no defense from me. They are cried from everyhousetop, and we all know them. What I am trying to picture is the tragic absurdity of trying to whip the March of Empire into a gallop.

Very specifically, I am pointing out that in this headlong stampede for speed and ciphers we are crushing the last remnants of something that ought to be preserved for the spiritual and physical welfare of future Americans, even at the cost of acquiring a few less millions of wealth or population in the long run. Something that has helped build the race for such innumerable centuries that we may logically suppose it will help preserve it in the centuries to come.

Failing this, it seems to me we fail in the ultimate test of our vaunted superiority—the self-control of environment. We fall back into the biological category of the potato bug which exterminated the potato, and thereby exterminated itself.