FROM THE BLUFF:
A Philosophy of Clifford D. Simak

William Henry Sharp

Chapter One
Simak's Prospect

I will attempt to write not the philosophy of Clifford D. Simak, but a philosophy. As a student of Emerson I am amazed, and at times delighted, by the range of biography and criticism about him. Emerson was, of course, a great man of literature. A lot of books have been written about him, many of them excellently done. One thing they almost all agree on is that he left no systematic philosophy, in his published writings, his lectures his sermons, or the many volumes of his journal. He left it to each of us to piece together our own philosophy. He spoke of his own life as a voyage of "a thousand tacks," which by successive turns, by repeated misdirection, took him closer to a port where he hoped to find some truth. I believe, first of all, that Clifford Simak was also on a 'voyage' of discovery that moved him, as the winds willed, into unknown realms in which he hoped to find some truth of his own, some deeper understanding of the mysteries of life, some herald of human destiny. This quest drew him on, through his stories, to the end of his life. How far Simak traveled we will have to explore for ourselves. That he did not systemize a philosophy is in no way unusual. If, like Emerson, he never felt compelled to do so it may be by choice, or, more likely, he simply never got it all figured out. Few of us ever arrive at a point of clarity and certainty in our own lives, and those who do tend not to tarry. Simak, I firmly believe, had the landscape of his world rather well mapped out but he never stopped moving beyond the boundaries into new territories.

Every story, every book, an author pens is to some degree autobiographical. More importantly, what draws us to stories is something that speaks to our own heart. Ray Bradbury once said that every book we bring home contains something of ourselves. That doesn't mean that we understand the reason we are drawn to the book, or other objects. If we understood we would probably just smile and walk on. The lingering, subtle mystery takes hold of us. To fill an unknown emptiness we take the book. Sometimes we even read it. Psychotherapists might say that we are only acting out fantasies or even dramatizing traumas. Others say that we attribute to those we esteem, including the writers we admire, much of our own unmet potential. I think there is more to it than that. The ancients told us that a life well lived is one of

introspection. Indeed, an unexamined life, they said, is not worth living. We gain understanding about ourselves by carefully paying attention to what draws our interest. As psychologist William James said, we are that to which we come alive. The novels and stories we love must work that kind of magic.

The two books by Simak that most captured my imagination in youth were *Way Station* and *A Choice of Gods.* Both are sited on a bluff overlooking the Wisconsin River, the former in sight of the point at which it empties into the Mississippi Rivers and the latter at that confluence. They are very different stories but each evokes an image of a small piece of landscape, isolated in time and space, long-lived characters who have time to reflect on the meaning of life, and, against their will, forced into a cosmic drama. Like in *City*, the stories center around a house that has stood for centuries, even millennia. In fact, that spot, however idealized, is where Clifford Simak grew up.

I traveled that corner of Wisconsin in search of an understanding of the mystery of the place. I found it not unique but representative of something many of us perhaps have experienced. As my wife and I traveled all over the country, hundreds of thousands of miles, mostly on back roads, we have found many 'Simak' places. They aren't all on a bluff. They don't all have wonderful houses. They aren't all in sight of a river. They are each very different places. Indeed, Simak himself wrote of many 'magical' places; some cloistered by trees, others in ravines, some in glades, some in mountains, some on the Great Plains, some in deserts and badlands. I've found the world full of such (almost supernatural) places. I lived in a stark desert for many years through which I hiked hundreds of miles. The desert, in mythology, and Simak's stories, is the landscape of searching souls. I've found many wonderful overlooks in the desert. On one mountaintop there was a day I sat with two Golden Eagles keeping me company. On another I watched two "Top Gun" fighters in a mock dogfight, throwing out the flares used to decoy missiles. I've walked on rocks over a billion years old, found Indian artifacts and dwellings, old horseshoes and discarded or lost tools, and occasionally a small meteorite. I have a favorite overlook in Death Valley that evokes the prospect of the mythical quest I so often find in Simak's books. More recently I found a bluff in Pennsylvania, where I now live, in a place named Wyalusing, which is the name of a place only a few miles from the Simak farm in Wisconsin, another river-carved bluff overlooking a beautiful farming valley. There is a house on a hill with a view over that bluff that is nothing short of glorious. I have been in little valleys in Pennsylvania with a stream and tall hemlocks and oaks and a mist with sun streaming down that seem like no place on Earth. I have found such places in the Rocky Mountains and in the Sierras, on the Great Lakes, in Maine and the California Big Sur near where I was born. The list could go on and on.

I've chosen the title "From the Bluffs" because of that deep appeal of high places, of prospects. I spent much of my youth in a place named after a bluff along the Arkansas River, a small agricultural community. For me today it is a place more of memory than of fact, much as Simak's Millville. It has to be. It is little more than an empty shell of what it once was, in either reality or memory. The people who gave it an almost mystical appeal are gone—teachers, mentors, neighbors, local merchants, doctors and lawyers, and politicos. During my youth the key to the house was in the envelope with the mortgage. The key to the car was in the ignition, where it belonged. My bicycle sat unlocked at school, in town or on the edge of a dirt road with

never a thought it would not be there when I returned to it. There were magical places near my home, some not more than a few minutes away, where I wandered and played and hunted and camped. Across the river, to the east, and to the south, is flat, mostly featureless farmland: vast fields cultivated for rice, cotton and soybeans. It is the largest level landscape in North America. It is Johnny Cash country. To the north and west, however, are rolling hills and valleys with streams, and once some old-growth forest, a country I came to love. Many of those old haunts are now housing developments and shopping centers. Downtown is a virtual ghost town. The wonderful Carnegie-era library refurbished into modernistic offices. The old brick school was torn down and replaced with steel and glass and concrete. A great old house we once lived in burned down. The wondrous old trees, remnants of old-growth forest, removed for fear a limb might fall. The ancient stretches of forest were cut down to feed the paper mills. But I seem to come home when Simak writes to me about Millville and I meet the characters, the "Neighbors," in "The Big Front Yard" and other stories.

Progress killed the romanticized memory of my youth, a place Ronald Reagan reflected that once represented "main street" America. As my wife and I travel we are both drawn to small towns like moths to a light. We are looking for something but we find most of the old main streets largely empty and decaying. Those that keep some of their past alive do so at the cost of a ring of modernizations that eats up the open land around them. Preservation of old buildings is due largely because of some small industry or college and too often a wealthy local benefactor in late life. Such places are little more than a heartbeat from the oblivion of history. Simak keeps those places alive in memory if not in fact.

I have always been interested in the idea of community, perhaps in search of something I feel lost. From my study of history and sociology I've learned much about social change and the idea of 'progress.' My wife is a master genealogist who has delved into the lives of those in our family tree and the communities they lived in. We spend a great deal of time exploring the places our ancestors once lived[1]. We are drawn to writers who have left vivid descriptions of lives in a now lost past, lives that spoke to us of the values, the essence, of human life. August Derleth, who sometimes wrote science fiction, and did a marvelous takeoff on a Sherlock Holmes character he called Solar Pons, wrote extensively about his home country in Wisconsin, indeed on the Wisconsin River just upstream from the Simak farm. Wendell Berry has written novels about the people who once lived along the Kentucky River, when farmers plowed with horses, where he grew up and where he has chosen to live out his life after a university career. He fictionalized his home town in his novels but there is a tiny rundown village behind which we found a cemetery filled with Berry's and the names of other characters in his stories, on a bluff above the Kentucky River. I have even found a strong candidate for the 'Simak' house. Between Millville and the town Derleth grew up in there is a legendary stone house on a hill, on the brow of the hill, facing away from the Wisconsin River toward a lovely valley. It is the home and studio of Frank Lloyd Wright, Taliesin. The house, as he intended, seems to have grown there. It is well cared for and could last for centuries. I see that house when I read Simak's stories.

[1] She wrote a book about a period before the Civil War, Priscilla Stone Sharp, *Langhorn and Mary*. It is about two common people, long forgotten, who lived an epoch-making life. Mary was the daughter of a prosperous German farmer. Langhorn, her husband was a free Black.

Simak also wrote of a town I have often tried to visualize, a 'Simak Town,' a place where "down town" is about three blocks of small locally owned businesses. There is an old-fashioned hardware store, mom and pop grocery, sometimes a diner, maybe a five and dime store[2], and perhaps a lawyer in an old office with the window opened for air. The town has a high school, two stories, of brick and neighborhoods with distinctive pre-and post-war home styles. In Simak's stories man has gone to the stars but there is still a drug store with a soda fountain where the kids hang out. This is the town of "The Sitters," where a little nest of aliens reshape and give meaning to the lives of those around them. The place was called Millville.

Prairie du Chien, just a few miles northwest of the Simak farm, seems a good candidate. There are several others in Simak's Grant County. During his early newspaper days Simak lived in several suitable small towns spread across the Midwest. I've found lots of 'Simak Towns' in my travels. They are places that were, or at least at one time, first and foremost about people who live on a human scale. Their stories are today often preserved in tiny libraries and by historical associations. They are the stuff of Simak's pastoral stories. They are part of an Americana Simak and many of us knew intimately in bygone days.

What can we really say about the influence such places had on Simak. Does a study of such places give us a better insight into his life and writing? Derleth wrote, in *Walden West*, "I truly believe that every creative mind is the essential outgrowth of its own native soil, and that no material is quite so perfectly adapted to it as the rich color and background of that soil." There can be no doubt that Simak was deeply affected by his childhood life and carried something of the beauty and magic of that 'Millville' landscape with him through his long life; the countryside, the farm and the prospect and especially the bluff on the edge of the Simak farm. He treats it almost like a vision of paradise. Let me illustrate this in Simak's own words. In *Way Station*, Enoch Wallace walked the path as he had done every day for over a century:

> "He went down across the field and through the strip of woods and came out on a great outthrust of rock that stood atop the cliff that faced the river. He stood there, as he had stood on thousands of other mornings, and stared out at the river, sweeping in majestic blue-and-silver through the wooded bottomland.
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> "Old, ancient water, he said, talking silently to the river, you have seen it happen—the mile-high faces of the glaciers that came and stayed and left, creeping back toward the pole inch by stubborn inch, carrying the melting water from those very glaciers in a flood that filled this valley with a tide such as now is never known; the mastodon and saber tooth and the bear-sized beaver that ranged these olden hills and made the night clamorous with trumpeting and screaming; the silent little bands of men who trotted in the woods or clambered up the cliffs or paddled on your surface, woods-wise and water-wise, weak in body, strong in purpose, and persistent in a way no other thing ever was persistent, and just a little time ago that other breed of men who carried dreams within their skulls and cruelty in their hands and the awful sureness of an even greater purpose in their hearts. And before that, for this is ancient country beyond what is often found, the other kinds of life and the many turns of climate and changes that came upon the Earth itself. And what think you of it? He asked the river. For yours is the memory and the perspective and the time and by now you should have answers, or at least some of the answers.
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> "A Man might have some of the answers had he lived for several million years—as he might have the answers several million years from this very summer morning if he still should be around."

That spot exists in fact and not just in fancy. Simak grew up there. Much of the scenery in Simak's works is certainly fictionalized, but that place you can find in a satellite images offered by most map sites (see below), just southeast, across the Wisconsin River, from Bridgeport, just as old Cliff and Asher and John Sutton described it in even greater detail in *Time and Again* and Jason Whitney did in *A Choice of Gods*.

[2] Now gone, victims of Wal-Mart and shopping malls.

I have come to two important conclusions about the localities described by Simak, and other writers, in fact and fiction. First, each is a dust mote on the stage of American life. They are universal. There are thousands upon thousands of such places and stories, mostly forever untold. Second, they are substantially different, in my experience, than Simak's representation of people and place in his stories. I find a special genius in the way Simak tells his stories. In those stories the people, except the main characters, are shadows. Ditto much of the landscape. I've come to the conclusion that his way of rendering the background, the people and the landscape and towns, into a hazy and indistinct blur while spotlighting his major characters was a masterful use of Gestalt psychology figure and ground. But his landscapes leave a different, more vivid trace in the reader's mind, and there are a number of variations that take a dramatic form in our own minds, elaborating a basic theme. There is a house on a hill and bluffs surrounded by autumn leaves, wood smoke from a warm and cheery fire and, often, robots with real personalities and stories of their own. There are hills and valleys and meadows and trees and rivers and streams and misty hollows, and there are barren places of trial and quest, deserts upon which a soul must journey. There are good and decent people, albeit many flawed in forgivable ways, and many aliens who are also good and decent people. Above all, there is a profound feeling of aloneness. It's not a pathological loneliness. It's not a yearning or hunger for human companionship. Simak's characters were happy and fulfilled in their solitude and the wondrous prospect it gave on the world around them. But when in the company of others, human or otherwise, they found deep and abiding friendships the like of which most of us would die for.

On our genealogical excursion we often find the ground once occupied by our ancestors, at times centuries removed. If very little remains of my hometown, much less remains of farms and villages of previous centuries. But the experience is instructive: First, to try to penetrate the change; and second, to try to understand the impact of those changes on the modern mind. Those changes are real and they are significant. In my workshops I have often asked people to tell about how they grew up, especially those of the boomer generation. I then ask them to describe the lives of their children and then compare the two visions. The result is fairly consistent: The change has not been for the better. What word describes their experience of life today? I hear two most often: Chaos and Confusion. Simak was a generation or two older than my groups. He was an adult through the Great Depression and World War II, two defining events in the life of his generation. He was more fortunate than many because he had a job through the Depression. He wrote intimate stories of people in the Depression, people he lived with in Middle America. He edited the news of a world at war, blow by blow, a war he was too old to be drawn into. He wrote or edited numerous articles on the rapid advances of science, technology and industry following the war. He also reflected deeply on the nature of the life of our ancient ancestors. We may never learn the full range of the things that influenced and shaped him, but his stories were not really about the past, not about the preparation, but about the present moment, the crisis's that his characters, none naturally heroes, are drawn into suddenly and without warning, and that is how I will treat his life and writing.

LIFE AND CAREER

The details of Simak's life are extraordinarily skimpy. What we know of him came from close friends, fellow writers, and a few who knew him only briefly near the end of his life (See bibliography for sources). Sam Moskowitz, Thomas Clarkson, Paul Walker and his literary executor David Wixon, did the most justice to his life in articles. Poul Anderson and Francis Lyall contributed memorial introductions to collections of Simak's stories. Muriel Becker composed a fabulous bibliography (book length) up to 1972, which includes an insightful interview with Simak. Phil Stephensen-Payne published an excellent and affordable and complete bibliography. Robert Ewald wrote the only book-length treatment of Simak and his work before this volume. Many of Simak's books and stories are available used on the Internet. There is an as yet un-mined archive of Simak papers at the Manuscripts Division of the University of Minnesota Libraries. There is, in short, a great deal of useful literary work yet to be done on Simak.

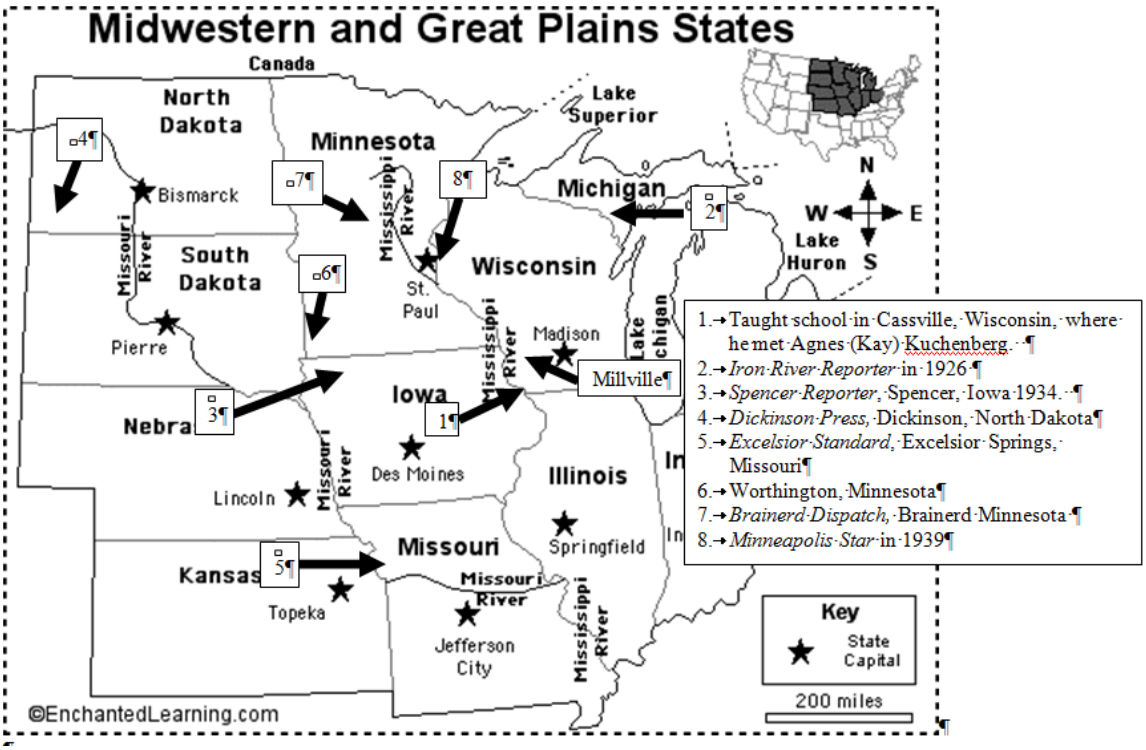
Simak was born in August 3, 1904 in rural, southwestern Wisconsin, on his grandfather's (Edward Wiseman) farm, in Grant County, Millville Township. Census records say that Wiseman emigrated from Cork County Ireland. Simak said he was born in England[3]. Wiseman was living in the Millville Township in 1880. He married Ellen Nagle. He made his living breaking tough prairie sod with a team of powerful horses and a strong, deep-cutting plow. He was buried in the Nagel cemetery in Patch Grove Township. Simak's father, John Lewis Simak, immigrated to the US in 1885 from Eastern Europe. In 1900 John was a farm hand on Edward Wiseman's farm. The farm is at the extreme northwest corner of Millville Township. The farm is indeed perched on a narrow bluff top that gives it a sense of isolation. I doubt there was much "gossiping over the fence." John married Maggie, farmer Wiseman's daughter, in 1903 and Clifford was born on the farm the year after. Simak's parent's first home was a log cabin. In 1910 the Simak family address was in Patch Grove Township, which is immediately south of Millville Township and close to the Wiseman farm. In 1917 they had an RFD out of Bridgeport, which is on the north side of the Wisconsin River within sight of the bluff on which the farm is located just as Old Cliff described it.

In many ways Simak's childhood was indeed idealistic. Simak compared his early life to the stories Robert Ruark told in his wonderful and warm classic *The Old Man and the Boy*. As a farm boy he did his share of work. He said he walked a mile and a half to a one room school for his first eight years of school and then rode a horse cross-country to high school in Patch Grove, a small, cross-roads farming village. There is an old one-room schoolhouse preserved outside the village of Millville, which may be the one he attended, or one much like it. He did well in school and got along well with the other boys but had little interest in athletics. He enjoyed the life of all the seasons like only a country boy or girl could. There wasn't a lot of money but he said the family was "close knit and devoted." The family would, as many farm families did, read aloud at night from newspapers and books. He learned to love words. When he was five, Moskowitz related, after watching his mother read the newspaper, he asked, first, if they printed news from all over the world, and second if they printed the truth. To both of these questions she answered in the affirmative. Simak said he knew at that point he wanted to be a newspaperman.

Simak completed perhaps one year at the University of Wisconsin. He took a teacher preparation course and taught school for a while in Cassville, Wisconsin, where he met Agnes

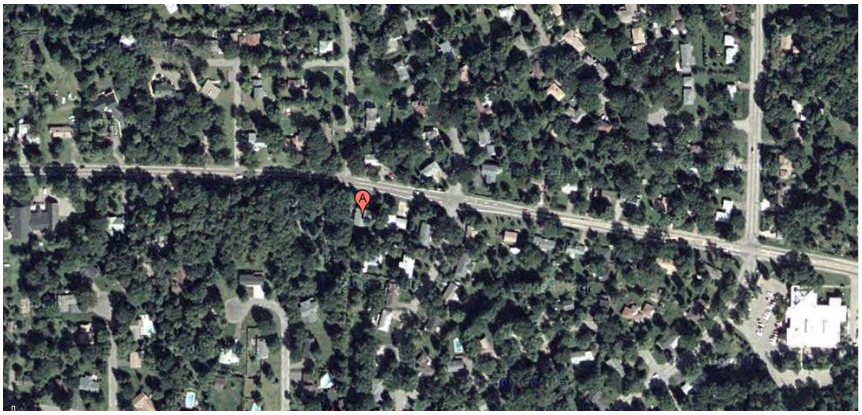
[3] This England to Ireland to America route of emigration is not uncommon.

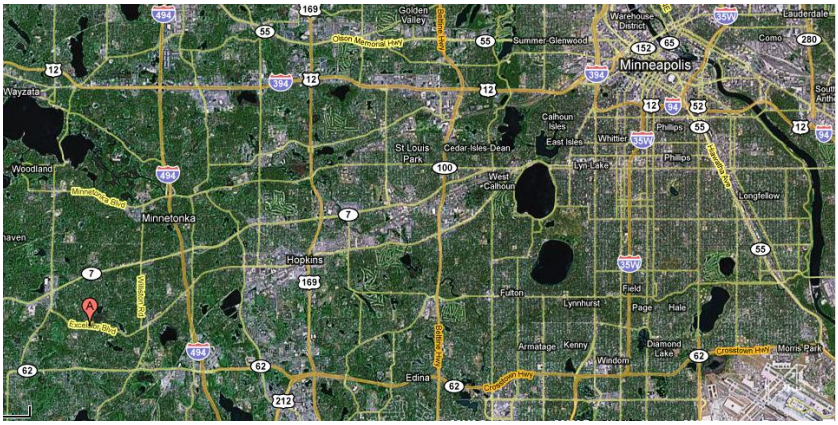
(Kay) Kuchenberg. He wanted to be a reported and got his start with the *Iron River Reporter* (Upper Peninsula, Michigan) in 1929 and was soon promoted to Editor. He married Kay on April 13, 1929. They had two children, Scott and Shelly. He joined the *Spencer Reporter*, in Spencer, Iowa, as editor, in 1934. He was hired by the McGiffin Newspaper Company after they bought the newspaper and McGiffin moved him to the *Dickinson Press*, Dickinson, North Dakota; then to the *Excelsior Standard*, Excelsior Springs, Missouri (Outside Kansas City); then to Worthington, Minnesota[4] (Southwest); and finally to the *Brainerd Dispatch*, Brainerd Minnesota (Central Minnesota). All were small town daily and weekly papers. He joining the *Minneapolis Star* in 1939 and rapidly rose through the ranks. He started as a copy editor, became chief of the copy desk and then news editor in 1949. He stayed on as news editor when the *Star* merged with the *Tribune*. In 1959 he began weekly science columns and became coordinator of the *Tribune's* Science Reading Series. In 1976 he retired and for the first time took up writing full-time. Kay died in 1985. Simak was also seriously ill since 1983, suffering from emphysema and leukemia, and had stopped writing in 1983. But he had one last novel, *Highway of Eternity*, and was working on a new short story when he died April 25, 1988, age 83.



[4] Near a town and its people Ken Burn's featured in his documentary "The War."

Minneapolis-St.Paul 16325 Excelsior Boulevard MInnetonka, MN After 1976





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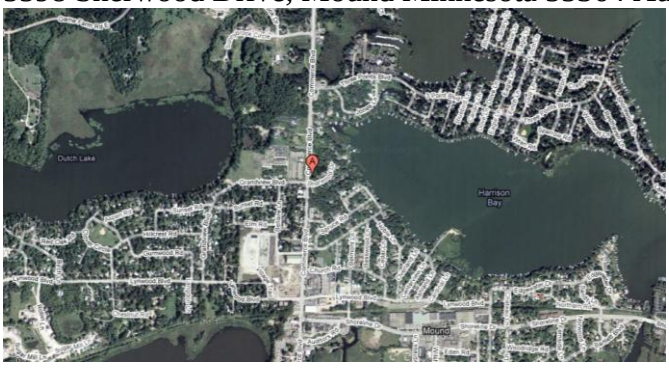
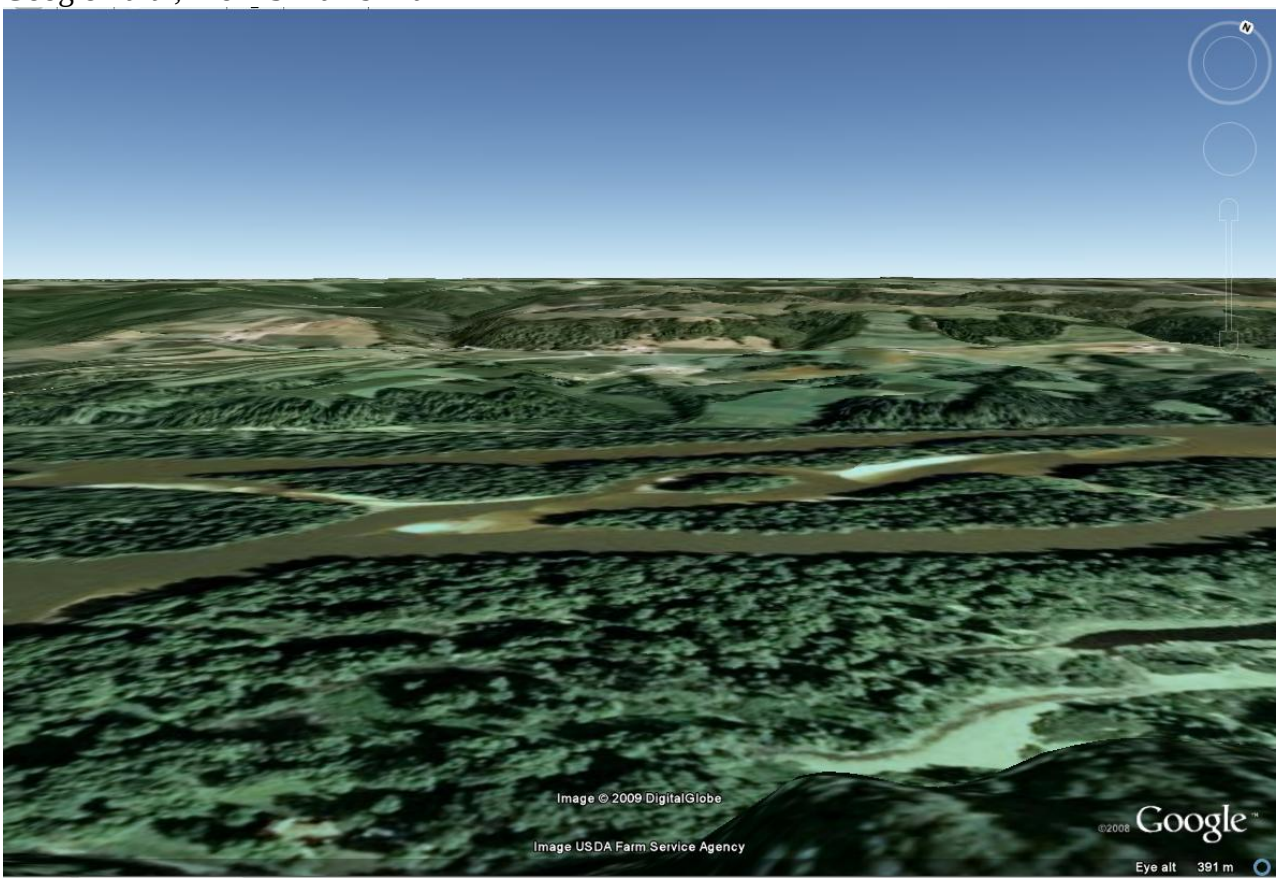


Google Earth, From Simak's Bluff



Simak Farm

Simak Farm