

BORN IN A TREE  
A Natural History

by

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Approximately 32,000 words

“Between every two pine trees  
is a doorway leading to a new  
way of life.”

John Muir

For Deanna, Michelle, and Amber

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## Preface

It is a literary tradition for writers to seek solitude, often in the form of a small and simple space or abode where they can quietly await their thoughts and work in peace, away from the distractions of the outer world. The most famous example of this of course is Thoreau and his hut at Walden Pond. So insightful was the writing resulting from Thoreau's experience that, ever since, there have been writers attempting to duplicate Thoreau's austere life in a hut or cabin of their own. Their hope being that the muse of Nature would anoint their pens as it did his.

When Deanna and I moved into the tiny one room cabin at the foot of Hawk Mountain in southeastern Pennsylvania, it wasn't to write. Neither of us were writers. We moved into the cabin to live. The year was 1972. We were both 26 years old. Our daughter Michelle was just starting school. A second daughter, Amber, was cradled in the cabin two years later. Our stay lasted a little over four and a half years. But the things we learned about Nature and ourselves in those years of rugged living have stayed with us and continue to influence our lives.

J.A

## Chapter I

### The Cabin

Deanna opened the ornate metal door to the heatrola for the first time and looked inside. The small fire box was banked with the ashes of previous fires. Remembering her Girl Scout days, she carefully laid dry twigs and crumpled paper together, forming the rough shape of a pyramid. With the strike of a wooden match, she started her first fire on a very chilly first night in the first house she ever owned. I watched admiringly as the fire blazed and Deanna began adding more wood. Then I grabbed my coat and gloves to make the long drive back to Philadelphia in order to return the borrowed moving van to its owner. "I'll be back in the morning with the car", I said, "Keep the fire going."

When I returned early in the morning, I found my young wife still sitting before the fire, looking exhausted. She had been up all night keeping the fire going, fearful that if she slept, it would die. Something inside her told her that the fire in the tiny stove was keeping her and our six year old Michelle alive. And that if the flame flickered out, they would perish together in the cold. That was how alien and big a deal heating with wood was for us. It was a matter of survival, not comfort. There was no thermostat in the cabin to set, only another log to lay on the coals. Eventually we learned to relax, but heating with wood remained a serious business.

Mountain winters are cold, and the antique heatrola was our only warmth. That old brown enameled stove, scratched and chipped by a century of use, was the difference between being able to live in the cabin or not. And for Deanna and little Michelle who, whenever I was away, wouldn't have a car to retreat to its warm heater, the wood stove was their only defense against hypothermia. I still had my job in Philadelphia as a paste up artist in a printing company. A paste up artist was a person who prepared pages for the press. The commute was two hours each way. At work I was warm in a modern building, while Deanna was at home in the mountain cabin keeping the fire going for her and Michelle. We had a small stack of dry limbs which we had gathered and chopped into logs, but our supply was running out. My plan was to collect all the wooden shipping crates and skids that the printing company routinely discarded and bring them home to saw them into small enough pieces to burn in the heatola. I figured two or three oak skids would heat our one room for almost a week.

The cabin was not made of logs. It was a wood framed building, 16' x 20', yellow with green trim, which we eventually repainted tan and dark brown. A crushed sea shell covered path led from the road to the front door. Another shell path leading around the side of the cabin to the side door and beyond into the woods, was obscured by evergreens. The land all around was mostly rocks and trees. Of this woodland we owned exactly one acre crowded with oak, maple,

cherry, white birch, ash, and tulip poplar, all tall and straight, competing for sunlight. The tulip poplar in our dooryard was three feet in diameter and over one hundred feet tall. I felt as if I was living deep in the forest under the tallest tree.

There was a small kitchen porch and a large screened in front porch. Inside, the cabin was one rectangular room with a loft accessible by a folding ladder that unfolded as you pulled it down. On one side of the downstairs room, placed in a corner, was the heatrola and on the other side of the room, an old refrigerator. The kitchen, which was set inside a small alcove, had a sink and drain which was piped through the wall. Outside the pipe simply hung a few feet above the woods floor and poured its contents onto the open ground.

We had no running water in the cabin, but there was a spring across the road always filled to overflowing. Using a small butter container, Deanna scooped water from the stream created by the run off. Each day she filled two five gallon jugs, sometimes twice a day. I don't remember us using more than twenty gallons of water in a day's time during the first two years in the cabin. Our low water usage was easily absorbed into the rocky ground where the kitchen sink pipe drained. Drinking water was poured from a jug into smaller empty milk containers and kept cold in the fridge. Water for cooking and washing was poured directly from one of the five gallon jugs as we needed it.

Deanna washed our clothes once a week in a coin operated laundry in the



nearest town until we finally found a small washing machine that fit in the cramped kitchen space. We washed ourselves in a basin in the kitchen sink and brushed our teeth outdoors. I think back to those mornings, standing in the fresh air, brushing my teeth under the canopy of trees. There was no hot water heater so when Deanna needed hot water, she heated a kettle full on the stove. Baths were taken in a large galvanized tub in a minimum amount of water which Deanna warmed with kettlefulls of hot water from the stove. Despite the labor required just to wash, we all kept clean and were always neatly dressed. Even then, my wife would not let any of us leave the house wearing stained or wrinkled clothes. She ironed frequently in the kitchen where there was a nice new and safe-looking electric outlet. We had electricity and a phone line also. But I would have given up both for an indoor toilet. Our toilet was an outhouse, fifty feet away from the kitchen porch.

Our families and friends and even some of our new neighbors who lived in modern homes must have wondered or even worried about our situation. But the tiny cabin suited us. It was cozy and all ours, free and clear. The three of us were profoundly happy and gladly accepted what many considered hardship. For Deanna, Michelle, and I, each day was shared adventure.

## Chapter II

### Who We Were And Where We Came From

Deanna grew up in East Petersburg, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Lancaster. At that time the whole area surrounding the small city of Lancaster was dominated by farmland. Many of the farms were Amish family farms. Seeing Amish boys and girls going to their own schools, Amish women pulling groceries in small wagons, Amish men in the fields walking behind mule drawn plows, and Amish families riding in horse drawn buggies, Deanna was aware of not only cultural differences but also alternative life styles. On the weekends, she and her older sister Loretta helped their parents in the city market, selling flowers grown in her father's greenhouses. Many of the competing stand holders were Amish and some were Mennonite, another religious sect that long ago settled in the area.

Deanna Lea Eshleman came from hardy Mennonite stock. Her Swiss-German ancestry has been in this country for more than 9 generations. Like the Amish, Mennonites adhere to a practice of Christianity that not only governs the way they worship but also how they dress and socialize. Originally Mennonites were farmers and tradesmen servicing the predominantly agricultural community. Gradually, some branched out into the broader business world. Deanna's paternal grandfather Eshleman was a car salesman while her maternal grandfather Myers

worked his whole life as a farmhand. Deanna's dad Clair Eshleman, who was raised Mennonite, worked in a brake-shoe factory and also maintained a business at home raising flowers and vegetable plants in three small greenhouses. During World War II Clair had gone against the pacifist tradition of the Mennonite church and joined the United States Army. Because of this, he and his young wife Mary were forced to separate themselves from the sect, but they remained devout Christians and raised their children as such.

When I first met Deanna, I was struck by the sureness she possessed of herself and the obvious strength of her religious beliefs. I had recently fallen away from Catholicism, and at the time believed in little more than myself. Though we were both only nineteen, she seemed older to me. From the first, I thought she was beautiful. I still do. Her face is small and oval. Her eyes are sky blue. She smiles easily and laughs often. And all of this physical loveliness is only the outer part of a deeper beauty inside, in her selfless heart and honest mind. My mother always said Deanna's voice reminded her of that of Snow White in the Disney film. And at times it does match that sweetness of sound. But I think what my mother really was hearing was the voice of a young woman who had no axes to grind; no argument she felt compelled to win. And unlike the joyous but loud and sometimes boisterous voices in the New York Italian-American household my mother grew up in, Deanna's voice never competed for attention in the room.

From little on up, she has been a doer rather than a talker. As a teenager her weeks were busy: one night for Girl Scouts; one night for choir practice; marching band practice after school; working in her father's greenhouses at home and helping her parents at the weekend market. And with all these activities, she still found time for dances, parties, camping trips and dates.

Coming from a household that nurtured and raised tiny seedlings to sturdy flowering plants, Deanna is a nurturer by nature. She nurtures herself through constant reading and others by being ready to listen or lend a helping hand. In her childhood friendships, she was a pivotal person, bringing people together who may not have become friends without her. I saw this immediately in the way her very different roommates in Philadelphia came together around her. In high school, she had been a member of the Future Nurses of America and after graduation, she left home to train to be an x-ray technician at Hahneman Hospital in Center City, Philadelphia. She and two other girls in her class shared an apartment on Walnut Street just a few blocks from Rittenhouse Square, a popular gathering place for writers and artists. An artist friend of mine named Frank Schroyer, frequented the Square much more than I did and he came to know someone who knew the three girls in the nearby apartment. It so happened that Deanna and her roommates, Bev and Sarah, were throwing a party for the other students in their class and some hospital interns. This acquaintance of Frank's

invited Frank. And Frank invited me. Not one to turn down an invitation to a party, I went. It became a turning point in my life.

Enthusiastic, likable, almost burdened by natural talent, I was aimless as to where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do. The only things I fully understood about myself were that I loved riding my Triumph motorcycle, playing guitar, and I could draw anything I could see or imagine. Art to me was a given that I completely took for granted. I didn't know that the young woman I found so attractive and centered and so sure of herself and so distant from me was the one person who could and would help me harness all my energy, good nature, and natural talents and focus on what I was meant to do with such gifts. In fact, before I met Deanna, I had never even considered my drawing and music and quick grasping mind as gifts.

It took some time but not too long a time for us to become a couple. And once we did, we were totally committed to one another. In less than a year, we were married. In our first year of marriage, we had our first child, Michelle, who we named after the Beatle's song so popular at the time. And at the age of twenty we were looking at the possibility of a two year separation while I served in the military. It was the time of the Vietnam War and rather than be drafted into the Army, I voluntarily joined the Navy. Doing so postponed my leaving for active duty approximately one year, and as newlyweds that one year meant a great deal

to us. Eventually I did get my orders and was sent to Bremerhaven, Germany. In six months we had saved enough money for Deanna and Michelle to fly over and be with me.

Since I was low in rank, we couldn't get housing on the U.S. base. So we rented a tiny apartment in a nearby German village. There we learned to do with very little money. But we did as many things that we could on the small monthly salary I was allotted. Picnics, walks, birdwatching in the well-groomed parks – these were the ways our days were spent. We missed being home in our own country. But we also tried not to miss any chance we had to experience the unique part of Germany we were living in. Bremerhaven is situated on the North Sea. There were dikes and windmills very much like those you associate with Holland. I had taken up photography back in the States and with my 35mm camera and 300mm telephoto lens, I photographed the song birds, squirrels, and deer that we saw in German gardens and the seals and large sea birds on the North Sea coast. Deanna and Michelle began to look like the German mothers and daughters in their dress and, in civilian clothes, I also could have been mistaken for a German national. We had in effect, blended in and adapted well to the little village of stone houses with thickly thatched roofs. Our tiny apartment had a large kitchen window that looked out on a neatly tended vegetable garden. We awoke to the singing of birds and the clip clop of a horse or burro pulling their owner's

farm wagons down our road. One afternoon the pastoral clip clop was suddenly ended by the screeching sounds of a skidding auto. Not twenty feet from our front door the burro we had been seeing each day lay struck down by a speeding car. The farmer was beside himself with emotion, seeing his beloved animal on the road, immobile, gasping for breath. In what must have been a supremely difficult act of love, he bent down, stroked the suffering creature with one hand, and with the other slit the burro's throat. Blood poured from the severed vein and pooled in the street. The burro's suffering was over.

This sort of sight was a far cry from the sights and sounds on the American Base where the apartments were all completely isolated from German life. There, it was like living in any apartment complex back home. The distinct separation from what was considered the ideal and what we were doing made a big impact on our way of thinking. We found that we preferred living in the village over the comforts of the Base. We enjoyed the daily tasks of shopping just enough for the small refrigerator, opening the couch for sleeping every night, and in the cold months, keeping the small oil furnace lit and filled with fuel. We liked the immediacy of the tiny garden and enjoyed seeing the storks nesting on our neighbor's roof. It was living much closer to Nature than the apartments on the U.S. Base could provide. And most importantly, we learned that it didn't matter what everyone else was doing. We set our own standards for living well.

Once we were back in the U.S. I returned to my previous job in the Philadelphia printing company where I had begun as an office boy, worked my way to the negative storage department, and finally was given a position in the art department. In our family, drawing was like breathing. My sister and brothers and I all knew how to draw. In part through natural talent, but mostly I think because my father Ed Arnosky worked at home as a patent draftsman. He did the official drawings of new inventions to be filed in the U.S. Patent Office. These files protected the rights to claims of ownership of inventions of all kinds. Some of today's most commonly known and widely used products were first handed to my father in their primitive, prototype forms. And each was explained personally by their creators so that my father would fully understand what it was and how the thing worked that he was being hired to draw. Dad made \$35 per sheet. Some inventions took one sheet. Some two. He never got rich doing this. But the many contraptions and devices invented to improve the quality of people's lives, always present on my father's drawing board, was enriching. At least it was for me. I learned at a very young age just how creative the human mind can be and how problems could be solved with ingenuity.

Perhaps the most universally known invention my father "drew up", as he called it, was Velcro. "Look," Dad said to me, as he pushed the two strips of Velcro cloth together, "one has hooks; the other has loops!" I always think of his words



when I use Velcro, pushing it together on a jacket, or pressing it down on buttonless pocket. “One has hooks; the other has loops!” Dad boldly predicted that “This stuff will eventually replace zippers!” He had no idea then of just how many uses would be found for such a simple idea.

We had the first Mascara eyelash brush in our house before it hit the market. The first snowblower. The first ice boat (a sailboat with a long blade where the keel would normally be). The first automatic x-ray developing machine. The first multiple hotdog broiler (the thing that rolls the hotdogs to cook them evenly all around). The original gyroscopic camera that made it possible for film makers to film moving subjects from a moving vehicle or on the run and not shake the lens and blur the image. That invention won the inventor an academy award for technical achievement just a few years later.

The most amazing invention my father brought home was the first Polaroid-Land camera. It was big, heavy, and had an old-fashioned leather bellows to move the lens back and forth in order to focus. My father was so taken by this instantaneous photography that he rushed home with it, anxious to quickly photograph the camera from all angles and use the instant photos to do his drawings from, thus finishing the job in a fraction of the time. What he hadn't considered was that there was only one Polaroid camera and it couldn't be used to take pictures of itself.

When a machine was too big to bring home, he went to it and looked at it until he had memorized all its parts, and figured out how they were put together. He took some photos with his brownie. But it was his innate knowledge of machinery and uncanny total recall that always was his best resource. My father knew how machines worked but he didn't know how his own mind worked. He feared his own thoughts, especially when something popped into his head that was disturbing. Rather than try to understand the workings of his very creative and powerful imagination, he attempted to drown it out with alcohol. And when he was drinking, he lashed out angrily at everything around him. He verbally abused my mother and frequently beat me, his oldest son, for reasons inside himself that we had no way of comprehending.

Deanna's father Clair was everything my father wasn't. He was selfless and sound in body and mind. Everything about Clair confounded my father. Clair didn't drink or smoke. He was an Army veteran of battle in the Pacific but never spoke of it. He was a florist – something my father viewed with suspicion in a man. And Clair had what Dad considered a girl's name. Yet unlike my father, whose manhood quivered inside him as if it was always being questioned, Clair was unselfconsciously masculine. In the Army, he acquired some fame among the troops as a boxer fighting under the name "The Dutchman". In his prime, he alone could pull a line of men down in a tug of war.

But I think the thing about Clair that most intimidated my father was the fact that Clair was as strong spiritually as he was physically. Clair was a deeply religious man. In my father's house, God was an unwanted intruder. As a teenager, pressured by his mother to become a Catholic priest, he rebelled and denounced his faith. But he retained his fear of the power of his mother's beliefs. As a result he reacted to any mention of religion with a mixture of fear and anger and a tirade of vulgar curses. I never heard Clair swear or take the Lord's name in vain, even when he was angry. And he could become very angry at times.

I saw Clair as a man I could admire and emulate and I adopted him as a role model. To me, he was the ideal father. And for years I spoke to him as a son speaks to his father, until the last years when he was faltering and we spoke as friends, and toward the end, when we couldn't speak at all. Deanna sometimes laments that her father never spoke much to her or her sisters when they were growing up. But she adds that he was always there for them, making sure they got where they wanted to go or had to be, were given everything they needed to achieve, felt grounded in the love of their family and buoyed by the love of God.

Clair and Mary both worked hard to afford the important things for their children. Mary was a talented seamstress and sewed her daughters clothes from paper patterns and bolts of fabric. And when the time came, she sewed their wedding gowns. She also worked away from home in a laundry, a food

preparation factory, and in a clothing store doing customer alterations.

I never heard Mary say an unkind thing about another person, but she did show her disapproval, usually with a quick dismissive wave of her hand. Like her husband, who kept the war and other emotional scars locked inside himself, Mary also had a private part of herself that she kept inside. And you always knew when you were stepping too closely. But aside from that core of privacy, she was a very generous person. She was always making things for others, sewing decorative designs, knitting blankets or sweaters for little ones and babies on the way.

My mother, whose name was Marie, tried to be a good mother to us, but she was distracted and eventually consumed by the problems caused by her husband's alcoholism. When dad was at his worst, he'd be gone for days, drinking in the Philadelphia bars. Every payday he would cash his check and spend most of it buying drinks for everyone he met. My mother had to make do with whatever money he came home with. We lived in Malvern, a distant suburb of Philadelphia. Often she would have to go to Philly to find him, searching the bars she knew he frequented in order to plead with him to come home before all the money was spent. His irresponsible behavior was hard for her to accept, I'm sure. She had come from a loving family in which everyone looked out for everyone else. She was naturally compassionate and friendly. However, after she married my father and they moved from New York City, those qualities were leached away by the

disappointment and despair caused by my father's destructive behavior. I truly believe that once my mother met my father, she was never able to advance a single step in her understanding of the world beyond what she was fortunate enough to have learned in her youth.

We lived in a beautiful rural area. But even though the world outside my mother's kitchen window included trees and grass and birds and sunny blue skies, it didn't enrich her. She had little time to truly notice or appreciate. Too often she was lost in worry over Dad or deep in prayer over Dad or physically trying to prevent him from going out where he would spend more of the money she desperately needed at home. She kept us fed on canned ravioli and a dish she mixed of rice, ground meat, and tomato sauce. But by mid week, the refrigerator chilled more empty space than food, and we would feed ourselves with tea and toast or butter sandwiches sprinkled with sugar.

As the oldest child, I tried to help. I took care of my brothers and sister whenever Mom had to go and find Dad. Sometimes it would take her until late the next day. I did the best I could to stay out of trouble and not add to her problems. And on one occasion when I was invited to a party at a friend's house, I brought food home which I hid inside my shirt to help fill our empty refrigerator.

Deanna brought her childhood filled with love and happiness to our marriage. I came loaded down with the sad baggage from my youth. But I was eager to shed it

and embrace all the good my bride was so willing to share. And it was these two very different people with completely opposite backgrounds who, along with a six year old daughter, came to make a home in a little one room cabin at the foot of Hawk Mountain.

## Chapter III

### Making A Home In The Woods

The plan was a good one. Put simply, it was to buy a place we could afford without a mortgage. That meant we would have to find a place out of the city in some rural area where the prices of homes were lower. We were living in an apartment just outside of Philadelphia, but the houses in the area were out of reach. So on weekends we would drive into the mountains searching for something cheaper. The idea of living in the boondocks appealed to both of us. But even where the populations were small and the houses far apart, real estate was expensive.

One day while driving in the mountains forty miles or so north of Reading, Pa. I turned down a narrow road that ran along the base of high mountainous ridge called Hawk Mountain. We carried drinking water in the car in an old Boy Scout canteen and the canteen was empty. Deanna spotted a spring house on the side of the road and asked me to pull over so she could fill the canteen with cold water. I pulled over in front of a small cabin opposite the spring on the other side of the road. As Deanna filled our canteen, I noticed a small card taped to the inside of one of the cabin's windows. It said FOR SALE and something else, too small to read. With our binocular, I read the card again and discovered it had a phone number to call. And after we walked around the tiny building together, we decided

we would give the owners a ring. It was a match made in the mountains. \$8,000 cash bought us the cabin and a new way of life.

It was affordable, but it wasn't easy. In order to live in the cabin we would have to do without running water and heat with wood. I would have to commute much farther to get to work, but I was willing to drive the distance and more importantly, Deanna was willing to burn wood, and do without plumbing. We had a lot to learn. Right off we learned that burning the old skids that I brought home from the printing company was not very practical. The kiln-dried oak was hard to saw and it burned extremely hot. Too hot to be safe. If we were going to burn wood, I would have to fell trees and saw them into stove sized logs. Neither Deanna nor myself had ever felled a tree or sawed a log. And we would have to cut down at least one tree every few weeks and make hundreds of logs in order to make it through the winter.

One day we pulled into our driveway and discovered a mountain of tree stumps – each one- and- a- half feet in diameter – piled on our property. Our woodland neighbors, none of which we had met, must have been talking and worrying about our non-existent wood supply, and one of them had anonymously gifted us the stumps. One stump had enough wood in it to heat the cabin for a whole day. And there were at least fifty stumps in the pile.

You can't put a huge tree stump in a fireplace or woodstove. It has to be split



into smaller pieces. Splitting wood is an ancient art, and one of the great achievements of self reliance one can feel. The great naturalist John Burroughs said that every log warms you twice, once while you work to split it and again when it burns in your stove. For logs under twelve inches in diameter, you stand the log upright on another much wider diameter log which serves as a chopping block, and strike it with the blade of a long handled axe. If the grain is straight and the wood is dry, the log splits in two. Depending on the size of your firebox, you burn the halves, or split them to make quarters. Then if you want even smaller sticks, say for kindling, you split the quarters.

For stumps, which are logs with a diameter too wide to split with an axe, a wedge is needed. A wedge is a two to three pound wedge-shaped chunk of cast iron. To use it, you hold the wedge on a stump and hit it with a sledgehammer once or twice until it is stuck in the wood. The best place to do this is a little off center in the rings of wood just outside the soft heart wood. Then you hit the wedge with the six pound sledgehammer until, hopefully, it splits the stump. If it doesn't, you have a large stump with what looks like an iron nose sticking out of it. This is why you keep two wedges.

I had to do this with every one of those huge stumps, one or two every few days. The exercise made my arms, neck, shoulders, and chest grow. For the first time in my life, I could feel the musculature of my biceps inside my shirtsleeves

without having to “make a muscle”. Using a small pocket-guide to trees, I identified my stumps as being ash. Ash wood is supposed to split easily because its grain is so straight. Look at an ash tree and you see a tall, very straight, heavily barked trunk, with very few branches below the crown. When sawed up and left to dry a little while, ash logs split beautifully – every log halved, every half quartered. But when first cut and still “green”, which really means the wood is still moist all the way through, the moisture acts as a glue holding the log together. Green wood resists splitting. The ash stumps were very green and splitting up just one of them took me the better part of an afternoon.

Such a labor intensive life style required time. With the four hour commute to and from work and eight hours at work each day, I had little time and no daylight to cut wood or do any other chores. And though she would try, Deanna couldn't do it all. I decided to leave my job and try freelancing as an illustrator from the cabin. We had a phone and a mailbox. We'd see if they could bring me work. Meanwhile, we were living a Spartan existence with very few expenses. One freelance assignment a month would pay our bills. With my days free, I could spend hours drumming up work on the phone, sending out samples to magazines, and still have plenty of time to do chores. My chores were mostly wood chores. I also made bird boxes, repaired window screens, set up feeders for the wildlife, and maintained the outhouse. Deanna kept the fire going, collected water from

the spring, cooked all our meals, prepared baths, and cleaned the cabin. She also got Michelle ready for school each morning.

The green wood worked well keeping us warm. Keeping us safe was another matter. You could hear a sizzling sound coming from the logs as they burned. I liked the sound. I didn't know that it was a portent of danger. One morning I awoke to the tremendous roar coming from inside the chimney. The house was very hot. When I went downstairs to check the woodstove, the stove pipe was glowing red. The chimney was on fire and it was terrifying. I called the girls down and we dressed in case we had to flee a burning home. The fire burned itself out quickly, but the fear lingered. I couldn't figure out what we had done wrong. I went outside and looked up at the chimney. It was black from the smoke and the metal chimney cap, still very hot, was simmering in the dew damp air. There was something else. Brown goo appeared to be dripping on the outside of the chimney, discoloring all the cinder blocks down to a distance of about six feet.

Down the road, also looking up at our smoldering chimney was a large bear of a man. I walked up to him and he introduced himself as Carl Holler, our nearest neighbor. He had seen the fire and was ready to call the fire department if it hadn't burned out quickly. He himself was a volunteer fireman. He told me chimney fires are most often caused by highly flammable creosote building up on the inside of the chimney flue. Creosote was that brown stuff dripping down the

chimney blocks. It is a chemical reaction created in the wood smoke whenever green wood is burned. All it takes is a cinder or lit spark to ignite the creosote inside the chimney and the whole mess burns up. We were lucky. The fire burned out fast. No damage was done.

Mr. Holler said that it was always better to let wood dry six months before burning it. But he knew we didn't have a half a year to dry wood. We needed wood to burn right away. When he dropped off the stumps, he purposely chose ash because it burns green better than most kinds of wood. Ash dries quickly because its wood is not as dense as maple, oak, or cherry. So he compromised to get us heat. And he had been watching our chimney for some time, knowing that creosote would certainly be building up inside. We had no idea that anyone else had our welfare in mind, and it was a comforting realization.

Carl holler turned out to be quite a character as well as a good neighbor. He was a big man, about six feet two inches tall, and weighed well over 250 pounds. I'm a fairly big guy and I found myself looking up talking to him. He wore steel toed boots, denim overalls, and a plaid flannel shirt. Under his shirt he had on a t-shirt or long-john top that was so thread bare, you could see in the part of the shirt showing at his collar that chest hairs were finding their way through the weave of the fabric. His face was whiskered all over but you couldn't call it a beard. He growled his speech and spoke in an old Pennsylvania Dutch dialect.

Whatever he said, I took seriously, because of his conviction in saying it.

Mr. and Mrs. Holler lived in a low profile shack of a house that blended so well into the evergreens that I hadn't noticed it before, even though it was only four or five hundred feet down the road. He invited me in to meet the Misses. Mrs. Holler was as rotund as her husband, only much shorter. She had coal black hair that she wore straight. Shy but friendly, she smiled as I stood inside their home and complimented them on how warm and toasty it was inside. They were very proud of the place. Carl had built it himself. It was framed entirely with two by fours and sided with flattened and hammered out metal kerosene and oil containers. The outside of the metal cans faced inside and since there was no insulation or inside wall board, you could read the can names and labels between the wooden studs. There was no plywood in the house except on the roof, which was covered with black tarpaper. Just tarpaper, plywood, and a thin wall of tin kept the rain and wind out. The cold was kept at bay by an enormous wood burning furnace situated right in the middle of the kitchen.

Carl opened the cast iron door and threw a whole unsplit log into the cavernous firebox. Then slammed the door with a loud bang! I was offered a seat. All of the furniture and appliances in the kitchen including the refrigerator, stove, and cabinets of all different brands and vintage were made to match with blue polka dots the hollers had spray painted on them. Some of the blue dots had lines

of paint dripping down from being sprayed too heavily.

Carl's father lived with them, but not in the main house. He lived in the backyard in a tiny tin and wood shanty of his own. Carl took me back to meet his pap. The shanty had floor space perhaps five times that of our outhouse. There was a bed, a stove, and a rocking chair which the old man was sitting on when I shook his hand. Old man Holler was smaller than his son, but large in bone and most likely was a bigger man in his youth. A retired coal miner, he had a long blue mark on the side of his face. He called it a "coal tattoo" and he got it during an accident in the mine.

The shanty was not heated with wood. It was warmed by coal which the old man kept in a loose pile on the floor in the corner of the room. Carl said that more than once, his father nearly died from carbon monoxide poisoning when the stovepipe was dampened too much and the toxic fumes backed up into the room during the night. Each time, the old miner crawled from his bed to the door and got out to breathe fresh air just in time.

Carl and his wife both worked and Carl couldn't understand why I wasn't seeking employment in the area. He never brought it up directly. He was too reserved for that. But he did go out of his way to come and tell me about various people who just happened to be in a position to hire a young fellow like me. He even coaxed me to go to his fire house with him one afternoon and, as we

sipped beer, he introduced me to his fellow volunteer firefighters who owned businesses and might want to hire somebody. “Not you, understand,” he would say, “just somebody”. Eventually Carl stopped worrying over my unemployment status and when he did, he stopped pressing the issue.

Carl Holler couldn't see it but actually, I was busy all the time, learning about the animals and plants around the cabin. I had begun keeping a record of all the birds that visited our feeders and sketching the animal tracks and signs I came across on my long hikes in the mountains. Professionally I was still drawing cartoonish people for ads and some pen and ink anthropomorphic animals for other freelance assignments. But I had begun to have aspirations of becoming a wildlife artist of the sort who illustrated the outdoor scenes of fishing and hunting in the magazines I enjoyed reading.

Deanna and I worked together to make life in our rustic home as comfortable as possible. And Michelle helped wherever she could. After seeing the Holler's tin walls, I insulated our cabin floor and sealed it off with large aluminum printing plates I had gotten out of the trash bin before I left my job. Inching under the cabin's tiny crawl space on my back to do this insulation job was not an easy thing for me to do. Not because of any lack of nimbleness or strength. But because of the rats and snakes I knew lived in such places. The crawl space was a haven for small animals. They lived in the deep holes and tiny crevices in the rocky ground,

and hid underneath the many bits and pieces of unused wood stored there for years. Luckily none of the creatures appeared while I worked, and after finishing the insulation, I left them all cozy under the house. We were cozy inside it.

You might wonder how we could have lived in a place knowing such things were living a few feet below us. The simple answer is that we just did. We had a lot to get used to in our rustic circumstances. Just using the outhouse took some serious getting used to. In the summer, it was odorous. In the freezing winter it was a shock to the system, going from the warm cabin to the cold room outside. For obvious reasons, the outhouse was fifty feet away from the cabin. A small footpath lined on both sides with white stones marked the way in the dark. Our first winter, we learned to hang the toilet seat in the house to keep it warm. But after carrying it fifty feet to the outhouse, it had chilled enough to still make you shiver when you sat on it. One night I was walking to the outhouse carrying the seat under my arm when I got a shock of a different kind. A large bobcat was resting on the outhouse roof and when it saw me coming, it let out a shriek of disapproval that only a wildcat could produce. But I was on a mission and going to complete it, bobcat or not.

While taking care of that little building, I learned about the basic needs of everyday living that we as humans require and the impact that simple requirement has on the land. Today we call such an impact a carbon footprint.



Back then I could only wish it was carbon I was dealing with. The deep hole had to be limed once a week to encourage the breakdown of the organic matter that piled up if it didn't break down. Liming also lessened the odor. Once every four or five months I had to use a long handled shovel to move things around down there to further facilitate breakdown and so we weren't sitting too close to, well...just too close.

I wasn't cut out for doing anything this basic and the job was a very unpleasant one for me. But I did it, and I kept a nice clean outhouse for the family. I wonder today, if more people were forced to confront or even take care of their own waste in such a direct way as we were doing at the cabin, that perhaps they wouldn't create as much of it. Flushing gallons of water to dispose of a single facial tissue or filling a commode with loads of toilet paper every time you go, no matter what, puts a lot of unnecessary waste out there. Sure, we were dealing with a most primitive sanitary set up, and we hoped to someday improve our situation by adding a more sanitary bathroom to the cabin. But having to deal with the outhouse made us more aware of our own impact on the land, and we did what we could at the time to keep that impact low. Unfortunately, our visitors and guests never appreciated all our efforts of cleanliness and maintenance regarding the outhouse and I suspect most of them held off until they could find a modern restroom on the drive home. It certainly prevented any outlasted

welcomes.

That was what visiting us was back then. When friends or family came to see us, they imagined themselves in our place. And perhaps they returned home better appreciating the comforts they had. But they saw us not complaining or bemoaning our situation. They saw us happily making the best of it, enjoying what we had, completely out of touch with the needs and wants of popular culture. For some of them we became a positive example of a simpler way of life. It may even have been inspiring. It inspired us. We found each day wonderful, exciting, challenging, healthful, and joyful all mixed together. We thought we were living like the old pioneers. But in truth we were new pioneers. Our desire to live more simply and take no more than we needed was not the old pioneer desire to conquer and subdue the land. We wanted to step more softly and appreciate our surroundings as we walked. It was not selfless. We wanted what we wanted and what we wanted was to live in the cabin free and clear of the burden of debt that most people accepted without thought of an alternative. We wanted an alternative.

As it turned out, our self-serving wish to live our own way forced us to be more cognizant of the land and made us aware of how much it meant to us. Our little plot of woods educated us about ecology and conservation like no other classroom would have been able to do. It was a simple matter of cause and effect.

We knew we were disposing wash water and waste into the soil we lived on, so we did everything we could to lessen the amount of water and waste we had to dispose of. We didn't know it then, but what we were doing was representative of a larger movement of people in the 1970's called the Back To The land Movement, all searching for simpler lives and ways to live more harmoniously with Nature. I wouldn't call us all early environmentalists, far from it, but in our effort to be sufficient,, we unknowingly were helping to lay the groundwork for the environmental movement and the emphasis on renewable resources, more Earth-friendly products, and gentler living alternatives that we have today.

At the cabin, everything we did was a learning experience that began in ignorance and gradually moved toward a kind of enlightenment. A perfect example of this was the garden. From the start we had planned on growing most of our food and Deanna's knowledge of caring for plants once they sprouted in her father's greenhouse was a good foundation for us to build upon. But what Deanna hadn't learned all the while she worked for her dad were the properties soil must have in order to grow cultivated plants such as vegetables and flowers. To us, soil was soil. And plants need soil, water, and sunlight to grow. We had plenty of all three, or so we thought, and began planting seeds in all the sunlit patches. But none of them sprouted. Even though our woodland soil was soft and

dark and rich with organic matter, nothing we planted in it would grow. Sunlight reached down through the canopy of trees and lit the planted places for hours every day. Yet our seeds remained dormant.

Deanna came to the conclusion that woods soil just wasn't the right kind of soil for a garden. And she also thought that the sun, while strong on the ground while it was shining down, wasn't shining through the treetops long enough to trigger germination. With only woods soil and a canopy of trees shading us from the sun, our chances of growing a garden were slim if not non-existent. What could we do?

I laid awake one night wondering about it. What to do? Our entire property was thick with trees. Perhaps we should have purchased more sunny, open land? Why didn't we think about a place for a garden when we chose the cabin? But we didn't choose the cabin. It chose us by offering its spring water when we were thirsty, causing us to stop and see the For Sale sign. I laid in bed thinking about all of this and about a garden in the woods and suddenly, it came to me! I could build a garden in our woods the way a landscaper builds a park or creates a pond. To do this I would have to create a spot with everything a garden needs. Sunlight. I could cut down just enough trees to let the sun shine in most of the daylight hours. Topsoil. I could buy it in bags. No. I could have truckloads brought in!

The very next morning I found a trucker who agreed to bring me the topsoil. He also suggested bringing shale to be laid down first for good drainage. I also found

a fellow who had a backhoe who agreed to spread the shale, then the topsoil evenly over the ground. But before all this, I had to complete the monumental task of cutting down the trees, sawing them into logs, and moving and stacking the logs away from the created clearing. Then, somehow, I would have to remove all the stumps and boulders to prepare a bed for the first truckloads of shale.

I chose a spot on our property where there were no old and stately trees. Then I watched over the next few days to see just how many trees it would be necessary for me to fell in order to let enough sunshine in. The trees in our garden spot were tall and spindly and grew very close together. I would have to cut eighty down to open the ground to sun. I sawed for days and stacked the wood to dry. It dawned on me that I was accomplishing two things – cutting firewood for next winter and making a garden for homegrown food.

The fellow with the backhoe used it to rip out the tree stumps and roots and remove them along with all of the largest boulders. Then truckload after truckload came and went bringing the shale and after that, an equal amount of topsoil which was all smoothed over with the backhoe. The whole operation cost me less than two hundred dollars. When the dust cleared, we had an eighty by sixty foot rectangle of sunlit soil behind the cabin. I made good use of the tops and left over branches of the trees I had cut down by using them to build a fence of rails around the clearing. Around the fence, I stretched small diameter chicken wire fencing to

keep the woodland critters out.

Deanna and I worked together all day, every day that spring to make the garden beautiful as well as prosperous. Michelle helped too. Our work was our play because we did it together. We were living every minute consciously, taking nothing for granted. We were aware of what exactly we needed and knew how to provide it for ourselves. And we found out that one secret to happiness was congenial, shared work.

We had learned these things from the forest that grew around us and the trees we judiciously cut down and the outhouse we maintained and the garden we grew. We learned this from our proud independent neighbors. And we learned from ourselves that we could be happy without most of the conveniences too often mistaken for necessities. We had made a home in the woods and had everything we needed.

## Chapter IV

### Our Circle Grows

Summer in the woods was green and lush. Even without a recent rain, the ground was damp to the touch. Black masked Wood Frogs hopped in the wettest spots. Bright orange Red Efts crawled on the shells covering the outhouse path. And under every rock, I found a glistening Striped Salamander. Summer red Whitetailed does with their spotted fawns stepped silently through the woodland, skirting the garden fence, eyeing our cabbages and turnip tops growing in green rows.

Carl holler wore the same clothing in summer that he wore all year, including the threadbare thermal underwear. Mrs. Holler dressed appropriate to the season, even wearing a bathing suit once in a while. The Hollers had a swimming pool in front of the house. It was one of those round above ground aluminum sided pools with a blue plastic liner. It was four feet deep and filled to the brim with its original water, untreated for years – a veritable petri dish of micro organisms. The blue liner was green with algae and the water was green as well. But that didn't bother Mrs. Holler who swam in it and afterwards would sunbathe on the roof of their tin house.

We were enjoying some of the fruits of our labors. Wood ducks were swimming in the small pond I had created by damming the stream that flowed from the

spring. The wood I had cut to make room for the garden was beginning to crack audibly, drying nicely for coming Fall and Winter fires. Deanna was freezing green beans she had harvested from the garden and picking fresh leaf lettuce and Early Girl tomatoes for the dinner table. And Michelle was keeping house in the little A-frame playhouse I built for her using the skids and packing crates I never burned.

I had been getting some freelance work from a few sources in Philadelphia – jobs given to me by old work mates who were now in new companies and in a position to dole out assignments. All the work they gave me was in advertising and though challenging, not as satisfying as it once had been. I was spending whole days outdoors learning about plants and observing wildlife. I was hiking in the mountains and catching wild trout in pristine streams. I yearned to share these things somehow, but I really hadn't considered pursuing illustrative work in outdoor magazines where most nature and wildlife art was showcased. For one thing, I wasn't skilled enough in drawing naturalistic animals. I had made some attempts at painting wildlife but professionally I remained a pen and ink artist who specialized in cartooning. And the cartoon assignments I was getting from the city were good paying jobs. Though we had no mortgage, we did have bills – gas, oil, auto repairs, registrations, fishing license, auto , health and property insurance, meat, sweets, and condiments. And the Philadelphia freelance work paid for them.



I sent some whimsical drawings and puzzle ideas to Golden Magazine, a very popular children's periodical at the time. To my delight, the editor loved them and over the next months she provided us with hundreds of dollars worth of work. Her name was Denise Van Lear, a young, attractive, athletic woman originally from Virginia. She had a nice southern accent and I enjoyed speaking with her over the phone. She loved the outdoors and along with her boyfriend Art, was an avid backpacker. Denise was open for any idea I had to create new and more complex dot-to-dot puzzles and mazes, and she bought as many as I could create.

I began drawing short comic strip style wordless stories about life in the woods. The character I created for the stories was a little woodsman named Nathaniel. Denise flipped over these and cherished every Nathaniel story I sent. She even saved the original art rather than return it to me. With Nathaniel as my centerpiece in the magazine, I began creating more outdoor and Nature oriented puzzles such as a dot-to-dot showing kids the proper way to web a snowshoe. Or connecting the dots to find out what kind of bird is swooping down to snatch up a fish. And with my freelance work finally reflecting the things I really was interested in rather than a hodge-podge of topics assigned to me, my own nature study intensified. I began drawing from Nature on my walks and even on fishing trips, filling page after page of a leather bound journal with leaping trout, winged insects, and deer alive or hanging in front of hunters' sheds.

My career as a cartoonist slowly began to look more like the budding career of a wildlife artist. I had found my true calling in the woods and mountains. I was as comfortable outdoors among the trees as I was at home beside the fire. My sketchbook began including notes and thoughts about the subjects I was drawing. Soon I was writing short pieces about the things I was seeing outdoors. This rapid growth of expression about the local wildlife encouraged me to visit the Nature Center in the Sanctuary atop Hawk Mountain, to see if they could use an artist like me.

Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, the first ever sanctuary for birds of prey, was an intimidating place. To birdwatchers and the more advanced “birders”, Hawk Mountain was hallowed ground. I first learned about the place when Deanna, Michelle and I were living in our apartment. I had read an essay titled “Winter On Hawk Mountain” by Maurice Broun. It was the story of the first winter of the first year after the mountain had been acquired by a conservation group and set aside as a sanctuary for the many eagles, hawks, falcons, vultures, and other bird species that migrated by each Spring and Fall. The task of patrolling the new sanctuary and protecting the birds from the local sharpshooters whose seasonal slaughter of the birds as they glided by the mountain peaks which had prompted action by the conservationists, was given to Maurice Broun and his wife Irma. Together they took on the daunting duty of confronting angry gunmen and

insisting they leave the mountain and the birds in peace. In return for their services, the Brouns got to live in the mountain's only building – a small stone house that once was an inn and tavern used by wagoners and peddlers on their way from Philadelphia to the North country.

Maurice Broun's description of his and Irma's life on the mountain in winter when they were snowbound for weeks on end in their little house, appealed to me. There was something about the solitude and very direct contact with the weather and landscape and wildlife that made me want to go and see the place for myself. And once I did; once Deanna and I experienced the birds from the vantage points of the high lookouts with Michelle climbing with us on the mountain rocks; we were hooked.

Hawk Mountain is situated on the edge of a great flyway where thousands of birds and butterflies migrating north in Spring and south in Fall fly by each year. Columns of warm air called thermals rising up from the valley below keep the biggest of the birds – the birds of prey – aloft as they soar by with wings outstretched. The thermals push the birds very close to the mountain's rocky ledge and a person sitting on one of the ledges can often view the birds at eye level and quite close. Back in the 1930's, as target practice for deer season, local hunters crowded the ledges to shoot at passing migrations. Every year hundreds of magnificent birds of prey were shot out of the sky shooting gallery style and fell to

the forest floor where they were left to rot.

It was high sport and one that found justification in the ignorance of the day. At the time all birds of prey were considered vermin. All hawks were called chicken hawks. The birds were accused of killing poultry, pets, and even carrying off children. The only good hawk was a dead hawk. Only an enlightened few understood the important role birds of prey played in the big picture. Shooting hawks was popularly accepted and generally encouraged.

A woman named Rosalie Edge became aware of the annual slaughter and was horrified. She quickly organized a group specifically dedicated to stopping the shooting and ultimately protecting the migration of all the birds passing the mountain. Money was raised to purchase the entire mountain, the Brouns were hired as wardens, and the war began. Anytime you mess with what has been considered a cultural right, you are bound to meet stiff resistance. The Brouns lived atop the mountain in danger of reprisals all the time, except in winter when the unplowed road snowed them in and the hunters out. But during all other times the Brouns were subjected to warnings in the form of hawks shot and crucified on the bridge Maurice and Irma had to pass to get to town. They were even threatened personally. But the Brouns were as tough and tougher than their adversaries and they were also armed. They kept the shooter s off the mountain,

at gunpoint when necessary, and educated all who came peacefully and were willing to learn about the true nature of the birds. In time, by sheer persistence, they won over the local population and even got many of them to visit the ledges with binoculars instead of rifles. Eventually the people who lived in the communities around Hawk mountain realized just how special a place it was. The Hawk Mountain story has become world famous. It is one of the greatest victories for conservation of the Twentieth Century.

The Brouns retired and were replaced by Alex and Marie Nagy, and during the Nagy curatorship, a young high school biology teacher from Shillington, Pennsylvania was hired as the Sanctuary's first educational director. His name was Jim Brett and he and his wife Dotty had young children around the same age as Michelle. They lived on the mountain in an apartment provided for them. We didn't know this until I got up the courage to visit the Sanctuary office with the express purpose of introducing myself as an aspiring naturalist and wildlife artist and asking if they could use someone like me.

I walked in on Jim Brett while he was alone repairing the wounded wing of an adult Golden Eagle. The bird had been brought in after it had flown into an electrical wire. Brett never said hello. He just asked me to hold the eagle's legs to keep the feet from lashing out and striking him with their long talons while he stitched the torn tissue in the injured wing.

I was thrilled but frightened as I held the huge bird by the ankles. As Jim worked, he made conversation, introducing himself, asking who I was, and revealing that he had heard about me and my family living down in the cabin at the foot of the mountain. I watched as he worked, admiring the gentle way he held the bird's gigantic flight feathers. His hands were small for his size and his arms were short. He was stocky in build but looked to be almost as tall as me which would make him five ten. His hair was brown and curly in the way I imagined a hobbit's hair would be. He spoke in a manner that made you feel very much considered in his words. Seven years my elder, he was to become a mentor and lifelong friend. But as I was holding the eagle's feet, the man working on the wing was a stranger and a figure of authority and someone I could tell was far more educated than I was.

The eagle bent its body forward and began probing my hands with its sharp beak. I flinched in fear. Jim assured me that the bird wouldn't harm me. He said that birds of prey are programmed to use their feet as weapons and their beaks to eat. The eagle was just exploring my hands. Brett spoke again asking me why I came. I told him I was an artist; that I was teaching myself to draw wildlife and that I hoped to become a naturalist. Then, with all the authority of a man repairing the wing of a spectacular Golden eagle, he said, "You already are a naturalist."

Brett had heard about my hikes and studies in the woods and mountains. He figured that anyone who studies nature day after day is a naturalist. But his validation, “You already are a naturalist”, was enough to make me want to fill the bill. Jim Brett opened the door and I walked through.

Perhaps because we were both Jims, Brett and I always referred to each other by our last names. I was Arnosky. He was Brett. But that didn't truly reflect the almost brotherly nature of our friendship. A relationship in which Jim Brett was the older brother. He taught me a lot about birds and plants and other wildlife on the mountain. He enlisted my talents to redesign the Sanctuary's newsletter and in creating a pen and ink illustration for a bookplate that could be sold in the gift shop. Our families celebrated holidays and birthdays together. And we were always invited to attend the educational events Jim organized.

One evening we went to the Sanctuary to watch a slide show. I forget what it was about exactly. I think it may have been about South American birds of prey. I couldn't see very much of it. There was a huge man sitting in front of me and blocking my view. He looked like a modern day version of a 19<sup>th</sup> Century mountain man. From the back he looked more like a mountain than a man. He had big broad shoulders that rounded off like the slopes on the Sanctuary's lookouts. Long bushy hair stuck out at the sides of his head, and an equally long and bushy beard covered his face. His clothing was made of pieces of buckskin sewn together by

hand. He wore feathers in his hair and on his hat which was one of those cowboy style leather hats. And on top of his hat, a live magpie was perched, tethered with a short rawhide string attached to the man's shirt.

Everytime the crowd in the room exclaimed or laughed at something the lecturer said, the magpie would squawk loudly and flap its wings. Once or twice it flapped so vigorously that it fell off the man's hat and tried frantically to fly away. But the big man calmed the bird and coaxed it to hop back up to its perch on the leather hat.

This fellow and his magpie stuck in my mind. Earlier, I had doodled a cartoon in the general mountain man mold, inspired by the mountain men I had seen in movies and mountain men depicted in the paintings and drawings of Charles M. Russell and Fredrick Remington. My mountain man was cartoonish and happy looking. I called him Crinkleroot after a wildflower that grew in our woods. He had the hair and beard and buckskins, a walking stick carved into the shape of a bear, and a live snake coiled around the crown of his hat. But something still was missing. After seeing the fellow at the lecture on hawk mountain, I added a crow on Crinkleroot's hat and it was perfect!

I had been looking for a way to teach children the things I was learning every day on my hikes. The educational nature of some of the freelance work I was getting, from Golden and more recently Ranger Rick's Nature Magazine, had



spurred me to explore the possibility of creating my own Nature teaching character. The puzzles I had done for Denise Van Lear were only a start. And the Nathaniel cartoon stories were a step further. Now I had created Crinkleroot, and was eager to find a way to use him. Crinkleroot embodied everything I thought a Nature guide should be. He looked a little like John Muir and a lot like John Burroughs, whose 19 Century books I had read. And he also invoked the image of Santa Claus which made him appear friendly and giving. I gave him Jim Brett's stocky body with shorter than average arms that, when held across a barrel chest, looked whimsical, a bit mischievous, and full of fun. I gave Crinkleroot Clair's hands – big and burly with knuckley fingers that nevertheless could touch flowers and handle fir boughs and tiny seedlings ever so carefully. Crinkleroot's hands suggested that no matter how strong and brawny, you can be gentle. By the time I was through, I felt I had created a character for the ages; one who could teach children all about the forests and streams. A character who could be the guide in his own books about nature. But to do so, he would need words. And I was not a writer.

One day, I was leafing through the Old Farmers Almanac, a format in which many writers, each with a specific expertise, contributed articles all presented under one entity, the almanac. The text of the Old Farmers Almanac teaches and prophesies to the reader as if it is one mind, even though each issue is the product

of many minds. I thought Crinkleroot could be the figurehead of his own almanac, and designed a mock cover to visualize it, hand lettering Crinkleroot's Nature Almanac across the top. Denise Van Lear was an editor who worked with words all day. Jim Brett wrote beautiful reports in the Sanctuary's annual newsletter. These people, if willing, could contribute to Crinkleroot's Almanac. And I could combine all their writings in an artful presentation. Brett and Denise agreed immediately. The three of us agreed to meet in a month's time to pool our ideas – Denise's nature activities and crafts, Jim's natural history facts and articles, Denise's boyfriend Art's ideas for outdoor How-to's and my illustrated page layouts.

A month passed and we met as planned. But when it came time for the writers to present their ideas and finished pieces, there were none to present. Nobody seemed able to come up with anything. The well I had dug was dry. There may have been a suggestion or two, but none I remember. The meeting was so sadly lacking in creative contributions that after we adjourned, I decided to shelf the whole thing, Crinkleroot included. It was a hard but important lesson for me to learn. Not everyone, even those highly skilled in the fields of teaching and editing, can get their ideas and methods on paper. It is a separate talent to be able to generate an original idea and translate that into something visual and, in the case of publishing, also readable so it can be shared with others. I was capable of expressing my ideas in drawings using the language of lines I had learned while

watching my father execute his precise pen and ink drawings for the patent office. But I was not a writer. I had only written a few songs and they were not very good. The writing I did in my leather bound sketchbook was accurate and filled with information but it was nothing I considered publishable. As far as I could see Crinkleroot was a dead end.

Luckily work was coming to me on a more regular basis. I had established myself as an illustrator well enough that I had other children's periodicals calling, including, after two attempts at submitting my work, the most prestigious Cricket magazine which, because of its literary content, was regularly scanned by art directors and editors of the hard cover children's book publishers. I didn't even have to solicit them. They would see an illustration I had done for Cricket and track me down.

One of those publishers was Putnam's and it was an editor from Putnam named Margaret Frith who encouraged me to at least try and write for publication. She had hired me to illustrate several books about animals that were written by others and as I worked on the art I would suggest that the authors correct some of the inaccuracies I had found in their wildlife facts. This created friction of course between myself and the authors, and an uncomfortable tug of war for the editor to find herself in the middle of. Margaret suggested that, since I knew such a great deal about the lives of wild animals, I should write something about them for her

to read. I resisted. But she kept encouraging me and realizing my fear of the written text, she said “Pretend you’re writing a letter . You write such good letters about your cabin and the woods and your walks.” And that’s what I did. I wrote her a letter in the character of Crinkleroot. The sentences flowed out of me as if I were channeling the old woodsman’s thoughts. I wrote:

Dear Margaret,

Hello. My name is Crinkleroot. I was born in a tree  
and raised by bees. I can whistle in a hundred  
languages and speak caterpillar, turtle, and salamander  
all at once. I live deep in the forest under the tallest tree.  
From my doorstep I can feel the world slowly turning.....  
Summer, Fall, Winter Spring.

It was an historic letter. Since then those words have found their way into almost every elementary school library and classroom in America. After writing that letter to Margaret, I never again sought the aid of another person in writing a book. I wrote my own.

It was around the time of Putnam’s contracting of Crinkleroot’s “ I Was Born in A Tree And Raised By Bees” that I began expanding my journals to include longer descriptive passages and writing as well as notes and blurbs of information to accompany my pen and ink sketches. I became a writer from writing Crinkleroot’s

book and from my lengthening journal entries, not from any writing class or course on form or style. I wrote my prose in the same way I had written songs, rhythmically, and my prose turned out to be better than any songs I had written.

My writing instructors were my editors and copy editors. The editors helped me with presentation and organization and making sure I said all I wanted to say. The copy editors helped by correcting my grammar and word usage. But I kept my relationship with these professionals at a distance. I did not go in to New York City to have lunch and hash out book ideas. My inspiration came from Nature and I felt strongly that the more I stayed home and kept my wanderings to the woods and mountains, the more I would have to say and the more I would have to write about. My publishers were perfectly happy to work with me over the phone or through the mail. And they loved the fact that they were getting material fresh from the forest. They saw me as an honest to goodness rustic who saw the world through the clear prism of actual experience. Even other children's book authors and illustrators began to recognize me as someone who was "out there", living with my subjects. And the best part of all of this was that it was completely true, and not an image created for the sole purpose of getting work.

Instinctively I knew that the growth of my career would be directly related to the lifestyle Deanna and I had chosen. And I was blessed to have discovered that connection so early in my career. Before Deanna and I turned 26, we were firmly

rooted in our own simple approach to living and I had developed a brand new and fresh outlook on Nature that was beginning to capture the attention of publishers.

## Chapter V

### Bees As Teachers

Even as work offers increased, we continued living in exactly the same way, scooping water from the spring, cutting and stacking wood, eating trout that I caught in the mountain streams, growing our own vegetables and even providing our own sweets by keeping a hive of bees to produce honey. Crinkleroot's claim to having been raised by bees was rooted in my own experience, and what I learned from bees. The idea of keeping bees came by way of an ad in a local newspaper. A retiring beekeeper was selling all his equipment. As it turned out, the man had suffered a stroke and couldn't remember how to use the hives and frames and beekeeping tools. He sold me everything at a price I could afford and gave me his blessing but no instructions. So like many things in my life that I have had to learn, I had to teach myself.

The old man sold me his equipment but not his bees. They had swarmed and left his hive empty. In order to get new bees, I had to send away for a starter colony. A starter colony consisted of three thousand worker bees (females) and drone bees (males) along with one queen. The whole batch would be sent to us via the mail in a small 10"x16"x4" wooden cage made of wood and window screen. Somewhere inside the cage there would be a tinier cage to house the queen. It sounded reasonable. I had no idea how I would get the

bees out of the cage and into the hive, but I sent away for the colony anyway.

While I waited for the bees to arrive, I set up the hive in a corner of our garden. The whole thing consisted of four boxes – one large box with three smaller boxes stacked on top. Each box held nine wooden frames and each frame held a thin sheet of beeswax to give the bees a foundation on which to build their comb. I filled each box with the wax holding frames and stacked the boxes neatly with the deepest box resting on a small wooden platform to keep it up off the damp ground. Theoretically, the bees would land on the platform and enter the hive through the slot provided on the front of the bottom box.

When the bees finally showed up in the mail, they were furious from being pent up and bouncing around on the backseat of the mailman's station wagon. The mailman was also angry for having to drive around all morning with the box of angry buzzing bees. The shipping box was simpler than I imagined it would be. It was just an open sided wood frame cage with window screen stapled to it to keep the bees inside. The bees were crawling on the screening, trying to get to their queen who was in her separate little box attached to the outside of the screen.

I had purchased a book considered the beekeeper's bible titled "The ABC and XYZ of Beekeeping" by A.I.Root. According to Root all I had to do to transfer the bees from the shipping box to the hive was to detach the queen's chamber, remove the tiny cork blocking her exit, and place the chamber containing the



queen inside the hive. Then I was to set the box of bees on top of the hive, open the screening and step back. The bees would evacuate the shipping box and rush inside the hive to be with their queen. I did just as the book said, except when I opened the screen, I ran.

To my surprise, none of the bees followed me. They flew out of the shipping box and swarmed in a great buzzing cloud down into the hive. It was easy! Just like that, I was keeping bees. But as the days passed I found it impossible to go near the hive without having the bees attack and sting me. They were busy, I know, but all I wanted to do was go see how they were doing. Weeks went by and still the bees reacted angrily to my approach. I was either blocking their way or casting my shadow on their entrance or just staring at them too much and bothering them telepathically. I didn't really know what it was about me that irritated them. But it was not the amiable relationship between a beekeeper and his pastoral bees I had hoped it would be. Perhaps the bees didn't like me for the same reason mosquitos do. I think I emit some sort of scent that insects can detect. Maybe the bees knew I was afraid of them and that made them defensive. Whatever it was, I was branded in their collective mind as an intruder.

But I wasn't going to let that stop me from getting honey for my family. So when it came time for me to look inside the hive to check for honey, I approached the hive from the side so as not to intercept any incoming bees. To

protect myself from multiple stings, I wore a full beekeeper suit that tightened at the neck, wrists, and ankles to keep bees out, a pair of thick gloves, and a pith helmet covered with netting that hung down over my head and face and tightened with a drawstring around my collar. I also used a smoker which is a small funnel-shaped can with a leather bellows to pump the smoke out. Supposedly smoke subdues bees and calms them. Other bees, maybe. But not my bees.

I made it to the hive alright, and began pumping soothing smoke toward the hive entrance. The cloud of smoke infuriated the sentries and their anger spread to the hive. I kept smoking the hive with the bees swarming all around and, feeling invulnerable in my protective clothing, removed the cover and took every frame that felt heavy with honey, smoking all the while, until the little smudge fire inside the smoker died and the air cleared. The bees quickly organized in the air and chased me as I ran this way and that way, around the garden and through the woods. When I got to the cabin with my booty of honey and ran inside, the pursuing bees attacked the closed door, pelting themselves against the window glass and leaving stingers in the wood.

This was how it was to be with me and the bees, but I never gave up. Each time I tried to work with the hive, I learned a little more about what rubbed them the wrong way and what didn't bother them so much. I stayed out of their way, moved slowly around the hive, and used the smoker more gently and judiciously

rather than blackening the air all around the hive. The bees told me by their reaction to me if I was doing things right or wrong. Like thousands of stern instructors, they chastised me with stings in my clothing every time I stepped in the wrong place or made a move they disapproved of. But no matter how careful I was, they never accepted me stealing their honey. However, I continued to do so, and always paid for it in stings.

The bees were less antagonistic to Deanna. In fact they seemed to like her. They allowed her to work in the garden right in the line of their flyway. They even let her pull the weeds that grew close around their hive. Perhaps it was because she was so comfortable in these tasks and knew exactly what she was doing. Her mind was focused completely on the plants, not on the bees, and I believe the bees knew this. It may have been watching Deanna work so peacefully around the bees, and my having to learn to work more thoughtfully with the bees that helped me better understand what it took to successfully find and approach wildlife. Because I began seeing the wild animals that so far I had only been able to track. Before the bees I had been tromping around in the woods, intent only on reading and interpreting the marks and prints wild creatures left behind. I never considered that the animals themselves might be just ahead hearing my noisy steps, smelling my scent, or even watching my every move. I had been hiking, not hunting and as long as I lumbered along with no thought of actually seeing wildlife

I would not see them.

The bees taught me to consider how sensitive they were to their environment and to make myself less intrusive in it. I could approach, but only slowly and as quietly as possible. This is how I began to approach my wildlife study and moving more quietly and slowly in woods made a big difference. Soon I was seeing the deer and grouse and fox whose tracks I followed. And when I located an animal unaware of my being in the forest, I added another element to remain unnoticed. I crouched down to change my human shape to that of a tree stump, and stayed perfectly still. Then, whenever the animal looked away, or lowered its head to feed or to browse, I moved a little closer, becoming a tree stump again before the animal looked up. If the air was in my favor, not moving toward the animal but moving toward me so that the wildlife could not detect my scent, I was able to get amazingly close.

I also discovered that, just as the bees could sense that Deanna was not interested in them and allowed her to work in their midst, so it was with other animals. Some of my closest and longest encounters with wildlife occurred while I was fishing, intent on my line in the water or my floating fly's progress downstream. With my mind on fishing, I had three deer, a doe and her two fawns, drink and walk in the water just a hundred feet upstream. I had yellow throated warblers alight close enough for me to see the lay of the soft olive feathers on

their backs. And for one memorable moment, a cedar waxwing perched on the very tip of my fly rod. How many times in the past had animals been close to me while I fished that I simply wasn't aware of? I am positive that it was my experiences with the bees that heightened my awareness.

Because bees are insects, we naturally wondered what the effect of insecticides would have on them as they pollinated the vegetable plants in our garden. To be safe, we began using Rotenone, which was considered organic and more natural than most of the other commercial pesticides. Eventually, we stopped dusting the plants completely, and began learning just what damaging insects we needed to remove, and picked them off by hand. Smashing bugs with our fingers was distasteful, but chemical free, and the practice along with frequent weeding allowed us to grow our food pesticide and herbicide free.

Deanna's dad used a number of pesticides to grow his flowers and plants. Watching her father work in his greenhouse, Deanna learned a lot about plants such their names and the length of their various growing seasons, but she gave little thought to all the sprays and dustings her father did to protect his investment from insects and diseases. It was far less interesting and something routine in the world of green growers. Keeping bees forced us to think about an alternative to pesticides. Whether or not spraying and dusting would have actually killed the bees or tainted their honey, we didn't know. As far as we were

concerned, that was a matter for the scientists and chemists and commercial food producers to figure out. But since our garden was just big enough to feed our small family, we could dispense with chemicals and do the same for our plants by hand. It was the bees who forced us to think about the alternative. And in our chosen lifestyle, the alternative was always the best way.

The honey I stole from the bees, we kept in the comb, rather than extracting it from the comb. I just cut the honey filled comb from the frames in four inch squares which we stored in the fridge where they would keep all winter. When we wanted something sweet to spread on bread or just eat it in mouth-sized pieces, we cut up one of the honey filled squares and ate it comb and all. Beeswax is edible. To separate the honey from the wax comb, which Deanna needed to do in order to use pure honey in some of her recipes, she simply heated the squares in a sauce pan and scooped away the wax as it melted and floated to the surface.

Deanna's mother showed her the proper way to freeze fresh vegetables (scalding them in boiling water first to reduce the action of enzymes and preserve the flavor) and taught her the step by step procedure to can foods safely. She also refreshed her daughter's memory on the use of a sewing machine. And Deanna began making all her own and Michelle's outfits, including authentic looking blue jeans. All of this saved us money that I would have had to make. My freelance income was growing but it hadn't broken the \$4000 mark, when at the time I

believe the poverty level was well above that. Yet we felt rich because we wanted nothing we couldn't provide ourselves. The fact that we were getting by on so little taught us what was just enough. And just enough was our new plenty.

## Chapter VI

### Pregnant At The Pump

When I received my first cover assignment from Cricket Magazine, the art director Trina Schart Hyman included a command.

“Here is a \$500 cover assignment. Use the money to put water in that place!”

Well, it was hard to ignore what was obviously a great concern Trina had about our living conditions. We used the money for water, but not exactly the way Trina wanted us to. Instead of drilling a well and piping the water into the cabin, which would have involved a much greater expense than \$500 could cover, we drilled a well and installed a hand pump. It was one that we found in a yard sale – an antique, but still in good working condition. It took only a few pumps of the long handle to gurgle up water from the new well. Michelle loved the new pump. Every day after school, she’d leave the school bus running to get home and pump water into the tin cup that we hung on the pumphandle. It was wonderful to see the joy she got out of simply getting herself a drink of cold water.

The pump money from the Cricket cover came just at the right time. Deanna was pregnant with our second child and stooping down to the ground to scoop water from the spring was getting harder every day. But Deanna insisted she continue to do her chores even as her belly got bigger. The well and pump made getting water easier for her. She was able to pump water in a fraction of the time



it had taken to scoop it up. And she could do it standing up. Her days suddenly had a little more free time, and she appreciated the luxury. She appreciated everything we had and never asked for more. And I couldn't have asked for more. At a time when I was just beginning to get work and making very little money, my wife sacrificed and worked hard to make a home in the woods. And she did this happily. Like those pioneer women in old movies, Deanna cherished her meager belongings – a crocheted afghan, her grandmother's quilt, even the inexpensive stoneware we picked out together when we were first married.

Whenever I cut wood, Deanna was there to help move the logs and stack them in the woodpile. If I was digging out a boulder, she would grab a shovel or garden trowel and help. We painted the cabin together, built the spring pond together, split wood together, and carried water together. And she did her part up to the very day she went into labor and gave birth to Amber.

At night Deanna would quietly read to the girls while I worked on my drawing board, or watch the TV with the sound way down. And once a month she helped me mail out samples to prospective publishers, something we started doing when we were living in the apartment. Had we not been partners in every way, we never could have made it in such rugged circumstances. One of us would have resented doing more than the other or gotten sick and tired of living as if we were in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was my idea to move to the mountains. It was my dream.

But it was a dream that included being with Deanna and facing the challenge together, and she knew that. She knew that I loved her more than the dream. And she happily helped me make it happen. She was not a writer but she invested her time typing my handwritten pages. She informed every thought I had and every sentence I wrote. I would think to myself as I worked and wonder what Deanna would think of what I was putting down on paper. Would she like it? Would she think it was good? She was not an artist but she involved herself in promoting my work, and gave me the hours of solitude an artist needs to look and wonder and figure out the visual world. Deanna was a listener, a confidant, and a bookkeeper before any other, when one another was all we had and all we needed.

We were spending 24 hours a day together and I never saw enough of her. I looked for her smile each morning and leaned toward her kiss each night. The cabin pressed our family together in a closeness that, in our young marriage and early parenthood, created a unity of spirit. If one of us felt bad, we all did. If one of us was excited, we all felt excitement. And because of Deanna's happy nature, our family lived in an atmosphere of happiness and calm. Even in times of crisis. When we suddenly discovered a large lump on Michelle's neck that drove us into a maze of worry that led to the doctor's office and the hospital where a biopsy was taken, it was Deanna's positive outlook that helped see me through. She prayed and hoped for the best when I could only think the worst. And when the results of the

biopsy were negative, and we took our little girl into our arms and hugged her close, Deanna was visibly relieved and grateful for her answered prayers. And I was grateful for Deanna because the fear of losing Michelle would have driven me to despair without my young wife's inner strength.

In winter, Deanna fed the birds every morning, walking out in all weather in her snowsuit and boots to empty buckets of seeds on the feeders. Hungry chickadees and nuthatches, the friendliest of all birds, flitted around her as she poured. Soon the others who had spent the long night feathers fluffed against the freezing cold, came flying in to their breakfast. They were not just any birds Deanna was feeding. They were her birds. Deanna's birds sang and flew all around the cabin and in springtime nested in the boxes we provided. The one nest box we had hung on the outhouse had a very small hole designed to accommodate wrens. And once the wrens found it, they nested inside year after year. We would see the parents flying to and from the box and hear the baby birds chirping inside.

One day the box had something else inside it other than the birds. A snake had climbed the outhouse wall, squeezed through the wren-sized entrance, and devoured all the baby birds. We heard no chirping. We saw no parent birds flying about. We saw only the snake's head sticking out of the box with its chin on the entrance way, resting after a heavy meal. Apparently the baby birds had formed such a large a bulge in the snake's belly, that it could not squeeze back out

through the hole. Because the snake stayed, day after day, peering out at the world as it slowly digested.

The sight of the snake made Deanna so furious, I thought she would break open the box and tear the snake to pieces with her bare hands. Instead she demanded I open the box and kill the snake, which I did not do. It was highly uncharacteristic of Deanna to be so angry. But then again, they weren't just any baby wrens. They were her baby wrens.

## Chapter VII

### Smokey and Twigs

A dog is not a necessity, but we had to have one. Our first dog was a beagle named Smokey. We considered him part of the family, like a small, very different relative who lived with us. Smokey was white with a brown and black saddle, brown ears, and black slippers with white toes. He rode in the backseat of the car and sat patiently whenever we stopped for gas or snacks. There was always a snack especially for him. Deanna had grown up having dogs but Smokey was the first dog I ever had. I delighted in everything he did. As a person who loved to draw animals, you would think that I would have sketched him and learned better how to draw the subtle anatomy of his canine shape and joints and face. But I didn't. I was content to just watch him, and enjoy having him around.

When Smokey and I would go for an occasional walk together, I never used a leash. Sometimes he would pick up the fresh scent of a rabbit and tear off, howling as he ran. Needless to say I did very little wildlife watching with Smokey. He would chase whatever he was after and I would listen and follow his howl to know where he was. After a little while, I'd whistle and call for him to come back. He always did. But oh! How he loved to run! An open door was always a temptation for him. His entire body would flinch at the sound of a doorlatch and, given a sliver of an opening, he would dash through to the outside. For the next

hour or so we would hear him howling as he ran through the woods.

When Smokey ran, he ran with total abandon, charging through brambles and stickers and brush at full speed. After one wild run, he returned with the nub of a twig sticking out of one nostril. The little guy was in discomfort, snorting and pawing at his nose, trying to get the twig out. The girls held his head still and I used a pliers to grab the twig and slowly pull it out. It was over six inches long. Imagine that! Imagine running so fast and furiously that you run right into a branch sticking forward that rams right up your nose to the depths of your eyeballs and, rather than stop, you keep running. We knew Smokey had kept on running because his howling never stopped or became interrupted.

One afternoon Smokey ran through the opened doorway and never came home. His howling grew more and more distant until we could no longer hear him. I hiked in the woods all around the cabin but found no sign of him. I thought his running, after a deer perhaps, might have led him away from our woods and into the mountains and I searched the high country calling his name, whistling, listening for an anguished bark or painful yelp. He might have gotten caught in some old barbed wire fence, I thought, or stepped into some trapper's leg hold trap. He might have been attacked by a bear or bobcat and wounded, was unable to get home. These things ran through my mind as I followed the game trails he may have followed.

I searched day after day, and after a week, gave up despondent. I had lost my little buddy. Our family had lost a beloved pet. We consoled ourselves with the possibility that he may have become lost and was picked up by kind people passing through in a car or truck and that now he had a home with them. But it was a hollow attempt at consolation. I felt so badly I thought I would never feel the same about any animal again – that Smokey was my first dog and would be my last dog. After all, a dog is not a necessity.

A dog may not be a necessity, but we simply had to have one. So I answered an ad in the local paper. Someone had puppies for sale. They were a mixed breed of mutt and coonhound. We picked one out. He was a cute little critter with an intelligent brightness in his eyes. We named him Twigs. It didn't occur to me at the time that I may have been thinking of the twig in Smokey's nostril when I suggested Twigs as the name for the new pup. Twigs had long legs, short floppy ears, and an extra long, apparently uncontrollable tail. As a puppy covered with liver spots and each of his eyes bespectacled with brown, he was cute. You might even say that he was adorable. As a fully grown dog, he turned out to be....How should I say this? Goofy. He was all legs and tail. His short floppy ears were the same size as they were when he was a puppy. And his face with still bright eyes looked more bewildered than intelligent. Twigs was not a house dog. He was too big and lanky for the tiny space inside the cabin. I built him a doghouse, on top of

which he sat, slept, and barked. He rarely went inside. The only time he relinquished his perch was on Sundays when Michelle, having just returned from church, would stand atop Twigs' doghouse and recite word for word, her Sunday school lesson. She preached from her doghouse pulpit with such fervor that Twigs, her only congregation, sat staring at her in doggy adulation. I suspect Michelle converted Twigs, but because dogs do not voice their thoughts, I could never confirm my suspicions.

Twigs wasn't allowed to run free unless one of us was with him. When I felt confident that he wouldn't run off, I began taking him with me on long hikes over the mountain. He turned out to be a great companion in the woods, running just a little ahead and never too far, and always coming to my side when I whistled. He was quiet and not one to chase a rabbit or bird. In fact, the wild birds seemed unafraid of him. I would pack a lunch and share it with him. And when I drank from my canteen, I would rub a small depression in the ground and fill it with water for Twigs to lap up. If we were near a stream, Twigs would drink from the stream. And seeing him lap that cold spring fed, crystal clear water made me cup some of it in my hands and drink also.

Twigs had a habit of stepping right into a stream pool as he drank. The thirstier he was and the longer he drank, the deeper into the stream he would get, until at times he would be standing in the water up to his tongue still lapping and



drinking. I loved watching him do this. It was something I wished I could do, but human inhibition and my clothing prevented me from doing it. Once, on an exceptionally long hike tracing a trout stream to its source within the deep wrinkle between two mountains, Twigs and I stopped beside a particularly beautiful pool. The color of the water was amber, like that of light beer. I plopped down on a boulder to rest my legs and lift my face to a shaft of warm sun, my eyes squinted but not closed. Through the curtain of my eyelashes I saw Twigs drinking and stepping into the water, lapping, stepping deeper, until he was again tongue deep. Suddenly I spotted a snake swimming, heading straight for the dog. It was a non-venomous watersnake, so rather than call or whistle Twigs out of the pool, I let things go and watched, wondering how each would react to a possible encounter. Twigs was in doggy heaven and oblivious to the snake's approach. The snake seemed not to recognize that the lump in the water was an animal's back. It swam right up to and crawled out on Twigs as if the dog was just another boulder. Then, in a lazy stretchy kind of way, the snake draped itself over the hairy lump and stayed, its head and thick body soaking in the sun, its long tail dangling down into the amber water.

Twigs kept right on lapping the water with his tongue. The snake lingered for a while, then slid off the dog and swam away. Neither animal seemed aware of the other in the pool. It was precious. The vision of that goofy dog lapping water

tongue deep while wearing a snake draped on his back is one of my favorite memories of Hawk Mountain and Twigs. A dog is not a necessity, but.....

## Chapter VIII

### Snakes

Living in the mountains meant living with snakes. In our woods we had gartersnakes, Brown snakes, Smooth Green snakes, Black Rat snakes, Northern watersnakes, Copperheads, and Timber rattlesnakes. These last two were venomous and deadly. I wore a pair of high, thick, bullhide snakeproof boots when I hiked. A person could hike safely wearing regular hiking shoes or boots. Most of the snakes were well hidden and shy. Many were walked by unnoticed by the walker. And very few people actually saw the big dangerous snakes. But I had been training my eyes to see animals, even those camouflaged in the scenery. And unlike those hikers or casual walkers who pass hidden snakes completely unaware of how close they came to stepping on one, I did see the snakes. I spotted the scaled bodies of snakes coiled under green leafy plants. I noticed the tails of snakes disappearing into the foliage. I saw the heads of snakes and the flicking tongues of snakes poking out of the crevices under boulders and logs. And I saw snakes crossing the narrow footpaths I frequented.

One hot and humid day, while fishing from the shore of a lake, I began seeing more snakes than usual. Most were watersnakes and they were hyperactive in the heat. One literally leaped, springing itself off a boulder just as I was hopping onto it. The nearness and the sudden sight of a large snake hurling itself through the air

and splashing down in the water, made my heart skip a beat.

There were watersnakes swimming. Watersnakes were coiled on wet muddy banks. It was a very snakey day. The number of snakes I encountered gave me the geebees, but the most harrowing snake encounter of the day happened between myself and another person. I was walking in the woods on a trail that paralleled the lakeshore. My eyes were glued to the ground which is why I didn't even see the young fellow on the trail heading toward me. I did however see a large Copperhead stretched across the trail, its thick body pressed against a surface root and looking for all the world like a tree root itself. For all the world, but not for me. I saw and recognized the dangerous snake clearly – its brown hourglass markings on an orange body, and its bright copper colored head with the yellow chin that marked it as a male.

I froze in my tracks, my eyes fixed on the danger just six feet away. Suddenly, I heard the twig snapping steps of someone coming and looking up, I saw a young man dressed in an open shirt, shorts, and flip flops walking casually toward me. His pink legs and feet looked extra fleshy to me due to the fact that they were only steps away from the fangs of a deadly snake. I was horrified, but could not find my voice in a mouth suddenly dry with fear. The walker smiled and waved and kept on coming, the snake behind the root completely hidden from his view.

The happy young man quickly closed the distance between us and was less

than three feet away from the Copperhead when finally I was able to squeak out “STOP! STOP! STOP!” while holding my hands up as if to ward him off. He stopped just one happy step away from the unhappiest moment of his life and looked at me as if I was crazy. As seriously as I have ever been, I explained the situation and convinced him to back up slowly and return to where he had come from. This he did, and seemed none the worse for it. But the hair-raising experience drained all the juice out of me. I was deathly white with fear over what could have happened had I not spotted the snake on the trail.

Snakes frighten me, but I don't hate them. Some people are so afraid of snakes that they do hate them. And there are people whose abject fear of snakes leads to superstition. My neighbor Carl Holler was one. Whenever he saw a snake, he killed it. If it was a venomous snake, he would burn its body on top of a pile of his old shoes, which I presume he saved for such purposes. He burned the snake and the shoes to ashes. It was a ritual he took very seriously and he recommended it to me. According to Carl, burning a dangerous snake on a fire of smoldering shoes triggered a kind of woods magic that would protect you in the future from ever stepping on a snake and becoming fatally bitten.

I dreaded being bitten by a snake. The snakeproof boots I wore protected me on the feet and legs up to my knees. But I was always worried that I might accidentally sit on a log near an unseen snake or reach up onto a ledge where a

snake was coiled. However, whenever I have had the opportunity to watch a snake, even a venomous snake, from a safe distance, I found them to be fascinating and very beautiful. The colors of their scales and the patterns the scales combine to create are among the loveliest designs in Nature. And while I have never had the desire or courage to pick a snake up, I always wondered what those velvety-looking scales felt like.

Jim Brett provided me with an answer to my wonder. He was driving down the mountain road and found a Copperhead that had been recently run over and killed. Only the head was smashed. The body was in excellent condition. So he brought the snake to me for us to skin together. It was another learning opportunity from Brett; one I did not relish. But holding the limp snake and touching its soft dry scales; running my fingertips over the tiny ridges called “keels”; and seeing the beautiful dead-leaf or hourglass pattern up close was profoundly satisfying and educational. This was the way with everything Brett brought into my consciousness.

Skinning the snake turned out to be fairly simple. With his pocket knife, Jim cut the skin all around the snake’s neck to separate it from the damaged skin on the smashed head. Then, using a pliers to grasp the newly cut collar of skin, and a thick gloved hand to hold the Copperhead’s still dangerously fanged and venom filled head, he pulled the entire skin off the muscle as if he were pulling a long

stocking off a leg. The skin came off whole, in a tube shaped piece with the scales now on the inside. Brett then laid the tube of inverted skin on the ground and, with Deanna's sewing scissors, cut the belly up the center. With the skin opened flat, he placed it scales down on a long board which I happened to have already cut, and he tacked the skin to the wood, keeping it flat but not stretched tight. Stretching it at this stage, Jim explained, would cause the snakeskin to tear as it dried and shrunk. Once the skin was entirely tacked to the board, Jim dusted it with some of Deanna's baking flour. And holding the finished product up proudly, he presented it to me. "Here," he said, "It's yours. After it dries, untack it and turn it over to tack it again so the scales show."

That's the kind of thing Jim Brett did, time and time again, for me and countless others. He taught tirelessly and generously and always followed up with something for you to keep. It's how we learn best, by remembering the people we learn from. Jim was aware that he would be remembered along with the lesson he gave and that was his reward.

My lesson in skinning a snake came in handy a few months later when we discovered that a large Black Rat snake had taken up residence in the stump that held our mailbox. The snake was a big one, even as Rat snakes go – easily three and half inches in diameter, coiled tightly in full view under the box, making everyone refuse to go near, even the mailman. Michelle, who passed the mailbox

every day on her way to pump herself a cup of water from the well, became frightened to go by the snake and would circle wide around. Though she still went to the well, the fear of the snake dampened her joy. I felt I had to do something but I believed trying to spook or scare the snake away would not work. It was comfortable inside its lair and wasn't going anywhere without a fight. Having a big snake strike at me was something I definitely wanted to avoid.

I loaded my twelve gauge, which I kept solely for protecting the family from dangerous wild animals, and went out to reckon with the reptile. Lining myself up with the mailbox, I raised the shotgun until the snake was centered in the V-shaped sight. One shot violently blew the creature's head off and sent it flying out onto the ground. I walked to the stump and pulled the rest of the lifeless body out of the hole. It was the largest wild snake I had ever seen. Its body was over six feet long without the head and a good portion of the neck. The unkeeled scales were shiny black with a faint hint of white diamond-shaped patterns. The belly was gray.

It was hard for me to kill. My whole being was geared toward appreciating and trying to duplicate the beauty in wild creatures. I tried to understand how every animal I saw lived, and what important role it played in Nature. But the snake was a threat to my family. It prevented us from going to our own mailbox. And it created an element of fear in Michelle where only joy had existed. This was a harsh lesson living in the woods taught us – the basic need to feel safe and protect



the comfort and happiness that grows from having your own small and sacred place on Earth.

Had I the skills of a herpetologist, I may have been able to remove the snake and transplant it somewhere safe away from our home. That's what Brett did when he discovered a rattler on the mountain's south lookout. The large Timber Rattlesnake was coiled against a boulder that the daily hawk watching public often sat on and congregated around. Families with children climbed the rock to watch the hawks gliding by. Their focus was on the sky and the birds. No one went to the lookout to see the boulders or a snake that might be coiled near one. Jim just happened to be looking around the rocks when he spotted the rattlesnake. Many rattlers and Copperheads resided in the cracks and crevices of the lookout's cliff and ledges. But rarely did one take up residence so close to where the people go.

The rattlesnake had to go, and it was Jim's job to evict it. Exactly how Brett and his helper Phil Haas, a young intern at the Sanctuary, captured the snake, I do not know. But they captured it alive and put it in a large drum-shaped container that had a tight fitting lid.

I was outside splitting wood when Jim and Phil pulled up in Jim's green jeep. "Wanna see a rattlesnake?" Brett asked in a voice high and loud from the adrenalin rush he was experiencing after having captured the snake. He and Phil

pried open the drum and lifted it just high enough for me to look inside. The snake was lying in a loose coil on the bottom of the container, probing the cylindrical wall with its nose and flicking tongue. The two snake wranglers intended to release their prisoner someplace where it would not be able to get back to the south lookout. This meant it had to be released where the climb back up the mountain would be too steep for a snake to make. Jim had just such a place in mind, where vertical cliffs rose seamlessly from the pebbled surface of an old railroad bed. He invited me to go along.

I crawled in on the Jeep's tiny back seat and the four of us – Jim, Phil, the rattler, and me – headed for the spot. The trackless railroad bed skirted the base of Hawk Mountain and then wound its way into the wilderness of surrounding mountains where the cliff face walled the roadway. As Jim drove the jeep on the bumpy, pot-holed gravel, the snake container in the cargo bed bounced all around. I glanced back more than once to make sure the lid was still on. So did Phil. Brett paid no attention. After a few miles of rough riding, he pulled over to the side of the bed and stopped. There he unloaded the snake container and carried it to a small pond choked with water lilies. He and Phil pried open the lid and tipped the container over until it was laying on its side at the edge of the water, and then we all stepped back.

The snake slowly began to slither out of the shade inside the drum into the

bright sunlight. It was a very large snake and took awhile for its entire body to clear the drum. I visually estimated its length to be four feet. Its head was the size of a boy's clenched fist and its girth in the middle was equal in circumference to a softball. It had a half dozen rattles on the tip of its stubby tail and they shivered a light buzzing sound as the snake moved down the short bank toward the water. It was without a doubt a magnificent animal. What was most impressive was its surprisingly brilliant colors – lemon yellow with deep chocolate brown chevrons, each one edged in velvety black.

The rattler slid into the tiny pond and swam with its head breaking a path through the green lily pads. The sight of such beauty moving slowly and menacingly encompassed the entire spectrum of unspoken reasons why we are attracted to wildlife. It was enigmatic – and I would attempt to capture and unravel the mystery of it in art from that moment on. Nature is more than the beauty we see. It is more than the peace we find in it or the violence we try in vain to look away from. It is the fullness and mystery of life pulsing through mortal skin. And for the moment, it was that deadly snake, beautiful to behold, holding us.

## Chapter IX

### A Madness In My Methods

I had fallen madly in love with the woods and streams and wild creatures that surrounded us. So complete was my madness that I began rejecting any illustrative assignment that wasn't about wildlife, even though my income remained below poverty level. It was a crazy thing to do, but something wonderful came of it. Art directors and editors suddenly felt that they had someone to call who specialized in natural history subjects. My work increased. And at home, once it became broadly known that we were not only living year round in the cabin, but that I was also working at home studying and drawing wild animals, people began coming to tell me about animals they had seen and a few even brought animals to me.

One day, Phil Haas brought me a female Belted kingfisher with a broken left wing. The bird looked fine otherwise. We perched it on the heatrola so I could sketch it from life, from a variety of angles. And with each new angle, my drawing improved, because my knowledge of the kingfisher's anatomy deepened the more I looked at the bird. It was different than sketching from a photo of a kingfisher. I could move around the kingfisher that was perched on our heatrola and see exactly how the feathers on its cheeks blended with the slightly larger feathers on the sides of its head and how they blended with the even larger feathers on the back and so on. I could see just how round the birds eyeballs were and how large

the pupils dilated. And I could see up close, the way the bird's long beak was incorporated into the face. Having a live animal for a drawing subject improved my eye-hand coordination. Whatever I saw, I could draw. I discovered that drawing was, in large part, seeing.

Each time I was given the opportunity to sketch a living animal, I took full advantage of it. Not only sketching it from multiple views, but afterwards, reading everything I could find about its life and behavior. It became a wonderful method of self-teaching. First finding or seeing. Then studying up on what I had found or seen. Rather than study broad topics, such as biology or animal behavior or general anatomy, I would discover an animal, learn its individual anatomy, find out what is known by others about its behavior, and add to that my own observations.

My interests, personal and professional, melded together into a way of life that not only provided an outlet for all I was learning in the present, but also tapped into my unique past – a childhood spent discovering Nature on my own, and watching how my father used drawing to show how things worked. I spent whole days outdoors, just as I had done when I was a boy. Only this time, I had an adult mind with mature skills of deduction and reasoning to help me understand the things I encountered. As my knowledge of our native wild animals and plants grew, so did my ability to draw them accurately.

I wanted to create more realistic pictures than I had done in the Crinkleroot

book. There I had worked in pen and ink in a cartoon style that perfectly fit the whimsical quality of the character. When I needed to depict wildlife in the book, I created a kind of cartoon accuracy for the animals I drew. The only colors in the book were the black lines and a sepia wash. At that time, children's book publishers would not invest in a full color book unless the author or artist had established an audience and the sales associated with that. Even in my magazine assignments, I was limited to black line with an overlay of a second color. I was perfectly satisfied with this until I saw the exquisite animal portraiture of Guy Coleach, and the dynamic action and atmospheric quality of Bob Kuhn's great paintings of African wildlife. To my mind, these two men represented the best in wildlife art. I studied their styles, trying to decipher their methods.

I was also drawn to the work of Winslow Homer, especially his watercolors of hunting and fishing in the Adirondacks. I tried duplicating the feel of Homer's watercolors in a few watercolors of my own. One was a small painting of a leaping Brook Trout. The other was of campers around a campfire. For the campfire scene which depicted a night scene, I experimented with under-painting, a technique I believed Homer used. I sketched the scene with the campers around their fire. Then I painted the entire picture in blue, leaving only the flames and sparks of the fire white. Then by shading all the figures, including the firelit trees in a darker blue, and finally adding the colors of the forest and the flesh tones and colorful

clothing of the campers, I created a stunning effect.

In order to do this underpainting then overpainting, I had to abandon traditional watercolors. Watercolors run and smear when you add color on top of color, even if you allow each layer to dry thoroughly. They still bleed into any fresh wet layer of color you add on top. Acrylic paint dried quickly and fixed itself so that many layers of color could be added without smearing the layers beneath. And acrylics could be used transparently like watercolors or thick and opaque like oils. I worked in transparent layers of acrylic paint, practicing every day until I had enough samples that were good enough to send away to publishers. That got me a few more magazine covers to do. But most of my paying jobs, even those I did for the children's book publishers, remained two color assignments.

One two color job paid unexpected benefits. I was asked to illustrate a book by a well known children's author who wrote under the name Miska Miles. The book titled "Swim, Little Duck" was a very young story that featured a menagerie of wild and domestic animals. I seized the opportunity and used the assignment to further my life drawings with the added boost of knowing they would be published nationally.

I made a list of all the animals in the story and sought out live models to work from. Some of the sketches I made from life had the mud of pigpens and the drizzle of rain in them. It was a most exhilarating experience – literally bringing

the living animals home in the lines of my sketches and capturing the feel of the outdoors in each illustrated page of the book.

As time went by and I did more life drawing, sketching animals in their natural environs turned out to be more than a means to an end; more than research for the illustrations in a book. It became an end in itself. I craved the reality of it, and made the most of every encounter. If an animal stayed still, I would draw it in detail, adding shading and even some suggestion of their surroundings. Sketching animals as they moved about required a different approach. My father could dash only a few knowledgeable lines down on paper and suggest a piston pumping or gears spinning fast. I used the same technique – fast organic lines – to suggest a bird taking flight, a fish leaping, or a pig rooting around in the mud. The faster I drew, the better the sketch captured the essence of what I was seeing and the animals I sketched looked real and alive. When drawing stationary life such as plants and trees, I worked slowly and meticulously. My subjects weren't going anywhere. I used a sharp pencil to recreate flower petals, leaves, branches, twigs, and buds. For the trunks of trees I used a dull pencil that made big heavy lines. I especially liked drawing old gnarly trees.

On the way up the mountain one afternoon, I spotted a particularly gnarly tree in the forest and hiked closer to draw it in my sketchbook. The tree was an oak about twenty inches in diameter and not very tall, being broken off at the height



of about twelve feet. Like so many of the trees growing on the mountainside, this one was bent and twisted from strong winds and heavy snows. In its twisted middle there was a large peanut-shaped cavity only five or six feet off the ground. I was about to go near and peak inside when a Screech owl suddenly popped up from down in. The small red owl perched on the threshold of the cavity and swiveled its head to look all around. Almost instantly, the little owl became aware of me and stared, widening its eyes and raising its feathered brows, but it didn't leave. It didn't even retreat back inside the tree.

I began drawing, beginning with the owl which I expected to fly away at any moment and added the shape of the hole around what I had sketched of the bird. Then, with the owl still watching me, I sketched the entire tree complete with shading. As I worked, I felt a great peace come over me; a peace I have since felt many times but only when I have been in the presence of a wild animal that is aware of me, but does not flee.

## Chapter X

### Winter Reading

In winter we stayed close to home to keep the fire going. If we left it for more than a few hours, the fire would go out and the cabin would chill and it would take time to warm it up again. At night we burned mostly maple and oak because those trees have dense wood that burns longer than wood of birch, cherry or ash trees. The few times when we burned ash overnight, Deanna woke in the morning and found water frozen in the kitchen sink.

But we kept ourselves from freezing. With a fire roaring in the heatrola, most of the time the cabin was approximately 70. Deanna always had something cooking on the kitchen stove, whether food or just boiling water to wash with, and the steam from the pots supplemented and also humidified the heat from the woodstove. We dressed warm inside wearing flannel shirts or sweaters and heavy wool socks. We slept under thick fluffy quilts made by Deanna's mother and grandmother.

On snowy days, snow on the cabin roof insulated and kept the inside room warmer than on clear days. But snow or no snow, the outhouse was always frigid. In winter a trip out to the toilet was an expedition that required a hat, gloves, and boots as well as carrying the warm toilet seat. One windy, ice cold evening on my way back from the outhouse, I paused on the kitchen porch just to listen to the

heavy arctic air pushing and shoving its way through the forest. Looking into the darkness I noticed a little yellow spot of light traveling horizontally flickering behind the trees. Then I heard the distant sound of a train whistle. The yellow spot of light was the headlight on the 11 o'clock train. The distance between the cabin porch and the train tracks was close to a quarter of a mile, and in that space thousands of saplings, hundreds of medium sized oaks, maples, poplars and birches were standing. Millions of branches crisscrossed, and blotted out the spaces between the trees. And there were evergreens grown thick with heavy, needle bearing limbs. How could it be that the light from the train was visible through the forest? Why wasn't the distant headlight completely obscured by the trees? There had to be tiny shafts of air – open spaces that if they could be seen and spotted by day, would reveal a speck of the world on the other side. The light flickered, disappearing and reappearing through the trees until the train was gone and I was left with only the illuminated snowflakes eddying down through the yellow glow of the porch light.

When we left the apartment in Philadelphia to live in the mountains, we hoped we would be experiencing everything anew, in isolation where we could come to our own senses and really feel what it means to be alive. I wanted my family to be aware of more than people and houses and traffic and billboards. I wanted us to be ready whenever something wonderful flickered by, like the headlight on that

train moving by on the other side of the forest.

Shortly before we found the cabin, Deanna, Michelle, and I visited Clair and Mary. I remember waiting for a stoplight to change to green in a busy section of Lancaster County where scores of tourists go to shop. As I sat in my auto, a young Amishman pulled up in his buggy and stopped in the next lane. His horse stepped and nodded impatiently but held steady obeying the pull of the reins. The rumble and noise of the passing traffic made the animal's ears flick and its nostrils flare, but the good horse held. The Amishman had trained his horse well and I admired him for it. But I was glad to see the horse's nerves at work, reacting to the loud and hectic environment with obvious strain. A tractor trailer roared by causing the animal beside me to rear back slightly. And when the light turned green, the horse was finally able to go, no longer chaffing at the bit.

That was the way I had been feeling in my world, driving every morning through the city traffic to get to work each day. And sitting idle in the inevitable traffic jam on the way home. It was a colossal waste of time. I was wasting my life. I flinched and chaffed at the bit just like that Amishman's horse. The turning point came the moment I decided to embrace my dissatisfaction and use it as an incentive to make a change.

Moving to the mountains took courage. We had very little savings and no experience owning a home. And in order to live at Hawk Mountain I had to

continue working in the city for a while, commuting twice as far as I had to when we lived in the apartment. But it was worth it every day just to experience the traffic thinning to nothing with the miles, and to feel the cool mountain air coming up through the floor panel as the road climbed. By the time I reached the cabin, I was purged of all I had left behind. The glare and noise and crazed competition of the city were someone else's world. My world was a quiet one where I could hear the birds and breezes and listen to myself think. Ideas came. Images formed in my mind's eye. My imagination ran free. There were no obstacles of conventional thought laid before me, no clutter of competing agendas and opinions. Originality was within reach. I formed my own thoughts and followed them to their reasonable conclusions. I was free to explore my own potential and discover what it was I was meant to do with the natural talents I had been given. I was reborn. And all of this was felt most surely and acutely in Winter when life is pared down to the essentials and the simple sound of dry leaves crackling under your boot steps can inspire.

I learned more about wildlife in winter than in any other season. The animal's tracks in the snow told stories of who had been there, what they did, and where they went. The snowy ground was a great big open book that I read daily. And the better I became at reading tracks, the more information they conveyed. I could tell how big the track maker was and whether the animal was in a hurry, just

moseying along, or slowly stalking another animal. When the snow was higher than my knees and difficult to walk in, I wore my snowshoes and found out which wild winter travelers were light enough in weight for snow to hold, and which were heavy and sunk down into the whiteness. I also learned which animals were walking on their own snowshoes made of longer stiffer winter grown hair and fur around their feet. And after reading the snowy book of winter outdoors, I would write about the things I learned in my journal, while my snowshoes dripped melting snow inside the kitchen door.

I quickly learned not to speak of what I had seen until after I had written it all down. Talking diminishes the power of writing. I kept all my newly discovered facts and sentences in my head and poured them all into the page. If there were pictures to be drawn, I would do them too, all before I spoke about them to the family.

On the coldest days of winter, when it was too cold or windy outside to hike in the woods, I read the books of great American naturalists. I began with books I had been aware of but never actually read. In "Walden" I expected Thoreau to describe something similar to our experience in the cabin. But Thoreau's experience at Walden Pond was not at all like our own. Henry David Thoreau was a single man temporarily living what was more of an experiment than a lifestyle. Though his hut was small, plain and somewhat austere, it was in fact within

walking distance to the village and the house he grew up in, giving him a convenient alternative if his experiment did not work out.

Deanna and I had a young child when we began living in the cabin, and over two years later, which put us in our lifestyle longer than Thoreau lasted in his, we had Amber. We were a family with little girls to raise and send to school and make sure they were fed and clothed and had friends to play with. There was no way we could understand what it was like for Thoreau. But when his book spoke of civil disobedience and of living life deliberately and imagining yourself in a certain role and then working steadily toward becoming what you had imagined, I felt a close connection with the author. I read "Walden" through to the end and set it back on the shelf, promising myself that I would read it again someday. So far I haven't.

Emerson on the other hand, I found to be more universally appealing. His tone was friendly and helpful, never stern or condescending. He seemed to have respect for his reader, as if he was speaking to an intellectual equal. He invited you into his thoughts and made you feel welcome. I read Emerson's "Nature" with great pleasure, seeing in it pearls of wisdom that could serve as guideposts on anyone's life journey. One in particular spoke directly to me. In Crinkleroot, I had created "a good chair in the woods" and the world was "beating a path to my door."

Even when Ralph Waldo Emerson preached in his writing, it was as if he were

preaching while walking along with a friend, his arm draped over his listener's shoulder. I could imagine him generously sharing his thoughts with his neighbor Thoreau, and extending the younger man an invitation to build a little hut on his family property at Walden Pond.

Aldo Leopold was the writer that struck closest to the bone with me. So close in fact that my first reading of "Sand County Almanac" seemed too familiar, almost as if I were reading from my own journal. His thoughts and conclusions on wildlife and land use seemed all too obvious. When I told Brett about this, he assured me that Leopold is one that you must read twice – once when you are young, and again when you are older and better able to grasp its greatness and embrace its simple truths. Aldo Leopold's pioneering thoughts on conservation and the ethical use of the land make him the father of ecology. And the fact that he was a hunter and fisherman and saw a world in which these and all other outdoor activities including the necessary harvesting of natural resources could be practiced compatibly and wisely, makes him a prophet of an all inclusive relationship with the land to which society has not yet evolved, sixty four years after his death.

I reread all twenty three volumes of John Burroughs' writings starting with "Wake Robin" and ending with "The Last Harvest". Burroughs had been the first writer I read whose mind closely matched my own. I discovered his work as I have discovered most of the important things in my life, by thinking I was doing



something else, completely contrary. With Burroughs I was not looking for books to read, but books to sell. And when I saw a carton of small leather bound volumes, each one gilded on the top and decorated inside with early color plates and magnificently reproduced etchings, each illustration protected by a thin loose sheet of transparent paper, I was certain they were worth a great deal of money. Yet the price on the box containing the entire set of books was 25 cents! I snatched the set up, and walked hurriedly away before the seller realized his horrendous mistake. I would sell these beautiful books and make a huge profit. That was my plan. Then I read the first book. And afterward, no money could buy the books from me.

I was 24 years old. We were living in the apartment. My love of the outdoors and deepening interest in wildlife photography took Deanna, Michelle and I to all the wild and beautiful spots within an afternoon's drive. We went to the Delaware Canal, the Pocono Mountains, the Jersey Pine Barrens, and Virginia's Chincoteague Island. All of these places held great fascination for me. They were natural places with wild animal populations. We were always on our own, learning more with each visit. And because we learned by being there, we went often.

My life of self instruction had found a perfect application. I was able to build on every new experience and learn from every new outing because I knew how to start from scratch when it came to learning. But it was a lonely way to develop.

Having Deanna and Michelle with me made a big difference. I had company to see and experience with me.

John Burroughs had been dead for decades when I discovered him and he came alive in his books. Reading Burroughs describing fishing for speckled trout was like being there with him and catching the gem-like fish he caught. His writing style was conversational and friendly, like that of a companion rather than an author. Much of what he had to say was what I had been thinking. When it came to art and nature, we were kindred spirits. And Burroughs planted wholesome seeds in my mind for new thoughts, all my own to grow.

I read Henry Beston's "Outermost House", a classic chronicle of a year on Cape Cod, Hal Borland's "Book Of Days", "Homeland – A Report From The Country", and "Countryman: A Summary of Belief." And I re-read Maurice Broun's "Hawks Aloft, The Story of Hawk Mountain" which I had purchased in paperback in the Sanctuary gift shop. Jim Brett's own book about the mountain titled "Feathers In The Wind" was a very personal read and wonderful back drop to the hours and days I spent with the author, having geology, botany, zoology, and even astronomy patiently explained to me.

Last but not least I read a series of highly informative wildlife books that were actually given to me by their prolific author. Leonard Lee Rue III was a writer whose work I discovered as a teenager at a time when his beautiful black and

white photos of North American mammals could be found in almost every outdoor magazine. A year or so before we moved to the cabin, Deanna and I met Lennie at his invitation to attend one of his highly popular lectures on the White-tailed deer. Deanna and I had only recently returned from our stay in Germany and I had the good fortune to get a few of my drawings and early attempts at painting hung in a Philadelphia area gallery. One of the paintings depicted a wildlife photographer asleep behind his camera, with a host of woodland animals crowded around, all looking curiously into the camera lens. The painting was purchased by friends of Leonard Rue and they requested that the artist, me, inscribe it "Happy Birthday, Lennie". Which I did.

A few weeks later I got a call from Mr. Rue himself and he invited Deanna and I to meet him at the lecture. He had recognized some spark of authenticity in my cartoonish depictions of wildlife. The authenticity he told me was in my uncanny ability to capture the true colors of nature in the scenery as well as in the wildlife. He wanted to encourage me to study and learn more about the animals.

To get me started, he gave me a few of his books and over the next year, we traded art for photos and more copies of his excellent books. Lennie's books were about specific species and their habitat. After reading "The World of the White tailed Deer", "The World of the Red Fox", "The World of the Ruffed Grouse", there were a dozen or so of them, I would never again think of a wild animal without

thinking also of its habitat.

In his writing Leonard Lee Rue often mentioned the artist and naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton. Seton came to fame in the early twentieth century with wildlife stories and art aimed specifically at young people. His best known book “Wild Animals I Have Known” is a classic example of the somewhat overly dramatic animal stories that were so popular at the time. Where Seton excelled on a much higher level was in his how-to writings and drawings explaining the elements of woodcraft. The best of his how-to work can be found in “Two Little Savages” and the original Boy Scout Handbook. I immediately saw in Seton a useful parallel to my own aspirations in children’s literature. This enthusiastic teacher of all things outdoors became the boiler plate for my then fledgling career. Lennie Rue must have seen the parallel as well because he sent his entire set of Ernest Thompson Seton’s “Lives of Game Animals” for me to study. What I found particularly instructive was his pen and ink drawings. They gave me clues on various shading techniques that were different from those my father used when depicting machines, and examples of how I could draw realistic, anatomically accurate animals using just pen and ink in future Crinkleroot books.

Whenever I had a question about something in one of Lennie’s or Seton’s books or about something I had seen outdoors, I called Lennie personally. As soon as he would recognize my voice he’d boom out “Jim Arnosky! What can I do for you,

young feller?” We talked on the phone regularly, about many things. He always asked about my family and showed an interest in my career. One of the topics we discussed was the relatively new field of Cryptozoology, which is the study of unknown or as yet unidentified animals such as the Loch Ness Monster and Bigfoot. There were a few books and a popular film out on Bigfoot, and I had become fascinated by the idea that such things might in fact exist.

Lennie was old enough to remember when the Narwhale and giant sturgeon had just been discovered, after previously being thought of as figments of people’s imagination. And he had met the great explorer Ivan Sanderson, who was the first to find and photograph footprints he believed to be made by the Abominable Snowman. Lennie put great stock in Sanderson’s claim, and he himself was open to all the possibilities of unknown undiscovered species around the globe. After all, hundreds of new species of smaller animals such as insects and fish and even mammals were being found and are still being discovered every year.

I mentioned all this to Brett who could sense my growing curiosity, especially about the Bigfoot stories and he nodded as if he shared my interest. Some time after, following a fresh snowstorm, Jim showed up at the cabin all excited. He had found something out in the snow that I simply must see. It would be quite a hike in snow so I should wear high boots.

I dressed warmly and followed my excited friend out the door. I had never seen Jim like this before. He was jittery with anticipation. We hiked down Hawk Mountain eastern slope into a narrow rock strewn basin which the Sanctuary called the River of Rocks because it actually is the dried bed of an ancient river. That morning, the rocks were all capped with white snow. Jim led me over the snow covered lumps to a broad flat plain of snow and there, in the middle of the white field, he showed me what appeared to be the fresh footprint of a large monkey or chimpanzee. The print showed a long, thumb-like big toe and four shorter and smaller toes. I measured the print. From the back of the heel to the tip of the longest small toe, the track was fifteen inches long.

I couldn't believe my eyes. The track was perfectly pressed and showed every detail. Every wrinkle and crease between the toes and on the sole of the foot was visibly evident in the snow. I stood back and looked around, then at Jim whose face was oddly contorted in a very serious expression. I looked around again, scanning the wide white field, and suddenly realized that the mysterious footprint was the only one of its kind in the middle of what had to be ten acres of snow. I turned back to Jim and asked him how a big monkey or Bigfoot or anything could leave only one footprint in the middle of a field so large. And in all seriousness my friend suggested that it must have been jumping or perhaps even flying and momentarily bounced down on one foot here in that spot. Then his

serious facial expression cracked and he exploded in laughter. We both laughed at my expense, and the sound of our laughter echoed off the icy cliffs of the mountain. Jim had hiked down earlier and pressed the “footprint” with his gloved hand, carefully sculpting the size and mysterious digits with his own finger. High boots indeed! But not for snow.

Brett’s practical joke turned out to be prophetic in an almost cosmic way. Many years later, at the very time that I began working on my own book exploring the possibility of Bigfoot, Jim was in Africa, the cradle of humankind, aiding a conservation group whose aim was to stop an Indian mining company from digging up a salt plain and ruining the habitat of millions of resident flamingos. To get to the place Jim and his hosts had to walk a long way over the ancient flats. On the horizon, a volcano coughed smoke into the sky. Jim got to see the birds and offered some suggestions as what could be done to preserve them and their unique habitat. He had been successful in spearheading protective measures in the Middle East and other highly contentious places around the globe.

On the walk back over the whitened plain, Jim spotted a footprint in the hardened salt. It was human and turned out to be one of three sets of prints – those of a man, woman, and child, walking barefoot together. As Brett was finding more and more prints and tracing the threesome over the flats, the volcano erupted, spewing a great cloud of smoke and ash which began rolling over the salt

flats, eventually reaching Brett and company who had to abandon the find and dash for their vehicles. After the eruption, Brett returned and brushed away the thick layer of ash to try and find the prints again. This time Jim had professional paleontologists along to help determine exactly what the tracks were and how long they have been pressed into the salt. The group uncovered a long series of footprints made by this trio of walkers and determined that the tracks were over 700,000 years old. In fact, they were believed to be the oldest human footprints ever to be found.

News of the ancient find spread all the way to the government of Tanzania which immediately revoked the mining company's permit in a determined move to protect a new national historical treasure. And Jim was asked to help put together a scientific team to properly study the site. The salt flats were preserved. The flamingos were protected. And a new page was added to history; all because of Jim Brett finding a footprint in the middle of a white field.



## Chapter XI

### Nocturnal Visitors

In the Wizard of Oz the wicked witch of the west warned that she had flying monkeys and wasn't afraid to use them. At Hawk Mountain we didn't have any flying monkeys, but we did have flying squirrels. I'm not sure what winter witch mobilized them but suddenly we had whole squadrons of them flying into our dooryard. We would see them at night, their oversized nocturnal eyes glaring in the yellow porch light as they raided our bird feeders. The squirrels swooped before us as we walked down the porch steps, and they glided over our heads on our nightly walks to the outhouse. They landed and ran on the cabin roof and scurried noisily on the clapboard walls. Occasionally one would bounce off the kitchen window causing a loud bang. We had never seen them on the property before. We didn't even know such creatures existed. Then suddenly they were omnipresent in the night.

Flying squirrels do not actually fly. They glide on outstretched legs that have fur covered webs of skin connecting forelegs to hind legs. Unlike bats which actually have wings and fly great distances, flying squirrels can only leap from a high place and glide downward a hundred feet or so. But in that short glide, a flying squirrel can twist and steer itself with its rudder like tail and land precisely on whatever perch it was aiming for. I loved seeing them sail down out of the darkness and land

with a light thump on the wooden thresholds of our many feeders. And after feeding awhile on seeds, they would leap and glide to a nearby tree and climb high enough to launch themselves again.

Why had the squirrels come, when they had never come before? It may have been that with the increase in my freelance work and the added income it provided, we unconsciously began buying a better grade of birdseed, with more sunflower seeds in it. A larger percentage of sunflower seeds always attracts red or gray squirrels. The little night-flying squirrels took only the oily black sunflower seeds in the feeders. After one had gorged its belly with seeds, it flew away an ounce or two heavier, making it descend more rapidly.

Everything about a flying squirrel is designed to float on air. Tiny and compact when not “flying”, one squirrel could fit inside a teacup. But with its webbed legs spread wide, a flying squirrel looks bigger – like a square kite with a feathery looking tail. The black eyes are enormous with huge pupils to gather all available light. It would be interesting to see what such eyes see. Would night be night? Or would it look more like an overcast day?

The squirrels returned night after night over the next month. Then just as suddenly as they showed up, they were gone. I imagined them moving on like a nomadic tribe of arboreal monkeys. Their absence took all the fun out of our nightly trips to the outhouse. And the kitchen porch and dooryard which had

become a busy flyway, was suddenly just a porch and dooryard again. Before the flying squirrels glided into our night, I was primarily a day naturalist. My interest focused almost entirely on the wildlife I saw on my daily hikes. The introduction of such fascinating creatures as flying squirrels into my sphere of curiosity made me wonder about other nocturnal animals living in the winter woods.

I tried walking after dark just to experience the night. The very first thing I discovered was that, though the pupils of my eyes are much smaller than most wild animals' pupils, after they had dilated to their max, the night was indeed brighter. I went from barely being able to make out the winding course of the dark trail before me to actually seeing the shapes of trailside boulders and saplings, and even smaller details on the ground such as dry leaves and twigs. The sky gradually changed from black to indigo, and the leafless forest canopy, from a blur of dark shadows to individually silhouetted branches.

The nighttime woods lacked the hum and buzz and vibration so prevalent during the day. These are the ambient sounds of insects, birds, and light zephyrs of air moving through the forest. Wildlife activity and winds decrease after sunset and the resulting silence transforms the atmosphere. Any sounds or movements that do occur are starkly contrasted against the profound silence and stillness of the night. The rustle of a mouse that during the day might go unnoticed amid many other competing sounds, becomes an isolated noise at night.

One day, after cleaning frozen leaves out of the storm gutter on the kitchen porch roof, I left the ladder standing against the wall. That evening, I switched on the porch light to look outside and saw a fluffy bird perched on the ladder's top rung. It was a red-phase Screech owl, similar in size and streaked coloration to the little owl that I saw pop up from inside the hollow tree up on the mountain. Could this have been the same bird? Screech owls range over a wide area when they are hunting. The owl turned its head and faced the porch light. And as it did, I saw the black pupils of its eyes visibly contract in the bright yellow light. Something must have rustled on the ground, because the little owl's head snapped back and all of the owl's attention was drawn downward toward the ground. The bird leaned forward to pinpoint the location of the sound which must have intensified because the owl's eyes widened. Then suddenly it left the ladder and dropped like a stone to catch whatever it had seen in the dark.

The owl returned a few more times and when it did not come back I figured it had exhausted the food supply around the ladder. I went out one night and tried calling it the way Jim Brett had imitated the tremulous call of a Screech owl.

"OW LOW OW LOW OW OW OW". I called from the porch

"OW LOW OW LOW OW OW OW". I called again. And somewhere in the woods, an owl called back. "OW LOW OW LOW OW OW OW." I can't tell you how satisfying it was to hear. Try it yourself to see if you have an owl in your area, and

you will understand how I felt.

Each Spring, we heard owls calling all around our woods but we never saw any. One Spring day I was picking my way through the softwoods on the property adjacent to ours when I came across a pellet made of hair and tiny bones. The pellet was about the size of a 20 gauge shotgun shell. I turned the pellet over with a stick and saw an entirely intact mouse skull tangled in the matted hairs.

Sometime earlier, in the Sanctuary headquarters, I spotted a small jar with a similar pellet inside. The pellet in the jar had been meticulously pulled apart to separate all the bones from the fur. The jar was labeled OWL PELLETT, and the bones were those of an entire mouse skeleton. Apparently bones and hair are indigestible to many animals. You see it passed through in the fecal stools of foxes, coyotes, and cats. In human beings, something in the digestive tract immediately senses and rejects hair and bone. A person can accidentally eat and swallow seeds, pits, toothpicks, even jewelry that has dropped in the soup. But let one strand of hair be tangled in a fork full of spaghetti or one slender bone be hidden in a mouthful of salmon or chicken and the entire mouthful will be immediately coughed up and expelled. When an owl catches a mouse, it swallows it whole as the owl does with all its prey. Owls can digest animal tissue but not bones and hair or fur. The hair and bones of a digested mouse form into a pellet inside the owl's stomach and the bird coughs the pellet up and out onto the

ground. An owl pellet on the ground is a sign that there is an owl perched on a tree branch above.

I returned to the spot under the evergreens where I had found the owl pellet and found another in the same spot. There were also some white bird droppings splattered on the ground. I looked up and searched the evergreen branches with my eyes. Directly above me, on a branch that was also stained by white droppings, was a large owl. It had feather “ears” or “horns” like a Great Horned owl does, but it was not a Great Horned owl. It was much thinner and had different facial markings than a Great horned owl. This was another large owl with ear tufts. I looked around on the forest floor and saw more whitewash and pellets under other trees. And above each pellet, I found another owl. All together I found seventeen. Every one of them were of the same species and each was perched on a low evergreen limb near the trunk. The owls’ eyes were tightly closed, sleeping after a long night of hunting. Each owl slept supremely camouflaged against the bark of the tree, looking very much like a part of the tree trunk. I later learned that these were Long-eared owls, a species that travel in nomadic groups, moving from hunting ground to hunting ground and roosting together at the end of the night.

With me skulking around below them, the owls awoke and began shuffling around on the branches on which they were perched. I tried to be quiet, but I was

determined to locate even more owls, and finally my desire for further discovery and greed for adding to my count disturbed the flock enough to cause them to flap silently from branch to branch trying to find better hiding places. I enjoyed watching. But the very next day they had abandoned the area.

Had I curbed my zeal, practiced moderation in my methods, and allowed them a greater space of time between my visits, I might have gotten a few more days, perhaps weeks, with the owls and learned more about them. Instead, I had chased them away, without getting to sketch them from life. It was an important lesson learned. Observing without disturbing.

## Chapter XII

### The Names of the Trees

In the winter landscape, rocks and trees stood out as in no other season. A single boulder or sapling possessed artistic value. While sketching outdoors in winter, I discovered that every tree I looked at was unique. There can be a billion trees in a forest and because each one occupies a different spot on the curve of the Earth, each receives sunlight and water in its own way. This phototropic and hydrotropic difference makes every tree grow differently. I often revisited individual trees that I found particularly interesting . Some of them were very old and had endured much. Many were young trees just beginning to branch out, and having to weather storms that would either strengthen or break them.

There was a steep wooded slope on the mountainside that had hundreds of slender hardwood saplings growing on it. Each sapling was bent at a right angle near the ground and growing straight again four or five inches farther up the tree stem. If you sawed one of these trees close to the soil it was growing out of and turned it upside down, the right angle bend in the stem formed a perfect handle for a cane. All you had to do was measure the length of the cane you wanted and saw that spot to remove the upper stem, branches and twigs. I called this place and places like it a “Walking Stick Woods”. After much thought, I came to the conclusion that the bend that forms the handle of the walking stick sapling is



created by heavy snows bending the young tree over and icing it in a prone position. Spring thaws release the upper part of the tree first allowing it to continue growing upward, but the snow bend remains.

Because of the way I was looking at individual trees and trying to understand them as living things, trees became more interesting to me than any other large feature in the landscape. And my interest wasn't limited to standing trees. I began looking more closely at the trees I had felled. In every log I sawed I could read the story of its life recorded in the annual growth rings. Thick growth rings marked the years of plenty. For a tree that means plenty of water and sunlight. If human beings had growth rings like a tree has, mine would be thin and irregularly shaped until my nineteenth year when I met Deanna. From there on, my growth rings would thicken with each year.

I could tell the age of a tree by simply counting the growth rings and adding a year for the heartwood. Like an MRI dissecting a body in visual slices, my chainsaw created cross sections of wood that revealed the tree's inner secrets. An aberration in an otherwise well formed growth ring showed where a sudden blow or wound had occurred. A large blackened scar meant the tree had been struck by lightning or scorched in a fire. Brown spots or discoloration in a growth ring were signs of some wood boring insects or disease the tree had survived. By counting the growth rings from the outer ones inward – the outermost ring being the

present year –I could pinpoint the exact years when these things happened.

Where we lived the trees had recently become infested by Gypsy Moths. The Gypsy Moth was not native to North America. It was a European species that had been accidentally transported to the U.S. on ship's cargo. The eggs of Gypsy Moths, laid in clusters and protected in a sticky silk sac, adhered to things like shipping crates and wooden boards. In our woods they were stuck to the bark of trees. Our trees were so infested with Gypsy Moth eggs that, after hatching, the caterpillars could be seen crawling on and voraciously feeding on every green leaf. As the caterpillars quickly grew they would crowd each other on branches and leaves and push each other so that thousands of them would slip off and fall to the ground. Every Spring which was the time of the caterpillars, we could expect a caterpillar shower. The insects landed on the roof of the cabin, the walkways, and the roads. A fully grown Gypsy Moth caterpillar is nearly an inch and a quarter long and plump from devouring leaves. Thousands of fallen caterpillars laying and crawling on the road became a hazard for cars and trucks that would skid and slide on the gooey mess.

Because of the Gypsy Moth caterpillars we had what amounted to two Springs each year – the natural season and, after the caterpillars had denuded the trees, a false Spring of replacement leaves. By then the caterpillars had retired to their cocoons to begin metamorphosis. The state of Pennsylvania was caught in a

quandary between spraying insecticide which many landowners protested, or doing nothing at all and letting the caterpillars take their annual toll. To find out what if anything could be done that wouldn't inflame the public, a study was launched to learn more about the moths, eggs, and caterpillars. State foresters began setting up traps in heavily infested areas, and that's how I met Mark.

Throughout my life there have been pivotal people, places, and events that came along just when I needed them. Frank Schroyer, who introduced me to the world of art beyond my father's drawing board, Deanna, meeting Lennie Rue, buying Burroughs' books, our empty canteen, the roadside spring, finding the cabin, befriending Brett, Denise Van Lear, having my work accepted by Cricket Magazine, Trina's \$500 cover assignment and command that we use the money for a well just when Deanna was getting too pregnant to continue scooping water from the spring, sitting behind the man with the magpie, creating Crinkleroot, and Margaret Frith gently coaxing me to try writing a book – all of these I look upon not as coincidences or luck, but a kind of providence. And so it was that just when my curiosity about trees in our woods was reaching a peak, Mark Tyser knocked on the cabin door.

Mark Tyser was the State forester assigned to study the Gypsy Moth infestation in our area. He just showed up one day, introduced himself, and asked for my permission to erect a tent on my land. It seemed odd that he would pick our one

acre in a woods of thousands of acres, many of which were on State lands.

I asked him why I should allow him to put a tent on our property and he explained that he was going to set up traps to capture and study the moths and caterpillars in the general area and needed a tent to work inside. I wasn't thrilled about having a stranger around all the time. But I felt that it was important to help if we wanted the State to solve the problem. I asked to see his credentials and invited him to walk with me around the property, in order to take his measure as a man who would be coming and going freely and spending time near and around our girls. As it turned out, he was a very nice fellow. Affable and enthusiastic about his chosen field. He was recently married. We were approximately the same age, he a bit younger perhaps. And though he was young, he had a great deal of knowledge about the woods. It dawned on me that here was just the fellow who could teach me the names of all the trees, and I made him a proposition. He could put his tent and traps on my land, if he agreed to tell me all he could about the trees in our woods.

I knew a few, the ones most country dwellers know – oak, maple, ash, white birch, and the great big tulip poplars. But I didn't know a white oak from a black oak or a pin oak. I didn't know a sugar maple from a red maple or striped maple. And I knew very few of the smaller species of trees. Mark taught me how to tell the differences when he visited our woods, and on his days off, while we fished

together in the mountains. He taught me the growth progression of a forest from the pioneer forest of short lived yellow poplars, aspens, and birches, that gradually overtake uncultivated fields. He showed me mature forest stands of maples, oaks, and beeches that had long ago replaced the pioneer species. And he explained that this was the way all forests grew, in a succession of species. Mark taught me the names of the smaller species of trees that grow in the wet and soggy lowlands - Cinnamon birch, cherry birch, yellow birch, alder, and willow – all new friends that were introduced to me by my young forester friend.

I'm not sure if it was Mark who introduced me to the tiny Sassafras tree, but it was unusually numerous on our property. When I mentioned the species to Brett, he told me that the Sassafras root smelled just like root beer and that it was what the original root beer or sassparilla was made from. Sassafras roots were also boiled to make tea. Old timers in our neck of the woods still used the root to make Sassafras tea. They boiled water, dropped in a few pieces of root and added sugar. We tried it. The tea was a light reddish color and tasted very much like hot uncarbonated root beer. Some people drank Sassafras tea in Spring because they believed it thinned their blood after a long cold sluggish winter.

Mark and I discussed trees and fished for wild trout together in some of my favorite pools which he had sworn to keep secret. He was a good companion and teacher. He came as long as his Gypsy Moth study lasted. Then one morning

Deanna and I awoke to find the traps and tent were all gone. We never saw Mark again. But because of him I know the names of dozens of species of trees and the life cycle of a forest and for that I will be forever grateful.

There were times when the trees themselves were my best companions. After I had worn Deanna's good listener patience down, trying to explain an idea developing in my mind, I would take a long hike up the mountain to sit and think among the tall trees and my thoughts would clarify in their presence. A tree is an old idea – seed, root, sprout, leaf, stem, branch, trunk, crown, blossom, fruit and seed again. And hatching a new idea while considering the logic and durability of a successful old idea sharpened my mind, forced a higher standard on my thoughts, and increased the likelihood that my new idea would work and last to be a good old idea someday. Try it the next time you have to come up with an idea for anything. Plop yourself down next to something tried and true, like a pair of webbed snowshoes or a woven basket or a wooden sailboat or stately old tree and see what happens in your head.

## Chapter XIII

### All Good Things.....

The cabin was the best idea I ever had. The rigors of living that it required from us were counterbalanced by the surrounding beauty and simple joyful existence it provided. Along with the satisfaction of self-reliance, it fostered a strong sense of responsibility. Michelle became a young lady in the cabin and a great help. While Deanna and I were busy doing chores, we trusted her to look after Amber who, once she became a toddler was on the go all the time. Together we learned that work and play are equally important and that sometimes congenial work can indeed be a key to happiness. Professionally, living in the cabin forged in me what every artist should strive for – independence of thought and action. It fostered a way of thinking and working that set me apart from the mind numbing and spirit killing influences of pop culture. It made me wary of trends instead of being a slave to them and allowed me the luxury of being virtually oblivious to competition. In the splendid isolation of the cabin I set my sights on a long range goal of becoming a first rate wildlife artist with not only artistic skill but a deep well of knowledge and understanding of my chosen subjects. And though I did not come to the cabin to write, living in the cabin made a writer out of me.

During our daughters early and most important years of development, Deanna

Michelle and Amber formed a closeness and life long bond that inhabiting a small house brings. Together they learned where need ends and actual living begins. We fully intended to live the rest of our lives at the foot of Hawk Mountain. We had even begun to talk about having the water piped into the house. But all of this changed one day when an unexpected and painful thought entered my mind – that while the cabin was a blessing, it was only a beginning and not to be our lifelong home. It was an idea that seemed to come from something outside of me. I did not want to accept it as my own.

I tried repeatedly to shrug it off, but the idea wouldn't leave, and instead pressed more heavily on my mind. On my long mountain hikes, the awful thought of it brought me to tears on more than one occasion. I had never wanted more, and suddenly more was what I craved. I wanted more of everything we had; more room inside, more land outside, more garden, more snow, more and different wildlife, more wilderness in which to roam. I had fallen in love with the cabin and Hawk Mountain and now, suddenly I wanted to move on. I asked Deanna what she thought about ending this chapter in our lives and beginning a new one. And after much consideration and prayer, she decided that perhaps it was time to leave. The girls were growing and soon would be needing more room. And Deanna had begun to envision a life with a full sized kitchen, a real bathroom, and a bedroom of our own, knowing full well that adding all of this to the cabin would ruin its



charm. Had Deanna rejected the idea of moving, we would have stayed. But I think in some profound way she realized that our leaving was necessary to whatever it was that we had been joined together to accomplish.

The four and a half years we lived ruggedly but joyfully in the cabin was like the heartwood in a tree. For growth there must be layers of living and many experiences, some outside of your control. Disturbing thoughts that you do not try to think but lodge themselves in your mind do so for a reason. Before accepting or rejecting them, you must think them through step by step. Like stones in a stream, they may lead to surprisingly pleasant places. All good things do not necessarily come to an end. We left the cabin but took with us the self-reliance and simplicity it had taught us. And, aside from indoor plumbing, our lifestyle has not changed. We still grow a garden and we still heat with wood. Only now we burn it in a more efficient airtight stove. Deanna continues to nurture her plants and feed her beloved birds. And I still spend my days studying the lives of wild animals. This old farm which we call Ramtails, nestled in the verdant mountains of Vermont, has been our home for 36 years. It is the house Michelle and Amber grew up in and the home they left to start families of their own. It is the happy place our grandchildren know and the spring from which all but the first of my 125 nature books for young people have flowed.

That first book, "I Was Born In A Tree And Raised By Bees" remains my favorite,

because it was written in the cabin. It is my WALDEN. In it, through the character of Crinkleroot, I laid the foundation of a life's work. Every time I open it to the first page and see Crinkleroot standing by his woodstove, I think of my lovely wife building a tiny pyramid of dry twigs in the hearth, and how with the strike of a wooden match, she lit her first fire on a very cold first night in the first house she ever owned. The cabin. That fire warms us still.

End

