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Wildness Explored

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HONORS PROJECT

Spring 1976

Charles Cantrell - Hoover

-FORWARD-

This notebook can by no means be considered a complete representation of all that we have done in connection with this honors project. This should be considered as only a token of what we have done over the past few months in relation to our project. There were several efforts which were made on our part which are not even touched on in this report. We have been selective in what we have included in an effort to compile a concise account which will require a relatively short time to read and look through. Our notebook can only be considered an introduction to our project in the same sense that our project served as an introduction into an area of interest which we will continue to develop for the rest of our lives.



-PURPOSE-

In undertaking this project, our purpose was rather vague. We wanted to make a very general study of man's relationship to his environment from both a practical and philosophical standpoint. Such topics as edible wild foods, wilderness survival, and the need for wilderness preservation have been investigated. Several books have been read in each of these areas and in addition we have made several field trips. We have looked over three or four proposed wilderness areas in Arkansas and Missouri but have become most familiar with the Caney Creek area in western Arkansas. Besides making several day hikes, we camped out for four days in the Caney Creek area during the spring of 1974. The pictures in this notebook were taken while we were on this outing. The results of the project have been very broad and general and have served as a means rather than an end in itself. In other words, our project has made us more aware of our natural surroundings and served as an initiative for our continuing to develop a healthy and meaningful relationship with our environment.

-TRIP INTO CANEY CREEK AREA-

Our trip into Caney Creek was extremely enjoyable and the notes we took while there will be utilized in writing this brief account of our trip. We arrived at Caney Creek about 10:00 a.m. and made a rather leisurely hike about five miles down stream before we selected a campsite. The weather was warm and sunny. Due to a lack of confidence in our foraging ability and a lack of foliage in mid-March, we packed enough food to get by on comfortably. In the morning we got up with the sun and in the evening went to bed within an hour after dark. The weather was most cooperative although we had quite a range in temperature. At night it was sometimes a bit hard to sleep because of the cold but during the day we once received a slight sunburn while sleeping on some rocks near a waterfall. After breakfast we would spend the morning exploring the area and enjoying the scenery and numerous waterfalls. Making our way back to camp for lunch, we would spend the afternoon separately for the most part. The afternoon hours were passed by writing (of which a few examples are included in this notebook), whittling, and exploring one's own mind. After a substantial supper, we would sit around the fire and discuss the broadest range of topics imaginable.

Although we enjoyed the solitude which was ours during the trip, we realized that solitude is something which one must become gradually accustomed to. So often people will go for

years without experiencing one single day of solitude. A person such as this should not expect to be able to fully enjoy a week in the woods with only himself or a companion. Even though a well balanced person has a need for solitude, this need is something which must be cultivated and doesn't come all at once, especially in a society that leaves so many people with the impression that solitude is unnecessary or only for those who have nothing better to do with their time. For some of us, a taste for solitude must be developed the same as we must develop a taste for an unfamiliar vegetable, even though it is good for us and later we will be able to actually enjoy and more fully appreciate that vegetable. So it should have been no surprize to us that we were more than ready to leave after four days. But during the course of this project it is safe to say that our taste for solitude has been whitted and not only could we have a greater appreciation of four days solitude but we would be more capable of staying a longer period.









-WILDERNESS-

During the course of our study we learned a good deal about the concept of "wilderness" area. We have become aware of efforts to grant wilderness status to several areas which are already included in our National Forrest. A wilderness area is simply a location which contains no privately owned lands, no permanent roads, no places of human habitation, and no permanent improvements. When granted wilderness status, an area would be protected from any development whatsoever. The bill which is now before Congress that is of particular interest to us is the Eastern Wilderness Bill (S.3433, H.R.13455). Under this bill, Arkansas would have two locations set aside as wilderness areas, one in the Buffalo River area consisting of 10,000 acres and one in the Caney Creek area consisting of 14,433 acres. As the result of our interest in the bill, we helped with a letter writing campaign expressing our support to representative Congressmen. We also talked personally with a couple of our United States Congressmen about the Eastern Wilderness Bill.

Over the past few months we have been forming our own ideas about the need, purpose, and role of wilderness in today's society. From our point of view, one of the most important purposes of wilderness is to provide a stabilizing influence in a society which is changing, especially when some of these changes are

happening too fast and appear to be of no value and even detrimental. Wilderness can provide a well-defined, permanent handle to which a person may cling when all else seems to be spinning around in an incoherent blur. Also, it is comforting to know that there will be areas where an individual's children may spend time in an environment which is free of man's "improvements" and that the only changes to have taken place were at the hands of Mother Nature. In addition, wilderness provides the solitude which is necessary for some people and provides this solitude in an atmosphere which is conducive to man's learning his appropriate role in the natural order of things.

Often during the course of the past few months we have asked ourselves why some people have such a strong attraction for the outdoors. Does man possess some sort of innate affection for trees, rocks, and streams? We have found it interesting to wonder if a child who was raised in an environment of metal and plastic would share our enthusiasm for what many of us call "natural" surroundings. Maybe some people just like the idea or image of being an "outdoorsman", someone who refuses to let the hectic pace of our modern world separate them from the basic elements. Surely there is a more fundamental answer. In nature, man finds a clue for his own existence. There is no mystery in being surrounded by four concrete walls which house a stereo, television, and furniture. Man is attributed with being the creator of all these items. But what happens when we are surrounded by

forrest and streams and clear blue sky? Man certainly can not be attributed with creating this phenomenon we call nature and maybe it has occurred to us that by discovering the creator of nature, man might in turn discover the identity of his own creator. And what better way to discover the creator of nature than by closely affiliating ourselves with and closely examing the creation itself. But what about those of us who feel they already possess some personal knowledge of the source of our creation? So much the better. What better way to feel close to that creator than by being surrounded by his other creations or what might be called man's fellow-creations. When we are in the midst of natural surroundings we have eliminated man and what we think of as man's creations, we have removed the man-made level which has been thrust between ourselves and the creator. The natural environment can be attributed to none other than the force which many people like to referr to as God. So quiet understandable there are going to be those of us who are upset with the destruction, interference, and pollution of our environment. To often we go to the trouble of removing the man-made barrier by going camping or hiking, only to find that another barrier has been erected in the form of pollution.

A Sand County Almanac - Aldo Leopold

Aldo Leopold, in his Sand County Almanac, describes month by month, the changes that overcome the land and the animals he observes. Leopold displays a deep appreciation for nature that could be described as a sort of reverence. Each plant and each animal is spoken of as though it were an object of art. He advocates through his writing a philosophy which calls for a "symbiosis" between man and nature. The Sand County Almanac is a poetic and stirring description of the things Leopold sees on his excursions into the wild with his family. More than this, it shows the way in which a man who is in harmony with nature views his surroundings.

When Leopold sets forth his "Land Ethic" he takes conservation one step further than usual. He states in the introduction to his book that we should see land as a commodity to which we belong rather than a commodity belonging to us. Leopold believes in the conservation of wilderness areas because of the tremendous contribution of nature to our culture.





A God Within - Rene Dubos

In his book, Dubos points out man's responsibility to care for his environment and suggests that we have been a bit delinquent in regard to our stewardship of the planet Earth. Even so, the author's work expresses a hopeful tone and confirms the ability of both nature and man to adapt to one another and survive in acceptable forms. He is confident that life will survive on earth in some form in spite of a technologically-rooted environmental crisis, but he does fear the degradation of human life as we know it. I think this fear is expressed when Dubos writes, "A decline in the quality of life coinciding with an increase of economic affluence symbolizes the trend toward the absurd in technological societies." The point is being made that our quality of life isn't always directly proportional to economic affluence and technological growth. While expressing a rationalist humanism throughout, Dubos book contains many good ideas and tied in well with our project.

-WILD FOODS-

One of the first wild foods we sampled were acorns. Our first attempt at preparing some acorns we had collected on the shores of Shady Lake was somewhat of a failure. By no stretch of the imagination could the acorns be termed edible. But not to be discouraged, a couple of weeks later we gathered various kinds of acorns and attempted to transform them into tasty morsels of natural cuisine. To remove the tannic acid, we boiled the acorns for a couple of hours changing water every 15 minutes or so. We then roasted the nuts, dipped them in butter and finally rolled them in sugar. To be perfectly honest, our second experience with acorns was only a little better than our first. Extreme hunger is probably the best aid to one's appreciating the fruit of the oak tree.

The cattail became the next object (or should I say victim) of our inquisitive appetites. After venturing out late one night to gather the roots of this plant, we returned to faithfully follow the instructions for preparing the cattail which Euell Gibbons provides in his book, Stalking the Wild Asparagus. Without going into all the unpleasant details, we quickly decided that cattails would make a good companion dish for roasted acorns.

At last, one evening as I was hiking along the bank of a small stream, my confidence was restored in "wild foods". I spied some exceptionally large crawfish and immediately shed my

socks and boots and attempted to catch some of them. This was easily done with a piece of pork rind attached to some nylon fishing line. After capturing 5 or 6 of the crawfish I built a fire and brought some water to a boil in a Dr. Pepper can I had picked up farther up stream. I then dropped the crawfish into the water and covered the top with a flat stone. After a while they turned a bright pink and I ate the flesh which can be peeled from the bottom side of their tail. The meat was quite tasty and tasted somewhat like shrimp. Also, I am sure the flavor could have been enhanced if some type of sauce had been prepared to dip the crawfish in.

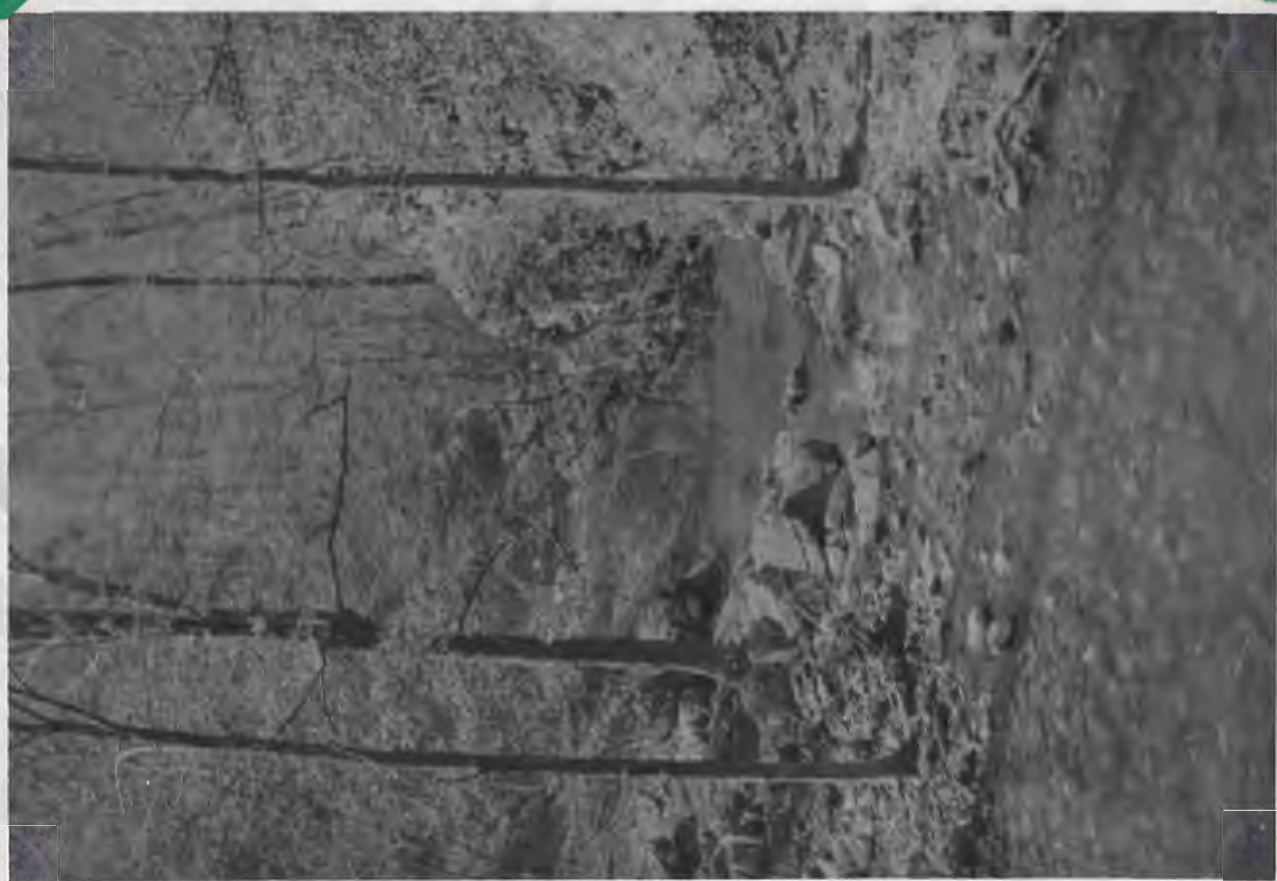
Various types of nuts and berries were probably the most pleasing of the few wild foods that we sampled and of course they required little or no preparation. Of course, the hickory nut is an old standby but requires a good deal of effort in cracking the hard shell for a comparatively small amount of food. We both agreed that the muscadine was one of the best wild fruits to be found, with the flavor resembling that of a grape to an extent. The berry can be used in several ways, as in the preparation of wine and jelly. On a couple of occasions we found the muscadine in Caney Creek.

We discovered that there are a variety of teas which can be prepared from various leaves and roots. Our first endeavor at preparing tea was with the sassafras root. The resulting brew was very pleasant in both aroma and taste but I will mention in passing that various additives one might decide to introduce

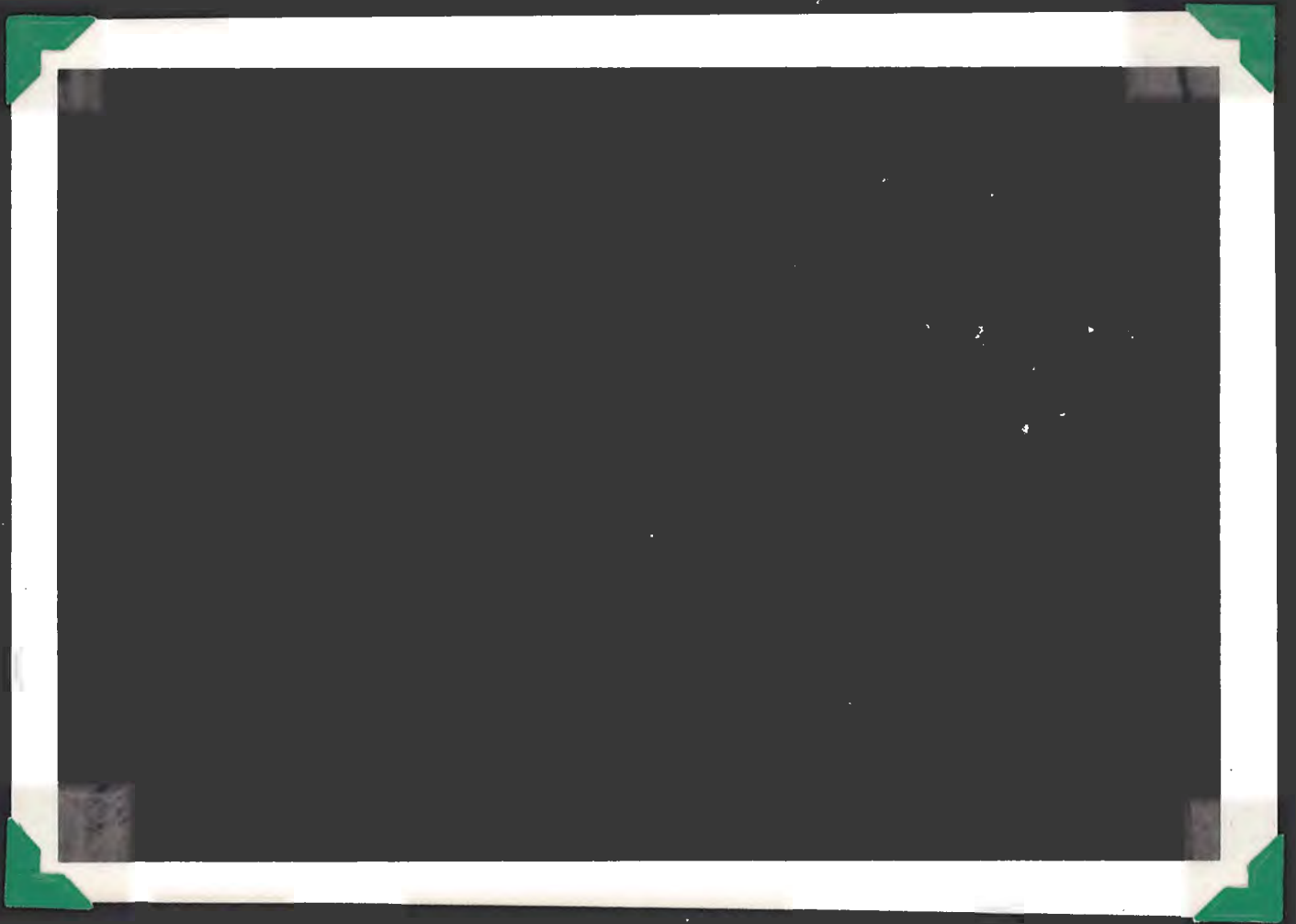
into the tea should be used with both care and moderation. A rather unusual tea can also be made from the dried leaves of the persimon tree. Although care should be used, the different kinds of tea which may be prepared and enjoyed is limited only to one's imagination.

Besides our conclusion that Euell Gibbons has no taste buds, this project has provided both of us with a respect for those who are informed and developed enough to enjoy what people consider to be "wild" or "natural" foods. One does not learn how to identify, gather, and prepare wild foods in a matter of weeks or even months. This is something which requires a great deal of effort and must be continually cultivated over a period of years. For us, this project has served as an introduction to wild foods and as a stimulus by which we will continue to add to our store of fundamental knowledge for the rest of our lives. Theoretically we know a good deal about wild foods, that is we have read several books and articles but only time will provide us with the practical knowledge which we can gain only through personal experience. Our interest in this field will certainly not be confined to the short period which was encompassed by this project.









THE FOLLOWING ARE A COUPLE OF EXAMPLES OF THE
WRITING WE DID WHILE CAMPING IN THE CANEY CREEK AREA

* * * *

It was great to be home. The feeling which accompanies a homecoming contains a warmth all its own. After walking down the wooded hillside and leaping the narrow ribbon of water, I could contain myself no longer. With an uninhibited shout, I bounded into the open field and felt the grass brush against the front of my legs as I gratefully ran through the yellow-green meadow. Upon reaching the middle of the field I fell flat upon the earth and sighed as I embraced my mother and was comforted as I relaxed upon her bosom.

* * * *

The youth had successfully completed the demanding climb which climaxed in arriving at the apex of the rugged mountain side. His spirit never failed to soar higher and higher with each step he took up the bluff but the result always seemed to be anti-climatic once he reached the top. Several times before he had stood on this very spot and almost been smothered by the view which enveloped him. The river stretched out below and the sky stretched out above with the sun overflowing onto all the surroundings. It was an extremely light day. As the youth stood there on his pinnacle he was made once more to realize what a minute part of the universe he composed. He was nothing. He felt frustrated as he realized that the understanding of creation was beyond his grasp.

He was in the dark. He looked down at the friendly rocks which were waiting several hundred feet below. The leap was made . . . and why not? He had rather be in the dark while he was in the dark than be in the dark while he was in the light.

* * * *

The lad sat perched upon the rock and was facing the majestic, aged birch tree with whom he was having a conversation. The tree was known throughout the countryside as representing the epitome of learning and was famous for the sound advice he would occasionally bestow upon those who were thoughtful enough, or should I say aware enough, to stop and speak with him. Since the lad was curious as to why everyone regarded the birch as so knowledgeable, he inquired as to the nature of knowledge itself. Upon hearing the question, the birch tree thought for several minutes and allowed the breeze to flow between his branches as though she were whispering a reply to the lad's question. While gazing down at the boy, the birch tree asked if the boy knew of the relationship which exists between a boat and the river?

"Certainly" answered the boy, "Everyone knows that a boat floats on the river. A boat is made for the river, that is obvious."

"I see" said the birch tree, "Now can you tell me the relationship which exist between the stone upon which you are sitting and the eye of the sparrow which is at this moment resting within the safty of my branches?"

This question was not so easy, but the lad thought for several minutes before he admitted that he could not explain the relationship

between the eye of the sparrow and the stone.

The tree then patiently explained that knowledge consisted of recognizing the relationships which exist between all things. When one becomes aware of the connection between all things, then one's knowledge is complete.