

Canyon Camp's Spring Wildflower Painting

Bloodroot, hepatica, Dutchman's breeches, jack-in-the-pulpit, snowy trilliums, toad shade. Warm rains at the end of April give birth to wildflowers that push up through the dead layers left by endless springs. Tiny bursts of color scattered randomly on the ground over the dun landscape between silent trees. To mark the end of winter, Doc and I would walk Forest Trail each spring, and look at the first spring wildflowers.

Forest Trail clings to a north-facing limestone palisade high above Coon Creek winding through the deciduous forest and dense understory shrubs. Maple, oak, prickly ash, gooseberry, cherry, walnut and honey locust were waking from their winter dormancy and stretching new branches sunward, testing the warming spring air. Brilliantly shining green leaves were emerging from split buds the end of each branch and turning their new yellow-green faces toward the sun.

Walking amid the new spring life, we'd breathe in and savor the dark, rich aroma of the decaying vegetation and soil that was life's annual wellspring. We would wonder and speculate about the urgent cycle of birth, maturity, reproduction, death and decay endlessly driving plant and animal life in Canyon Camp's woodland world.

Each year Doc would stop here and there along the trail. He'd use his knife to cut the stem of a bloodroot and hold it up as it dripped carmine sap from between the ends of his dirt-covered fingers then describe how the liver-shaped and colored leaves of hepatica gave it its name. We'd look along the dead elm tree roots searching for morels and crush a few flowers of red columbine, touching our tongues to the sweet nectar captured in the four basins of each flower. The same flowers were there year after year, and year after year, Doc would tell me the same stories about the wonders found along Forest Trail. He'd apologize for repeating them and looking at the same flowers, but no matter how many times I heard the stories, I never tired of them and looked forward to our spring hike.

At the trailhead where his Nature Center now stands, he'd stop for a moment looking into the distance through the gap in the limbs of the trees above the creek. He always said that each season of the year paints a picture on the landscape of the world and for those who could see it, the picture was always the same, yet always different. It would never be painted or seen exactly this way again, even though the elements of the picture—the flowers and trees and birds and creek and animals—were within the frame.

We'd stop and look at tracks on the game trails—deer mostly, but sometimes there were huge three-toed turkey tracks. At the edge of Coon Creek, raccoon and opossum tracks were pressed deep into the black mud. The bark was worn off a number of small trees where deer had rubbed the velvet off their antlers weeks earlier. We'd look at these signs and speculate about what the animals had been doing and where they were now. He'd examine the tiny green berries hanging on the canes of the gooseberries and the flowers on the raspberries and blackberries to predict how big the berry crop would be. He was almost always wrong and I'd gently tease him about the failures from previous years. But he didn't care and continued to predict good and bad crop years for berries and walnuts and squirrels.

Doc was a small man and lived a vigorous outdoor life as a large animal veterinarian for more than 40 years. He spent his working life in cattle yards and pig lots wrestling animals that were often ten times his size. As he got older, he let the younger vets in his practice gradually take over the large animal practice while he worked on cats and dogs. He grew up on a farm in far northwestern Iowa during the Depression and would often tell me about his childhood and how they got by during those desperate times. For his family, working together on the land was their life and their life was in the land. The land was always protected; nothing was thrown away, nothing wasted, everything reused. He never understood how people in cities survived those hard times without the living land and family near by. He'd say proudly that while his family never had any money in those years, they always had enough to eat. They raised crops and animals and a garden beside the house, bartered and traded among their neighbors, picked fruit and nuts from their own trees and hunted.

As a child, he stalked squirrels and rabbits and pheasants in the fields and woods, in the creek bottoms and along the prairie edges. Hunting was only for food; the meat was eaten and the skins were carefully tanned and sold for scarce cash. He had nothing but scorn and ridicule for those who hunted for sport or trophies. Throughout his adult life, anything he had, he gave freely to family, friends and strangers. He wasted nothing, built and nurtured a strong family all the while loving and preserving the land, the plants and creatures on it.

Cigarettes took their toll and each spring our walk was shorter and slower. We stopped more often to look at the flowers and talk. One year we didn't climb up the steep switchback trail around the huge ravine that cut across the trail and through the layered limestone wall; the next, we only walked to the giant white pine tree standing like a sentinel watching over Coon Creek and its floodplain for more than a century; then we didn't hike the game trail that zigzagged down to the creek; last year, I carried a folding stool so he could sit and rest, at times gasping for breath. Each year, he'd say that he'd walk Forest Trail as far as he was able to be sure that nature's painting had been made new.

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This spring, I walked Forest Trail alone.
Doc is at rest in the land he loved. But walking the trail, I saw that Nature's picture of Canyon Camp had been painted once again, and Doc can be seen inside the frame among the wildflowers.
All is as it should be.