A Natural Life

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My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The child is father of the man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound to each in natural piety.
— William Wordsworth

It had been a long day working on what was to become my book The Natural Heritage of Indiana and my mind had started to wander back to my boyhood on the farm in southern Indiana.

In my mind’s eye, I saw myself at about age 3 with my mother on a dewy July morning walking to our hill pasture on the bluff above Laughery Creek to fill half-gallon Karo syrup buckets with dewberries for making pies. As we walked, my mother took the opportunity to excitedly point out each type of wildflower in the meadow, along with every nectar-sipping butterfly, bird’s nest, and chubby toad.

Emerging from my reverie, it began to dawn on me that the state’s natural heritage and my own heritage were one and the same and that over time they had become woven together into a fabric of great strength and beauty. In this moment of insight, I saw that I had, in essence, been living and writing The Natural Heritage of Indiana all of my life although I had only begun putting pen to paper about 10 years ago.

When I thought about the book after that, I could see embodied within it a synthesis of my boyhood and career as well as of the past and the present of Indiana’s natural heritage. Careful observation, an intimate understanding of natural Indiana, sharing what I have learned with students, working with The Nature Conservancy and the Indiana Division of Nature Preserves to protect a portion of the State’s natural heritage have combined to make my life and career rewarding far beyond even the most wild imaginings of my youth.

My formative years were spent on a horse-powered farm in rural southern Indiana in a now bygone era. A few years ago during a lecture in my course “Humans and the World Environment,” I was contrasting the lifestyle of that world with that of an urban teenager in America today. After class, as I was gathering my materials, a young woman came forward and asked skeptically, “Did you really live like that back in those days?”

When I told her that what I had described had indeed been our normal routine, she countered with a response that has often caused me to chuckle. “My parents are about your age and they never did any of those things,” she said emphatically. “Are you sure you didn’t grow up on a different planet from the rest of us?”

My answer to that question is the same now as it was then: “I’m reasonably certain it was the same planet, but I’m equally sure that it was, in fact, a different world.”

It was a world in which life was immersed in and governed by nature — a world in which life proceeded along different rhythms. It was, as well, a world that to a young boy was filled with wonder and beauty. And, as it turned out, it was a world that was to stay with me throughout the rest of my life.

Farm life in southern Indiana during the late 1930s and the decade of the 1940s was indeed a world apart from that which most young people experience today.

One major difference between then and now is that our challenges back then were more physical as dictated and necessitated by the year-round routine of daily chores or fieldwork performed in all kinds of weather, plus a decided lack of creature comforts, including indoor plumbing, central home heating, or even electricity.

Another difference, which is more in keeping with my theme here, is that we grew up close to the land and its multitude of creatures, living life in a way that enabled us to see ourselves as part of the environmental web that supports all of life.

In “Good Oak,” one of naturalist Aldo Leopold’s classic essays, he stated: “There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery store, and the other is that heat comes from the furnace.” Another danger, I firmly believe, is that if you lead a totally urbanized life, the opportunity for you to develop a deep and abiding kinship with the landscape and all of its life is usually lost.

During my boyhood, the wisdom of Leopold’s words were impressed upon me and the rest of my family on a daily basis.

Our farm, which we called the Homeplace, was a rather typical general farm for that time and area. Its
100 tillable acres (divided into eight or nine fields of varying sizes) were cropped to corn, followed by winter wheat, and then red clover-timothy hay in a three-year rotation. That cropping plan required that we plant or harvest only 35 acres at any given time. The remaining 46 acres contained the farm woodlot (15 acres), some 20 acres of lespedeza-bluegrass pastureland, a three-acre black locust grove for farm fence posts, plus a fruit orchard, large garden, potato patch, farm lanes, building sites, poultry yard, barnyard, and houseyard.

Our large, white frame farmhouse sat on a hill overlooking the stream valley and the red brick Tanglewood Baptist Church located at the Homeplace’s east boundary. A red, pin-framed, 40-by-50-foot barn, large chicken house for laying hens, two brooder houses for young chickens, two hog houses, corn crib, woodshed, wellhouse, and “necessary” completed the farm buildings. Farm animals included 7 to 8 head of draft horses and mules, about 15 to 20 milking shorthorn cattle, some 10 to 12 brood sows that produced 80 to 100 pigs per year, 100 to 200 laying hens, and 200 to 300 chicks per year.

The picturesque farm landscape varied from dead flat at the western end to strongly rolling to the east. The buildings were nicely situated between two intermittent streams that sometimes ceased flowing during dry times. A pond within a former limestone quarry served for watering the livestock, and two wells met domestic water needs.

Immediately after we moved to the Homeplace, all of us went to work getting it ready to support a family of nine. Our earliest efforts were to stop and reverse the negative impacts of decades of poor farming and land neglect. My father understood clearly that soil fertility and proper land management were the keys to successful farming — and family survival. Sensible conservation practices were lessons we learned as a matter of course.

We began by stopping gullies which were forming on some of the steeper slopes, covering erosion-prone areas with permanent vegetation, and judiciously using animal manures, marl, agricultural limestone, and crops of green manure to restore and maintain soil fertility, tilth, and overall productivity of crop fields. Then fences were built or repaired, buildings roofed and painted, the woodlot thinned, and animal flocks and herds improved. Within four or five years, my father, along with our help, had restored a Depression-ravaged farm into one of the most productive in the neighborhood. And because these were lessons learned through their doing, they have served me well for a lifetime of teaching and application.

There was a joy in the simplicity of the lifestyle on a family farm at that time. During my formative years, we were rich in everything but money — abundant wholesome exercise in fresh country air; a rich variety of family-gathered or homegrown, home-butchered, and home-cooked vegetables and meats; plenty of farm eggs “so fresh that they cackled when you cracked them”; real milk and cream fresh from the cow; wild game; fresh fish and turtles; wild fruits and “greens” in season; supportive, helpful neighbors and good friends; a caring extended family whose members visited often; dedicated teachers in our small classes at the Versailles School; and the fellowship of devout members at the small church we walked to on Sundays.

And just as importantly, the slower pace of those days helped instill in us a sense of peace, serenity, and tranquility. Working daily behind slow-gaited farm horses teaches patience and perseverance, in addition to inducing olfactory fatigue!

We roamed over the entire Tanglewood neighborhood — an area of about four square miles — more than 2,500 acres. At first we walked everywhere; later we explored on our bikes or rode with friends who had Whizzer motorbikes. We knew every farm intimately, including the identity of its current owner and the land history of each parcel from settlement days forward to our boyhood.

At one time, ancestors within my extended family personally owned more than 2,000 acres of the surrounding land, so we felt that it was rightfully “ours” to use for hunting, fishing, gathering wild foods, or as a private playground. We knew the landscape like the back of our hands — every forest, field, cow path, nut tree, blackberry patch, wild grapevine for miles around.

With our feet we likely caressed every square foot of our domain at one time or another in every season. We knew every brush pile that might shelter a cottontail in winter or house a brown thrasher nest in summer and every shelf fungus on each decaying black locust tree where a gray tree frog might perch cryptically on crustose lichens and call plaintively as a July thunderstorm approached. We knew the seep springs where the bevy of bobwhites drank and each hickory tree where a dray of fox squirrels breakfasted during August sunrises. The bobolink’s burbling song above the pale magenta red-clover hayfields, an exultation of meadow larks from the pasture fencerow, and the chipmunk’s snicker within the pile of winter firewood were the musical sounds of nature that lightened our daily work load.

During our ramblings, we became alert to and alive with the diversity of this landscape, which our ancestors had tamed a century earlier. True, the original Native American residents, wolves, bears, passenger pigeons, and old-growth forest were long gone, but our parents taught us how to identify every remaining tree by its leaves, bark, fruit, or wood, as well as the resident wildflowers, farm weeds, wild mammals, birds, snakes, and conspicuous insects. My mother kindled my interest in birds and told me where to find their nests.

Because there was no money to buy binoculars, I spent countless hours lying in meadows, walking the edge of our quarry pond, or perched in tree tops waiting for birds to come to me — to come close enough to
identify. The only “field guides” to birds that I had access to were Thornton Burgess’ classic The Burgess Bird Book for Children, which I checked out of the school library and practically memorized, and the few pages devoted to bird identification in the Boy Scout Manual, which I bought at age 10 with 50 cents I had earned by trimming the grass around gravestones in the cemetery next door.

One of my favorite places and perhaps the one that more than any other helped shape my love of natural history was the overgrown fencerow along the north boundary of our farm. During respites from farm work, I walked the fencerow in all seasons, checking every bush and briar for bird nests; searching out rabbit, skunk, fox, or weasel tracks; and examining interesting insects or the plants themselves. One of my favorite — and I think one of my best — nature essays was “Fencerows,” which was published in Snowy Egret magazine a few years ago and which was based on those boyhood investigations of “my” fencerow.

In the years that have followed those boyhood explorations, the entire country has become my fencerow. On my office wall, a framed map depicts each county of the United States. My lifetime of travels and ramblings beyond Ripley County have been recorded by coloring each county as it was visited. Some 70 percent of the total counties in the U.S. are now shaded, extending my “home range” beyond even the fertile imaginings of my boyhood. Many of my boyhood dreams about faraway places and their unusual creatures, which were known to me only as pictures in my geography books, are now interwoven into the rich tapestry of natural experiences that has been my life.

After high school, a series of detours almost separated me from nature. For two years, I worked at a Coca-Cola bottling plant in Fort Wayne and then served a two-year active tour of duty with the U.S. Navy Reserve.

The Navy, in the “infinite wisdom of the military,” decided that my aptitude test scores indicated potential for becoming an electronics technician. The electronics field did prove fascinating enough to lure me to post-Navy employment at ITT, where I assembled steering intelligence modules for Talos ground-to-air missiles and did technical writing for the engineering-drafting unit.

After three years in this interesting and well-paying (for that time) job, I was quite comfortable and in danger of becoming entwined permanently in the “characterless cable of conformity,” as wilderness advocate John Muir described urban civilization nearly a century ago. Then one warm blue-sky spring day when the trees were leafing, flowers blooming, and birds singing, I decided at age 24, that I had had my fill of indoor work and that I was going to enroll in college and become a naturalist. The admissions office at Purdue University patiently reminded me that they had no such field of study as natural history, so I compromised and selected forestry as my undergraduate major.

After enduring undergraduate forestry courses which were strongly oriented toward intensive forest management to produce sawlogs, I was seeking “an alternative, less-applied-science avenue” to my goal of becoming a naturalist.

The answer came in a course entitled “Plant Ecology,” taught by Dr. Alton A. Lindsey, in Purdue’s Biological Sciences Department. Lindsey, as a former member of the Admiral Byrd’s Antarctic Expedition of the 1930s, a National Park Service ranger-naturalist, long-term ecological practitioner, and an originator of The Nature Conservancy, provided holistic ideas of the relationship of humans to planet earth and, along with them, the academic excitement I had been seeking. Later, I was to do my Ph.D. research under his direction.

Having gotten such a late start in college, I poured on the coal, as they used to say (steam locomotives also being a thing of the past for the most part), and let no grass grow during the pursuit of my degrees. By taking overloads every semester and scheduling summer sessions, my B.S. in conservation of natural resources was completed in three years. To recuperate from that feverish pace, the summer of 1961 was spent in the peaceful setting of a U.S. Forest Service fire tower in the Idaho panhandle, doing fire detection and suppression.

Strengthened by three months’ work in the invigorating mountain air and restored by wilderness vistas that seemed infinite, my Ph.D. program in plant ecology with Dr. Lindsey was initiated in September 1961, while my academic career still had a full head of steam. My field research centered on the question of how differences in microclimates influence the timing of seasonal events in nature, in particular those related to the flowering dates of spring wildflowers.

As I was fond of telling my family and friends during my graduate school years, I had the best job in the world. Getting paid (although not very well) to walk through a beautiful nature area daily for two years and watch the seasons change and the wildflowers bloom had to be one of earth’s choice assignments.

I still feel the same way about my work, as I truly love what I do. Helping others learn about nature through my courses, research, and writing has been a most rewarding career. There is not a person in the State of Indiana with whom I would trade jobs.

Six years after entering college as a freshman, in June 1964, my graduate study was complete, and at age 30 I had a new Ph.D. and an assistant professorship in the newly formed Life Sciences Department at Indiana State University. My goal of preparing for a lifelong career as a naturalist had become a reality. As the saying goes, the rest is history.

More than six decades have come and gone since my mother and I picked dewberries in the hill pasture. In
what is now Versailles State Park, a young forest has reclaimed that field of our former farm. My book *The Natural Heritage of Indiana* is now a reality. And my career as a naturalist and professor of ecology is nearing completion, causing me to think more seriously about retirement.

But just when I half convince myself I should retire, I think: “But who would tell ISU’s students about life on a horse-powered farm?” and I realize that if I didn’t they would be missing part of their heritage as well.

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