

## Rachel Creek

Two years was all I would have. Only two years after my time in Arkansas, I would be in another state, both physically and mentally. By then I would have completed my first computer. But that brief but magical time, would make its mark on me as a ten-year old boy. Soon, too soon, it would be over and our family would move again. But for the time, I didn't think about electricity of radio circuits or computers. My days were spent discovering the fascinating world of nature.

We lived near Little Rock, Arkansas in a small house with a natural lake across the street and a magical place, called Rachel Creek, a mile or so through the woods down a nearly invisible path that started at the edge of our back yard.

I have many memories of the lake. It's where I would collect tadpoles to put in a jar to watch them grow. There I would build my first raft – a crude vessel of tire inner tubes and some discarded lumber - but an ocean liner to a young boy. With a long pole I would push myself along the edge of the lake, exploring every inlet. Sometimes with a crude paddle I would work my way out to the middle of the lake where the pole would not reach bottom. It was an escape. Then and for many years to come, I would find many escapes like this, in many forms. I didn't take any of my books or even a notepad to write on. I would just sit there and watch. Birds. Fish jumping for dragonflies. Once, near sunset, I watched the lazy-S shape of a water moccasin work its way toward me across the surface of the glass-calm water. The lake was a quick and available escape that I visited often in my makeshift raft.

Rachel Creek, though, was even better. It was further from the house and all the things that even then I wanted to get away from. Unlike the lake, where time slowed almost to stillness, at the creek there was always much to explore. Something as simple as swimming where the creek got wide, or turning over rocks to see what creatures might be hiding there – many adventures awaited along Rachel Creek.

I was fascinated by the animals I found living in the woods and near the creek. The easiest to catch were snakes, and I managed to catch lots of them. At first I would bring them back to the house in a burlap bag, but that habit wasn't appreciated. Once I had a black racer in a cardboard box at home. I was trying to get it to strike at a shiny gold belt buckle I dangled at the end of a piece of string. That's when I learned that snakes don't care about shiny things – they are more interested in warm things. I found the snake was very good at striking all the way to my hand, completely ignoring the intended target. He got a pretty good grip on my finger – I was more surprised than hurt. At least it gave me a chance to look closely at the pattern of a snake bite. I knew what to expect from a non-poisonous snake, and the half-crescent of teeth marks in my finger was a welcomed sight.

Lizards were not as easy to catch, nor were they as interesting. But I would see them often sunning themselves on a rock or a fallen tree limb. Now like every woodsman, even a ten-year old needs an outdoorsman's knife. It was also great for throwing, though I could never hit anything. It was pretty unusual for my throws to end up anywhere near what I was throwing at, and the possibility of it actually arriving with the blade pointing forward was purely a coincidental. That's why I didn't think much when I saw a lizard on a fallen tree limb several yards away. I thought I'd give him a scare to make him scurry away, so I threw my knife

casually at him. It was the one time that my knife flew unerringly to the target and impaled the unsuspecting lizard with the blade in perfect trajectory. I was devastated. I had killed an animal, and it was a stupid careless act. Perhaps the lesson was best learned then with a knife instead of later with a more powerful weapon. At the time I had no idea within a few years in military school I would fire an M-1 rifle, or that in the service I would fire an M-16 automatic weapon and later would be the sole guard on a thermonuclear special weapon for an F-106 supersonic interceptor aircraft.

But then, I was just a boy of ten, and I was discovering the woods. There were some animals that I encountered near the creek that wouldn't normally be in the wild. There was at least one pack of wild dogs that roamed the woods. Of course today it wouldn't be tolerated, but this was rural Arkansas in 1957. When I was in the woods, I was on my own. The thing about the dogs is that they were never quiet. I could always hear them hundreds of yards away because of their barking and howling. I knew that sound meant they were in pursuit of some unfortunate animal that they would soon take down. When I heard the barking, I would scurry up a tree until the sound passed. One time, they ran directly beneath the tree I had climbed. They stopped quickly, perhaps confused by a new scent, explored the area just under the tree, never looking up and then raced off after their original prey.

Perhaps they had been chasing a fox. I knew there were fox in the woods as I told my family one night at dinner. Nobody seemed to believe me and certainly nobody cared. Once, when I was swimming in the creek, I saw one come to the water's edge to drink. I was surprised it didn't seem to be afraid of me or care I was there. But the fox were fast, usually fast enough to outrun the dogs, so I would certainly never be able to catch one. I would never be able to prove they were there at all, and nobody in my family would ever venture out to the creek to see for themselves. That was okay with me. It was my place.

Once, in the winter, there was a cold spell that froze the top surface of the creek. I didn't go back there as often or stay as long in the winter as I couldn't go swimming. Once, though, I rode my bike down the path I had made back through the woods to the creek. Then I saw it: a small, red fox in the water, frozen in the top layer of ice. How or why it was there I didn't know, but I didn't care – it would be the proof I needed. I had a wire book basket on the front of my bicycle. Once I had chipped it out of its icy resting place, the frozen fox went with me in the basket and on the handlebars of my bicycle back to the house. It was the proof I needed – unwelcomed of course, greeted with a request to take it back to the woods – but at least my claim was confirmed.

I visited the house some twenty years later. It was still there, though it seemed to have gotten much smaller than I remembered it. Of course it hadn't changed at all. My world had gotten larger. But other, tangible pieces of that previous world had disappeared. I could see from the house that the lake was gone: drained, filled in, and covered with row after row of streets and houses. I didn't have to look to see that the creek was gone too. A local map showed the whole area was now a residential suburb of North Little Rock.

So Rachel Creek is gone everywhere except in my mind and in this little essay. But the adventures it lent to a young boy live on, at least in my memory, and I still turn over the occasional rock in the woods to see what might live underneath.