

# Night walks

We were up visiting Aldo Leopold's "shack" the other week — the unassuming little chicken coop that is now a shrine of the environmental movement — and I haven't learned so much in a single day since The Seven Foot Nun was teaching us the Old Math with a New Yardstick.

Marion Moran was going to be taking one of her UW-Extension classes up to the "shack" in a couple of days and as is her custom, was "preflighting," going over the ground, checking out the trails for windfalls and water, choosing the right section for the "night walk."

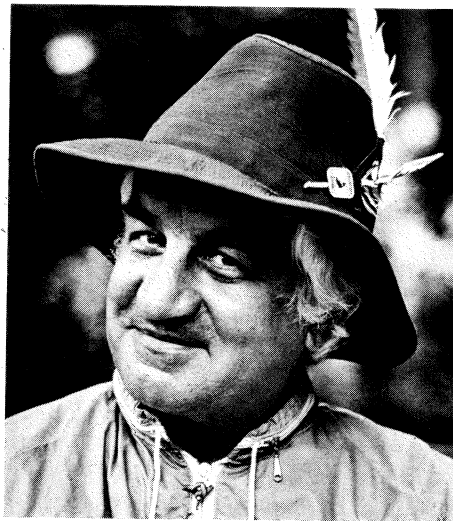
Her husband, Gene, who often shares her Extension "walks on the wild side" all over the state, was preflighting too because whenever Marion schedules a night walk, Gene usually functions as rear guard, making certain that no walker is lost, strayed or stolen in the darkness. Then he serves tea and cocoa to all the survivors.

"We have never," he says quietly, "lost a walker."

That's true. I remember being on one of their night walks with a bunch from College Week for Women one year — "Real ladies of the evening," Steady Eddy says in admiration — and it was one of those nights when Cherokee Marsh looked like the inside of a whale.

I figure if they didn't lose me, they aren't going to lose anybody. That's when I first realized Marion Moran was a different kind of naturalist, a different kind of teacher. I don't know what we expected when she had us huddle together in the awesome cave of night. We couldn't see each other. We couldn't see her. We couldn't see Gene. For all we knew, we were alone. And then Marion's voice spoke in the darkness, spoke the words of the dead Chief

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Seattle. And not even the jet overhead, low enough to touch, it seemed, could drown out the power of those words and that voice.

Marion had us touch the trees that night.

They stood like great silent animals knowing their power, sensing our fears and let themselves be touched. Then explored. Then petted.

"You stand around in one place all the time," Steady says, "and you get to know the neighborhood."

"Now, on our weekend walks," Marion says, "the ones that last three days or so, we have people adopt a tree. Then at the end of the session, after a few days, each person speaks to the group as the tree."

She says it's not anything like *I'm an oak tree and cute little squirrels live upstairs*.

It's more a transference. The tree becomes a metaphor for their own lives, and in describing what the tree's life is in the world, in this place, each person is able to open up, some for the first time, and speak of their lives and their connection to the world, of "their place in The Circle," as Marion puts it.

Gene says it's so: Most people seem to

have a willingness to accept even trees as friends, once somebody suggests to them that such a relationship is not only possible, it's one of the most natural things in the world.

"Most people," Gene emphasizes, "but not all people."

He went on to recount that in his 27 years at the University of Wisconsin Arboretum in Madison he has seen a lot of scientists and a lot of scientific experiments come and go. He recalled one project in which a scientist was growing a test plot of plants and unfortunately the plants were shaded by a nearby tree.

"To make a long story short," Gene said, "that nearby tree got cut down. The tree had been standing in that spot for 80 years but nobody spoke up for it. It might have been different if the tree had been part of somebody's test plot . . ."

It was fitting, I thought, that this was being said as we trudged through the autumn rain on Aldo Leopold's land for what Gene was saying now, Aldo had written down 30 years ago in *A Sand County Almanac*.

"There are men," Aldo wrote, "charged with the duty of examining the construction of the plants, animals and soils which are the instruments of the great orchestra. Each selects one instrument and spends his life taking it apart and describing its strings and sounding boards. This process of dismemberment is called research. The place for dismemberment is called a university."

A professor may pluck the strings of his own instrument, Aldo Leopold allowed, but never that of another, and if he listens for music, he must never admit it to his fellows or to his students. For all are restrained by an ironbound taboo which decrees that the construction of instruments is the domain of science, while the detection of harmony is the domain of poets.

When we got to the shack for lunch, we shucked out of our ponchos, drew water from the pump the rain had been priming all morning, got a fire going, ate and dried out, pants legs steaming. You

# Outdoors

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sense Aldo very strongly there. It's as though he just stepped out, binoculars in hand, to glass the marsh.

We ate, watching the fireplace roar into life, watching the blackened kettle steaming on its hook.

Annie Dillard wrote in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* that once she had visited a great university and wandered, a stranger, into the subterranean halls of its famous biology department. The door to the *Ichthyology Department* was open a crack and she glanced in. There were two white-coated men seated opposite each other on high lab stools at a hard-surfaced table. They bent over identical white enamel trays. On one side, one man, with a lancet, was just cutting into an enormous preserved fish he'd taken from a jar. On the other side, the other man, with a silver spoon, was eating a grapefruit.

"I laughed," Annie Dillard wrote, "all the way back to Virginia."

It's as Steady Eddy says: "When you find your passenger pigeons, for God's sake keep it to yourself." ■