

## →For Radio or other Media

Interview Q & A  
for  
The Road to Beaver Park, Painting, Perception, and Pilgrimage  
(Excerpt from the book, p. 149)

### Conversations with the Author

#### *1. When the trip started, what were your expectations?*

Freedom! Exploring new territory! Getting off the school schedule, which we had been living all our lives, from student days to teaching. I expected time to draw and paint. I had some apprehensions about living so closely together. Would we get along? Would the trailer be too small? Would we get cabin fever at some point?

On the other hand, we were experienced campers, and the children too, so I expected we would all enjoy the trip and love being outdoors.

#### *2. What was your art background at the time?*

I did not major in Art, but I did pick up classes after college—4 or 5 courses in Drawing and Painting, including oils, a year of Printmaking, which was wonderful. I did 300 botanical drawings for *Wild Edible Plants of Western North America* (Naturegraph), which was published in 1970 (still in print). I wanted to paint watercolors, and I didn't know what I was doing. A year of practice would make a big difference. Just like any serious artist, I needed to get off by myself and figure out how to do things my way: equipment, gain brush control, personal choice on colors, evolve a style, experiment with media, discover favorite subject matter.

#### *3. Were you using Instruction books, or just painting out of your head?*

To start with, I left the books at home, but over the year's time I picked up several. I'm especially fond of J. M. W. Turner's watercolors that show atmospheric effects, and I picked up 2 books of his watercolors to study. I think it was the Taos Bookstore where I found Color in Turner (John Cage), which gave me plenty of 19<sup>th</sup> century color theory to chew on. A couple of books on Sumi Brush Painting led to a lot of experimentation.

#### *4. Why did the family choose to travel the Southwest?*

Our usual camping trips occurred in the summer, and Southwest deserts are too hot for that and too far away from home for quicker trips. Don chose to do a field study in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado in the fall. His other area was Sonoran Desert in the springtime, when we could get to Death Valley, CA, and Arizona, as far south as Organ Pipe NM on the Mexican border.

#### *5. How did the family dynamic evolve?*

We included the children in everything. The kids helped get firewood, wash dishes, set up their own tent, took care of their own duffles and any gear they used. They helped set up camp and take it down. We functioned as a family just like at home. During the winter months when days were short and weather might keep us trailer-bound, we went home. The children

went back to school for 2–3 months until the mountain pass was clear of snow, and we could head for the low desert.

Sitting with family in our fishing camp in the Rockies, a friend made the comment, “It’s wonderful to see a family where the parents are so relaxed.” We had really kicked back, we weren’t fussed up all the time, the pace was unhurried, informal.

*6. Do you have any practical advice for camping/traveling with children?*

Everyone needs to stay warm and dry, sleep warm and comfortably at night, and have plenty to eat. Choose adequate bedding or sleeping bags, pads, ground cover, shelter from weather.

Choose campsites that are child–friendly. That means no dangerous water, no cliffs, away from roadway, place to play, etc.

Check out available gear: we started with Army Surplus gear, remember that? Nowadays there is more for kids, such as, little tents, but don’t buy more than you care to handle. Keep it simple. We always had a pickup truck where kids could play if it rained. Bunks where they could nap.

Clothing: What wears you out when camping is not what you think. It’s not the physical activity so much as the exposure to the elements. It’s being out in the open air all the time, with heat and cold and wind and rain. It requires adequate covering and common sense. You don’t see cowboys riding around in short sleeved shirts and cutoffs. They wear long–sleeved shirts, even in the hottest summer, bandana to cover nose and mouth from trail dust, and heavy duty pants or chaps, boots and a hat. They cover up. They have to. We may start out with city clothes, but we change pretty fast to jeans, long sleeves, always a hat, rain poncho available, warm coat when needed. You will too if you want to stay out any length of time.

Plan on a regular Laundromat stop.

Traveling: No TV or movies in the car. Encourage children to watch scenery, play the Alphabet Game, watch for antelope or other animals, name the highest peaks, sing, do roadside Geology, tell the history of the area, etc., imagine the old days. Don’t bring a lot of toys. The kids will prefer playing with rocks, sticks, dirt, mud, water in the creek, cones, and going fishing.

Food. Cook over the campfire when you can—meat, kabobs, vegetables &/or fish in a wire holder, biscuit dough wound on a stick, etc. Fix food the children will eat without serving hot dogs every meal. One standby is homemade batch of cooked hamburger mix that can be thawed to combine with chili beans, Sloppy Joes, Joe’s mix of burger meat and spinach, or any of your favorites. Boil spaghetti Backpacker Style with very little water, cover, take off the stove and let it sit till soft. We had S’Mores now and then, maybe once a week we roasted marshmallows, otherwise fruit for dessert. Have a steady supply of homemade Gorp with raisins, dry cranberries or other dry fruit, cashews, peanuts, almonds, or other nuts, and a moderate supply of M&Ms to spark it up.

Steer clear of foods that take a lot of water to prepare or a long time to cook. Water is precious, fuel is expensive and may not be readily available.

*6. What advice would you give to people today who would take such a trip?*

Choose a destination and plan to stay. Trying to visit “Ten Parks in Ten Days” is exhausting and frustrating for everyone. Don’t hurry; no pressure; take your time. Leave space in

the plan for unexpected opportunities to explore. Try to meet everyone's interests. Think the best, not the worst. It keeps everyone cheerful.

Do your homework and prepare. It's much easier now with online resources. Google the places you want to go. You can get reservations ahead of time (some parks fill up fast), work out your route and check things before departure.

If you are planning a lengthy trip, take a dry run if you can. We took our tent trailer to the Coast, which was about 150 miles from home, and stayed a week during spring vacation. Would our tent trailer be adequate for the big trip? No, it would not. Steady rain made the canvas damp around the edges. We couldn't keep warm enough. Wind was a problem. We had to get a different trailer. Figure out what kind of rig will work for you, and then figure out the equipment you will need.

Plan how each person will spend the time. When you have hiked and taken a look at the creek, what do you plan to do? We fished, dug fossils, looked for geodes, chased lizards, caught insects and identified them, kept a bird list, sketched, painted, played games that didn't require a lot of stuff. More active doings in camp included modified badminton, horseshoes, and sawing up firewood, if permitted. Don photographed, looked for wild edible plants, and worked on school projects. I sketched, painted, and sewed small sections of a quilt.

Warning: most of the places where we camped as open camping are no longer open. Those beautiful spots may now be picnic areas or day use areas only. On the other hand, available camp grounds are much improved, monitored by camp hosts and serviced regularly. Remember that campground sites generally accommodate vehicles up to 25 ft in length. If your rig is longer than that, you need to be sure what's available before you drive into a place that may not be easy to get out of. If your rig is too large, you are probably not camping. Keep it simple.

*7. As you look back, what was the low point of the trip? The high point?*

The very lowest point was when we had to go home.

Just being there was the high point.

We ended up having favorite areas. We loved the area around Tucson, especially the Arizona–Sonoran Desert Museum. That is a must for anybody; also the Boyce Thompson Arboretum, about 30 mi east of Phoenix, a State Park right on the highway. It's a wonderful natural style botanical garden. Get there at 8 am when they open, bring a water bottle and a hat, and follow the trail. It's pleasant in the early morning, even in summer.

Other favorites are the San Juan Mountains of Colorado, Telluride, Mesa Verde, and Great Basin National Park. Death Valley was fascinating. Even though we stayed there a month, there was still more to paint. Not to be left out, we love the Northern California Coast where we started. Our abiding sense of place covers an enormous area of land.

*8. If you could paint one scene again, what would you paint?*

I really wished I could go back to Death Valley. The last few days we were there, and already preparing to move on, we drove the Artist's Drive. Because we thought there would be a lot of traffic on that road, we didn't go until the end of our stay, and it was gorgeous over there. No wonder they call it the Artist's Drive. Every earth color you can imagine is on the hills. I didn't have a chance to go back. I made a few color notes, but I would still love to go back and paint a whole scene.

*9. Are you still painting today?*

The only time I paint today is if we are out on a picnic, or a camping trip, and I have plenty of time. Nowadays our camping trips are curtailed due to age and physical disabilities, but if I get a chance to go out there, that's the first thing I want to do. I reach for my sketch book and black pen. I sketch with ink, freely recording something, a scene, a tree, a flower; I just start in. If there is time, I pull out my travel watercolor set and watercolor tablet.

It's hard to focus on two expressive arts at a time. Now I spend my days writing.

*10. The trip was 40 years ago. Why are you writing this story now? Why is it relevant today?*

It has taken years to realize the importance of that trip, but the ideas, the learnings we gleaned are still relevant. They are timeless.

At present everyone is into environmental thinking, but back then, not so much. Ecology was in beginning stages. On our unhurried discovery trip, we glimpsed the truth of the Earth's Dynamic System, how it works in dynamic equilibrium. We returned home with a comprehensive viewpoint, a vision, if you will, of how life on earth is put together. We identified with plant communities, now called eco-communities, because the plant community is the basis for life. Of course a plant community does not work without animals, so everything is involved, including humans. This is an important pulling together of previous scientific study which separated plants and animals into categories, species, and the like. Those methods are useful for study in their own areas, but the new approach encompasses the wholeness, the interrelationships, the unity of the natural world.

Writing about the trip has helped me not only to put it into perspective, but also to share the story. I think other people can gain from our field experience. I hope our adventures will motivate others to reconnect with the outdoors, learn nature's ways, study individual plants and animals, consider the large life regions, the organizing earth systems, and learn how wonderful they are! And how beautiful!

We arrived home different people. We laugh and say it ruined us forever for the workaday world, and that's true, but it was time to return home. We stayed long enough, went further than most, explored deeply. The understandings remain with us and have inspired our work and writing, which attests to the fact the experience has been of immense value.

*11. Were you looking for a spiritual experience when you started out?*

No. I was not looking for anything of the sort, but it found me. In recent literature I find mentions of "Seeking the Sublime," to borrow a phrase. Adventurers, high risk sports enthusiasts, naturelovers of all kinds are discovering an extra dimension in an outdoor experience. Environmental literature, art shows, and articles in outdoor magazines occasionally mention the "otherness" of certain moments.

I was not seeking any Sublime, but nevertheless I was gradually brought back to faith as I discovered the awe-inspiring Order, Unity, Creativity, Functioning Systems amid marvelous networks of nature. In addition, there was always "something more." Epiphanies found me in wondrous landscapes and at times in individual "inscapes," those intricate works of leaf and stem, fruit and seed. An unbidden natural reverence accompanied those experiences. The overwhelming sense of mystery, a peace that transcended understanding, and soul-stirring beauty were undeniable.

*12. Can God be found in the outdoors?*

That's a big question! My answer is Yes. The outdoors brought me close to what I consider the Source of what's going on out there. It's my major "sacred pathway." I connected that blossoming awareness to Christianity for several reasons. First, because that was my background originally, and I knew the way back. Second, Christianity is linked to a Creator God, and I wanted to explore that understanding. Third, Christianity affirms life-nurturing values, such as love, forgiveness, healing, peace, justice, mercy, and sharing. Fourth, Christian principles establish a moral compass, and fifth, the Christian Way provides direction for a meaningful life. Field tested for 2000 years, Christianity has helped a great many people. How does it work? I wanted to know.

For someone who doesn't have a Christian background, C. S. Lewis acknowledges, "You need a road map out there." Ask someone who knows about the Creator God and Jesus, the Christ. Find a study group. Get out The Message Bible, and start reading for yourself how ancient people made the connection. If organized religion puts you off, listen to what Jesus actually says in the Bible. That's the Way.