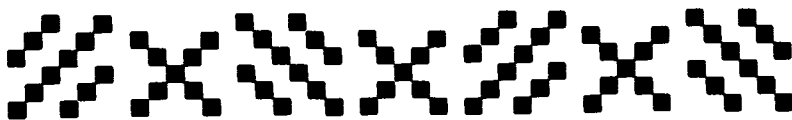


“Down in the Hills o’ Brown County”:  
Photographs by Frank M. Hohenberger

*Lorna Lutes Sylvester\**



It was cold and snowy in Brown County, Indiana, during the winter of 1917-1918. The temperature was frequently below zero,<sup>1</sup> and on his field trips through the county photographer Frank M. Hohenberger sometimes struggled with eighteen inches of snow under a heavy crust. “Walking was an arduous task,” he wrote in his diary. “Crust not tough enough to support my weight and every step I had to nearly pull out one foot before I could progress with the other.” He added enigmatically: “Crust as strong as that on the pies mother used to make.”<sup>2</sup> Another photographic expedition Hohenberger described both graphically and philosophically: “Walking on the snow was an illustration of one’s uncertainty in this world. You would strike a nice patch and walk on top—first thing you knew, down into it. Out again, one or two steps, down. Get discouraged but just then another fine territory. If anyone saw me they’d have thought I was crazy, but these pictures are not with us every day.”<sup>3</sup>

Hohenberger was a newcomer to Brown County in 1917, so it must have been the native residents who told him that

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<sup>1</sup> Frank M. Hohenberger diary, [18], [20], Hohenberger Collection (Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, [17].

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, [18].

this was the first winter of its kind in many years in the county. He stayed on into the spring to see the snow melt "like hot rolls with Jersey cream butter,"<sup>4</sup> and for most of the next forty-five years he photographed the southern Indiana hills during all seasons and in all kinds of weather. "Truly weatherly speaking," he wrote, "one who can live in Indiana can exist anywhere. Variety the spice of life. Now the sunshine brightens your hopes, then it is shielded by a cloud and the hurrying bits of clouds parade before you and you forget about the mud around you."<sup>5</sup>

Trained from youth in the printer's trade, Hohenberger had worked in many print shops throughout the Midwest before he came to Brown County. When he lost his job as a makeup man on an Indianapolis newspaper around 1916, he began a new career as manager of a camera shop in the Hoosier capital. From there, snapshots which someone had taken in the rustic southern Indiana county lured him to Nashville, the Brown county seat.<sup>6</sup> It proved a propitious move. He photographed his new neighbors, trying to get the "character which stood out in the faces of these people . . . onto a photographic plate,"<sup>7</sup> and he began to record on film the rusticity and beauty of his new home. He snapped birds, trees, clouds, creeks, roads, snow scenes, spring blossoms, autumn leaves—everything from the "majesty" of panoramic views to the "seemingly insignificant objects" which he found "so attractive."<sup>8</sup>

In 1933 Hohenberger told a reporter that he had sold his first photographs to tourists who saw them displayed in a Nashville shop window. A short time later the rotogravure editor of an Indianapolis newspaper purchased a "batch" of prints, and Hohenberger, as the reporter put it, "was started."<sup>9</sup> By 1920 some of his pictures were selling for as much as twenty-five dollars each, and he was mailing them through-

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, [20], [21].

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, [24].

<sup>6</sup> Webb Waldron, "He Quit His Job; Took a Train—," *American Magazine*, CXVI (October, 1933), 104; Hohenberger diary, [66], Hohenberger Collection; Indianapolis *Star*, January 6, 1957, sect. 2, p. 1; *ibid.*, November 16, 1963, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Waldron, "He Quit His Job; Took a Train," 104.

<sup>8</sup> Hohenberger diary, [22], Hohenberger Collection.

<sup>9</sup> Waldron, "He Quit His Job; Took a Train," 104-105.



FRANK M. HOHENBERGER

out the world.<sup>10</sup> By the time of the Great Depression Hohenberger was sometimes making as much as five thousand dollars a year, most of which he plowed back into photographic equipment and materials. According to the reporter, his financial security lay in the thousands of negatives which he had accumulated and which could be used again and again. They were "as steady a source of income as money put out at interest."<sup>11</sup> Hohenberger's photographs appeared in *Good Housekeeping*, *Farm and Fireside*, *Farm Journal*, the *Indianapolis Star*. Authors used them to illustrate their books, they served as guides for artists in their painting, and people frequently sent the "picture man" bits of verse which they hoped he could match with a photograph. He almost always could.<sup>12</sup>

Photography, however, was not Hohenberger's only interest. He only took it up in the first place, he said, "for the reason that it took me outdoors." Later he saw its possibilities and "gladly entertained the muse,"<sup>13</sup> but he was an avid naturalist and a concerned environmentalist many years before these became popular avocations. As early as 1919 he exhorted groups and individuals to preserve the natural beauties of southern Indiana. "Farmers cutting down the trees here quite rapidly," he observed. "They look at the large area of shade that falls upon their crops, early in the morning, or late in the evening, of course, and then began to figure how much grain could be raised in that spot, and down goes the tree. . . . We are campaigning through the local papers to stop this destruction. Also how to save the trees when a road is put in, culverts made, etc."<sup>14</sup> And in his less tolerant moments the photographer sometimes quoted an artist friend who had stated that a great many of the trees in Brown County were "worth more than the owners themselves to the county."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 105; Hohenberger diary, [179], Hohenberger Collection. Acknowledging receipt of a photograph of a sycamore that Hohenberger had sent him on order, a professor at Cambridge University, England, wrote: "It is the most magnificent picture of a tree I have ever seen." Quoted in Waldron, "He Quit His Job; Took a Train," 105-106.

<sup>11</sup> Waldron, "He Quit His Job; Took a Train," 106.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 106; Hohenberger diary, [98], [99], [103], [110], [131], [243], Hohenberger Collection.

<sup>13</sup> Hohenberger diary, [47], Hohenberger Collection.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, [117].

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, [12].

Other kinds of progress, too, Hohenberger realized, could ruin the rustic beauty of the Brown County he photographed. "When the telephone line and improved roadways encroach upon a man's property, in a great many cases he is going to begin to polish up," he reflected, "and away go the vine-covered rail fences and flowered by-paths. The clapboard roof he has grown ashamed of and he covers the log cabin with an outer wall of native grown timber."<sup>16</sup> Hohenberger's pictures lured many people to southern Indiana; progress came with them. In a sense, then, the photographer—through the very excellence of his work—helped to destroy as well as to preserve the peaceful, old fashioned flavor which so intrigued him in Brown County.

Hohenberger's pictures were not always successes, of course, but "I never show my failures," he wrote. "I make as many and possibly a great deal more errors than other folks as I am continually at work with photography," he admitted. "When disappointment looms up I just go at it again."<sup>17</sup> Perhaps as much to prevent future mistakes on his part as to provide suggestions for other photographers, Hohenberger filled his diary with instructions for improving photographic technique. These hints ranged from technical descriptions of which film, lens, filter, and camera were best under various conditions to statements that vertical prints were "suitable for pictures intended to convey the sense of life, vigor, gauntness . . . ." Horizontal ones were "preferable for those depicting spaciousness, peace, decay . . . ."<sup>18</sup> In photography, Hohenberger told one interviewer, "you've got to do everything yourself—pressing the bulb, developing, printing. And you've got to put your whole mind on it at every stage."<sup>19</sup> He followed his own instructions and proudly claimed that what he knew about photography had "been gained almost entirely through experience. Not bookology."<sup>20</sup>

Hohenberger also expressed very definite ideas concerning the proper method of viewing a photograph. "Some folks' idea of examining a pictorial print is to figure out where the scene is laid," he sighed.<sup>21</sup> This he considered unimportant

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, [121].

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, [47].

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, [182]; see also *ibid.*, [148], [152], [174], [190].

<sup>19</sup> Waldron, "He Quit His Job; Took a Train," 104.

<sup>20</sup> Hohenberger diary, [117], Hohenberger Collection.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, [147].

and as great a drawback as observing a picture from such close range that "any opportunity for the work of art to breathe its poetry" was prevented.<sup>22</sup> And he recorded in his diary the philosophy with which any collection of his work must be approached:

In viewing a photograph the first thing some folks do is to search for detail, instead of viewing the picture as a whole. And so we are with the problems of life; instead of picking here and there, why not weigh the matter as a whole. This is giving fair play to the weaker parts. The larger the print the farther away the observer should be. I'll admit that the greater the distance between some of my work and your eyes the more satisfactory is the view. It rests one's eyes to gaze into space.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, [122].

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, [116]. All photographs which have been used in this article are located in the Hohenberger Collection in the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington. No attempt was made to identify the exact scenes which Hohenberger pictured. All quotations used with the photographs were selected from the Hohenberger diary because of their interest or seeming relevance not because the location specified in the quotation described any particular picture. None of Hohenberger's suggested captions have been used. Entries from the Hohenberger diary have been standardized and typographical errors therein corrected in order to make them more readable.







"It had been a sultry, sticky, threatening for rain day, and clouds tried to gather all around for rain" [40].

"About four o'clock this afternoon I slipped away from the Studio to get some cloud studies for my spring negatives. Don't know what results I got, but as I only have to journey about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  squares to get more clouds it never worries me about what is on the plates" [73].

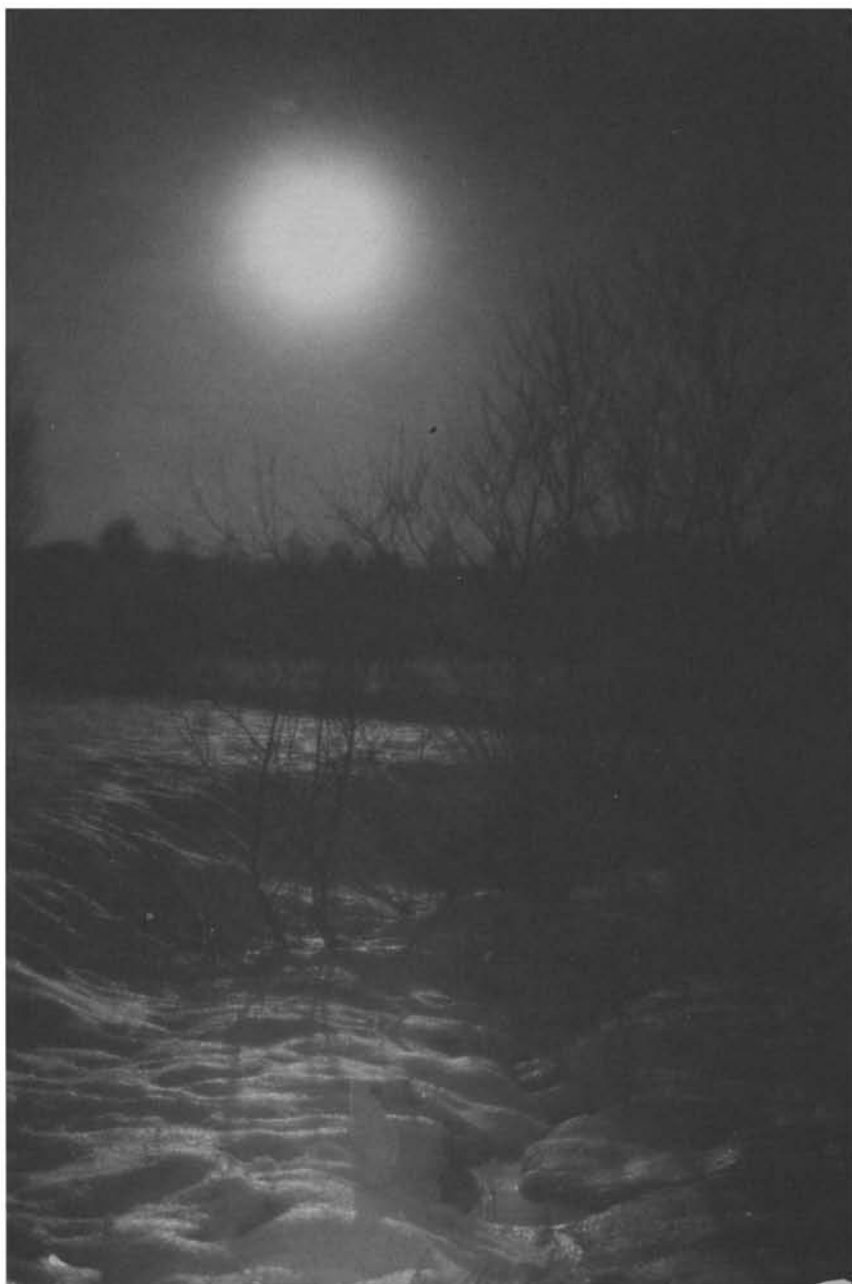
"The clouds are rapidly overlapping each other to form an almost opaque canopy. The western sky assumes a blue-lead color. The old hen under the apple tree, now bearing tints of deep red, has gathered her chicks. The light becomes so dim that I light my candle to finish washing dishes" [79].

"We are told that after the trials in life come the joys. When we view the beautiful cloud formations after the storms we are reminded how true this is in art" [90].





“About the only thing one thinks of when winter is mentioned is snow and very blizzardy weather. Thousands of things to see that will drive away these shivering thoughts” [32].





"Little ditches covered with lids of ice" [26].

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*"BIRDS IN WINTER—After you pass out from the village a little ways you see the nice, clean varieties. Seems like the scuffy sparrows form such a contrast. When crust is on the snow the birds just jump from spot to spot. Some places their tracks look like they had coasted. Saw blue jay Jan. 8/20 in snow at foot of Hopper apple tree. Couldn't tell whether it was getting a 'drink' or picking for roots. Many redbirds and flickers noticeable, also an occasional blackbird. Juncos indeed very tame" [14].*

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Of a field trip through the snow, Hohenberger wrote: "I wore the following: Winter underwear and flannel shirt, khaki trousers, long woollen socks knitted by Mrs. Berry, also other pair of cotton socks, rubber boots—Jersey Co., 6.7 U.S.A. on heel, and 7W in big red letters near beginning of heel on sole.—pair of woollen gloves from Nelly, also my fleece-lined mittens, Woollen cap, also woollen sweater. . . . I didn't think the trip was a cold one" [142].









Above: "I had been wishing for a good old New England snow and here it is. When I arose this morning and raised the window shade the sensation that ran over me is indescribable. Couldn't hardly believe my eyes. Everything bearing a mantle of white . . ." [141].

Left: "Bridge at Bessire's recalls with sadness how rapidly rustic things are vanishing" [21].



“Was glad to see the snow come, and regretted to think of its going until I was all worn out. Then I was glad to see the pictorial end. Nothing more exasperating can happen to you than to get your boots full of water, which happened to me on Salt while trying to break the ice and move it on, so that I might have a solid place for the tripod. While making the little place that had the rushiest little stream near the big trees at McLary’s ford, the leaping, laughing waters seemed to say, ‘Hurry, it’s getting late’ ” [144].

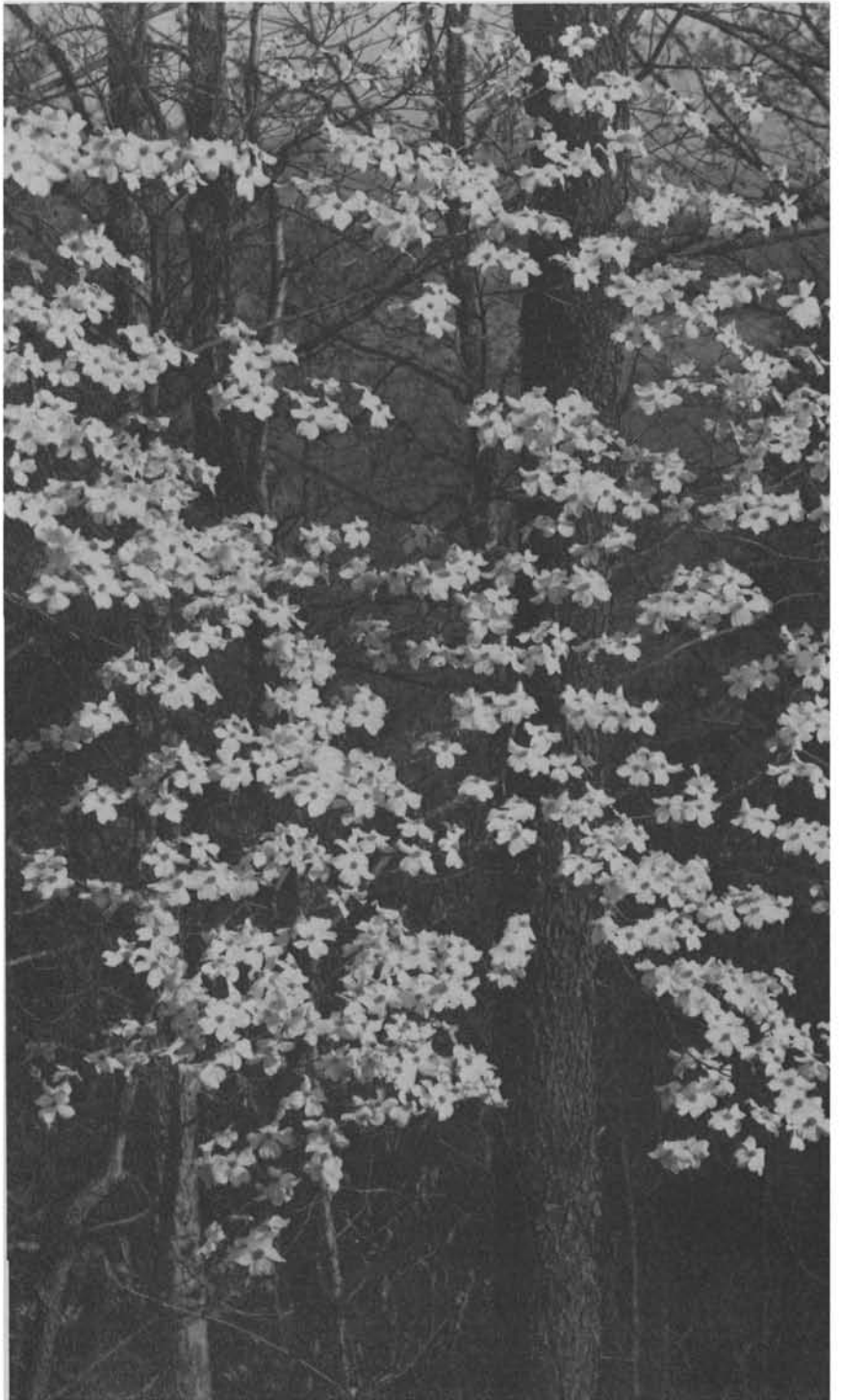
"Everything planned nicely—flowers for us along the highways all the time—one comes and the other goes" [46].

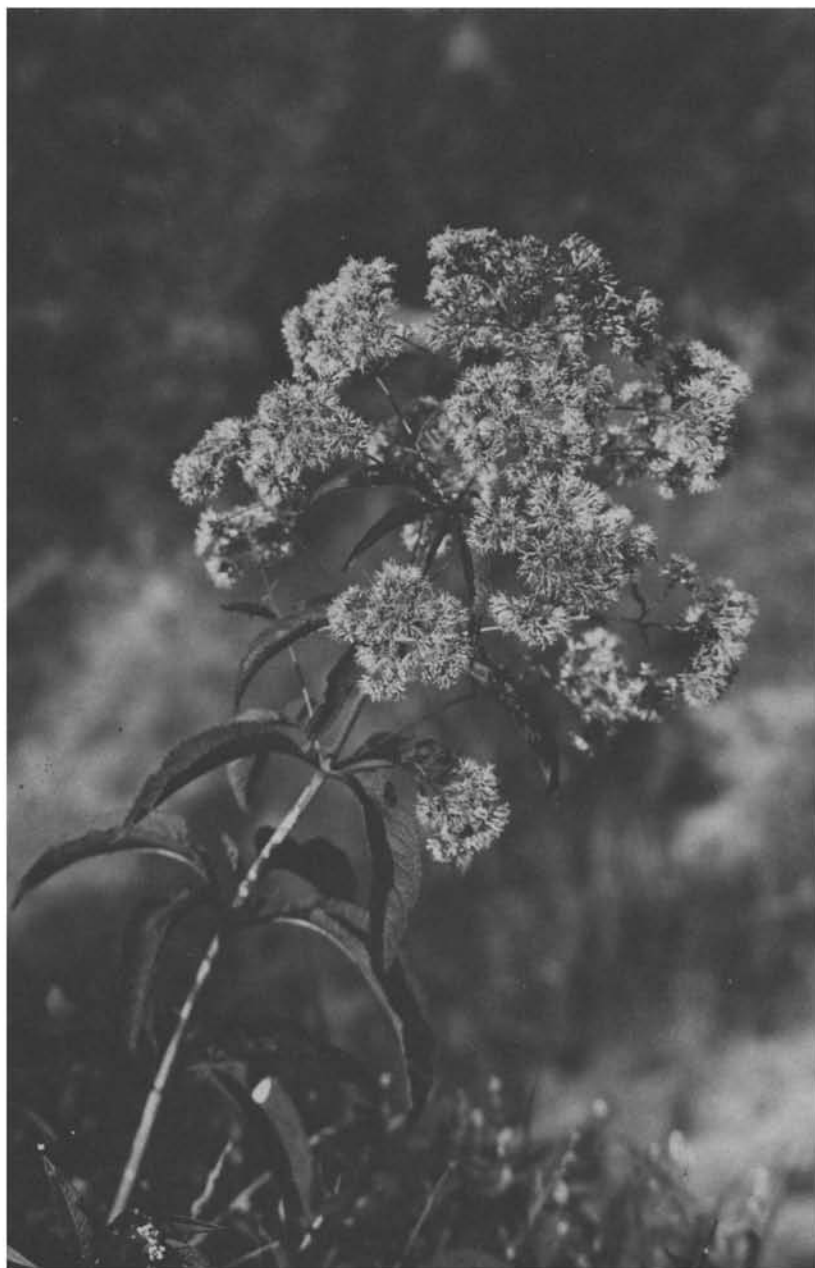




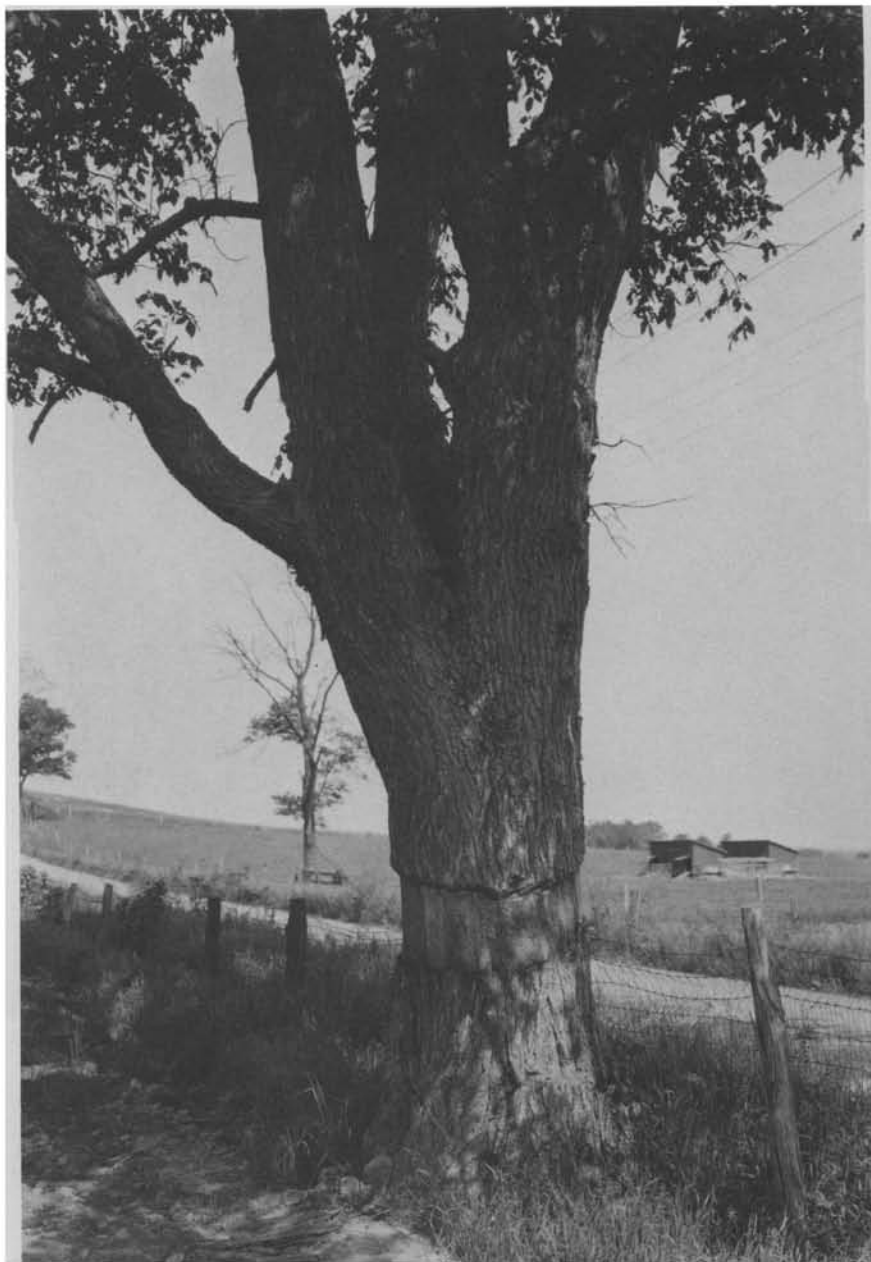


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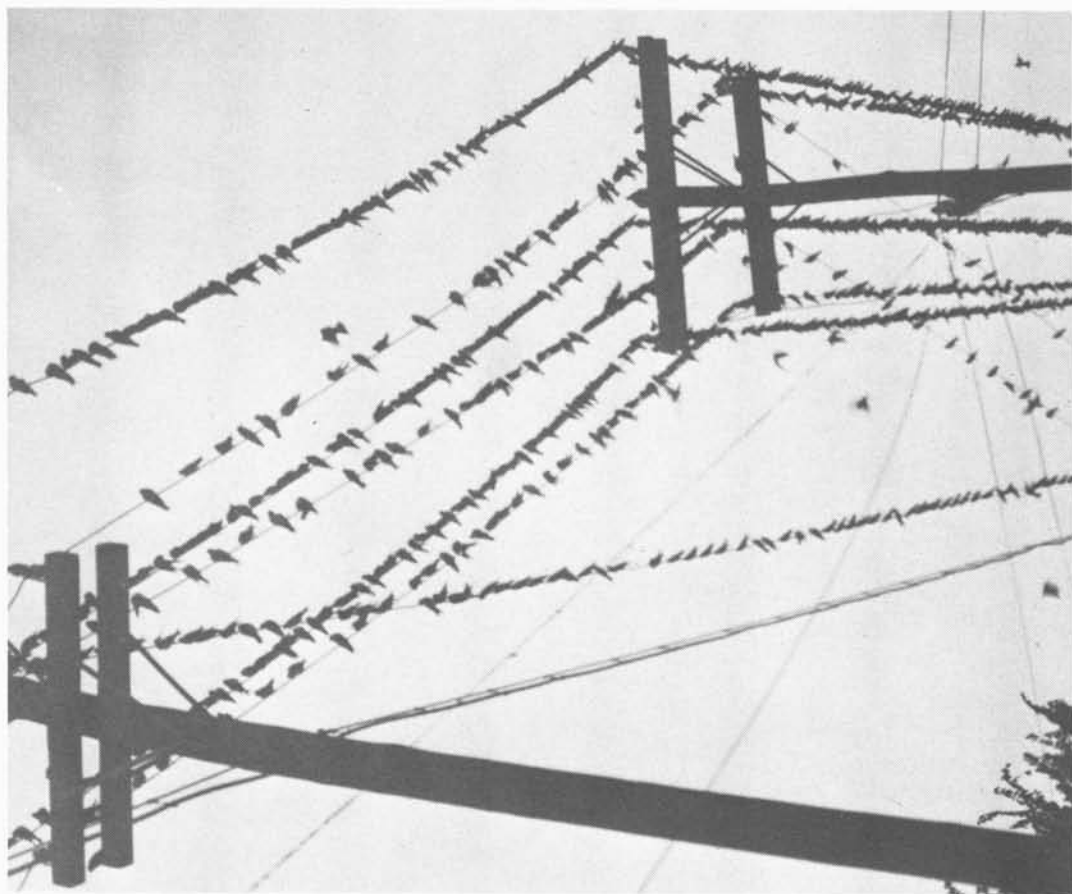
"I would suggest that where your Club sees a tree that is liable to be cut down that you find out what the owner wishes for it, tell him your mission, and if he still is bent on destroying it, offer him a price, own it and then put your name on it" [117].



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"Old tree with hollow center well elevated looked like one of those big German guns" [29]. Dated March 2, 1918.





"Yes, it's quiet in the country, but if you don't like bird songs you will change your mind. It's the bob white in the early hours and whippoorwill in the earlier hours. Chipping sparrow gives a plaintive chirp and sounds very melancholy, yet I failed to be convinced Sunday morning that I ought to get up" [39].





"A bird nest an interesting study—day after day intense interest accrues" [46].





"A regular paradise for birds. A fine place to meditate. Everything so quiet. The heat of the day kept the cattle from lowing and not even a dog's voice to be heard" [108].

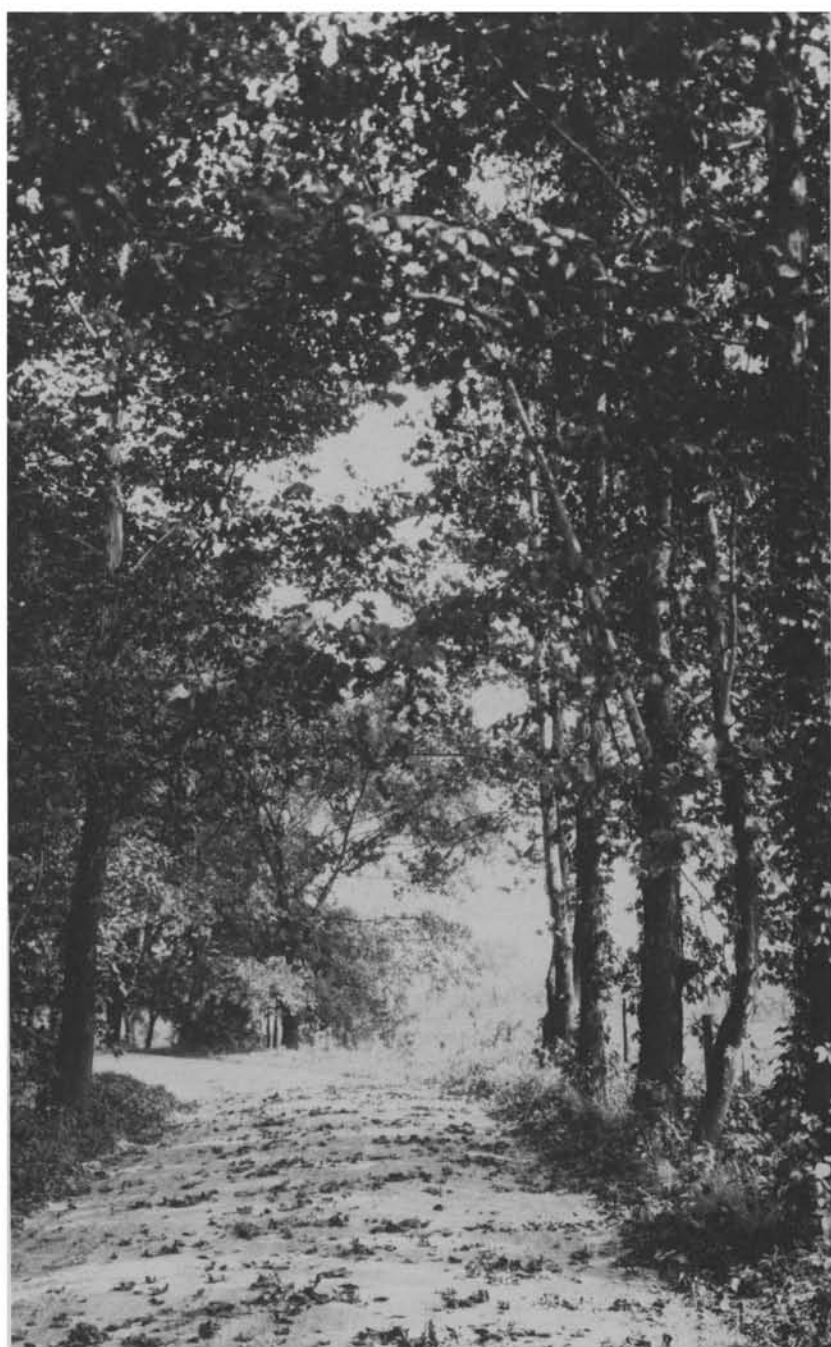




"A lady from Florida who has spent some time in Canada where they have perfectly straight roads remarked that a snake would break its back traveling over our winding thoroughfares. I told her that if we straightened them out we wouldn't have room for all of them" [268].







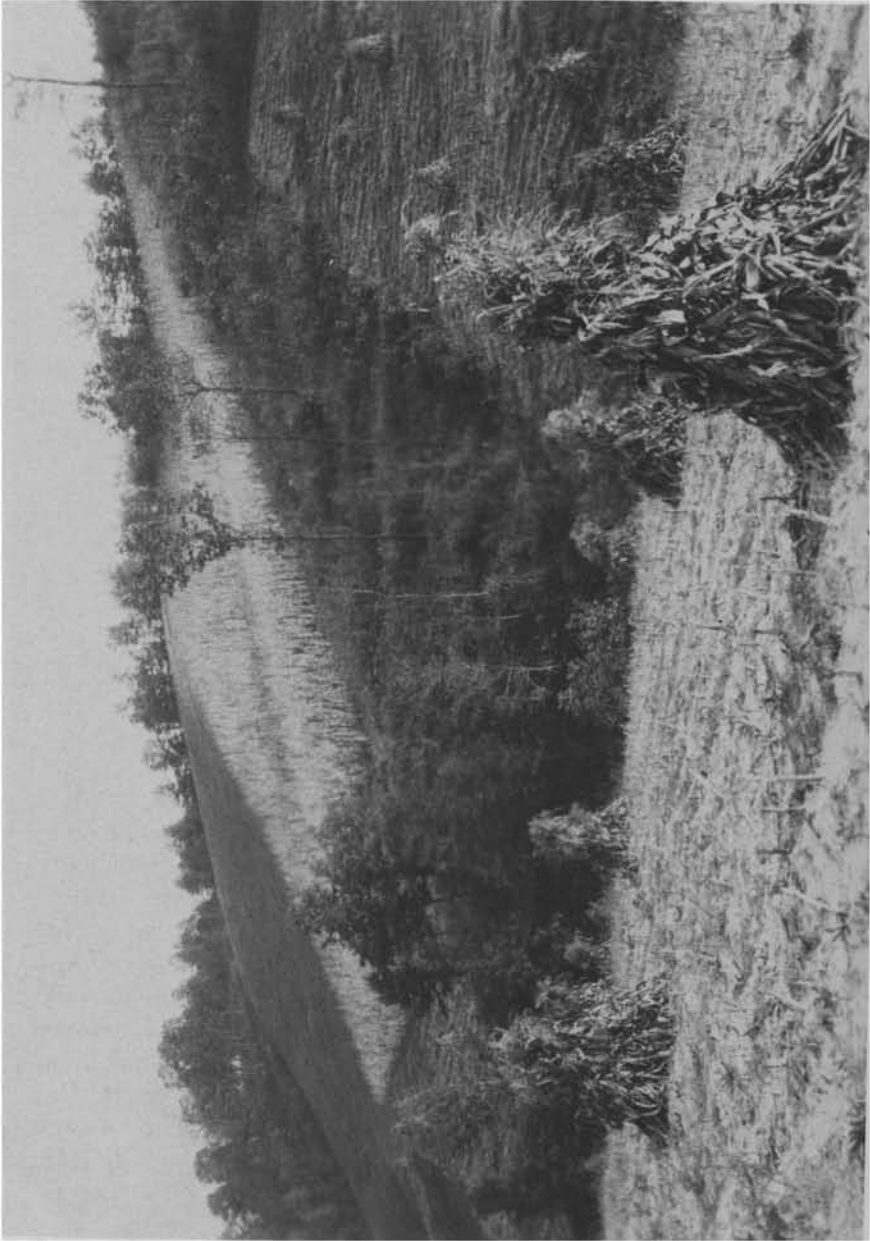
"Speak of the autumn colorings—sassafras, shumac, golden rod, purple aster, small field daisy—white. The golden yellow of the hickories, blended shades of the maple, new clover in the fields, and the burnt grass along the roadsides. And over it all a blue sky that is lovely to see, and picture" [119].

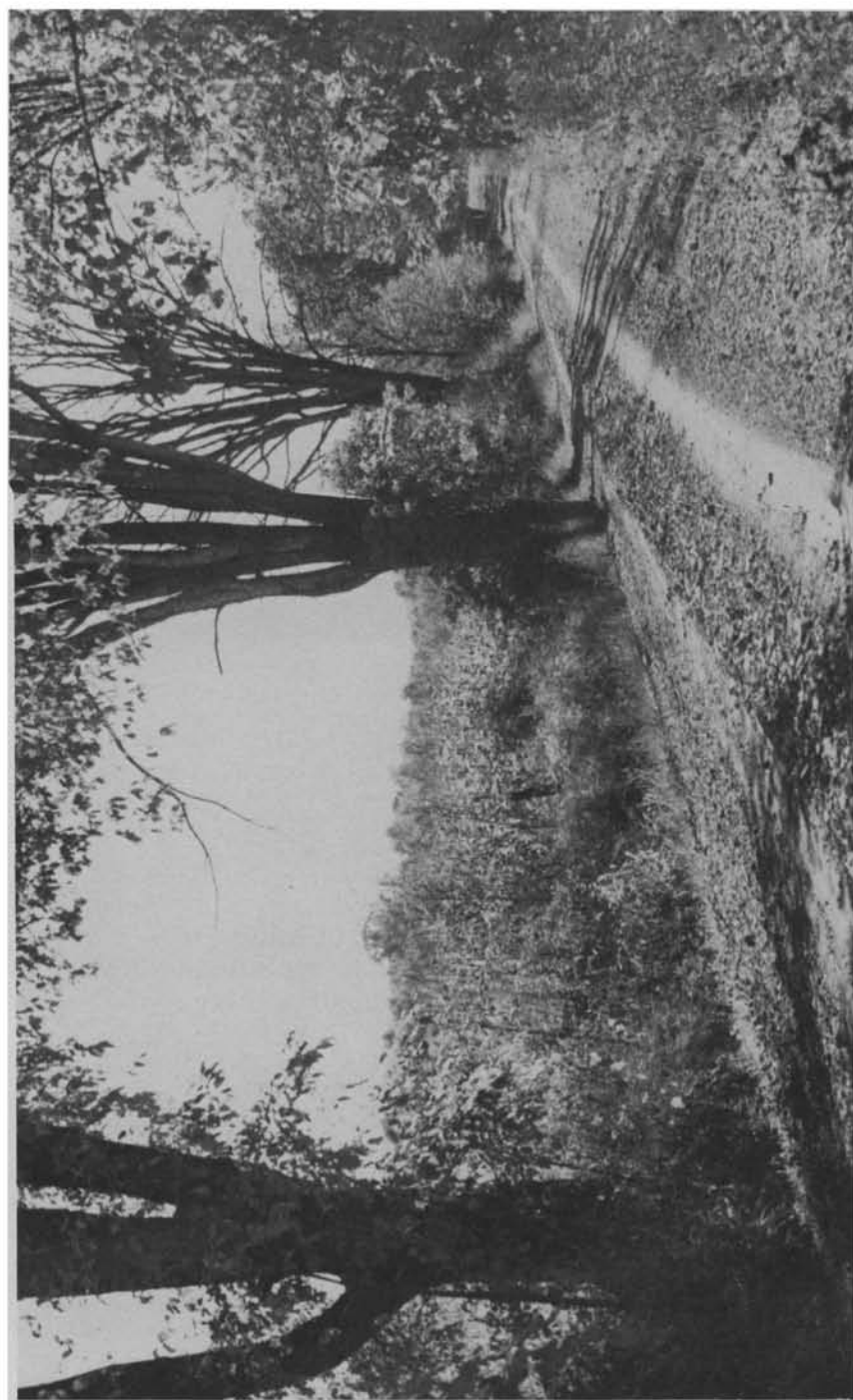
"I loved to stand and watch the leaves as they fell into the water—watching their reflections until they touched the water and sailed away like a masted vessel" [128].

"Every trip to same spot reveals something prettier. And so it should be, else God would have failed in His divine plan to have all things lovable at all times. Our eyes will do the work if our mind is in accord" [25].

"When making photographs afield I could imagine after I had finally wrestled the best there was from my camera that I could hear Bobwhite sing 'All right.' And you can rest assured I would be glad if he was correct in his conclusions" [46].

"Left at 1 p.m., for trip up Salt creek, returning via Taggart settlement and Clay Lick. Was a fine day, sometimes cloudy—bright, and not too hot. Elderberries ripe, and dragonflies in great numbers here and there, flying over the fields. Touch-me-nots when taken away from their regular surroundings remind us of human nature—die for want of pleasant and profitable surroundings. Like to be where they can do what they most like to do. The creek at Weddle's can be crossed on foot-stones. Locust and elm tree on the little brook near Taggart settlement. James Neff hill, made at 5:50. Bitter sweet not yet ripe, but I brought home green berries. Large jack-in-pulpit seed here and there. This was August 26th, 1919" [108].







"So many small things to command your attention. Have you ever noticed that the tiny bits are so attractive. And so it must be else we would not pause" [22].

"Not the large things alone that count in Nature. We marvel at the majesty of some things but how much more intimate do we become with the seemingly insignificant objects" [22].





*"RATTLESNAKES—*July 28/19 in court house yard. Ned Pedro tells of his brother killing a large one near the Hobbs place. Another evidence that they are numerous on Weed Patch hill [Brown County State Park]. He also said that there are many tracks of snakes crossing and recrossing roads in search of water—the prophecy is that it will rain soon" [103].



"June 3/18. Heavy fog forming the night before as we had a fine rain Sunday. Early Monday the mist was quite heavy and when I went to get a bucket of water was attracted by the spider tents all over the yard. I made several snaps, and while doing so was impressed with the fact that we could learn a lesson from the little spider who makes use of what they have around them to do their work. We could economize also" [38].





POKEBERRIES  
AND  
PAWPAWS