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The House That Never Was

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Saugalock was born of a boyhood dream 20 years before I ever saw it. When I visited the site in Lee County, Alabama for the first time in 1984, the murmuring waters of the Saugahatchee and Loblockee creeks called to me much like the natal marshes summon their long lost waterfowl children home each spring. There was no turning away, and before long the 176 acres between the confluence of the two streams became part of the family. Because the creeks merged close to our western boundary, my wife, Cindy, and I fashioned a name that was part of each, and with this final christening, we embarked on our adventure in land stewardship.

As one might expect, the paperwork had hardly been completed before we began planning where to build our dream home. We had several good choices: The site of an old, burned-out house that commanded the highest point on the land; the 80-foot bluff overlooking the Loblockee; the white oak hollow graced by the largest trees on the property and traversed by a permanent brook; the ridge overlooking the Mitchell farm and the Saugahatchee.

Each potential site afforded different and engaging vistas of the land, and each had advantages and disadvantages in terms of eventual construction costs. Each also had associated ecological costs measurable by the wounds that would be inflicted to assure our comfort. Power line rights-of-way, water lines or wells, roads, culverts, a sewage system, and the like would exact varying monetary and ecological tolls.

Permanent occupation at any site would disrupt, to some degree, the natural functioning of the land. The open-canopied old home site had become a monument to European man's previously futile attempts at permanent colonization, as well as a thicket refuge for white-tailed deer fawns, cottontail rabbits, white-eyed vireos, and black racers. The north-facing, dry, bluff was dominated by craggy hawthorns, post oaks, and hickories that were heavily used as food and cover by white-tailed deer, wild turkeys, gray foxes, coyotes, and numerous types of songbirds and reptiles; it also was poised above a plant community unique to the only bare granite outcrop on the land. The cool, moist white oak hollow was now a courting ground for several turkey gobbler sultans and their attendant harems each spring, and one of the few sites where Jack-in-the-pulpit, Catesby's trillium, and green adder's tongue were making a comeback. The south-facing ridge dominating the Saugahatchee valley also headed a unique hollow of pure beech forest that had just begun to heal wounds of heavy erosion wrought from previous farming and logging indiscretions.

In our youthful zeal, we decided to move to Saugalock immediately; then real-world social and financial pressures re-focused our plans. The immigration schedule changed to a move 'once the children finished high school.' Curiously, as that time now approaches, the subject has been little discussed. An unspoken tenet seems to have evolved: Keep your influence to a minimum, lest you fall into the trap! By moving out there we would again begin the cycle of human domination, a period from which the land has spent numerous years recovering. It had taken until the 1960's for the forest community to begin to assume normal functioning after 30-40 years of futile farming that extended from the turn of the century until the Great Depression. Then another assault, this time logging, in 1971 had left it in the condition we inherited - a quick "money-cut" with the only merchantable trees left standing being culls, boundary trees, and those on terrain too steep to log. I began to sense that once we permanently moved on to the land we would insist on dominating the community rather than simply becoming another member of it. Such is one aspect of man's 'superiority over the beasts.' He becomes a jealous tenant, and before long, forces other members of the land community to give way to his desires.

Even among the best of those with an ecological conscience, this human arrogance surfaces. Examples of my own frailties along these lines may better explain. We share Saugalock with canebrake rattlesnakes and copperheads. Initially, we intended just to give them wide berth whenever they were encountered. Then my daughter, Laura, stepped on a copperhead while trying to catch a butterfly in our picnic ground-campfire area. She wasn't bitten, the snake seemed unfazed, and we each went our separate ways. However, the incident ignited a spark of that fiery hubris of which I wrote earlier. We declared the immediate picnic ground-campfire area a safe haven from venomous reptiles, which would be quickly dispatched if caught 'trespassing' again. Since then I nearly stepped on a large coiled rattlesnake a hundred yards from there while investigating the excited alarm call of a northern bobwhite, and Tex, our dog, nearly stepped on another sunning in a nearby logging road. This led to a new dictum - henceforth, all poisonous reptiles found within the three-acre, boot-shaped piece of land surrounding the picnic-campfire area were to be considered *persona non grata*. Upon pondering these dictates for a time, I uncomfortably began to admit that I, a wildlife biologist, had independently developed my own 'kill them on sight' mentality regarding venomous reptiles that was not greatly different from that of most non-biological types.

With little difficulty, one could imagine how this precedent in ecological tinkering could easily be expanded. If we were to become permanent residents of Saugalock, we might logically want to bring some 'domesticated friends' with us. Just as I dreamt of having a place like Saugalock as a boy I also dreamt of one day having a racing pigeon loft; back then, as I watched my uncle's racing homers fly, my spirits soared with them. Until now fulfillment of that dream was impossible because of where I chose to live. Moving to Saugalock would solve those human problems of zoning. However, new and potentially more

serious conflicts of conscience would arise. You see, racing homers, being athletes, need to train regularly. They do so by daily plying the skies for an hour or so, coursing over the terrain about their loft. Few human problems to deal with there, but I trust resident Cooper's hawks and transient peregrine falcons would be compelled to exact rent for use of the firmament - probably in the form of a regular meal of the less fleet, or indiscreet. How would I balance the physical loss of a prized racer against the death stoop of a peregrine? Similar questions would have to be resolved relative to vegetable gardens and deer, a free roaming Tex and nesting turkeys, horse pastures and un-trampled natural meadows, 'civilized' forestry and dead snag communities, impounded fish ponds and free-flowing brooks, manicured lawns and unruly wild flower patches, and so on. As visitors, such conflicts are transient and easily settled with our departure; as permanent residents, final resolutions and unsettled consciences would be inevitable. How would we respond? Such questions we could not answer, and I feared most that they would not even be asked once we settled in.

Thus, it has been twelve years since Saugalock was christened. We visit regularly, but the house that was to be, still isn't. Of late, building it doesn't seem as important as it once did, and until we decide how to better become part of the wild community there, the house that was to be will remain the house that never was.

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