

Jim's Perspective...

A Walk Through the Woods

There is something so very unique about a walk through the woods. In one sense, it is peaceful and quiet, but in another way it is bustling with the sound of birds, insects and rustling leaves. It can feel a little haunted, but then you see many animals including squirrels, birds, butterflies, turtles, rabbits and frogs. So the woods will usually wrap you in an array of senses that will pique your interest and make the walk a lot of fun.

And so it was, that I decided a few years ago that the grandkids would enjoy a summer walk in the woods. Two of the kids were in third grade and one had not yet started school. I took them out to Pioneers Park on the west edge of Lincoln. I knew there were extensive wooded areas in the park and many trails through the woods in the park. We started in an area called the Prairie Corridor on Hainse Branch. This is a ten-mile trail that runs in a southwesterly direction from Lincoln. It connects Pioneers Park to Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center located near Denton, Nebraska, and, finally, the trail ends at Conestoga Lake State Recreation Area (a lake where I used to fish for Crappie). This entire Prairie Corridor consists of about 7,800 acres. Haines Branch is a shallow creek on the south side of Pioneers Park that flows into Salt Creek.

We parked in the southern part of Pioneers Park at a parking area that is adjacent to a small snack shop which is now closed. We walked west a short distance on a bike path, and then crossed the Haines Branch Creek Bridge. Once over the bridge, we turned right and walked north a short distance before heading west down the Harrington Trail Loop which runs next to the creek. This trail is a dirt trail, in the woods, and bikes are not allowed. The three kids were in constant touch with mother nature. They poked at turtles and frogs, and chased rabbits. I led the way because they had no idea where they were going. They saw a mouse, and ran. They saw a grasshopper, and stopped, and peered at this animal, not sure what to make of it. They saw crickets bouncing near the path. They looked up in the trees where squirrels and birds seemed to sit and watch us. We then saw a separate smaller path that went north to the creek. We went along this short path which went down the bank of the creek to a sand bar area with a shallow stream of water running alongside the sand bar and over some dead branches in the water. It was like a babbling brook! The kids took broken sticks and fiddled with them in the stream. What really surprised them is that there must have been 20 or 30 small green frogs in this area. They poked at the frogs with their sticks. We stayed here for probably twenty minutes. Luckily, they never got their shoes or clothing wet.

The banks of this creek are very steep. I ventured down the path to the creek bed first and I reached back and grabbed the hand of each child as they came down the bank to help them get down the bank and make sure they didn't fall and go sliding down the slope. They wanted my help. No doubt they had never ventured down the steep bank of a creek!

Below is a picture I took of the grandkids that day on the sandbar in Haines Creek. Three explorers interacting with mother nature. Three young children learning about life in the woods. There is no evidence of structured neighborhoods, concrete, or electricity lines. There is nothing

but the humming sound generated by animals in the woods, and the gentle bubbling water in the creek. We are all alone in the woods. Shush!



We left the creek and continued west down the Harrington Trail Loop. The trail turned south and left the creek. The trail went next to a small pond and swamp. We saw muskrats and weasels. The kids stood still. They were not sure what to make of these wet animals. To the west of the pond is an area of pristine tallgrass prairie. Now they are out of the woods and away from the pond, and standing in the prairie. There are monarch butterflies fluttering under a clear blue sky. The prairie grass is about waist high on the kids. This is all part of the Prairie Corridor on Haines Branch. I explain to the kids that many years ago, families of settlers explored the tallgrass prairie of Nebraska looking for a place to live. Mom, dad and the children moved through the tallgrass prairie in a covered wagon. There were no maps or towns. There might be wagon ruts that served as a type of trail for families to follow. The kids wondered how they ate and where they slept if they didn't have a house.

According to the Prairie Corridor on Haines Branch Administration, in an article published May 9, 2021, at one time, tallgrass prairie covered 142 million acres, or about 40 percent of the United States. Today, there is but one percent left. It is one of the rarest and most endangered ecosystems in the world. It is quite an ecological treasure that a patch of tallgrass prairie flourishes on the southwest periphery of Lincoln. Each fall, every Lincoln Public Schools fourth grader spends a day in the prairie through the Public Schools' Prairie Immersion Program.

We walked south, still on the Harrington Trail Loop, through the tallgrass prairie and came to a bike path which we took that headed back east back to the Haines Branch Creek Bridge. This path went back into the woods. We stopped at one point because the kids saw a large tree with a black trunk and no leaves on the branches. The tree looked dead and the kids could not figure out what happened. I explained it was probably struck by lightning. They were astounded by this possibility. The dry wooden tree trunk had some names and other etchings on it. The kids picked up some small rocks and carved their first names into the tree trunk. We made it back to the bridge. The kids stood on the bridge and looked at the water below. They each had a small dead stick all of which were thrown over the bridge rail and into the water. They watched the tree sticks float down the creek water. They decided the sticks were in a race and they each wanted their own stick to win! As the water turned to the left in the creek bed and disappeared from view on the bridge, the stick to go out of site first was the winner!

We got into the car and headed back to Papa's house. However, there was one more activity to complete before getting home. The kids talked me into stopping at a Casey's convenience store to pick up a treat! We entered the store and the kids ran to the candy aisle. They each got two items of candy. When we arrived home, the adults were not too thrilled with Papa's decision to let them get candy. Dinner was not too far off. But then, that's what Papa does and, in part, I think that's why they like to go on an adventure with Papa! Ha Ha!

Ever since our first exploration of the Prairie Corridor on Haines Branch, we periodically venture out there for another walk in the woods. I took them there a week ago. They still love exploring the woods and the tallgrass prairie. But now, they know where to go and what paths to take. Papa just tags along. They make their way down the bank of Haines Creek and they don't need my help. They always stop at the burned dead tree and examine their etched names. My, how things have changed! The only help or guidance the kids need today to explore the Prairie Corridor on Haines Branch is for someone to drive them to Pioneers Park!

As we gather for holiday family events, there can be this feeling, sometimes, that things have changed. The grandkids are older now. They manage their own affairs and are not in as much need of adult assistance. But it is not just that things have changed for the kids, life marches on for all of us, and in a certain sense things change for all of us in some ways. It is this aspect of change, in life, that makes holiday traditions more meaningful, and, in a way, so helpful. The family traditions during this holiday season stay pretty much the same. It gives us some feeling or sense that life is something we can control. We can all take comfort in tradition, especially family holiday tradition.

'Trees' By Joyce Kilmer

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast:

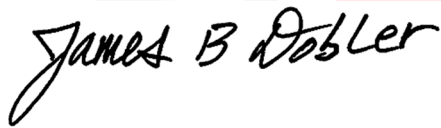
A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

A tree that may in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;

Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

'Joyce' was actually a man, whose full name was Alfred Joyce Kilmer. He was killed at the Second Battle of Marne in July, 1918, at the age of 31.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James B. Dobler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'J' and 'D'.

Jim Dobler, CPCU

PIA Legislative Coordinator

Questions or Comments? Please email jbdobler@outlook.com