

## The Timber

October 2000

I slip the paddle back into the water, pulling steadily against the passing flow. The canoe slides through the watery channel; a twisting passageway cut deep into the farmland of eastern Kansas. The canopy provides brief retreats from the warm summer sun. Up ahead a large Sycamore tree tempts me with her verdant awning. I succumb to the lure, pulling hard on the sculptured piece of ash; creating small eddies in the murky water. The bow swings to the left, sending my craft across the current, heading for the shade. At the precise moment, I push the paddle forward against the water, stalling the canoe, and causing the nose to swing downstream. I reach for the Sycamore's exposed roots, hanging on while tying a rope. Once secured, I slide forward on the seat, placing the life jacket behind my head for a pillow. I lean back and exhale a relaxed sigh. The muddy water silently passes by, as the shrill melody of a cardinal pierces the quiet. How wonderful!

Though many years have passed since traveling this waterway, we remain old friends. Directly above me, and about 100 yards to the east is where my little legs first ran freely in mid-America. I've often reflected on the good fortune of playing out my youth in rural Kansas. It could have been so different. In fact, my parents set the stage for me to become a "city-boy", as my dad's first job out of college involved work with an aerospace firm in Baltimore, Maryland. Mom and Dad made their way through early-married life, while my siblings and I continued our conditioning for the city life; we knew of no other. However, little did we know that the "big people" of our lives planned a major change; a change that eventually brought me to this peaceful shade. Dad wanted to switch from airframes to fresh-air—he decided to become a farmer.

Mom and Dad left just enough room in the overloaded 49-Chevy to squeeze my three brothers and me in amongst our possessions. Five days later, the doors of the exhausted Chevy swung open, letting four rambunctious boys out to explore the new Kansas farmstead. An old two-story square house greeted us, and from that moment on, would be remembered as home. However, what caught our young city-boy eyes was far more exciting than any old house; it was what we call, even today as middle-aged men, "the timber".

The gently bobbing canoe relaxes me. The water is calm today, yet torrents of childhood memories flood the banks of my serene world. The farm included a creek and a timber in the backyard—a treasure unimagined by transplanted young lads. Our East Coast nest of four grew to a Midwestern nest of ten—seven boys and three girls. However, my sisters had little to do with the games we boys played in the timber. One of the more dangerous pursuits involved playing war, Indian war. Fresh off a good Indian movie from the old B&W television, we would head towards the creek for some real action. Our weapon of choice was an Indian favorite, the bow and arrow. The bows came from willow trees with branches about three quarters of an inch in diameter. Cut into four-foot lengths, we then

stretched baling twine between each end, tightly pulling the stick into a perfect bow. The effectiveness of the weapon depended on the quality of the arrow, or should I say, the nettle. We pulled the native weed from the timber floor, trimmed the top off, and cleaned the soil from the pointed root. A straight and well-balanced nettle commanded respect—they traveled where aimed. Less perfect nettles had other outcomes—you might even knock out a “Good Indian”!

Our war games had low structure, but high drama. We divided into Indian nations by having the two oldest brothers take turns choosing from the rest of the poor shooters. Being the second oldest, I never suffered the humiliation of having little tactical value. To add tribal distinctions, we would crush wild berries in our hands and smear the deep reds and purples on our faces. We knew each other as the Red-Berry Tribe from the east bank, and the Purple-Berry Tribe from the west bank. The distance across the creek provided little protection from wildly launched arrows. Putting a little arch on the shot, a straight nettle could clear the watery span, and with a little luck, nail one of those nasty purple-faced Indians.

Not all skirmishes took place with the water being the dividing line. Occasionally the game became one of ambush. The Purple-Berry tribe lived on the heavily forested side of the creek, and occasionally would invite us into the deep woods for a little search and destroy fun. Once crossing into unfriendly territory, the well-worn paths seduced us to follow. The enemy could be hiding anywhere: behind trees, ducking in the bushes, burying themselves in depressions on the timber floor, and even lurking high in the trees. The Purple-Berry tribe specialized in camouflage and trickery. One day our entire band met its demise at the hands of some high tech weapons. It seems the purple-facers had visited the local dump and found some roll-up window shades. Apparently, while high on grape Kool-Aid, they started whacking one another with the shades, eventually breaking the rolls in half. To their surprise, they discovered a thin wire coiling between the two broken ends. One of them must have said, “Ugh, this make good trip-wire.” Sure enough, their trap caught us by surprise as we raced down a timber trail in tight formation. Our entire search and destroy party was sought and destroyed! We landed in a heap of red-faced Indians, laughing our rears off as the purple-facers sprang from cover and bounced nettles off our hides.

A floating log bumps into the canoe, and with the light thump, my attention shifts from Indians back to the gentle river. I watch the bobbing wood pass by, so effortlessly, so natural. Our nautical pursuits on the Vermillion were not as effortless, or natural. Once we reached suitable age, dad allowed us become sailors. Unfortunately, our Navy had no vessels. Unfazed—we resorted to innovation. Our fleet began with a log raft weighing as much as the water it displaced. It floated until the sailors climbed aboard—then it became a submarine.

During the course of warm summer days, our maritime failures sunk to new depths. Undaunted though, we merely stepped up the sophistication. Out of our skunk-works came a set of 51 Buick Roadmaster hoods. Butted together, we secured the seam with screws and roofing tar. Heavier than the Huck Finn raft, we slid the rusty behemoth in the

water once, never returning it to land. Much later, we had enough money to buy small fishing boats, and even outboard motors. Never having lost our flair for stupidity though, a summertime brainstorm birthed the idea of putting two 10 horsepower outboards on a 12 foot fishing boat. We anchored a 2x6 plank across the midsection of our 12-foot craft, with adequate length extended over the each side to mount the motors. The racer would require two pilots, sitting side by side in the middle of the boat, each controlling a motor. Vague concerns crossed my mind about what would happen if one engine quit while the other continued blasting away on our “Miss Budweiser”. Apparently, a guardian angel helped launch our highly specialized craft. We slid the engine-laden boat into the water, watching it tilt just enough to begin a slow roll over on its side. The boat continued rolling until it disappeared into the murky water. I didn’t understand what went wrong anymore than my younger brothers knew whether to laugh or scamper up the creek bank. Their eyes stared at me, calibrating my expression, looking for clues as to an appropriate reaction. We stood immobilized, frozen in disbelief, listening to the bubbles “blurp” as they percolated to the surface.

From where I lounge in my 17-foot craft, the leaves of the canopy seem distant. I wonder how small I appear to the songbirds of the treetops? The life of the songbirds prompted my brothers and me to try our own version of flying over the water. In fact, our daring increased with age, leaving little room for good sense. The concept of flight seemed simple, and irresistible. We found a tree with a strong branch shooting as high and far out over the creek as possible. Once located, we talked my younger daredevil brother Steve into taking the rope up into the tree to tie it onto an overhanging limb. Younger brothers will do anything to get attention. We emphasized how to tie the rope securely; we wanted no mistakes. Getting the loop on the pilot’s end of the rope the correct distance from the water was important—a one-foot clearance would enhance the fly-by effect.

All systems appeared ready. Next, we needed someone foolish enough to try it. No volunteers came from the higher-ranking brothers. We attempted to persuade some of the junior members by dramatizing the thrills of soaring like a bird. My younger brother Mike took the bait—the sales pitch replacing his good sense with blind heroism. With enthusiasm outweighing fear, he scampered up the tree like a chimp with a stolen banana. Mike disappeared into the canopy. Although out of sight, the snapping twigs and the grunting indicated he continued the ascent. In fact, his exuberance carried him higher than where Steve tied his end to the branch. When all the leaf shaking and noise stopped, Mike had climbed to about 50 feet above the water. “Are you ready Mike?” I yelled. He did not respond. Either deep prayer or intense fear kept him quiet. “Mike, what’s going on?” His response was direct, and immediate. The leaves started shaking and the branches started cracking. Amidst the treetop clamor, Mike suddenly broke through the foliage, free falling towards the water. His saucer sized eyes, his gaping mouth, and his tight clutch on the rope indicated a terror beyond screams. I watched without breathing, visually calculating his trajectory. The look on Mike’s face confirmed my estimates...we screwed up! He accelerated downward heading directly towards his ground crew. We lunged for the ground, as Mike’s landing made a loud “SPLAT”. Mike touched down on the water, about five feet from the bank. The impact generated a tidal wave that washed over him as he impaled himself in the soft, muddy water’s edge. He let out the scream

that refused to come forth during his descent. Fortunately unscathed, he busted out in laughter, joyous to walk the earth again.

Mike's failed test flight did not dissuade us though. He immediately demanded that Steve adjust the rope. We then all helped build a launch platform high in the trees. We spent the balance of our warm summer days happily flying through the air and across the water, just like the songbirds of the timber.

I laugh capriciously from my quiet canoe, breaking the silence of the river. The expression on Mike's face of many years ago remains a valued possession. In fact, he went on to become a fine engineer, no doubt motivated by our childhood miscalculation. His splashdown happened only a few yards from where I rest. So close, yet so long ago. I reach up to untie the rope holding the canoe in place. I had better move along before the Purple-Berry Indians find me in their territory, or some crazy kid falls out of the tree, swamping my canoe. Baltimore could never top this.