

A Spiritual Place for all Seasons

(The University Woodlot)



J. Anthony Fitzgerald

July 6, 2003, originally July 21, 2002

SLIDE: Introduction

I wish I were good enough with just my words so that I could paint the sort of pictures in your heads that surpass reality. I'm not, so I'm going to use the crutch of technology and hope that each picture is truly worth a thousand words. I hope you'll forgive.

SLIDE: Map

As long as I've been in Fredericton, I've been aware of the stretch of "undeveloped" land that stretches between the malls and New Maryland that is the University woodlot. I would occasionally ride my bike through the major roads and when I was a beaver/cub/scout leader, we also made occasional use of the woodlot for outings. It was, however, about three years ago that I began regular walks there with my son's dog.

It began innocently enough with Nicholas asking if we could take Peerless to the pond in the woodlot to see whether she would enjoy the water. She didn't the first time, nor the second. Not for a while, in fact, but I would be getting ahead of myself.

SLIDE: Peerless swimming

We had driven to the pond as the roads were open until two years ago, but I saw a lot of people walking and allowing their dogs to run freely. I decided to come back on my bicycle and explore a couple of roads so I would not be caught by surprise when walking if they went in unexpected directions and determined that this

SLIDE: short map

would be an easily walked route that would take us past the deeper pond with the clearer water for swimming with a good walk to dry off and past a more interesting pond formed by a "Ducks Unlimited" embankment.

SLIDE: Duck Pond

We would occasionally see beaver as well as the ducks, red-wing blackbirds and Canada geese made this pond a stop off when fall came. Peerless and I would walk in the woodlot each evening and on weekend mornings. It was good exercise for

both of us, we got to know some of the regular other walkers and their dogs.

SLIDE: Autumn trail

That fall, there was a change in our family status. My youngest son was approaching nineteen and my wife and I agreed to separate. I knew that except for me, the rest of the family preferred to sleep in on weekends, so I offered to continue the weekend morning walks of Peerless and my son agreed. With only two walks a week, we began exploring other trails and eventually settled on this longer walk.

SLIDE: Longer route

It takes us just over an hour and a half. Part of the walk was now along the new trans Canada highway which, at the time, was not yet in use and back in the old New Maryland highway. If it wasn't too wet or buggy, we would leave the highway and take a woods road that diverges from it.

SLIDE: Pine late spring

Summer slides into fall and we enjoyed the changing season.

SLIDE: Pine Fall

This old Pine dwarfs the new growth surrounding it. I like this view and have decided to complete the seasonal collection over the next half year.

SLIDE: TCH 1 - Pine in context

Just so you can see the view in context. This and the previous two pictures were taken at the point a major woodlot road was cut off by construction of the new highway.

SLIDE: TCH 2 - East route

Turning slightly, we see the road curving away to the East.

SLIDE: TCH 3 - West route

Before the new highway opened, this section was paved and looked ready for a year and a half. It was a chance to get out in the open and a breeze would usually keep

the mosquitos and black flies at bay. With no traffic, Peerless had complete freedom.

One day, we were walking this stretch when a woodcock, I think, pair began flying in front of Peerless performing the injured wing act. They had led Peerless several hundred meters up the road when I called her back. The birds became quite frantic as the dog returned to my side and fell in heel. In fact, the pair landed on the road ahead and ran towards us holding their wing out with feathers splayed several times to within ten feet trying to draw us off. It was an amazing display which eventually ended as we continued our walk and were well past their nest, at which point they flew off circling widely and back the way we had come.

SLIDE: Fall

Fall is a fantastic time in the woodlot. A couple of hard frosts and the biting insects are gone. The colours, of course, are fantastic and the temperature is brisk in the morning but pleasant in the sun. This road is a dead end at the edge of a swamp.

SLIDE: Winter route

After a couple of days of consistently sub-zero temperatures, the ponds and streams begin to freeze and new opportunities begin. By late December we try the following route, now avoiding the highway which will be less attractive once traffic begins and slushy, salt spray is common.

SLIDE: Survey line through swamp

The swamp is now passable and has its own unique beauty. Here we see the survey trail as it passes through the swamp.

SLIDE: Favourite picture

This is my favourite of the pictures. It shows peerless beautiful in profile.

SLIDE: Peerless back lit and contracting

Another beautiful picture with Peerless backlit by the sun and contrasting nicely with the swamp brush and the swamp margin in the background.

SLIDE: Red leaves

Panning to the East, there is a view of pure New Brunswick swamp, small acid tolerant brush trailing off to a margin of stunted evergreen. A few weeks later, the heavier snow would come and being sticky, would form a layer over the tops of these bushes leaving a hollow layer underneath. It would not make pleasant show shoeing, but I'm getting ahead of myself again.

SLIDE: Swamp 1

Now two quick scenes, a little later, looking to left then right at the surrounding remains of trees that grew here before the swamp formed.

SLIDE: Swamp 2

It's bleak, but the camera does not do it justice and there's a stark beauty in this landscape too.

SLIDE: Early morning blue snow on trees

As winter progresses, we find that the sun is not up when our walks start and we start out in darkness and sometimes bitter cold. It doesn't make sense to put on snowshoes until we reach the part of our trail which hasn't been packed down by other walkers or cleared by the University or Forestry school. Fingers get very cold and it can be painful attaching the snowshoes to the boots. We have the advantage, however, of being able to go where others can not and judging from the tracks that sometimes precede us, there are not more than a handful of people who take this trail in the winter.

The light just before dawn casts a blue pall over everything.

SLIDE: Peerless running up trail

But it's obvious that Peerless is enjoying this part of the trail. Once I'm on snowshoes, the extra exercise generates heat so that my hands quickly warm and except on the bitterest days, I find that I can take off the mittens and get by with just the light gloves that I wear under them.

There is a sense of satisfaction in just being able to be here.

SLIDE: Sunrise in winter

But a few minutes later, there is the glory of a winter sunrise.

SLIDE: Peerless mired in snow

The snow is deep and soft. Peerless will struggle ahead, then let me pass and work through the trail that I leave, the going is still tough, but not nearly as tiring. After an hour of this, she will sleep the rest of the day. Periodically we take a rest and I remove the balls of snow that form between her paws.

When we finally get back to a travelled path we both breathe a bit of relief and Peerless will do a dance which consists of running full tilt with head lowered and throwing a spray of snow, first to one side of the path, turning tail, running to the other, turning sharply and running back towards me at full tilt. Only the sharp command of “down” stops her from throwing her 30 kilos full against me and knocking me down.

It's her run of pure joy and enthusiasm and it is catching.

SLIDE: Cartoon - Peanuts

A slight change of pace with this slide. I'm probably violating copyright but there will be no commercial gain.

Winter, too, is a grand time. No biting insects, Peerless comes home clean and modern technology provides light weight clothing that holds the cold at bay.

SLIDE: Early spring mud

Winter turns to early spring. This morning has brought back a freezing cold, however, in a few hours the sun will turn the road to a cold soup. We'll walk elsewhere when the mornings are too mild until I know that the ground has dried out.

SLIDE: Lichens

Spring brings life and colour back to the woodlot as well as biting insects. Here we see lichens in their spring colour.

SLIDE: Mossy rock

An old rock shows the accumulation of mosses and lichens that time has given it.

SLIDE: Moss closeup

Here is a close up of mosses showing the spore forming organ. This picture is a slightly different technology from the others which were mostly taken with a digital camera, this picture was scanned in from a 35mm slide.

SLIDE: Mushroom in bridge

And the oddities that always attract our attention. This mushroom was one of several growing out of this old bridge over a relatively unused trail. I noticed it on the morning walk, so came back in the afternoon by bicycle with the camera to capture the picture.

SLIDE: White lady slipper

This orchid of our temperate forests is common along one of the trails and mid to late June is the best time to see them.

SLIDE: Pink lady slippers

These two beauties were beside the trail that we take into the swamp in the winter. The pink lady slipper is much rarer in the woodlot.

SLIDE: Blueflags

We called these wild iris when I was a child in Nova Scotia, but I still remember the New Brunswick teacher chiding me and stating quite firmly that they are blueflag. Whatever you choose to call them, they are beautiful and while I was taking this photo, a bull frog was croaking from the cattail plants in the background.

SLIDE: Lupines

Of course the multi-coloured and common in any open and sunny area lupines are always beautiful.

SLIDE: Blackberry blossoms

These are black berry blossoms. You can tell them from raspberries because they have real and very vicious thorns.

I love black berries. I would occasionally pick some of the raspberries we found growing in the woodlot and give them to Peerless. When the black berries were ripe, Peerless quickly noticed that I was eating them and she was only getting the occasional berry so she joined me among the canes. I watched as her tongue wrapped up and around each berry and with a gentle motion, the ripe berries would roll off and into her mouth. Unripe berries stayed behind. I recalled a film strip in which it was shown how dogs drink by making a cup by curling the tongue back and lifting the water into their mouths. I then began to speculate what a civilization and technology would be like if it were based on prehensile tongues instead of opposable thumbs. A walk in the woodlot can generate strange musings indeed.

Remarkably, however, one tends to see more “wildlife” in the city than in the woodlot. It’s there, but it tends to stay hidden. Birds flock to our feeders in the city and squirrels are common. I’ve even seen more raccoons and foxes in the city than the woods.

SLIDE: Track in snow

A lot of the evidence is after the fact. This raccoon track was in late winter. I’ve seen lots of deer tracks, moose tracks, tracks that might have been bear.

On occasion, we will come round a bend and startle a deer. Peerless will return on command, so there isn’t a problem with chasing. The most concern I had was one day when I saw a porcupine some distance off, but it had vanished before we got close. Another time, I think we saw a coyote. It was a largish, german shepard like animal that disappeared into the side of the road before we got close.

SLIDE: Caterpillars

Most commonly, we see the little creatures. Mosquitos, black fly, deer fly and sometimes something interesting.

SLIDE: Woodpecker

We hear birds more often than we see them. This wood pecker was unusual in that

I happened to have the camera and he stayed still long enough to be photographed.

SLIDE: Rabbit in trail

Rabbits, more correctly, I suppose, hare are common. This picture I got while bicycling. I stopped at some distance and got the camera out then took pictures and advanced until the hare took off and I kept this last picture. One of the advantages of a digital camera.

Hare are common. They don't seem particularly bright. One time, I kept Peerless at heel by command and figured the hare could easily see us and would bound off before we could get close. We were within ten feet before Peerless could stand it no longer and broke heel. With only ten feet of head start, the hare almost did not make it. Since then, I let Peerless run and she makes enough noise that small animals have lots of warning.

SLIDE: Pond with duck dabbling

The woodlot is natural habitat for these animals, so one sees them behaving naturally. Here is a duck dabbling.

SLIDE: Close up

Then I clipped out the detail so we could see better.

SLIDE: Fish boiling around apple

This time, I was bicycling and stopped on a small jetty in the ducks unlimited pond to eat an apple I had with me. I saw the fish in the water and decided to see what they would do with a thin slice of apple. Not quite the boiling water of a feeding frenzy, but interesting enough, none the less.

SLIDE: Close up of fish

Again, a detail which allows us to see a couple of the fish. I think they're just one of the large collection of small fish that we tend to call minnows, perhaps dace.

SLIDE: Moon framed by trees

Pure miscellaney, this picture. I liked the way the trees framed the half moon in

the early morning light.

SLIDE: Inukshuk

People who regularly drive the New Maryland highway have probably noticed these. An older woman builds them. Peerless and I greeted her one morning while she was working at the base of the embankment where the exit from the Trans Canada meets the New Maryland highway. She seemed harmless enough.

SLIDE: Brush and fur

Home again. Bathed if necessary, breakfasted, brushed out and teeth cleaned.

SLIDE: Cartoon - lint rollers

Golden retrievers, of course, have a reputation for their fine fur which constantly sheds and clings fiercely.

SLIDE: Home again, Peerless

we share a bit of rest.

SLIDE: Cartoon - Big picture

And Golden retrievers have a deserved reputation for all the qualities that we admire, respect and desire.

SLIDE: Cartoon - Eek and Meek

This cartoon is more of the same by a different author at an earlier time.

SLIDE: Peerless jumping

We'll end the slide show and take a brief look at a short mpeg clip, then we're done.