Recollections of a Big Thicket Woodsman

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After reading *The Big Thicket* by Gunter, I wanted to sit down and absolutely cry because I felt like I had lost something that I could not recapture in my own lifetime, let alone later on for future generations. The most enjoyable thing in my life is to stroll the woods with my wife, daughters, and sons-in-law, and 7 grandchildren and find strange flowers, bushes, and trees that are rare to me, let alone to them. After the question is asked, "What is that Daddy or Pa-Pa?", sometime I have to go home and look up these shrubs myself, to know what they are. After living in and around the Big Thicket all my life, I am still filled with wonder at the beauty of it, but I am saddened by the destruction of it that is taking place hourly.

The first thing that should be said, after reading this book, is this: every one of the 200 million American stockholders, as Walter J. Hickel expressed it, should be up in arms. They should be ready to insure that our resources are not abused.

Mr. Hickel further states in his forward that we must never forget to consider what the value of land is, where a man, his children, and his children's children have the right to roam or the right to simply have a place in nature where they can refresh their spirits.

Roy Howric's superb photography gives us what little remains of the solitude and beauty of the plant life, along with the wild animals, that are left. These are things that we cannot buy on the New York Stock Exchange.

With these few remarks, I want to leave what they had to say and impart my own feelings and what I have had stored in the memories of my by gone days as a youth and as a man above his fiftieth year.

I was born in Fuqua, Texas. At this time, the saw mill there was one of the largest in the South. I can remember one day my mother took us about a mile or so from our little farm near the Santa Fe Railroad. We got lost gathering hickory nuts and I can remember how beautiful those virgin woods were, even though my mother, with two small children of 4 and 6 years old, was lost in a beautiful white oak, red oak, hickory, and pine forest. Although it seemed like there was no end of these beautiful trees, I had no fear of being lost because it was a place I wanted to stay in and not leave. We later found our way out of this beautiful forest. This was in the vicinity of Roymayor. I well remember that we could find horns that had shed off of the deer in the forest, and they were plentiful.

Another time our family of 5 children went along with my mother to gather grapes which grew in great quantities around Milvid and Roymayor in my early childhood. We cut down trees that had abundant clusters of grapes, which we gathered to make jelly and wine which were very delicious.
Another place that brought back many happy memories of my childhood was where we use to go to a lake right out in the middle of the forest, called Hardwood Lake, out from Milvid, 2 miles from the Trinity River, where we had a large wooden boat that would hold 5 or 6 people comfortably. We always carried a dog with us, and we would catch plenty of goggle-eye perch, sun perch and catfish with pole and line. But the dog had to be kept quite on account of large alligators would come toward us if he started to bark, and they would scare the women folk.

I remember one time when we were assisted by a number of our neighbors going to the woods and cutting several small, low trees to gather moss to make a moss mattress. We gathered the moss and then buried it in the ground so that it would die or scalp it with hot water, and then we put it out in the sun to dry.

After making the mattress and sleeping on it about a year or two, we would remove it from the ticking and pull it apart to remove the knotty lumps that was caused by sleeping on it. If you have never slept on a moss mattress that has been sunned and picked you have missed one of the most exhilarating experiences of your life. The aroma and smell alone is an experience that you can never forget.

Another experience that I remember happened when I was 10 and 11 years old and occurred after my mother remarried and we had moved from Silsbee, Texas back to Milvid, Texas. We lived in a Company house and the mill was owned by Wesley West Lumber Company. Often as a boy, I would turn our old blue tick hound dog loose late in the afternoon and he would jump the back rail fence which was about a block behind the house and run down to a small branch that ran through the wood, often treeing a coon within minutes after turning him out.

I would follow this old dog and try to help him get the coon out of the tree but I was too small to do so. After Old Blue and I got tired the old dog would lead me back home.

Many a Sunday afternoon after going to Sunday School I would rove the beautiful woods which had some of the largest Magnolia trees I have ever seen anywhere; the trees would measure 4' and 5' in diameter and would have branches 12" - 15" in diameter. We would climb these large trees to gather their blossoms, and you could walk through the woods and never be out of the range of the swell of them, and often times we would watch other people cut large, green trees down just to gather honey from where the bees made their hives.

I am relating just a few of these experiences to show the public what a small boy who was raised in a saw mill town in the Big Thicket enjoyed and got a fortune in enjoyment and experience by being raised in a place that only God could give to man. But how long will this destruction of that place go on before mankind will be deprived completely of these invaluable experiences.

As a man, I often hunted deer and squirrels near Sartoga, Honey Island, and the Sour Lake area toward Nome. I remember one time I was in the Nome-Sour Lake area when the frost came early and all of the leaves were still on the trees, and at one time they turned a golden brown-yellow, and some were pink, and the pin oaks were scattered with their green foliage. This picture will forever be captured in my mind.

Also I was hunting up above Thicket, Texas, near Sartoga and was camped on the swift running creek called Manard Creek. I don't think there is any prettier creek in Texas.

Also where else can you find a wild pecan orchard like the one that grows wild on the banks of the Trinity River.

You can walk in the woods of the Big Thicket a life time and you will discover different plant life, different things that you hadn't seen before. It's there, if only you
can discover the hidden mysteries and species of plants, trees, and animals. It's there if humanity will only save it for future generations.

I will say this and say it in all sincerity: how can a public relations man paint a picture of a growing forest as shown in Gunter’s book, or an executive in a 20 story office building filled with cigar smoke and with plush furniture ever hope to clear the cobwebs out of their brains to ever appreciate what we have until the well runs dry. The pillage and rape was done early by the small jerk water saw mills, and tie mills, then by the hand-hewn ties and then by the white oak stave cutters to make wooden barrels, to be hauled to stave mills to make barrels to store whiskey, beer, wine, and pickles, also lard barrels. I saw at Milvid on the Santa Fe Railroad siding and other places thousand on thousands of white oak staves waiting to be shipped to the mills.

And the Major oil companies had their part in destroying this beautiful country by pumping salt water into the sloughs and creeks, destroying the ferns, shrubs and vegetation.

The Big Thicket Association for years, as Gunter says, compromised with the companies, and listened to their claims about re-growing the thicket and being stewards of the land. Now the facts are clear as bulldozed clay and burning hardwood: if we don’t begin to change, there will be nothing left, no game, no birds, no wildflowers, no forests, no trace of a once Great Wilderness.

I firmly believe we must establish a Big Thicket area or park, as large as possible, to keep the developers away.

The story of the large companies and paper mills that run big ads in the newspapers about trying to save the large green forest with game inside these rows of pine saplings is ridiculous.

It reminds me of the story that Gordon Baxter related over the radio:

Surely that substance that came from the polluted Neches River and turned it Black, and put that smell in the air didn’t come from a paper mill. But that old tom cat like to have worked himself to death scratching a hole in the ground to cover it up.

I would like to remind the people that there is still a chance to save the wild life in the Big Thicket. No later than a year ago I was going to my camp in the woods near the Sabine River, which was dense hardwood forest. It was late in the afternoon in March, just before dark, when mayhaws were ripe. My wife and niece were supposed to have been at my camp after gathering these mayhaws, but I couldn’t find them. So, I went hunting for them. I walked down the slough that ran close to the river and inside my land. When I got to a fence, I knew my wife would not have gone any farther, so I started to a small camp house we had near a back woods lake, to see if my wife had decided to stay there. I heard a movement among the under brush too far from me to distinguish what it was. When I stopped to listen for the noise, it ceased. I went on to the little camp house and found my wife. It was dark by this time and as I sat down to drink a cup of coffee a panther let out 2 blood-curdling yells which made the hair stand up on the back of my neck even though I wasn’t afraid, because I knew what it was. The two women looked at me half astonished like and asked, “What was that?”

Naturally, I didn’t want to alarm them because I might never get them back to this camp house again. So I said, “That was just an old screech owl,” and said no more. About 3 months later I told my wife the truth. But right then, I was afraid that she might become frightened and never again enjoy walking in the forest by herself.

I have heard stories from other people that they had been stalked by panthers. They are a curious sort of an animal, although I have never heard of anyone being hurt.
by them. I know in my early childhood days I could hear these wild panthers yell out while they were hunting food in the forest. Some people compare their sound to a woman's voice hollering, but their first note sounds similar to a screech owl when they begin.

Back in my boyhood days, I can remember when I would go camping out along the rivers and creeks of the Big Thicket. We could catch bull frogs at night among the back woods lakes, catch lizards to use as a lure on the end of a long cane pole with about 12” of line and 3 hooks forming a bridle. We would carry the lizards in a Prince Albert Tobacco can with nail holes punched in the can so the lizards could breathe. We only used about 3 of these to catch all of the bass we needed to eat. After putting the lizard on the bridle we would creep up close to a deep hole along the creek banks and drop the lizard on top of the water so he could wiggle or swim, and sure enough, the water would boil no sooner than the lizard hit the water. Afterwards, we would set limb-lines or trot-lines across the river or creek, and bait them with crawfish or perch. We often came home with plenty of bass, frogs, and catfish. Oh, I forgot to tell you, we often shined the eyes of an alligator when hunting frogs with a acetylene head light at night. The alligators would just sit and stare at you while you caught Mr. Frog, or just move off in the opposite direction from where you shined their eyes with the light.

These are some of the experiences that I hope to preserve for your grandson and mine, so that when they get older they can listen in the woods and not hear anything that sounds like it is man-made, so he can hear at a far off distance the hoot of an owl, the bang of a wood pecker, or the beautiful song of a thrush, the call of a wood duck and late in the afternoon when the old bullfrogs hit a high base note, the screech of a lonely crow that has been disturbed by a wild cat trying to catch a bird near the water, or a crow making a feed call or sounding an alarm when danger is approaching. These are the sounds that we need so that man can soothe his thoughts and forget his trials and tribulations and relax among the God-given birth right of nature in all of its glory.

I think that all a person needs to do is make a tour of several countries in Europe as I did once and you will notice people go to parks and other small areas to stroll on week ends, to try to get away from the hustle and bustle of crowds and city life. But I never saw very many places in the seven countries that I visited where you could really get away from it all, you are never out of the sight of people or cars or houses. All they have left is a story book tale of a Sherwood forest, or Black Forest, or Picidilly Park. I don’t care for this.

In the name of common sense let’s not fence ourselves in.