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A free-agent classroom

The Enchanted Canyon

By Phyllis Kippenberger

My "Enchanted Canyon" lies approximately 2½ miles east of Thomas, Oklahoma. Dozens of young people enjoyed the peace and tranquillity of exploring it with my brothers, sisters, countless cousins, and me. I delight in sharing the memory with others.

Skimming past the wild plum thicket where thorns snatch at your clothes like pointed witches' fingers reaching to ensnare you, the air rang with "what if," "let's pretend," and "play like." The transformation was almost complete as we sat on the high shelf overlooking the creek to remove our shoes and stockings or socks.

The canyon was a special secret place to spend a hot summer afternoon lost in another world. Water sprayed our bare legs as we ran, giggling and shouting, across the top of the two-foot waterfall. A piercing shriek dangled on the air as a foot splashed into the cool water to land on smooth, hard pebbles momentarily before sinking into the soft bed of the creek. Mud squished between toes to plomp back into the stream as the foot lifted, the disturbed silt rushing up, swirling like a hoop out of control leaving a brown inky stain to mark our passage.

On the opposite bank we climbed the deep path that spliced through the hills, created over the years by farm cattle on their way to and from the barn lot and pasture. Fine dirt trailed off our heels, powdering down onto the packed earth behind us. Before us loomed "Pikes Peak" in all its glory—a smooth red sandstone hill topped by a large cedar tree. Countless afternoons had been spent chiseling steps and handholds into the surface of our mountain.

Straining and slipping, sweat beaded across our foreheads to trail along the hair line as we made the last lunge and grabbed a low-hanging branch of the old cedar tree to pull ourselves up to the summit. The thrill of swooshing down the steep, unobstructed bank side of the hill in a swirl of chalky, red dust was reward in itself. Wild flowers and weeds scented the air, a tangy, sweet fragrance intensified by summer's heat, as their stems were crushed beneath the thud of running, bare feet anxious to make the next ascent.



Photograph by O J Bailey

Much later, a slight breeze cooled our backs through thin cotton shirts as we stretched out on our stomachs across the damp sand to bury our faces in the cold creek water and drink deeply. Turning gingerly on tired, quivering muscles, we lay on our backs to rest before climbing out of the canyon. High above, through swaying tree branches, we caught sight of silently rolling white clouds in that time space we had so recently vacated. We watched as an unseen giant's hand ladled thick, whipped cream across the sky, forming figures for our entertainment. The aroma of cedar trees invited us to linger and quietly recall other summers and to dream of summers and adventures to come as we reflected on our enchanted canyon classroom.