I have read and approved Susan Dillon's ID 499 honors thesis, "Two Weeks with Thoreau."

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TWO WEEKS WITH THOREAU:
An Experiment In Simple Living

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INTRODUCTION

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." 1

So, too, did I go to the woods, pursuing the thoughts and ideas of Henry David Thoreau to see if he could lead me to the simple life, where all is not "frittered away by detail"(p.66). For two weeks I lived alone on a steep, wooded hill overlooking Otter Lake in northern Indiana. My dwelling was a two-room cottage which, in a small way, I helped to build. My neighbors were the beech and the hickory, chipmunks, deer, jays, and, of course, the lake. Although I took a certain quantity of food with me, I learned to like a frugal meal of fried rice washed down by cold spring water. My days were spent in long rambles through those woods and hot fields from which I was not barred by barbed wire and NO TRESPASSING signs, although I must admit that even these did not always keep me out. I did not wander with the intent of doing damage, unless my gain of knowledge could prove to be some farmer's loss. My days, then, were filled with the study of nature, from which I hoped to glean prosperity of spirit. My evenings, too, were spent in study, for I read Walden and sucked up the thoughts therein, discovering, bit by bit, that Thoreau could indeed take me by the hand and point out a path leading to a much simpler existence. He could not take me to the end himself, for I could simplify my life only to a degree satisfactory unto myself. This is what I learned to do, and it is the brief account of this learning which follows.

1 Henry David Thoreau, Walden (New York: The New American Library, 1960), p.66. All further references to this work are taken from this edition, and will be indicated by page numbers only.
PREPARATIONS

Thoreau went to the woods in 1845 to confront nature and "to live deliberately," and I followed him there one warm afternoon in July, 1970. He had said that "...to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely..." (p.53), and it was this that I was seeking to discover for myself. What happens when the exterior coverings of life are stripped away, and only essential items are permitted to remain? What, if anything, can be learned from living simply? How might such a life create changes in people-- in me? The answers to such questions could only be found, it seemed, by actually experiencing pieces of Thoreau's two years at Walden Pond.

My preparations for such an experiment were quite simple and few, consisting primarily of mental packing and the gathering together of those items which I considered essential to my existence in the woods. Since my purpose in going was to live simply, I felt that I should begin by following Thoreau's statement: "Man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone" (p.60). Although Thoreau would possibly have considered me poor by this standard, I felt quite satisfied. On the morning of July 21, I packed my camera, a pair of heavy jeans, two pairs of socks, a wool sweater, a shirt, bathing suit, tennis shoes, and a toothbrush, placing all of these items in a small suitcase. I also took along some brushes, water colors, pen and ink, and drawing paper. With these I set off by car toward my destination-- Otter Lake, located approximately 55 miles north of Fort Wayne and just northeast of Pokagon State Park.

All of these activities concerned only the material aspect of my preparations; my mental arranging took up a much shorter period of
time, but was of greater importance. I decided to emulate a few of
the actions of Thoreau as described in *Walden*, adding to this base
whatever activities or experiences came my way while I remained at
Otter. In essence, I would adopt Thoreau's mode of living only to
the extent that it would serve as a suitable foundation from which
to raise the structure of my own life.

All of these thoughts I had considered very carefully beforehand,
but I pondered over them again as I drove north from Fort Wayne. At
one point in my drive, I stopped the car to place the following
comment in a notebook:

> I certainly enjoy solitude when I am in need of it,
> but I wonder how I will react to two weeks of it. I
> suppose that I am attempting to discover whether or
> not I can seek and find companionship in growing
> things. This will be a period of the most extensive
> close contact with nature, and I am wondering if it
> will draw me closer to the simple things of this
> world, or if I will decide that I cannot find peace
> and contentment without the aid of other people,
> amid comfort and numerous possessions.

I was not without worries and skeptical thoughts concerning this
experiment, but I was also determined to follow through what I had
just begun, and not to give up at the very beginning.

As I continued my drive, I passed Otter Lake and turned toward
Fremont, a small community about three miles northeast of the lake.
Here I purchased my food for the two weeks ahead: some meat and
eggs, rice, milk, and two loaves of bread. When I finished my
shopping, I drove back to the lake, anxious to at least begin my two
weeks with Thoreau.
Frank Lloyd Wright believed that buildings should blend in well with their natural surroundings; I agree wholeheartedly with this, and I feel that my house followed this idea, for it seemed to be a part of the forest itself. It grew on the top of a steep hill bordering the south side of the lake. In keeping with the verdant greens surrounding it, its sides were clad with a light green siding. The roof sloped as steeply as the hill itself, crowned regally by a tree of stone. The most pleasing aspects of my dwelling were the great windows facing out over the lake; they glassed the entire front wall, permitting the trees to come inside, and never setting up a stiff boundary between the woods and my walls.

The interior portion of my house consisted mainly of fireplace and walls, the first being of solid stone and the last constructed of pine. Again, the elements inside seemed to be a small-scale continuation of the natural landscape. I could sit by the fireplace and stir the ashes with a stick, feeling very much a part of the free-roaming Indians whose homes were once beneath the same trees which now sheltered me. This feeling pervaded my hours of rest, too, since the sounds of the night filled the air I breathed, vibrating any chords of a free spirit contained within me.

All around my dwelling was my yard, formed by the various layers of the forest. Standing closest to my house were the giants reaching up to the topmost layers of growth between earth and sky. These were the beech, the red, white, and black oaks, the sugar and red maples, the tulip and bass, and a few white ash. Of these, my favorite was the beech. During the day, I sometimes would fall into silence and complete wonder, gazing at the variations of sunlight and shadows tagging each other on the face of the beech.
the early evening, too, the last rays of light would often catch the smooth, gray trunks and turn them to silver. This tree never seemed cold to me, but always friendly and inviting to the touch of a hand. How light can affect the spirit!

The second layer of the forest was formed by the ironwoods and blue beech. These smaller trees lacked the command and awesome stature of their neighbors, but their lower branches were quite often the only moving limbs I could see in the dense growth above my head. I am afraid that I paid very little attention to these lesser members of the forest, attracted more often by the larger trees. Beneath these trees grew the lowly maple-leaf viburnum, and, even lower down, all of the lesser plants forming the ground cover in the woods. Nearest to my house grew the somewhat sinister-looking Indian pipe, beechdrop, and white baneberry; in the early spring, the soft hues of the May apple, trillium, and hepatica dot the center portions of the hillside, sprinkling themselves about at random; numerous varieties of toadstools and the soft greens of the mosses completed the ranks of the more numerous members of the forest floor. As the hill leveled off toward the lake, the gray soil played host to a different set of plants. Here were the various types of grasses and long-stemmed reeds, the cattails, and even a few of the brilliantly colored marsh flowers. My yard ended beside the lake, as did the leafy path which tumbled down the hill into the lake.

If all the homes of man were like this one, surely more men would remain at home. My house may have been more than I really needed to keep myself and my possessions sheltered, but I was thankful for it at times. I built a small lean-to of branches and sticks near the borders of a field, but this served as a house to me for only
one night, as it kept off neither the rain nor the insects, making any serious contemplation impossible. I even padded the sloping roof of this shelter with moss and grasses, but still the rain came through. "If one designs to construct a dwelling-house...consider first how slight a shelter is absolutely necessary" (p. 24). I did consider, and I found my house on the hill to better serve my needs. In my own way, I felt that I had helped to construct and fashion this house, although my father, mother, and brothers were the master workmen. Carrying nails, shoveling sand, lifting stones-- even minor tasks can give birth to a feeling of satisfaction in work and the creation of a plan. Thoreau believed that "there is some of the same fitness in a man's building his own house that there is in a bird's building its own nest" (p. 36); I felt as much a part of my house as it was a part of me.
NEIGHBORS, BRUTE AND HUMAN

My nearest human neighbor was within hailing distance from my back door. She worked in a hardware store in Fremont during the day, returning to the lake only in the early hours of the evening, so we seldom saw each other or spent any time in conversation. Her house was farther down the hill than mine, and was perched on much flatter ground. I greatly admired her house, and often would stand by it, peering boldly into her front room to observe any recent changes within. She knew about my peering, but did not mind since I hid none of my actions or activities from her. Besides this one woman, I had another neighbor who lived just to the east of the crest of my hill. He was extremely friendly, liking nothing better than a long discussion about nothing in particular. This man very seldom came to stay in his little house; I saw him only once during my two weeks, so he did not interfere in my wanderings.

By far the most interesting of my human neighbors were the few old fishermen who lived on the north shore of the lake. I knew none of them by name, and cared not in the least to further our acquaintance. One of them had a lovely sign by his house inquiring of all passers-by whether or not they had received the Holy Spirit. I thought that this was a very good question, although I could see no outward signs that the man himself had had such an enlightening experience. I often spent pleasant moments observing the actions of these men on land, watching them scurry about at some self-appointed task or other. It was especially entertaining to see them burning dead sticks or branches that had fallen into their yards during a storm. After energetically gathering every stray twig into one large pile, they would pour kerosine over it all, then stand
back and throw matches at it until the expected explosion of hot flames occurred. It was at this point that their real sweating began, as every stray spark had to be squelched out, and the fire itself carefully watched to see that it did no damage. Watching from the shade of the woods on my side of the lake, I sometimes felt rather like a concerned deity pondering the sanity of the poor wretch who forced himself to carry an unnecessary burden through life as a self-appointed stick burner. At other times, however, I simply leaned back against the cool bark of a beech and gloried in my own moments of leisure. I spoke one morning with one of the men whom I had seen so employed by the burning ritual on the previous afternoon, and I questioned him as to why he had spent that time in such a manner instead of enjoying a quiet hour of fishing. I consider his answer to be quite profound, blending the spirit of man with a few of his instincts: he burned sticks, he told me, because they needed burning. I felt very wealthy to possess a yard in which sticks and fallen branches belonged, so that I, too, need not become a burner. Thoreau commented in Walden that "I am want to think that men are not so much the keepers of herds as herds are the keepers of men..."(p.43). If he had met my neighbors, he might have added that grass and fallen sticks may narrow a man's time, and possibly his mind.

Although my human neighbors were entertaining, the animals who lived about me and shared my hillside were much more sociable and worthwhile to observe. I often shared my dinner with a chipmunk who had invited himself to my table, or with impatient birds who asked only that I finish quickly and leave enough behind for them. My most unsociable neighbor was an old woodchuck who lived in my
drainage pipe. He would go about his business all day long, returning to his home only as the darker shadows of evening rested about his front door. He did not much like me, and would wait until late in the evening to enter his house if I happened to be anywhere nearby. As a peace offering, I once left a crust of bread by his door, then hid behind the windows of my house to observe the manner in which he accepted my gift. Poor neighbor that he was, he received my offering with an indifferent sniff, adding the insult of a slight shower of dirt from one hind foot. All degrees of social behavior are evident in brute as well as human neighbors! Most of the other animals accepted me to the degree which I left them alone.

I often observed travelers crossing my section of the woods. Most of the deer came by for a drink from the creek flowing by the western edge of my hill, but they always hurried back to the pleasures of the field grasses. An occasional red fox trotted by my house, but I saw no more of them than a flash of a tail and sandy indentations in the soil. Gray rabbits, skunks, raccoons, weasels, muskrats, field mice, and stray dogs also came and went, never stopping for very long. Only the red squirrels with their saucy chattering, the birds, the chipmunks, and my friend the woodchuck remained with me for the full two weeks of my visit.

At night, those wild neighbors I never saw during the day would come by to gaze at me through my front windows. I was quite often startled by looking up from the pages of a book into a pair of glowing yellow eyes. If I chose to sleep outside, crackling twigs or cautious breathing warned me that I was still being watched by wary observers. These evening visitors caused me deep concern for a few nights. I would say, though, that he is either a very wise or a very foolish man who has no fear at all of these night eyes.
Although I never completely lost my own fear of them, I did come to realize that my fear was based on a lack of knowledge, as is all fear; whenever I came to know these animals better, I could but find interest in their actions, and an understanding of life in their eyes.
MY WORK

Unlike Thoreau, I did not come to know beans during my short stay at Otter Lake. My garden was my mind, and I hoed it by wandering the shores of the lake, and by watching the life of the fields and woods go by me. After planting a few seeds of knowledge, I attempted to carefully raise a good crop of natural sense and ripe pods of wonder. I only had two weeks in which to work the fertile soil, but now I have the years ahead to spend in further cultivation.

When I was not poking my head beneath bushes or roaming free about the fields, I sat near my house and worked with my hands. I took to heart Thoreau's comment that if you "follow your genius closely enough, it will not fail to show you a fresh prospect every hour" (p. 80). My inclinations were slanted toward capturing the pace of life around me on paper, although I knew that whatever I kept for myself would be a mere copy of that which could never really be kept within bounds; the essence of life itself, pulsating through the veins and cells of everything about me, was something I could only feel, at most retaining a strong memory.

My first project was from the fields beyond my hill, where I often observed the butterfly fluttering faintly about the open mouths of weeds and wild flowers. After making a short excursion to the nearest meadow to gather long-stemmed grasses and some of the butterfly weed, I sat down beside my front door and began working. I sanded down an old, wooden picture frame, delighting in the soft smoothness of the grain beneath my hand. It was good to sit in the sun, working at my own pace. My reward for my labor was a little pile of sandings in my lap. I left my frame for a while, walking down to the lake to observe what the fish were doing. I watched a
hawk fall down below the highest trees, then returned happily to my work. I stained the frame with a wood preservative, then left it in the shade of my roof to dry. After covering the cardboard backing of the frame with black felt, I began the actual composition of what I sought to capture. A few mosses formed the base of my picture; next came the slender grasses and ferns, among which I placed one very long weed, fastening it securely in an S-curve which ran from one end of the felt to the other. I placed the bright orange butterfly weed near the grasses, then added five brilliantly-colored butterflies which I had brought with me from Fort Wayne, arranging them, too, in the slight S-curve. When I finished all of these steps, I fastened glass over the cardboard, placing the entire picture within my frame. I admired what I had created, satisfied that I had followed my genius to something worthwhile. I left my work for my neighbors to see, having decided to give my attention to the cool delights of a refreshing swim in the lake.

During the course of several hot afternoons, I sat beneath the leafy shade at the edge of the woods, sketching a scene in the field before me. An old, weathered tree had caught my attention on previous trips across this particular field, so I returned to spend more time with it. This tree was nearly dead, retaining only a few new leaves of growth on one of its limbs. The sight of its dark branches raised against the sky was beautiful, and it was this pattern of near death in life I desired to have as my own. After finishing a light sketch in pencil, I returned the following afternoon and completed my picture in ink. Two more brief sessions added the water-color hues of the hill and sky. Again I was pleased with my work, not because it was a true artist's masterpiece, but because it was something I had created. Satisfaction comes from both the
idea and the expression of this idea in work.

Since much of my time was spent in an attempt to learn the names of the trees and flowers with which I was living, I spent many hours making out of plastic the shapes which I had identified. These plastic flowers were simple to make, the plastic liquid flowing over the lines of molded wire frames. Seeing the sun play with these colored petals on my windowsill was truly delightful. I also made tiny ink drawings of some of these wild flowers, but my attempts to emulate the studied brush strokes of the Orientals failed completely. This did not concern me greatly, however, for I had accomplished my true goal already, which was to learn about flowers by observing them closely. I was always very much amazed to gaze through a magnifying glass at the inner delicacies of the flowers that so many people trample over quite carelessly. Whenever I felt a bit lonely, this occupation never failed to make me forgetful of my own feelings. Who can be alone when in the midst of nature?

Whenever I was not busy working with my hands, I passed the time pleasantly enough by the self-appointed task I have already mentioned -- learning the common names of the woodland flora. I always carried a small notebook with me, as well as some sort of a tree or flower guide. I once gazed at everything within one square foot of forest floor, writing down the names of those plants I was able to identify. I used two glasses of different magnifications as my eyes: one enlarged my specimens fifteen times their actual size, and the other eight times. People who say that a distant landscape is quite dreary never bent their knees in the dirt to observe the varied patterns of life at their feet. Although many of the names of flowers with which I became acquainted I have since forgotten, what I learned of growing things I shall never forget.
READING

I could not live always on the same diet, so I often took a book with me out on the lake or when I went walking. "In those days, when my hands were much employed, I read but little, but the least scraps of paper...afforded me as much entertainment..." (p. 35). Much of what I read was not greatly more than "scraps of paper," having few pages and even fewer thoughts. I sometimes carried a magazine or digest in my pocket, but a diet of pure entertainment can soon become wearisome; I found very little indeed in these readings that satisfied the cravings of my appetite. Occasionally I would come across a page of some newspaper clinging to the roots of a tree, and I found some pleasure in reading of things past.

Like Thoreau, "my residence was more favorable, not only to thought, but to serious reading..." (p. 71). On cooler evenings, I would sit before my fireplace with my copy of Walden, contemplating the thoughts of the man whose ideas I was attempting to digest. Often I would select one passage and spend many moments gazing into the flames in thought, the fire in my mind burning as brightly as that in my fireplace. Most of my reading was from Walden, as I tested and tasted Thoreau's ideas by morsels. I disagreed with some of his thoughts, but I found it all the more interesting to have him come and argue with me, and to share the pleasures of my fire. I never found him completely disagreeable, although his tone of voice sometimes angered me by its seeming self-assurance.

The only other reading I did of any consequence was my dipping into Fielding's Tom Jones. I found this delightful, but not as conducive to higher thoughts as Walden. I did consider this novel to be good reading, though, so it was not at all expensive in terms
of time lost, for what was gained was of greater value. I sometimes felt that I was losing what I did not read, but Nature is the best of teachers, so I sat more often in her company than in that of the writers who were her students.
Daily drudgery does not usually bring much happiness; it causes the mind to ferment like a keg of beer, the only difference lying in the fact that the beer is bettered in the process. I found that I was quick to become bored with any set routines or schedules, so I constantly changed whatever I had to do so that no set patterns would fasten themselves to me. Cooking was a creative outlet for me, especially when done on a hot rock either in the fireplace or just outside my door. What I ate was simple fare, prepared in a simple manner. "A man may use as simple a diet as the animals, and yet retain health and strength" (p. 46).

One warm evening I ground some corn with a pounding rock, making a slightly watery mash. To this I added a bit of cereal bran for consistency. I had already heated a flat rock on the stones outside my door, so I placed a small cake of my yellowish mash on the widest portion of this rock, then sat down nearby to watch my dinner bake. I used a stick and my fingers to turn the cake, not minding a bit of bark as seasoning. When I thought that my cake was quite sufficiently baked, I placed it on a large sassafras leaf, then proceeded to dine under a canopy of beech leaves. I also wished to try the acorn cakes made by the California Indians many years ago, but I found the only available acorns to be rotten and wormy.

Although most of the edible plants were past their peak, I did manage to find a few to supplement my diet. I brought some slightly aged dandelion greens home for my dinner only once. I greatly enjoyed the work of mashing and boiling these leaves, but after straining the juice through a cloth, I found the resulting tea to be less than satisfying. After this experience, I was somewhat
less enthusiastic about trying the same procedure with sweet clover. To my surprise, this liquid made a very mild tea which was not at all displeasing. Dandelion salad was much better than dandelion tea, although I never used it as a permanent substitute for better salads.

I became extremely interested in the edible plants of the area, even though most of them were no longer fit to eat, having long since passed their peak. The May apple, which grew in my front yard, has a fruit that is quite sweet when ripe; its roots are not edible, however, being rather poisonous. Many of the plants I studied had portions that were quite edible when ripe. If but gathered and dried during their peaks, these plants would provide adequate sustenance for some time. The leaves of the marsh marigold, for instance, can be cooked and eaten like spinach; chickory roots, when dried and ground-up, may be used as a coffee substitute; the various parts of the dandelion could provide salad, tea, or wine. Besides being used for food purposes, many of the plants have other uses as well. The juice from the butter-and-eggs flower have been used as a fly poison; the roots of the butterfly weed were used by Indians for dye and medicine; the juice of the pokeweed berry has been used for an ink, as well as for painting and dying. I found a much more complete list of edible plants in a publication of Acres, Incorporated, a conservation society located in Fort Wayne. For this listing, see Appendix 1.

I ate only one meal a day, usually in the evening. Whatever I ate-- whether woodland plants, corn cakes, or fried rice-- my meals were indeed simple. I washed down what I ate with a cup of cold spring water, or with some leafy tea. After I once became accustomed to such infrequent eating, I discovered that I felt better and often
thought better; full stomachs lull the higher faculties. I also enjoyed my time for meal preparation, since I was cooking different items in unusual ways. People who hate to cook must either lack imagination or are too timid to serve foods such as I ate. Or, perhaps the answer lies in a lack of suitable cooking rocks.
"Explore thyself" (p. 214); "let every one mind his own business, and endeavor to be what he was made" (p. 216). This is extremely good advice, as I soon discovered. Man surely cannot know what he is until he has been alone with himself. True feelings and ideas can too often be obscured by the heavy clouds of public opinion.

Solitude was at first a soul-stirring problem for me. My first few days by the lake were tinged by moments of depression, and also by the strong desire to find human companionship. I felt as Thoreau must have felt at the moment he experienced the following loneliness:

"I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when, for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life" (p. 92).

I have often deliberately avoided the company of men, preferring the company of my own thoughts. Here, however, I felt that the situation was such that I would wish to reverse that order, seeking out others rather than avoiding them. This feeling passed after I came to realize that solitude is not measured by the distance between people, but by a measuring of inner thoughts, and the feeling of satisfaction which can result from an awareness of such private ideas. Physical separation from the bustle of people has its own rewards, although these are most difficult to appreciate when loneliness seems to be the only available companion.

During the first few days of my stay, and especially during the long, blind nights, I sometimes felt totally abandoned, dropping to what I felt quite sure were the very blackest depths of despair. I was seemingly engulfed by waves of emptiness, and my thoughts were bitter.
My body sinks beneath steel waves of grief,
Depressed by untold thoughts of light and dark--
Or death-- or life of naught save dimly brief
Perceptions of security. All stark
And stinking lies the brackish sea of thought
Within the wasteland of this body's soul;
No ripples scar the shores where breakers wrought
With fury such wondrous devastation bold.

In thirsty desperation stand I now.
Some sandy indentations mark my path
Of slow progression. Only stagnant vows
Remain to tempt again the storms of wrath.
If only stars would dare this deadly night--
Perhaps some light might ease this endless flight.

My lowest feelings passed as I became more aware of the life all
around me, and my attitude toward solitude began to change, too.

I began, by slow degrees, to feel that

Understanding
Comes with time.

By decree,
Nature's wonders unravel
In life's tranquility.

Like Thoreau, I became aware that "every little pine needle
expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me" (p. 92). By
studying nature I studied myself, for I was a part of all that grew
around me. I soon delighted in the companionship of growing things,
since my deeper meditations were still free to expand in all direc-
tions. I could feel totally free—rather like the wind, I thought;
all the wide expanses of lake and field and wood were mine to view
at my leisure. This in itself was mind-expanding!

My solitude became a treasured gift. I could visit my neighbors
or talk with travelers, but I was still free to return to my house
in the woods, where my thoughts could be my own. The Hindu prophets
once had a saying that "the greatest revelation is stillness." The
interruptions of life do not leave much time for private ideas to
develop. I was blessed with the time to listen to myself and learn
from what I heard. To be alone with your thoughts—this must surely be the meaning of solitude!

"I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude" (p. 95).
Solitude and a lack of complications serve to call the senses from their long slumber beneath the blankets of confused thinking. Discovering an awareness of the rhythms of life was a beautiful experience for me. It created what Rachel Carson called "a sense of wonder"--the wonder of life and growing things. Noticing a raindrop on a fern, becoming aware of the sound of a creek slipping over rocks--these things are life.

During my first afternoon at the lake, I wrote the following passage in my notebook:

I sat on an overturned boat down by the lake for quite some time this afternoon. The sun was wonderfully warm on my back, although there was a cold breeze coming in from the northwest. The lake was covered by unending ripple lines moving before the wind. Just watching them made me feel cold, so I left the boat to search for fish along the bank.

I was noticing a few of the things happening around me, but I really was not yet fully awake. I believe that to see life, an eagerness to discover and investigate it must come first. I made many trips through the fields and out over the lake before this feeling captured me. Then I began going to see specific things, such as a duck's nest in the marsh, and I was always surprised and pleased when I noticed other sights in the process.

I believe that the first sense to awaken in the woods is that of hearing. No one can lie near an open window at night without taking some notice of the multitude of sounds pulsating through the blackness. At first the nights seemed quite still to me, but then nature opened my ears, sending a violent thunderstorm to acquaint me with sound at its most furious tempo. I was a bit uneasy about being alone with the darkness. Thoreau certainly knew what he was talking about when he wrote that "it is darker in the woods, even in common
nights, than most suppose" (p. 117); I felt nearly suffocated by the layers of darkness engulfing me. The storm came very rapidly; I was forewarned only by the sudden rise of the wind. I could not see the trees, but I knew by the sound that they were being bent by no gentle breeze. Branches began battering my roof at a great rate. The first flash of lightning was like an unwelcome revelation; I was literally terrified. Like the ostrich, I hid my head. I could not shut out the sounds, however, for I could still very distinctly hear the lightning ripping the sky apart. Heavier branches struck my roof, and I began to be conscious of the sound of waves cuffing the shores of the lake. By now the trees were really thrashing each other at a great pace, and the thunder managed to serve as a rumbling backdrop for splitting limbs. This storm passed as quickly as it had come, leaving me with a terrible stillness. Soon my straining ears caught the first low notes of the bullfrogs, after which the rhythms of the crickets and other insects chimed in.

The one sound I was most constantly aware of was the humming of the insects on my screen, both during the day and at night. The mosquito especially affected my state of mind, dispelling quiet thoughts entirely. "I was as much affected by the faint hum of a mosquito making its... tour through my apartment at earliest dawn... as I could be by any trumpet that ever sang of fame" (p. 64), said Thoreau. Perhaps I am not the philosopher Thoreau was, but such faint humming indicated to me the front line of an attack. I felt that the savage mashing of this tiny warrior was just retribution for its viciousness.

Besides the sense of hearing, all of the other senses became
more acute when life is simple and undisturbed, and nature is close at hand. A quiet observer can see many things. One of the most awesome sights for me was the lake just before dawn. Many times I watched the thick night mists swirl in fantastic images over the nearly obscured surface of the water. I think that I was always surprised and even a bit sad to see the first warming rays of sunlight dispel the eerie magic of the mists.

Thoreau stated that "there are none happy in the world but beings who enjoy freely a vast horizon" (p. 64). Although this comment is perhaps not completely true, there is truth to the idea that a vast horizon can produce happiness. I found such happiness in all of my wanderings, but especially during the last moments of each day. It was at these quiet times that I enjoyed sitting on the hillside beside my house, gazing out over the still lake to the woods and open fields beyond. Sunk in quiet revery, at such moments it was easy to feel an integral part of everything around me. I could see and hear and smell the life of the natural objects, but I was also a part of a much greater world. "All sound heard at the greatest possible distance produces one and the same effect, a vibration of the universal lyre..." (p. 87). This vibration I am sure I felt; it created the sensation of timelessness, as though all life, past and present, was gathered together for one, brief moment. I was happy to free my mind to the very essence of the vibration-- the continuity of life in nature.
Otter Lake is not at all like Walden Pond, but I felt as though I studied it for two weeks as Thoreau must have studied Walden during the first weeks of his two years there. I came to know a few of its secrets as a stranger comes to know the features in a new landscape--by perseverance and curiosity. I wandered its shores, paddled a canoe through its marshes, swam in its waters, and peered at its creatures. This lake came to be a source of energy to me, both in body and in spirit, and I called it my friend.

Otter Lake covers an area of approximately fifty acres. In cross-section, it is a bowl-shaped lake, the depths ranging from a few feet at its banks to sinks and depressions of nearly thirty feet out in its middle sections. From end to end, it is shaped somewhat like a peanut, having larger bay areas at either extremity, with a slight narrowing effect through the middle. My hill ran down and touched the south shore of one of these narrower parts. The lake is always murky, the only bottom areas being seen nearest to its banks. The floor of its deepest portions is composed of heavy sands and silt, rising and falling in gentle hummocks; as the bottom draws nearer to the surface level, more silt is found, and the slopes of the hummocks become steep, forming sudden depth-changes; closest to the shores, the lake bottom is made up of very large deposits of soil and sand, creating a soft muck. It is in these areas of one- to seven-foot depths that weeds of all description take hold of life and grow.

I actually believe that if left to its own natural life cycle, this lake would grow smaller and smaller as the land encroached on the domain of the water, until only a very small pond remained. The water would never disappear or dry up entirely, since it is
fed by numerous underwater springs and by creeks flowing down from the hills around its edges. There are also two main outlets at either end of the lake, although these could conceivably clog up and eventually become a part of the land. These channels into other lakes were nearly always clogged by islands of weeds and muck. Man, however, has halted for a time this natural spread of the land, having built concrete or wooden walls in places to prevent the soil from spreading out and taking hold of the lake. Men also cut down the growth of weeds each year, thus taking away another source of soil accumulation. When the men are all gone, the lake and the land will resume their battle; until then, man will continue to do as he pleases with the land, treating it as his own.

Thoreau wrote in *Walden* that "a lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature" (p. 128). How true this is! I watched Otter change with every change in the weather, imparting a general feeling of hectic fury and strength or one of quiet calm. Every disturbance of wind or boat created ruffles on the water's surface, yet I knew that the secret depths remained always the same; they were perhaps moved by the endless motion of the lake as a whole, or swept by very slow-moving currents, but no great change ever occurred there. This gave the lake a stable character, and made me realize how much greater the lake was than I who was often affected by outer difficulties. I especially admired the changes in the features of the lake in the early morning, just prior to the sunrise. The waters would be very dark and still, and every movement of my canoe would disturb this stillness. Quite often in the morning, sudden winds would rush across the lake, channeling its surface with small waves that would slap angrily at the sides of my canoe,
leaving me with a restless, disturbed feeling. As the sun finally made its way from behind the hills, the waters usually became still once again, and the pre-dawn hush would pass on to the noises of the morning. I never understood why the winds would come and go like this, but I always felt as if a mighty hand controlled the mood of nature, quieting the winds to give a calm initiation to each day. In contrast to this, I almost always found the lake at sunset to be completely still, unmoved by winds or waves. I preferred the lake at sunrise, since I had it to myself at that hour, whereas I had to share its wonders with the fishermen in the evening. Pictures of the lake appear in Appendix 2.

Between early morning and evening, most of my hours with Otter Lake were spent in its marshes. These bordered the eastern and western sectors, where the channels ran long and twisted fingers out into other lakes. To the east lay Marsh Lake; to the west, Big Otter Lake extended its own channels into Snow Lake, which in turn joined Lake James and Lake Jimmerson. I found the marsh between Otter and Marsh Lake to be the home of endless varieties of insects, as well as of muskrats, snapping turtles, ducks, birds, and, of course, fish. I even started up what looked like a large, brown crane. Its legs, neck, and bill were very long and thin, quite suitable for fishing, I suppose, although I never saw it at this particular task. My canoe passed easily over weedy hummocks and piles of soil, but I did not think that many boats could pass this way. I was surprised on several different occasions, therefore, when I had to move into the reeds to make way for some fishing boat, propelled by a vicious little motor which churned up the bottom and pulverized many of the beautiful water lilies. I was always
secretly pleased when I could observe such a boat stuck on the bottom, the men in it poling madly with their oars to push themselves further along. Sometimes I would spend an entire day in this marsh, carrying only a bottle of water for refreshment. As in the woods, I soon learned that a quiet observer could learn and see a wealth of life-lessons carried on by the smallest creatures. I only wish that the fisherman could see how each inhabitant of this watery land used its environment carefully, treasuring that which gave it life.

When I was not out in my canoe, I often roamed the banks of the lake near the foot of my hill. I liked to sit for hours with the sun warming my back, observing the fish scraping out beds in the sandier parts of the lake bottom. There are many fish in this lake, including bass, bluegill and sunfish. I never cared to catch and eat any of these, preferring to leave them flitting silently about among the weeds. I went swimming in the mornings, and again in the afternoons if the sun was hot, at which times the fish would come and watch my antics. Very few turtles ever came this far from the shelter and security of the marshes, but those that did were extremely large for lake snappers. I saw one gliding near the shore one morning, and his head was nearly the size of my fist. I thought of him afterwards as the protective Cerberus of the lake depths, out surveying his watery home.

Otter Lake was my Bhagvat-Geeta. In it I read of the laws of life and death, of survival and defeat; from it I learned the philosophy of the reed— to bend with the wind. In moments of quiet, it imparted to me the inner peace which it possessed; when its surface was churned by the wind, I felt a part of the wild spirit contained in its waves. To me, Otter Lake was the symbol of the very simple existence I sought.
THE WOODS

When I was not spending my time watching the lake, I was usually out tramping through the woods. Here I studied the flowers, followed the tracks and paths of animals, or simply gave myself over to the sheer bliss of roaming freely among the beech and hickory, the dogwood and the redbud. "No weather interfered fatally with my walks, or rather my going abroad, for I frequently tramped eight or ten miles...to keep an appointment with a beech tree, or a yellow birch, or an old acquaintance among the pines..." (p.178).

The woods begin at the edges of the lake, cloaking the surrounding hills with a rich mantle of greens, grays, and browns. The entire area is a part of what is left of a climax forest, some of the trees by my house being well over a hundred years old. The forest floors were soft and spongy with the debris and accumulation of all the long years of growth and decay. From the back of my house I could walk in a straight line for about one quarter of a mile before encountering an old county road, which in turn bordered the northern limits of Pokagon State Park. The woods between my house and this road were practically impassable, due to a low, very swampy area extending from the back edge of my hill to the gravel road beyond. I once nearly lost one of my boots here, having sunk into the bog up to my knee. I seldom traveled this way unless I was searching for wet-ground woodland plants; I preferred to walk in a southwesterly direction through the woods, thus going perhaps three-fourths of a mile over somewhat higher ground before reaching the county road and Pokagon's boundary fence. Walking through these woods was no easy task, for the smaller saplings and higher bushes slapped my face and seemed to cling to my clothes at every step. The many plants that grew here made my trips worthwhile, however, espec-
ially the very delicate maidenhair fern.

I suppose that most of my time was spent in Pokagon's wooded areas. Here I had many pines to walk among, breathing in their pleasantly distinctive odor, and taking off my shoes to feel the softness and thickness of the mat of needles beneath my feet. Here were miles of woods to roam alone, and I gloried in my freedom. I did not always follow distinct paths, often tracing out some faint animal track instead. In the middle of this park, there are very swampy sections of land into which I seldom ventured, for I feared the pools of quicksand there. For the most part, I stayed on higher ground with the pines, following the ridges of the hills to find my way. On weekends I avoided the park entirely, leary of the litter-scattering hikers. For pictures of these woods, see Appendix 2.

To the immediate west of Otter Lake were more lakes and low regions, but to the east were more wooded hills, stretching out for miles and miles, disturbed only by an occasional road or farm-house. It was in this section, about three miles slightly southwest of Otter, that I once lost my way, wandering about for what seemed a very long period of time before I found myself again. I simply followed a small stream back out to an open hillside, where I was again able to see familiar objects in the distance. "It is a surprising and memorable, as well as valuable experience, to be lost in the woods any time" (p.117), for "...not till we are completely lost, or turned round...do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of nature" (p.118). I learned a bit of humility from this lesson, and was more careful to watch where my wanderings led me.

I am not sure what it was I sought in the woods, for I followed
something within me that was elusive. There were many times when I would stand on a hillside looking down on the trees beneath me and feel an aching inside my body and mind. It was as if I were searching for that which forever eluded me, yet I could not stop my search. I have heard men say that there are people who travel on and on simply because they feel they must discover for themselves what lies in the distance. I believe that these people are looking for more than the excitement of conquering a hill. Perhaps Thoreau best expressed this search in what he said concerning his own strange wanderings:

"Once or twice...while I lived at the pond, I found myself ranging the woods, like a half-starved hound, with a strange abandonment, seeking some kind of venison which I might devour, and no morsel could have been too savage for me. The wildest scenes had become unaccountably familiar. I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both" (p. 143).

Perhaps it was this struggle between two opposing natures which so often tugged at me. Whatever it was that I searched for, I do not believe that it was something uncommon in the woods. It was-- and is-- a part of nature, and as such, nature would be lessened for me without it.
THE FIELDS

Intermingled with the wooded areas of the land I walked were clearer spaces of grasses and vines, small trees and dense bushes; these were my fields. I did not travel in these as frequently as in the woods, for here the sun burned unmercifully on hot days, and I always returned to the shade of the trees for relief.

The three largest fields in my area were situated about a quarter of a mile west of my house, completely rimmed by the woods. These fields were possibly once natural meadows, but as I knew them they had been widened and somewhat squared off by a farmer, who used them as an orchard at first, and later for grazing his horses. The horses had been gone for many years, so the fields were in the process of returning to a more wild state. The grasses and weeds were again waist-high, providing excellent forage for deer and small animals such as the rabbit. Many of the cultivated apple trees still remained, although none of the regularity of rows was visible. These trees were a constant food source for me, yielding very good cooking apples. Most of the fences scattered between the fields had rusted and long since fallen to ground level. The vines gloried in twisting around these fences, creating a very dense thicket of ground cover that was almost impossible to walk through. In the gullied sections of the fields, thick groves of winged and staghorn sumac clustered together, creating what looked like scarlet meadows from a distance (see picture in Appendix 2). The slopes of the hills were covered by a spectacular array of wild flowers; here were purple asters and orange jewel weed, campion, cinquefoil, wild senna, milkweed, Saint John's-wort, butterfly weed, everlasting, goldenrod, and sunflowers. Some of the prettier field flowers bloom
earlier in the spring and summer, but what was left for me to observe did not lack color or variety. Along the fences grew the bright red-orange trumpet vine, although in places this flower was crowded out of clinging space by the vines of the wild grape. I tried eating some of these very small and seedy grapes, but found them to be decidedly unripe.

During the cool hours of the morning, I often stopped to observe what had taken place in these fields during the night. I remember one such morning particularly well. I had crawled out of bed and stumbled through the motions of dressing at an earlier hour than usual. By the time I reached the first fence of the nearest field, the sun was just beginning to yawn in soft shades of orange and yellow. What rays reached the grass through the trees seemed to deliberately call my attention to the awesome sights all around me. The ground was still heavy with the night's dew, so my pants were soon as wet and dripping as any of the field plants. I stopped several times to admire the play of light on night-strung webs, and to watch droplets of water drip silently to the grass. I found a few places where the grass was matted down, presumably by deer. It was at a moment when I was not really looking for them that I saw two young bucks just ahead of me. They paused to watch me, then bounded off into the woods. A short while later I caught my foot in a bramble patch, and, while turning to free it, I gazed directly into the eyes of a doe. She stiffened for a moment, then relaxed and trotted out of sight over a hill. This was the closest I had ever come to these skittish and alert animals, and I do not think that either the deer or myself was in any way lessened by this meeting.
I often followed a rabbit or a raccoon into one of these fields, and I noticed that they never spent much time here when the sun was high. Like me, they seemed to prefer the shelter of the cooler woods. The rabbits burrowed here at night, as did the tiny field mice. Life in the fields was pleasant, but it had a faster pace and more urgent tone to it than that of the woods. The lack of shade during the day made the foraging hours shorter for everything here—including myself. For pictures of these fields, see Appendix 2.
ON THE FOOLISHNESS OF MEN

These two weeks at Otter Lake gave me much time to reflect on my own life as well as the lives of men in general. Making my comparisons with nature left me feeling that perhaps man's intelligence and capabilities do not suit him half so well as he may think. All of the worries and frustrations man puts into his life through determined efforts and well-made plans make it true, it seems, that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (p. 10). By attempting to make life easier for himself, man invents new items and ideas which only serve to clutter up his mind and strew his path with complications.

"Most men," wrote Thoreau, "even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them" (p. 9). My neighbor once drove fifty miles from his home to "get away from it all" at the lake. It was a beautiful day, though some might have considered it to be too hot for true comfort. I spent the afternoon admiring some flowers growing in a bog deep in the woods. I even removed my boots so as to enjoy the coolness of the muck on my bare feet. The droning of my neighbor's saw served as a backdrop to my thoughts. I wondered at the beauty of the jewel weed; he wondered at the sheer cussedness of an ironwood stump, totally unaware of everything except the sweat dripping down his back.

Sometimes I was amused by the foolish actions of the people I met or observed, but there were other times when I was only abhorred. I have watched people along some of the other lakes chopping down their trees so that they could have a better view of whatever it
was they wished to see. It did not seem to matter that the trees were very old and beautiful, having earned the right to live by enduring many decades of harsh winds and rain. Invariably, these same people would plant young saplings in their yards within a few days, sitting uncomfortably in the heat until these might grow large enough to shade them. Why is it that man is never satisfied with things the way they are, but must always rearrange nature's works of art to suit his fancy?

Thoreau stated that "with a little more wit we might...make our civilization a blessing. The civilized man is a more experienced and wiser savage" (p.32). I would agree that civilized man is a savage, but he no longer has the instincts of the primitive savage to use only what he needs of the land. Instead, he over-kills, overcuts, and overuses the land, little understanding that it is only himself he harms. He works until he has exhausted his energies in service to what he considers his basic needs. Man too often confuses his needs with his desires, which is why "a little more wit" might indeed be a blessing-- not only to nature, but to man as well.
CONCLUSION

I went to the woods to test Thoreau's ideas on the advantages of leading a simpler and less complicated existence. I went with doubts and fears, some of which were not entirely dispelled by the time I was ready to leave. My main objective, however, was indeed accomplished, for I discovered, under the guidance of Thoreau, that what he called simple living was most worthwhile; it was also quite a mind-expanding experience. I felt a part of the land, having learned to better understand a few of the principles which governed nature. The greatest aspect of this lesson was that I also learned to look within myself. I finally left Otter Lake feeling that I had made a great discovery: a life of complication is not only unnecessary, but also unwise; it shrouds much greater things than tall buildings and tall dealings in a mist of worry and needless work, allowing little time for pleasure and a sound sleep.

Thoreau advanced according to the music which he heard. He did not advise that others attempt to emulate his actions, yet I am most grateful that I did so, at least to the extent that I could keep pace with him but still hearken to the rhythms within myself.

"If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness" (p. 215).
APPENDIX ONE
TO EAT OR NOT TO EAT

This is a partial excerpt from a pamphlet sold by Acres, Incorporated, a conservation society located in Fort Wayne.
BEVERAGES

Sassafras Tea

The tea is made by brewing the roots (some say the young shoots also), the brew being a deep red color. In moderation Sassafras tea is wholesome, an overdose of the oil may be narcotic in action.

Mint Tea

Steep tender leaves in boiling water and then strain.

Clover Tea

Steep the flowering heads of sweet clover in boiling water, strain.

Camp Tea

The twigs and chips of white cedar, bearing the familiar cedar-oil, steeped in boiling water. The one who drinks cedar-tea will not have rheumatism.

Sumac Lemonade

Gather a quantity of the bright red heads of the Scarlet Sumac in midsummer and prepare them as follows. Bruise the fruit heads in water with a potato-masher; simmer, but do not boil, and then strain the colored water through cloth to remove the small hairs. Sugar and ice should be added to taste. This drink will resemble a pink lemonade, and provide a slightly acid, flavorful drink.

Dandelion Coffee

The dandelion, being closely related to chickory, can be used to adulterate coffee or used alone to make a somewhat bitter but palatable drink. Dig the roots and dry them, grind and roast them.

The following list includes the principle wild plants which have been recommended as substitutes for tea:

sweet goldenrod (young leaves and flowers)
spice bush (leaves and twigs)
witch hazel (leaves)
shrubby cinquefoil (leaves)
raspberry (leaves)
basswood (leaves)
grapes
elderberries
VEGETABLES

Spring Beauty Root

Scrub with a brush, boil with skin on for fifteen minutes. Peel and dip in melted butter.

Evening Primrose

Boil half a dozen good sized roots in two changes of salt water until tender, then serve with hot butter.

Queen Anne's Lace—Wild Carrot

Wash carrots (roots), scrape them, boil them in just enough water to cover them for about 20 minutes, until tender.

Pokeweed

The young shoots of pokeweed should be gathered when about four to six inches long. The developing leaves should be stripped off, the stalks washed and boiled in two waters. On the second boiling, cook until tender, then serve with butter.

The following are mild enough to be cooked in their own juices, although by throwing off the first water the herby and often slightly disagreeable flavor may be removed.

reed (young shoots)
spiderwort
pickerel-weed
beech (young leaves)
docks (watery)

SALADS

The following wild plants supply salads:
cattail (bases of new sprouts)
sweet flag (bases of new inner leaves)
spiderwort (leaves and young tops)
wild rose (petals)
redbud (flowers)
clover (young leaves)
ox-eye daisy (young leaves)
WILD FRUITS

white, red, or black mulberry
paw paw
May apple
gooseberry
strawberry
raspberry
blackberry

plums
cherries
grapes
huckleberry
bog cranberry
elderberry

NUTS AND LARGE SEEDS

pine seeds
pickerel weed-- seeds
walnuts
butternut
hickory nut
hazelnut

beechnut
chestnut
sweet acorns
hornbeam-- nuts

CHEWING GUM

spruce
sweet gum
milkweed

Break the mid-ribs of the leaves of the common milkweed and the milky juice oozes out. In a few minutes, it hardens and can be used for gum.

MARMALADES OR JELLIES

cattail (rootstock)
red mulberry
May apple
barberry
wild crab
chokeberry
blackberry

wild rose
plum
cherry
grape
elderberry
strawberry
raspberry
EMERGENCY FOODS
(Available, though unattractive)

- lichens
- pines (inner bark and young twigs)
- spruces (inner bark and young twigs)
- fir
- cedars (young twigs)
- willows (inner bark)
- ironwood (small nuts)
- locust
- bittersweet (inner bark and young twigs)
- maple (inner bark)
- basswood (inner bark and young twigs)

POISONOUS PLANTS

- buttercup
- larkspur
- white baneberry
- false hellebore
- water hemlock
- milkweed
- Jimson weed
- May apple (rootstock)
- pokeweed (root)
- butterfly weed (root)
APPENDIX TWO