

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
June 23, 1955

The weather is warm and the bees are buzzing. They are on the dandelions and the chokecherries; the Iceland poppies and the caraganas. Tame bees from the bee yard and wild bees from all over. We won't sample much of the honey made at this time of the year, for it is used by the bees themselves in raising their ever increasing brood. Dandelion honey is not too good anyway. It is dark and strong and scratches your throat. The good honey is made later in the summer - mostly from clovers of various kinds. This is the light, fine-tasting honey familiar to everyone. It is ordinary fare throughout the land.

But did you ever taste wild honey? Real wild honey made from wild flowers by large bumblebees? Well, I have, and it just isn't possible for me to describe the delicious taste sensation that ensued. For richness of flavor and aroma, there is nothing to compare with honey made by bumblebees.

Bumblebees may make a nest almost anywhere, but usually it is in, on or near the ground. It resembles a mouse's nest in outward appearance, but inside the ball of fine, dry grass is the irregular comb, made up of brood cells and honey cells intermingled. They also make good use of old straw or hay stacks, or a recess in the wall or under the eaves of a building; and once I found one in a rather unusual manner.

I have a habit, when I see a tree with a woodpecker built hole in it, of giving it a sharp rap or two with a stick, just to see what the opening will produce. In the spring you may stir up a woodpecker, chickadee, swallow or wren. At any time you may disturb a flying squirrel, or a chipmunk, or a horde of angry bees. I drew the latter one summer's evening when I whacked a half rotten, ten foot high, poplar stump that had a hole near its top. I had to remove myself in a hurry to a safe distance as they poured buzzing from their round doorway.

I knew by the numbers that this was a larger than usual colony, and I did a hit and run act on that stump every now and then for the rest of the summer and fall, just to keep tab on them. Then I forgot them completely until early the following spring when I passed by the stump again. This time, since it was quite unsound, I shoved it over and broke it open at the nest hole just to see where all those bees had come from when they were annoyed. I found that they had been at least the third occupants of that tree abode, for below their nest was one of twigs, perhaps a wren's, and on the bottom was a bit of sawdust, which is all a woodpecker ever needs.

It was the usual type of bee nest and the brown comb inside was still intact. All the outer cells on this fist-sized hunk of wax were empty. They had contained brood and honey; but on the inside of the comb was a group of about six cells of sealed honey, just as the bees had left it. I squeezed it out onto my hand; about a teaspoonful altogether. It was liquid, transparent, and amber in color; and the flavor was out of this world.

Nectar of wild rose and honeysuckle, of fireweed and goldenrod spiced with wild parsnip and aged in the comb. Honey fit for the gods. I wished for a gallon of it. If I could raise that kind of honey in commercial quantities my fortune would be made. Oh well -- I guess I'll go and spread a slice of bread with good old clover honey.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
June 30, 1955

This is a part of the world where man is in relatively little danger from wild animals. Yet one of the eeriest experiences a person can have right here, is to be followed by a wild animal at night, be it friend or foe or merely curious but neutral. Company is a wonderful thing on a dark, bush-lined road late at night, but not that kind of company. That kind will give you goose pimples and prickly scalp in a way that no horror movie can do.

Several times in the past, but not in recent years, I have been followed by animals at night, and always along a travelled road; never in the wilderness. Mostly their identity has been guessed, but on at least two occasions the animal was a lynx. In both instances they followed a short distance behind me and inside a fence just off the road allowance. Once I was on horseback and of course I remembered Tommy Marshall's story about the lynx that left its claw marks on his horse. The other time I was afoot along with my brother. He had broken his bike and was pushing it home, and I was pushing mine to keep him company. We were nearly two miles west of Bluffton when we first heard the footfalls in the dry October leaves. It was about 2 a.m. and pitch dark, but we had a flashlight so felt quite safe, since we had always heard that a light would keep dangerous animals at a distance. We could never get a look at our friend however, and if we stopped, he would take about two steps and stop also. This was worse than the footsteps so off we'd go again. After half a mile or more of this we decided to do something about it, so I held the flashlight while Allan heaved a fist size rock into the brush; right where the last soft footstep had been taken. Up to this time we had only suspected that our bashful companion was a cat, but the snarl that was emitted as he jumped away from that rock left us in no doubt. He didn't go far, only about two jumps sideways; but he didn't follow us anymore.

"You know," I said to Allan then, "if I'd thought of it, I would at least have had my jackknife in my hand." Allan said nothing, but he thrust his left hand into the beam of the flashlight. It held his big jackknife with the long blade open.

I have never felt that any wild animal I was apt to meet in the woods was in any way dangerous to humans, with the possible exception of a rabid coyote in recent years. Another well known exception is a mother bear with cubs, but I have never been in bear country in the summer time. Nor have I ever seen an angry moose, although some people have. Still, it is not the most comfortable feeling in the world to hear those unseen

footsteps following along behind you, and on the nights it has happened to me, I have been more than usually glad to get home.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
October 6, 1955

Last month we enjoyed a short visit from our old friends and neighbors, Bud and Margaret and family. Bud is an old schoolmate of mine, and he once again reminded me of an incident of our school days that I am sure neither of us will ever forget. In fact, I am reminded of it every time I see a big puffball, and I'll bet nobody in the country can get as much pure enjoyment from the sight of one of these large fungi as I. I'll tell you why.

We had been down to the old swimming hole near Iola - about six of us, and we were just leaving the river. We were not in a compact group and I happened to be some yards ahead of Bud and had gained the top of a high, grassy bank before he had reached the bottom. Here I found a big, white puffball about six inches across. It looked quite firm, but when I felt it I found it was quite soft inside: just how soft I couldn't tell.

In those days we were all crazy about softball - girls came later - and we were always throwing things back and forth to one another. So, shutting my mind to any possible consequences, I acted on the fiendish idea that popped into my head. I picked the puffball and waited for Bud to appear below me. When he was forty or fifty feet away and just about to start climbing the bank toward me, I hollered, "Hey, Bud, Catch!" and I heaved the missile.

My aim was good. Without thinking, he assumed his best catching stance, and had it been a softball he was catching, it would have been very pretty. Well, he made a perfect catch but it was not pretty. The inside of that puffball was about the color and consistency of pumpkin pie just before it is put in the oven. The smell, however, was not like pumpkin pie. It was pretty terrible. And Bud had the gooey mess just dripping from him.

I didn't wait to see more. I took off, and for the rest of the afternoon I was careful to keep a safe distance from my pal. At the same time I was just as careful to keep him always in sight. In fact, I wasn't at ease in his presence for a long time afterward.

That was many years ago. Bud didn't say the other day if he had forgiven. He certainly hasn't forgotten.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
November 17, 1955

It is a weird experience to be followed by a wild animal by day or by night and the times it has happened to me I haven't especially enjoyed it. It is different when the shoe is on the other foot. I enjoy tracking wild animals. I find it interesting just to see where they go and what they do. Much of our knowledge of wilderness ways has been gained as a direct result of the tracks most animals must leave behind them, and in this part of the world tracking is greatly simplified for several months of every year by recurring falls of snow, which is infinitely better for the purpose than is sand or mud or jungle growth in those parts of the earth that never see the white stuff.

One of the most interesting animals to track through the snow is a lynx. If there is any windfall around you are almost sure to be led into it. A lynx can negotiate that stuff with amazing dexterity. He can walk up a slanting, snow-covered pole that is much narrower than his paw prints, then jump down several feet onto another, making four perfect imprints where he lights. You would think he had descended by parachute, so light and sure is his landing. Occasionally, in any terrain, he will climb a tree or stub, apparently just to look around; and frequently in his travels, he will sit down on his haunches, right in his tracks, and I always have to chuckle at the undignified imprint he leaves in the snow.

Just once have I seen a fox in this part of the province, and not more often have I heard one yipping. Because foxes are so scarce here, I take a more than usual interest in any tracks I see. Once, out on a frozen beaver pond on Beaver Creek, I came upon fox tracks that left such a vivid account of his actions that it was almost as if I had seen the performance.

A hunter had walked down the length of the pond, leaving his tracks in the four or five inches of snow. Later a fox had come along, taking a course at right angles to that of the man. When he came to the man's tracks he stopped, not wishing to cross them. He then made a large half circle which brought him again to the tracks he so mistrusted, but at a point several rods away. Still he didn't cross them but made another half circle, and another. Finally he concluded that there was no way around; so he trotted back about five rods, then turned and ran toward them as hard as he could go. He made a magnificent leap, clearing those hated man-tracks by ten feet on either side. Then he trotted off in his original direction, quite unharmed.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
November 24, 1955

Occasionally a meteor creates enough stir in the atmosphere to get itself mentioned in the news. The first such one I can remember seeing any part of occurred during the 1930s. It made the night sky bright as day for a few seconds and was seen across Canada from British Columbia to Quebec. I was indoors when this brilliant white ball flashed by, and all I saw by the time I got outdoors was the long, fast-fading trail of light it left.

I was much luckier in 1946. There were several spectacular displays that year, including a concentrated shower on October 9 that reached one hundred meteors per minute at its peak. These were mostly ordinary shooting stars with an occasional bright one among them. The effect of the display was lessened somewhat by moonlight.

A few nights later, on October 21, I watched the complete course of a brilliant meteorite that lit up the northeastern sky just before dark. I answered a request for information about this one, made through the newspapers by the professor of mathematics at the University of Saskatchewan. I was later informed that from the more than one hundred replies he had received from people who had seen this meteorite, he had been able to determine that it fell near a spot about twenty five miles east of Edmonton.

The most brilliant and most spectacular meteor I have ever seen occurred earlier that same year on May 19, 1946. This one too, appeared in the daylight just after sundown, in an absolutely cloudless sky. I was walking east and it appeared high in the northwest, illuminating the earth with a light so intense and so white as to far outstrip the best the sun could do at midday. Possibly I was lucky that I did not directly observe the early seconds of its trip across the sky. When I did turn around, I saw a bright, white ball, larger than the sun, sailing down toward the southwest. It travelled slowly for a meteor, becoming orange, then red as it moved more slowly still. Then, low over the horizon to the west and a little south, it exploded into many smaller, fire-red fragments which scattered in all directions.

This seemed like the glorious end of a glorious spectacle, but it wasn't, quite. I resumed my walk, and about five minutes later and a quarter of a mile farther on, I heard a loud, strange peal of thunder that had a quality unlike that of any I had ever heard before. There were two or three sharp, tinny explosions against a background rumble that was similar to the constant roll of a severe but distant electrical storm. I knew at once that the sound came from the meteor, as it came from the same direction, and also because there was not a cloud of any kind in any part of the sky.

Since sound travels about twelve and a half miles per minute, and the estimated lapse between the meteor and its thunder was about five minutes, and the direction of both was west-southwest, I reckoned that the meteor must have exploded somewhere in the vicinity of the town of Nordegg.