

A Moveable Feast

ome years ago I set out to see if I could walk from Westford to Concord without ever resorting to paved roads—of which there were many along my intended route.

The plan required a certain amount of what Henry Thoreau used to call cross-lot walking, which in our time we would define more prosaically as trespassing. It also required, at least in my case, a good sense of direction. Lacking such contemporary navigational devices such as a Garmin GPSMAP or smartphone, and armed solely with a knowledge of the lay of the land, the position of the sun, and a sadly out-of-date geodetic survey map, I was delightfully lost from time to time, which was part of the idea. I wanted to imagine, as did Mr. Thoreau, the possibility of encountering some remnant of wildness in my own backyard.

This venture took place on Columbus Day, a holiday set aside to celebrate the arrival of the first of many alien invasive animals and plants in this brave new world of the Americas; and as I forged through swamps and thickets, deep forests of hemlock and pine, and uplands of hardwoods, I did in fact encounter many exotic plant species, as well as a number of people of European ancestry and a bird or two of British origin. But I also came across many native plants, and inasmuch as this was autumn and all the leaves were ablaze and the day was bright and the weather warm, it seemed to me at times that I was passing through a veritable Eden of abundance.

Ripeness was all that day. Even before I set out, I noticed a patch of bright red *Russula* mushrooms, and a little farther along a cluster of oyster mushrooms, a puffball, and a fine stand of coral fungi. Then, not a quarter of a mile onward, having crossed the first of some five or six roads I would traverse that day, I came upon someone's neglected summer garden, all overgrown with the drupes and seeds and berries of various European and Asian species of plants. Thirty yards beyond the garden I came to an immigration story of a different sort—an apple orchard.

Although there was a native crabapple here in North America before the seventeenth century, the Reverend William Blackstone, the first European settler

in the place that became Boston, brought a bag of apple seeds with him and planted an orchard on Beacon Hill. The governor of the Boston Puritan colony, John Winthrop, who arrived five years after Blackstone, in 1630, was himself an orchardist back in Suffolk. He took over Blackstone's orchard and brought over his own supply of pips, or apple seeds, as well as honeybees for pollination. These he developed into the Roxbury Russet, the first of the New World apples; and since these modest beginnings American growers have developed several hundred varieties of apple.

On the eastern edge of the orchard, effectively blocking my intended passage, was a thicket of blackberry canes so dense and so impenetrable that I was forced to cast about for a suitable route to the east. In the end, the only way through was a wide clearing covered with another berry-producing plant—poison ivy. But I slogged on.

All along the way as I wove through the landscape I came upon similar thickets of berries and wide patches of poison ivy, as well as old struggling apple trees growing in deep shaded woods of white pine, or maple and hickory. I also crossed over many stone walls and hedgerows festooned with vines and ramblers. Here was the native fox grape, the original species from which Ephraim Wales Bull developed the famous Concord grape in the midnineteenth century. Here also was the rambling riverbank grape, known more simply as the frost grape. In the green tangles of Virginia creeper and in the wooded sections, I tramped through stands of shagbark hickory, pignut, beech, and butternut, and sections of woods strewn with the acorns of black oak and red oak. The nuts of all these trees once served as crucial fare for the native people of this country as well as the European colonists.

Like most hunter-gatherer cultures, the Native Americans were skilled at plant identification and use. Somewhere within the town of Acton (I think), I came to a dry hillside covered with blueberry bushes, one of the staples of their diet. The tribes in this region used to practice an early form of game management that involved the shrub. The Indians would burn over certain sections of the forest to encourage berry growth, which would in turn encourage the local populations of the white-tailed deer and black bear, both of which they would

hunt. In preparation for winter, the local Indians would make a trail food known as pemmican by mixing blueberries with bear fat and strips of dried venison.

I once knew a man who claimed that with three milk goats and a working knowledge of edible wild plants an individual could live comfortably off the land throughout the year. He happened to live in Arizona, and I doubt that he and his goats could survive a New England winter,

but I did come across many wild edible plants on my walk that day: elderberries; five different species of edible mushrooms that I was able to identify, and many more that I couldn't; acorns, which the Indians would boil and dry and grind for flour; and also ubiquitous stands of lamb's-quarters, a plant that the Indians would eat as a green in spring and as a ground seed meal in winter. The seeds of this plant are notoriously abundant—as many as 75,000 on a single plant—and are common in local archeological digs. I also passed isolated stands of American filbert, or hazelnut, a favorite of both mice and men. In some obscure history, I remember reading that the whole army of some ten thousand knights and soldiers of King Henry V, marching toward Agincourt, was sustained for a day or two with the local species of hazelnut.

Somewhere near Butter Brook in Acton—or maybe Concord (nature knows nothing of political boundaries)—I came upon another lesser known staple of both the Indians and the newly arrived Puritans: the groundnut. It may be that there were more groundnuts in the primal forests of New England—old histories describe an abundance of vines of these underground tuberous plants bearing “nuts” as large as small potatoes, and records indicate that along with the tubers of hog peanut, which I also saw all along my route, groundnuts were an important fall crop.

It was not only human fare that I passed during that singular journey. Most of the plants that I encountered served also to feed the local wildlife as well.

