

## *The Artist's Almanac*

January 2018

*I'd rather live in a less desirable neighborhood and have more space*

Flannery O'Connor – *The Habit of Being*

It's the second of January 2018 and our pipes are frozen. We are in the grip of a stubborn winter Midwest high and relief is not in sight. This means no hot water and we won't shower today. But what we will do is sit quietly alone, stare into the fire on the stone hearth and reflect on our life together here for over half a century. The holiday bustle past and we have solitude and silence.



The view from our new homesite 1965

Why did we move here and build this house? We named it *Stonehearth*, and so it is. The mammoth fireplace of limestone was recovered from a slave-built dry-wall fence marking the far side of our place. It had been dressed and erected by a descendant of those who taught their children the only winter occupation known to them then – removing plow-busting limestone from the rocky fields to make them tillable. Later they would convert the best of those chosen to make the rugged pioneer homes we treasure today, such as Cragfont and Rock Castle. These stone workers were justly jealous of their exclusive franchise and would down tools when a stranger appeared to watch how they worked.

We were fortunate to secure the best stonemason for miles around to build our house and fireplace. Later when he grew old and partially blind he declined to build a foundation for our add-on stone porch until Claudia agreed to help him. She would select the stones he asked for and bring them to him for shaping, mortaring, placing and fitting them into the foundation wall. She learned about *shims* and to avoid *dead stones*, that would shatter at the first touch of the hammer

When they finished, he remarked, *Lawd, you is the strongest white woman ever I seen.*

It was the last wall John Frank Swaney ever built before he downed tools for the last time, due to increasing blindness and advancing decrepitude. Claudia continued to visit him regularly in the nursing home until his death.

Fire is one of the most elemental of our needs, and meant as much to our ancestors as food, water and air. To our hardy antecedents it often meant their very survival against the Indians who would rain terror down upon those settlers who dared to clear their forests, plow their earth and divide their hunting lands with their neatly squared stone fences. Today on the coldest day of the year we can imagine ourselves as one of our ancestors as we gaze into our fire at Stonehearth and reflect upon our life here.

More than a time for short-lived resolutions, this frozen, clear New Year is a time for a reality check – a reflection on why we built our final home here. Did we choose wisely when we turned our backs on the city, with its culture and conveniences, to build our house on family land, overlooking an old river port, neighbors to the freed slave community of Peach Valley, facing east and upstream across the shimmering waters whence came our ancestors into this rich valley the Indians once called *Warioto, or beautiful river*? I sometimes asked myself this, as I drove my children through the roughest section of town to deposit them in a formerly *separate but equal* black school, or left them standing shivering in the dark upon a lonely country road awaiting a crowded school bus.

And yet, the place yet resounds with the memories of giggling children and elegant dinner parties with new old friends, while the land remembers the shouts of lively Easter egg hunts, soaring kites, lush flower gardens, bountiful harvests of fresh vegetables gardens, squeals of sledding parties, scary dark walks through hidden valley on Halloween where, when each child was required, gave me the name and number of their parents' homes, in case they went

missing. When granddaddy blew his fox horn from the dark woods, they clustered tightly around me, clutching at my pants and coat. Later there was bobbing for apples, until a gruesome witch appeared to tell their fortunes. There were long strings of fish brought home from the lake and during the striper runs we paddled out to the edge of the weed beds to hook bright fish that grabbed our spinner lures on every cast. Just across the bridge was Cherokee Steakhouse, where Claudia and I could slip off for an hour's talk, watching the yachts come and go.

In later years we enjoyed Harvest Parties under tents filled with venison from the back fields, deviled eggs, potato salad, and local barbeque. There were hayrides, views of the craters of the moon, bright Jupiter and the unbelievable rings of Saturn through my telescope, all to the background of a live bluegrass band. On weekends the boys held skeet shoots and target practice with their .22 rifles. We built a large pony ring where Lina conducted her riding school, and her long rides across the farm on trails were a treat for young visitors. Then came Thanksgiving, with the ingathering of a large family with homemade fruitcake and hand stirred boiled custard. Finally, the joyful season of the Incarnation, the excitement of Christmas with the wild tumble and happy shouts of grandchildren, followed by Midnight Services and happy feasting and laughter around the family table at this, the homeplace.

Now is the cold, quiet season, fit for reflection and, after all is said and done, did we make the right decision in moving back home, to the country? By hiding the television so our children might enjoy exploring the *hundred-acre woods* and the lake, on their own,

*Wisdom is justified by her children*, said our Lord,<sup>1</sup> and the five sturdy ones raised on this place, successful in love and marriage, in business, cherishing our traditional values, in their own homes, patterned after ours, in this place in the country; this now contents me in this cold new year.

And the world now tilts back towards a brighter, warmer sun as we now look towards to the rising of The Son, our Lord, on Easter morn.

*Listen, what's that noise? Loud banging, gurgling, gushing. The pipes are thawed! We have water!*

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 12, v.19