

## The Artist's Almanac January 2006

*To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive.*

- Robert Louis Stevenson

*The road is better than the inn*

- Cervantes

Our ancestors came to Middle Tennessee along the Avery trace.

As many as six thousand a month came along this ancient trail, bearing their children and all they owned in ox carts, walking, or riding horseback, carrying their hopes and their brightest dreams of virgin land.

Today, on a sunny winter day, we retrace their route and wonder at the daring of these people who crossed mountains and braved savagery to people a wilderness.



Nature bares her breast to us this month. The white sycamores mark the springs the pioneers used to locate their preemptions and the ancient oaks that once witnessed their passage now enter their fourth century. Were these people a race of giants?

We may never know, for two-and-a-quarter centuries of leaf fall hides a world of memories. Yet patient inquiry may yield some clues.

Land grants and old maps yield clues as to the first roads, and winter is the best time to explore them.



Old ford of Desha's Creek just above mouth into Bledsoe

Their courage was learned by years of hardship and by necessity. Perhaps it was both of those that enabled them to trade people as they did livestock. Black and white alike, they tamed the land. The few who sought to free their own slaves were turned upon by their families and by their communities. It took a great cataclysm that dispossessed them to bring that about.

All the modern evils we complain of were present with our ancestors – pride, greed, temper, adultery, litigation, envy, and violence. There has never been a race of giants, only giants.

These people were travelers, willing to stake all on the next opportunity. Most of their descendants did not stay here, but moved on to what they perceived as the next land of opportunity, in Texas or California. As their agricultural way of life passed, so did they.

We, seeking permanence of place and destination in these quiet woods, find it neither in history nor in ourselves. We, as they, are travelers.

On this mid-winter ramble we survey our own failed resolutions for the past year, as tattered as mulch of old leaves, and look for a spring of hope to renew us. Look closely and you will find that even in January the buds have begun to swell.

