

Starting the day on the Fox

By Gail Grenier Sweet © 2002

I like starting my day in a different head.

Today, Feb. 5, my husband and I took the Fox River for our morning walk.

It's been such a snowless mild winter that this was only the second time Mike wore boots and snowmobile suit. His moon-explorer outfit slowed him down as we walked from our house across the neighbors' front yards, to the river. Once on the frozen river, he sped up... or maybe I slowed down due to my fear of slipping and falling.

I had walked the Fox alone last Friday as snow fell on my head — a beautiful experience — but I kept stepping through the top layer of ice, down to the second layer about four inches below. It was jarring. I kept grunting “UH!” every time I popped through. Once I pulled the muscles in my left calf when my right foot sank.

Today, however, the ice was harder. We only broke through once. And a snow covering, maybe two inches, kept us from slipping.

The river is such a different path from our usual route — the old Bugline railroad right of way. The Bugline is straight but the river meanders, so we meandered.

The Bugline is wide but at some points the river is only about a yard across, so Mike and I walked one in front of the other.

The Bugline is public (although we don't meet many folks before dawn, at five degrees Fahrenheit). The river is private, so I had much more hope of meeting some deer, a flock of turkeys, a great horned owl, a rabbit or vole.

A man-made split rail fence runs along the Bugline. The river's border is made of puffy snow and extravagantly abundant buff-colored grasses. The blades of the grasses are thick and soft: a cushy bed.

We walked in silence. Sometimes I hummed a church song, my theme song for when I'm outside: “...for Love is Lord of heaven and earth. How can I keep from singing?”

But today the song wasn't in my head. Instead, the Indians were there. I thought about how they survived along this river in winter when the giant oaks near us were saplings.

“Can you imagine,” I asked Mike, “getting up hungry and having to invent a bow and arrow? Can you imagine how hard it must have been to fashion something strong enough to bring down a big animal?”

We talked about sinew and about sharpening arrow points. When the thought of sinew started grossing me out, I switched focus to animal tracks.

There was a trail of a dog-like animal whose tracks were much bigger than our dog's — a large coyote, maybe. There were highways tramped down by mice and voles and rabbits. It seems all animals are creatures of habit, following the same routes over and over.

Deer tracks were everywhere, even on the frozen river. Some of the tracks were very fresh, but we spied no deer.

We eventually got tired of scrambling over deadfalls on the river and returned to the Bugline, then to a path through cornfields and fencerows, up the moraine toward our land.

The flock of turkeys had left their giant tracks in the fenceline and in the cornfield itself. Pickings there must be getting slimmer and slimmer.

The great horned owl was done hunting and gone by the time we got to his tree. The sun blazed orange by then, the sky painted in wild pinks and blues.

Finally, on our own land, we saw one shy deer, running, white flag up. By the time we stomped off our boots in the screen porch, we had spent one hour walking outside, never once treading road or sidewalk.

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The End

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