

TEXAS HILL COUNTRY

# OUTDOORS



## The Gift

By Steve Ramirez

I guess the first time I saw the gift was in the summertime. The Texas sun had already moved closer to the earth and those who think that the day begins at noon were finding it difficult to spend time outdoors, but I have always risen while the morning star still sits upon heaven's forehead. And so each Sunday morning before the sunrise I would drive down scenic loop road toward the gift. It was always worth it. Nature is my church. For me, God lives in the tree tops and among the limestone and I have heard his voice in the breeze that blows gently through the brittle golden grass.

By noon the summer heat would have driven me into the water or under a roof but I always arrived at the gift when the dew was fresh upon the leaves and the air still cool beneath them. The gift is one of those places that teach me how to walk. I enjoy hiking but when I hike I always seem to be going somewhere and when I walk I always seem to be going nowhere; which is often the better destination. When I hike I tend to lose myself in the long vistas and scenic destinations and there is nothing wrong with that; but when walking, I stop, and listen, and see, and be. When walking I move away from life's illusions and back into the moment. The gift makes me walk.

As my feet hit the trail under the cedar canopy, across the first dry riverbed and toward the old windmill I see them as they see me. A half dozen deer stand staring, motionless save for the beating of their hearts and then all at once they realize that I am one of them. They walk with me no longer afraid and in time we part ways, their tails swishing

and dark eyes peaceful for the moment. An opossum climbs a tree along the trail. We consider each other for a moment and then I start walking up the slight incline toward the bench that is waiting for me. At the bench is a windmill that turns in the breeze and drips water into a stock tank and from the tank into a pool where the yellow cheeked warblers come to drink. In the tank are some goldfish. I drink the coffee I brought with me and share my scone with the fish. They seem happy to see me or perhaps they only love me for my crumbs.

In time I begin to walk again up the limestone path across the top of a ridge and down the other side to an ancient granite bolder that overlooks the next valley. When I sit on this old stone in the coolness of the early summer morning I realize that the gift not only teaches me to walk; it teaches me to sit. Like so many others I have invested too much in the American drive to "do something." Instead, I sit and look through the trees where someone has carved a heart upon its younger bark. The heart remains, perhaps long after the artist and his inspiration have passed. I imagine a time when two lovers sat upon this stone and gazed through the trees and wondered if time could be held still. And, now I sit, just me... watching and listening to the chickadees and feeling grateful for the moment. The gift also teaches me to be grateful.

I have walked these trails during every season of the year. In the fall the leaves turn golden, yellow, and red. They fall in the wind and the chilled air braces your face. In the winter I come later in the day and find warmth on a sundrenched bench. In

the spring, I sit on my boulder and notice as life springs white flowers among the rocks and green leaves among the trees. But in summer, I come early. In summer, I sit alone with my thoughts and my memories. I walk in the early morning coolness putting life in perspective.

There are many others who have found this place; it is no secret. I see a group of men who jog the trails and speak in familiar tones. On the lower trails a family spends time together laughing. A woman walks with binoculars in hand searching for birds among the leaves. A couple sits together; in love. And I am reminded that so many call this place home.

In the distance, not too far away, I can hear the booming of men at work. I cannot see them but I know where they are and what they are doing. Blasting the top of the limestone hillside, they make room for "progress." Just beyond crown ridge I have seen the dry white scar that shines above the green parklands. Soon the same hillside where the mountain lions trod and the coyote sang will be nothing but rooftops and driveways. I walk on.

I have made no secret of my great love of this land. The Texas Hill Country is unique in its subtle beauty. Sometimes it reminds me of Africa. Always, it reminds me of home. This summer I hope you will walk in the early morning coolness and take time to notice the gift. We must be careful not to take it for granted. We must be careful not to love it to death. Once it is gone, it will never return. And when that day come, like the two lovers sitting upon the stone...only memories will remain. X

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