

Catoxen Cabin on the Rancocas

BY GEORGE SPENCER MORRIS

All things must have a beginning as well as an ending, and our camp on the Rancocas commenced in the writer's parlor one Sunday afternoon about ten years ago. We were sitting before the open wood-fire talking of old times. There were two of us, the one a sportsman much interested in birds, the other an ornithologist much interested in sport. We were reminiscing, and our good wives would be the first to forgive their much blessed husbands for the little note of longing that crept into our conversation as we dwelt on days gone by when guns and canoes, frying-pans and fishing tackle claimed our attention rather than servants' wages and the sizes of babies' shoes. Presently the long-legged sportsman broached the thought that perhaps even staid married men like ourselves might keep a little in touch with old woods life if we went about it in the right way. The idea found a ready resting place in the mind of the short-legged ornithologist, and then and there was conceived the plan of erecting a small house, shack or shanty somewhere in "God's great out-of-doors." We had not the faintest idea of the best location for this air castle, but we were not unduly ambitious; we sought no sportsman's paradise. We just wanted a bit of woodland—pines preferred—well away from the city; a stream that would float a canoe and perhaps furnish a few fish; a country not thickly settled, where we could cut our own firewood without criticism and once more enjoy the sweet incense of frying bacon wafted upward through overhanging boughs; where in the autumn we might be able now and then to knock over a quail or a rabbit. In the spring we just wanted to watch the flowers grow and hear the birds sing; and then, too, a fellow could sometimes take his wife and children. This generous thought naturally arose to soothe the stirrings of the domestic conscience.

The next move was made in the dining-room of a well-known club, where the table was spread for three. The men of the



PHOTO. BY H. S. NEWELL.



PHOTO. BY W. STONE.

CATOXEN CABIN.

fireside conference had taken unto themselves another, a smiling blonde-haired individual whose name is known to all students of American ornithology. Later they added two more to their number, one a cheerful fellow, who while he loves the bird in the bush, cares still more for the bush containing the bird, for it is among the botanists that we must look to find his name emblazoned; the other a man of learning, an instructor in one of America's greatest universities, a close student of birds, with a keen love for out-door life.

The diners separated after having come to certain definite conclusions. All were enthusiastically interested in the scheme. They at once planned a campaign of search for a possible location. They were agreed in thinking that the spot should not be more than twenty miles from Philadelphia, and that a return ticket should not cost more than one dollar.

Investigations to the north, south and west on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware revealed no satisfactory location. At a later gathering some one boldly "took the bull by the horns," and said, "Well, I suppose there is nothing for it but Jersey." For the benefit of readers residing far from the benign influences of the Delaware valley, let me state that it is customary for Pennsylvanians in general, and Philadelphians in particular, to speak in a haughty, and even contumelious manner when referring to our sister State. There is nothing to justify it; it's just a time-honored custom, with no real malice back of it. Having thus asserted our superiority, we straightway betake ourselves for the months of summer to the shining sands and surf of Jersey's health-giving coasts, where for a long series of weeks the busy natives devote themselves to the pleasant task of separating us from our hard-earned cash.

But between the sea and the river lie sixty miles of sandy soil, well watered by streams that flow with a dark, strong current. There are the highly cultivated sections, which extend across the northern half of the State and down the eastern shore of the Delaware, and then there is the great central wilderness, stretching southward from the middle of the State and reaching at most points to the coast. It is a region of pine and oak and cedar, lonely and level, where the deer is still to be found and

small game abounds ; where you may wander far without meeting with signs of man, save perhaps the charred relics of deserted charcoal camps. You may take a likely-looking trail into this lonely region, sure that it must lead to some point of interest, but it rarely does. It just ramifies and fades away, and one is fortunate if there is enough of its thread left to make possible the retracing of his steps. Over this lonely land the broad, brooding wings of the Turkey Vulture are constantly spread ; its dark swamps are bright with *Cypripedium* and White Orchids ; in the spring its dry, sandy stretches are fragrant with trailing arbutus ; the little sundews lift their heads in the moist places ; millions of cranberries gleam in the brown bogs in autumn. In the winter it is a country of beautiful color ; rich russets and reds give contrast to the dark greens and purples of pine and cedar.

Here in the warm shelter of seed-bearing thickets thousands of birds find food and protection during the winter. The light, sandy soil does not hold the frost. The proximity to the sea has a distinctly moderating effect upon the temperature. You come upon birds and plants and even insects and reptiles which you had not expected to find so far north. In short it seems as though a bit of the Carolinas had been transported thither. In summer the marshes dry up to some extent and the land becomes gray, parched and dusty. Forest fires burn here and there, and by autumn the dry and sandy regions look withered and wasted.

A mild March day found three of the would-be campers wandering on the edge of this mysterious country. The old town of Medford was not far distant ; the deep, dark waters of the south branch of the Rancocas Creek flowed beside them. In the distance the purple pines formed a frieze along the skyline, hemming in the desolate regions beyond. We had come to the eastern edge of the farming country. A mile further and we would enter the Bear Swamp region, and then one might wander across some forty miles of almost uninhabited wilderness before reaching the coast. To us it seemed an enchanted land lying out there in the soft spring sunshine, and it called us with alluring voice. We determined to settle, if possible, within sight of its borders.

A thin strip of woodland fringed both banks of the Rancocas where we were wandering. The growth was about equally divided between pine and deciduous trees. Presently we came to a grove of taller pine crowning a little knoll which rose somewhat steeply from the bottoms bordering the stream. At the foot of the knoll bubbled a clear strong spring. A more ideal camp sight could hardly be imagined. But what would the owner of the land say to the coming of strangers upon his broad acres? As though in answer to an unspoken prayer there straightway appeared before us a tall son of the soil who looked us over with a keen but kindly glance. He was a man well on in years, full of a native dignity, and a sort of strong gentleness. We told him our story, and somewhat to our surprise he seemed to understand. The result was that then and there arrangements were made for the erection of our cabin beneath the whispering pines. I will not dwell upon our building struggles: suffice it to say that one of the members who posed as an architect draughted plans. There were heated arguments as to the most economical methods of cutting lumber, and it looked at one time as though blood might be shed in connection with the erection of the fireplace and flue.

But at length there came a lovely day in May, when for the first time we gathered under our newly-erected roof-tree, and taking our lives in our hands boldly plunged into the dangers of amateur cookery. Looking back over the past decade with an eye to our efforts along this line, one is impressed with the fact that man is a creature hard to kill. That first meal ended, we gathered about our broad fireplace and smoked the pipe of peace. Our labors were over, our dream had found fulfilment. Outside the moonlight sifted down through the pines and the wind whispered softly. We were far from the sounds of man. Only the occasional barking of the farmer's dog in the distance seemed to unite us with the outer world. There were the wild cries of the seemingly sleepless Killdeer over in the pasture, and every now and then an Ovenbird or a Catbird would break into song, stirred by the spirit of spring and the bright moonlight.

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fashion at all seasons of the year. We have penetrated the lonely regions to the eastward almost to the coast. The waters between us and the Delaware have been navigated by canoe. We have tracked the small beasts of the woods in the snows of winter. We have watched the Shore Larks and Pipits sweeping over the bare fields like leaves in the gale. We have become intimate with the swamp-dwelling birds which grow fat in the winter on the seeds and berries of sheltered thickets. In the spring we have heard the first flute-like notes of the Bluebirds traveling northward across the sky, and have welcomed the gay throngs that follow until all our grooves and thickets are filled with fluttering wings and rollicking songs. We have watched the building of nests and the rearing of young as spring and summer progressed, and then when autumn has made all the woods and thickets to swim in a riot of color, we have seen the Wild Ducks come driving down the curves of the stream, and realized that soon the snowflakes would fly again.

Moreover, there has been a delightful human interest about this little cabin. Jolly family parties, when the flutter of skirts and the laughter of children enlivened the woods; wild, marauding bands of ornithologists and botanists who swarmed up trees and plunged into swamps in search of prey; dreamy-eyed artists with palette and canvas; tired business men who just wanted to lie on their backs and look up at the pines through half-shut eyes; and then there are the snug evenings spent before our glowing fireside when the winter wind whistles about the house and the good tale is told and the hot argument fought out. Yes, our venture has been a success, and has helped not only ourselves but others also, we trust.

All this has been written in the hope of stimulating a desire for such a life on the part of the readers of *CASSINIA*. We all know something of "the call of the wild," but whatever our inclinations may be there are few of us who can respond to it, save perhaps at very rare intervals. There is, however, a modified summons, which we might term "the call of the half wild," and to this we can more easily respond. Dame Nature is always loitering just round the corner. It pays to follow her beckoning; you can find no better company.