**Colonial Wilderness**

As humans, we are inexorably bound to the context into which we were born. Each society, each individual, can only catalog his responses by the standard of personal experience. Since the first homo sapiens looked into the sky and pondered the origin of the water that fell from the clouds, we have sought to explain our world. One fact was clear, even to early man, we are all at the mercy of nature. Some societies sought to explain this dependency by investing significance in each organism, a spirit in each entity. In ancient Greece, a pantheon of gods and demigods each controlled a unique aspect of an otherwise chaotic world. In Judeo-Christian tradition the preeminence rested in the hands of a single deity. It is this monotheistic heritage which invested the majority of pioneers with confidence in their ability to shape nature and reform it for their benefit. This confidence, however, was tempered with an entirely reasonable fear.

Many dangers awaited those who chose to strike out into the wilderness. Dehydration, exposure, starvation and disease must have been prominent in every mind. These must have followed the pioneers like the footsteps left behind them. To go where no others have gone must have required either an extraordinary conviction or a deficit of alternatives. Either motivation would have to be supplemented with raw courage. The most obvious concern was rooted in uncertainty. Would you find water or food? Where would you settle? What would you do if the soil was rocky? Would winter snow come early and how long until the melt? What if you were injured, ill, infected? All of these thoughts could not have been far from mind.

It is only natural that settlers would employ their strength and resolve to turn a perpetually hostile environment into a more gentile existence. They characterized their struggle as a battle, using military terms to describe their interaction with the wilderness and pronouncing their survival a triumph. According to Nash, “The New England Colonists saw themselves as ‘Christ’s Army’ or ‘Soldiers of Christ’ in a war against wilderness.” They positioned themselves in opposition to the native land and to its indigenous populations. In place of wilderness, they coveted the safety of pastures and townships. It was a harsh existence, scraped out season by season, by individuals determined to bend nature to their purpose.

As I have never been, by conviction or deficit, forced to scratch my existence from the earth, I cannot judge the actions of those intrepid immigrants who forged paths where none previously existed. Like them, I am bound by context, unable to escape my own perceptions. I do believe the struggle they faced might have been diminished if they worked in harmony with their new environment and offered respect to those who knew the land. A humble, receptive community, eager to coexist rather than dominate, might have inspired a more positive reception. As hindsight is 20/20, and foresight if foolish, there is no way to know what might have transpired.

The only experience I have had in nature that caused me actual fear was being caught in a thunderstorm. I live in Central Florida and have been told since childhood that we are the lightning capital of the world. It is not unusual for our area to receive 10,000+ strikes per hour during a summer storm. I spend a great deal of time outdoors and have been caught in a good few storms over the years. There is nothing quite like the resonating blast as lightning flashes and thunder immediately follows. If you are outside, you crouch down into the smallest ball, tucking your head and keeping your rubber-soled feet flat on the ground. In these moments, I would have to agree with the ancient Greeks. The storm has a mind and spirit of its own.