For his birthday on April 16, 1953, my mother gave my father a recently published book by Bangor writer Bill Geagan titled *Nature I Loved*. The author had inscribed it to my dad, with whom he was acquainted. Eighteen years later, at age twelve, I discovered the book on a shelf in our house and read it. And I reread it, again and again.

That book, along with Jean Craighead George’s *My Side of the Mountain*, essentially changed my life. Well, perhaps I shouldn’t say they changed my life, but for a young boy with a craving for time in nature and a youthful desire to strike out and test myself in the woods, these two books certainly guided me on a path of adventure.

Bill was in his early twenties when in the 1920s, he struck out to try to find himself, living in a derelict cabin on Hermon Pond in Maine. Supported in the endeavor by his mother and nearly estranged from a father who was losing patience with his son, Bill worked hard, contemplated, pontificated (if only to himself), and survived and thrived on the shores of the lake (Hermon Pond is technically a lake). *Nature I Loved* is a loving testimony to Bill’s time in the woods – fishing, hunting, exploring, existential soul-searching, and even falling in love for the first time are chronicled in his story. The book spoke to me.

Easily impressionable, I became driven to live in the woods by myself for an entire summer vacation, using only rudimentary tools and my wits. When I approached my father with the idea, he (knowing I didn’t *have* any wits) suspected that I would likely be dead in two or three weeks, and after thinking it over for what seemed like a bit too long, decided against it. Even with eight children at home, it hadn’t escaped my father that my nose was in *Nature I Loved* much of the time, and he suggested we consult Bill after church the following Sunday. We did, and when my father told Bill my plan, the author smiled at me and regarded me with a respectful, if not amused, gaze. I remember Bill offering me words of encouragement, and, in retrospect, he did so without making me feel absurd. Which I was. Eventually, it was agreed that it would be better if I acquired some skills first. Bill recommended I attend the Penobscot County Conservation School at Branch Pond in Ellsworth, Maine, a summer camp emphasizing backcountry skills and woodscraft. I wanted to go, but Mom and Dad didn’t have the money to send me. After a couple of weeks, Bill called my father over after Sunday service and offered to sponsor me to the summer camp program. I think the arrangement made my mom a little uncomfortable — she had been raised a Baptist and wasn’t one to accept charity.

I did go to the summer camp, and although I certainly didn’t win the “Camper of the Week” award (I swear to God I thought I’d outgrown the bedwetting), I also wasn’t kicked out of the program and sent home early, so I considered the whole endeavor a triumph.

For several generations of Mainers, *Nature I Loved* became a subtler homespun version of Thoreau’s *Walden*. But Bill Geagan, at the time more a fly fishing bum than a transcendentalist, worked very hard at his cabin. While Thoreau’s mother and sister delivered his meals and firewood so Henry would have the time to think things over, Bill eked out an existence by any means he could find. He eased his existential angst through hard work and by leaning on his faith. He grew crops, ate the fish, deer, and rabbits he killed, and earned what little money he could from guiding, writing, and illustrating. Such an industrious attempt at finding oneself appealed to thousands of Mainers who read his book, as it did to me.

Bill went on to write several other books, but *Nature I Loved* is his greatest legacy. He and his wife Alice never had children of their own, but they had their books to which Alice contributed greatly.

Bill died in November 1974. I was a sophomore in high school, and I had sadly watched his health, battered by cancer, deteriorate. True to his unassuming way, the family’s obituary in the Bangor Daily News was only fifty-seven words long. A short time later, his friend Bob Leeman wrote a lovely, heartfelt piece about Bill in the newspaper in his “*Needles from the Pine*” column — the name of which was inspired by Bill years earlier. Every writer who has written about Bill’s life tells of how the author of *Nature I Loved* was buried with a sprig of pine needles in his hand because that is too cool not to mention.

I started writing my first outdoor-themed book at fifty, the same age Bill was when he began *Nature.* Years later, decades after Bill and Alice had passed away, I investigated Bill so I could write an affectionate essay about the writer’s influence on me. The research became a story in itself. Initially, I thought it would be enjoyable to find the location of Bill’s cabin, see if I might draw a little inspiration from the place, and fish some of the spots the author described in his books. In the end, my quest for the cabin’s location – the site long reclaimed by the forest and occupied now by modern lakeside camps – became a story about the man beyond his influence. It became about the author’s follies, triumphs, and perhaps more importantly, legacies.

I learned many new things about the author while researching him for the essay. Reading through his papers, I learned that he was an incredibly thrifty man, often recycling old, used pages of paper for his first drafts, sometimes even using the backs of envelopes. I discovered that he never learned to drive and that Alice or his fishing and hunting friends had to transport him everywhere. And that he was fond of good whiskey. While not poor, I also learned that he and Alice never had much money and that the $300 he paid for my sponsorship at the Conservation School must’ve been a hardship for them, and it made me appreciate the gesture even more. As a writer, it took me several books to get to the point where I could make any money from writing, and during the struggle, I would often recall a passage from *Nature I Loved*: “Money, fame, and power aren’t everything in this world. Many men of only very moderate success who live in comparative obscurity, but who enjoy what they are doing, are very often the happiest.” Those lines buoyed me, just as his summer camp scholarship had done decades earlier.

*Nature I Loved* is a beautiful book that stands the test of time and is still beloved by many people. When Maine native Paul Kelleher decided it was high time that somebody produced an e-book version of it so that new, younger generations of people throughout the country could discover and learn from the book, I was thrilled. Paul had the credentials and the desire to see the project through, and now North Country Press in Unity, Maine, has stepped in to place the physical book back onto bookshelves in Maine, where it belongs. Bill would be proud and grateful, and my being asked to write the forward for this anniversary issue is one of my greatest honors.

Every couple of summers, I go back to Hermon Pond to fish and explore places Bill described in his books. Time has changed the landscape and changed me (I’ve grown up…and out), but the same streams, brooks, and meadows are there. I often sit in my canoe or climb up on a rock on the banks of the lake and wonder what it was like there in 1922 when only a few log cabins dotted the shoreline. I think about the long-gone tiny town at the head of the lake that once had a post office, a train station, and a store. I wonder about the lives of the people that lived there and what it was like for them at the time, their heads still swimming from the ravages of World War I. And I imagine Bill, unsure of himself, untrained in any trade, canoeing up and down the lake in a leaky boat, trying to figure out what the heck to do with his life.

Bill Geagan went to Hermon Pond precisely a hundred years ago to find himself. I went there ten years ago to find *him*, but what I found was that he had always been right where I left him…in the pages of *Nature I Loved*, along with his words of encouragement, his reverence for nature, and his kindness.

— Dee Dauphinee

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