

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

"Why should not we . . . have our national preserves, where no villages need be destroyed, in which the bear and panther, and some even of the hunter race, may still exist, . . . not for idle sport or food, but for inspiration and our own true recreation? or shall we, like the villains, grub them all up, poaching on our own national domains?"

So Henry David Thoreau wrote more than a century ago and nearly twenty years before Yellowstone, our first national park, was established.

Thoreau was one of the pioneers of American conservation. Born in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1817, he graduated from Harvard College in 1837 and returned to his native town to live, where with but a few brief interludes he remained the rest of his life. Many of his townsmen came to consider him an eccentric, for, after a few years of school teaching, he abandoned any pretense of following a profession and devoted himself to his two loves--writing and observing nature. They could not understand a man of his education not making a "success" of his life. When in 1845 he went out to Walden Pond, about two miles from Concord center, built himself a cabin for \$28.12½ and proceeded to live there at a cost of twenty-seven cents a week, his townsmen were all the more convinced of his oddity. Two years later he returned to the village to live with his parents, but he still continued to live the simple, unconventional life, boasting often that he reversed the Biblical formula by working one day and resting six. What he called

"rest" however meant spending hours every day at his writing desk and still more hours studying the flora and fauna of his native region. The one day of "work" he devoted to surveying, pencil-making or any other form of manual labor that enabled him to pick up a few dollars.

Thoreau's Walden (1854), the account of his two years at the pond, is universally considered one of the greatest masterpieces of nature writing. It is more widely read than any other book-length work of 19th century American non-fiction, and it has been translated into virtually every major modern language. Nature lovers also enjoy his Cape Cod, Maine Woods, and such shorter essays as "Walking," and "Wild Apples." True connoisseurs relish above all his fourteen-volume, two-million-word-long Journal, which records in perceptive detail his observations of nature and life in Concord over a quarter of a century.

Thoreau was more than simply a lover of nature. He was a keen student who kept records of his observations so comprehensive that they are regularly consulted by twentieth century scientists. His paper on "The Succession of Forest Trees" was a pioneer study in ecological succession. But he was more than a scientist and an observer. He was a philosopher of nature who studied man's relation to nature and nature's relation to man. He believed that man, Antaeus-like, derived his strength from contact with nature. He often stated that he could not preserve his health and spirits unless he spent at least four hours a day "sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements" and urged his friends to "air their lives" and "starve their vices" by frequent

excursions into the woods and fields.

At a time when his contemporaries were thinking only of exploiting our natural resources commercially, he foresaw their rapid exhaustion. He stoutly advocated each village's setting aside tracts of land to remain forever wild for the benefit of coming generations. He also urged federal ownership of outstanding mountain ranges, waterfalls, and wilderness areas, for, he said, "In wildness is the preservation of the world."

Thoreau died in 1862 at the age of only forty-four, ironically the victim of that scourge of civilization, tuberculosis. Ignored by his contemporaries, he has come into his own in our day as not only one of our greatest writers but also as one of our pioneer conservationists.