



BACK TO NATURE: MAKING THE TIME

by Carolyn Faught

"You be the Tie Fighter, I'll be the X-wing." This from my Star Wars-obsessed four year old, Will, with whom I had spent the morning battling with in some imaginary galaxy. My other son, Sam, 13, was on the computer. He was plotting against Hitler's army in a game that, although educational, was eating up far too much of his Saturday.

Meanwhile, four inches of fresh snow beckoned. The winds that had howled all night were silenced; the sun was making an occasional appearance, and the thermometer read 30 degrees. Why weren't we out there?

I called my husband, Dave, at his office. It was tax season and he is a CPA already under the gun in early February. "Come home," I said. "You can work later. I've got a plan."

I loaded the car with snowshoes, Will's inflatable sled and my cross-country skis. In no time, we were heading through Northport to Kehl Lake, a 140-acre natural area preserved by the Leelanau Conservancy in 1990.

After parking, we tumbled out and strapped on our equipment. Dave attached a rope to pull Will in a donut-shaped sled plowhorse-style and we were off.

We crossed a field scattered with sumac, the plants' velvety maroon plumes bright against the contrasting snow. Dave led the way to an opening in what felt like a sky-high curtain of pine and cedar. After passing the kiosk holding a trail map, it seemed as if we were slipping backstage and into some incredible show.

The forest at Kehl Lake is full of century-old hemlocks. As the Sno-Tube swished along the winding path,



Will kicked back, his little upturned face studying the delicate, lacy-needled branches and the heavens beyond. After a bit, Dave stopped to rest and touched a low lying, snow-laden branch. Cascading powder created a sparkling veil, like

magic dust. No talk of Darth Vader or rebel forces here.

We came upon a twisted tree near the shore of the lake, known as a "marker tree." Its unique, bent trunk and shoreline location made it an easy find for traveling Native American, who used this tree as a meeting place.

Looking out over the frozen, undeveloped lake, I told the kids about a man named Albert Voice, who, along with his crew cut big chunks of ice from Kehl Lake in the early 1900s. Voice stored the ice chunks between layers of straw in ice houses and when summer came, sold the ice to households and businesses for refrigeration.



The trail led away from the lake then, and we passed a shallow-rooted cedar that had blown over in a storm, its tangled, earth-clad tentacles upended for us to ponder. I pointed to a hummock ahead and told Sam that it had most likely been created as a fallen tree had decomposed.

These things and more I had learned from Mary Lyons and Marsha Buehler, two of the Conservancy's Docents who led hikes all year long at Kehl Lake and other Natural Areas. In my capacity as part time Communications Director, I had been out with Mary and Marsha earlier in the year, and found their knowledge astounding.

Near the end of the one-mile trail, my family pushed on ahead and I found myself left alone in the peace of the deep woods. I thought about how we had moved to Northern Michigan 15 years ago in order to access this very thing; that we had left promising, lucrative careers in Cincinnati because we wanted to live amidst such beauty.

As we leave the enchanted forest I'm asking myself why we let the laundry or work deadlines or the minutia that fill our daily lives keep us from enjoying these sorts of experiences more often. Right out our back door is a playground for our children which includes pristine waters, spectacular shorelines, majestic dunes and snowy forests.. All we have to do is open that door.

Back at the car, stepping out of his snowshoes, Sam looked up as I approached. "Wow, that was beautiful, Mom," he says. "Can we do it again tomorrow?"