

Last week's essay about cowpies made me think back to earlier times. When we were girls, my sister and I were responsible for "going after the cows" in late afternoon, bringing them to the barn for milking. Although this was a regular task, it was also usually an adventure. All of Nature that existed on our route was at our disposal. We watched birds, examined the colors and patterns of stones in the pile on our route, and hoped to see something unexpected—a muskrat, maybe, swimming in the Apple Tree Pond, or a deer emerging from the Speicher Woods. Usually, though, our entertainment along the way was of our own making.

One of the ways we enlivened the daily job was to lead each other across an expanse of field or pasture. The "leadee" shut her eyes, and the leader took her by the hand and led her across any interesting features of the terrain. Often, this involved a thistle, an unseen hollow in the field, an anthill, or a water puddle. However, cowpies, especially fresh ones, were also fair game. I never could understand that I stepped in so many while my sister seemed to move around them quite easily even though I was leading her directly to fresh manure. Only in later years did I realize that she, older and wiser, kept her eyes just slightly slitted so that she could actually see where she was going.

Our mother went with us sometimes when we took our daily cow trek. From her, we learned about other little diversions available to country kids. She had grown up with eight brothers and no sisters. When people mentioned that she, as the only girl, must have been spoiled, she denied it vehemently. Instead, she said, she had to be tough to survive with so many boys in the family.

Probably from some of them had come her knowledge of certain little tricks that added to the pleasures of the fields and woods. She taught us to whistle using a blade of grass held between our thumbs, with hands clasped. We can still do that. She showed us how we could chew the purple and white bloom of a bull thistle until we had a good mouthful of liquid and then spit "tobacco juice" at some target. The chewed thistle produced a very brown and evil looking saliva. And, she showed us a trick with stalks of timothy grass that we were told not to pull on visiting children. It is easy to cross two timothy stalks in the mouth, with the heads in opposite directions and after biting down, pulling the stem ends away from the mouth, it will result in the victim with a mouth full of timothy fluff.

We knew where the wild apple trees were, we could find the one gooseberry bush in the depths of the Speicher Woods, and we could walk directly to the violets, Sweet William, and bloodroot flowers without error. I never could, though, avoid those fresh cowpies.