

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



Truly Golden Adventures

Our columnist recalls childhood hikes with her father – and the Golden Book guides that introduced her to the natural world.

By J. Morton Galetto

With the onset of the Thanksgiving holiday I began to think about what aspects of life I'm

thankful for, and which ones might be fun to share with you, the readers.

One of the first things that came to mind was the way my father shared his love of the great outdoors with our family. On Sundays he would take the children in the neighborhood for a hike. Often we would go to the 300-acre Rionda estate, in Cresskill and Alpine, New Jersey, or sometimes we would visit the historic Rio Vista Tower/ Devil's Tower and Chapel, where my dad would relate some lore about the famed Spanish-born "Sugar Baron" Rionda's monument.

Manuel Rionda (b.1854 - d.1943) called his estate "Rio Vista" (c.1904) since it sat perched above the Hudson River (Rio) and offered views of Yonkers and New York City. The Palisades was once called millionaire's row, but when we visited it was primarily woods and some ruins from the estate.

Today the Alpine is once again a millionaire's row, with more tightly-placed mansions and primarily two-acre estates. It is said to be the "most affluent zip code in the United States (Forbes 2012 median home value of \$4.2 million, this is far lower than the homes surrounding the tower have sold for)." In my adolescent years it was all wooded and just a mile away, as the crow flies, from our

modest Cape Cod style home. But our approach was circuitous and we likely walked three to four miles round-trip, which with my short stride seemed like twice the distance.

As we wandered, we identified trees, shrubs, insects, birds, tadpoles, frogs, crystals, fossils, an occasional Native American point, and lots more. Each of the hikers took turns carrying a forked stick above his head for removing cobwebs crossing the trail. But the highlight as a child was reaching the hundred-foot tower and hearing about Mrs. Harriet Rionda's ghost, who reportedly haunted it.

I doubt my father knew much about the Rionda's, but he had fun creating some tall tales to get us properly motivated and spooked, which in my case takes very little provocation on either score.

Current lore refers to the stone structure as "Devil's Tower," and has Harriet jumping to her death from its heights, distraught over the discovery her husband's infidelities. Then, as any good jilted dead wife would do, she haunts the tower to this day. I honestly don't remember what my dad said, I was too in awe of reaching the ornate tower and too frightened to listen. Furthermore, I knew on some level that he was embellishing any story he wove anyway.

In truth, the tower simply housed an elevator to his office at the top, which he could access from his home via an underground tunnel. It also served as a water tower, supplying the estate's surrounding buildings. The structure was designed by one of Rionda's neighbors, the architect Charles Rollinson Lamb, and our walks often began by travelling Lamb's Lane eastward.

As for Harriet's death, the Palisades Parks Conservancy reports it as being "an entirely natural demise from the after-effects of a stroke, in a New York hospital in 1922."

Now that I have set the stage allow me to share my purpose. On birthdays and special occasions my father would purchase *A Golden Nature Guide* on any number of topics. Often we would load a backpack with a few guides, fruit, and some sandwiches, while he would carry his old army canteen.

If we knew we were going to be around a stony area we would pack a book on rocks or fossils. Possibly because I was close to the ground my interest was often insects and their identification; the pages of my old insect guide are worn thin and its binding is secured with packing tape. And when watching the bird feeder, *Birds* was the go-to

resource for learning about species. I still use the guides to this day; I'm sure nostalgia is a factor.

The reward of identifying something you see in the field still holds the same allure for me, and the natural history facts build a greater appreciation for each natural object or species. Looking at a bird's range map and imagining the places it has seen and travelled is fascinating. Seeing the differences between a male's and female's plumage and learning the logical explanations behind their colorations should ever hold us in wonder.



Not every child will adopt an interest simply from perusing a nature guide but many will, and for those that do, a lifetime of enjoyment awaits them. Photo by S. Godfrey.

Studying an acorn to decipher what species of oak it fell from should never lose the

wonder associated with the beginning of a new life. Surely long before the 1300s, when Geoffrey Chaucer wrote, "Mighty oaks from little acorns grow," people have been marveled at life bursting fourth from a tiny seed. Nor should we lose the metaphorical significance of the proverb itself – as it might relate to first readers. I am sure that many a great biologist has been fostered by the pages of those tiny 160-page readers, many of them going on to embrace science and write theses, and volumes on the same topics.



People of all ages feel accomplishment when they identify a species. Photo by S. Godfrey.

It is not until we identify something that we can share our experience with others. It is

through identification that we make the first step toward appreciating the existence of a plant or animal or rock. In fact it is in part why we are named at birth, to give us an identity.

The Golden Nature Guides (later entitled Golden Guides) were first introduced in 1949, although most of mine are copyrighted in the 1960s. The first was "Birds" while the last one issued was "Snakes," in 2002. Originally Western Publishing distributed the volumes under their children's department, but in the early 2000s St. Martin's Press took over the series with revised and updated versions. In all, 84 different titles were published.

The guides had a 160-page formula, intended to fit in a pocket. While the books were edited by Herbert S. Zim and Vera Webster, each was written by an expert on its topical title.

I purchased a number of the same titles that I had in my youth for my niece and nephew. And I added Peterson's "First Guide to...", another series with a simpler format, that was introduced in the 1980s. I know of thirteen titles in this collection.



Possible captions: Golden Guides are still available at \$8 or less used. Peterson First Guide varies from \$6.80 - \$123. for a new set of 13 (Nature-watch.com).

Curious, I called a number of well-known local naturalists to find out if they had used Golden Guides as children. Many said they loved them, still enjoy them, and especially enjoyed the illustrations. Some named specific titles they liked such as *Pond Life*, *Stars*, *Sky Observers*, and *Mammals*. I also asked 20 recent participants in a birding walk if they had used these guides as youngsters, and at least a third said they had. A number of teachers told me they still

make the Golden Guides available to their students.

The most basic guides are a good place to start when you seek to identify something, because the most common species are covered. When something is new to you it helps to begin with an elementary understanding before you delve into complexities. Although they are dated, the Golden Guides are still a good starting point. With technology there are more sophisticated tools that I use on a regular basis, but honestly for me and also for many children there is nothing like a book to capture your fancy.

So the ghost of "Devil's Tower" is apparently as much of a fabrication as were my father's tales, but every good story needs a hook and so too might every good hike. For me the little Golden Guides were one component that got me fascinated by nature. But primarily it was the mentoring of my father and his interest in the world around us that has given me a lifelong enjoyment for visiting natural, historic, and cultural areas. I am grateful for the role he played in my life.

I would like to encourage parents and grandparents to take a child outdoors. And by all means consider giving them some introductory nature guides this holiday

season in the hopes that they can foster, in the next generation, a lifetime of enjoyment in the natural world.■

Sources

Devil in the Details, Palisades Parks Conservancy, Palisades Interstate Park Commission, September 2023.
NJpalisades.org

The Devil's Tower of Alpine, New Jersey Magazine, New Jersey.com.

Golden Guide, List of Guides, Wikipedia.

Historical Marker Database, hmdb.org.

Rionda Estate



Rionda's 100 - foot Stone Tower was designed by Charles Rollinson Lamb erected in 1910. Alpine Historical Society marker reads: Alpine Stone Clock Tower Formerly Rio Vista Observation and memorial tower. Original owner Manuel Rionda, Erected in

1910. Plaque dated 1998. Photo: Palisades Parks Conservancy.

Rionda's Stone Chapel still stands having been integrated into a two-acre property's grounds at 8 Esplanade, Alpine, New Jersey. It too was designed by Lamb and was built to house Harriet Clarke Rionda's ashes after her death.

