

THE DOGWOOD TRAIL, OHIO'S BEST KEPT SECRET

Glenna Holloway

If you can find it hidden away in the Appalachian Plateau, less than 60 miles south of Columbus, Hocking Hills is a kaleidoscope of white and pink dogwood, redbud, uncountable wildflowers and the best scenery in the midwest. Composed of six noncontiguous state parks, Hocking Hills offers great variety to hikers, photographers, anglers, and nature lovers.

Unlike most sandstone formations, the variety and color of the intriguing rockscapes are the result of meltwater from the last ice age rather than glacial gouging. Time and a unique climate have colluded in ways that aren't duplicated elsewhere. Canadian hemlocks make their southernmost dip into the midwest while dogwoods confront the northerly winter in vast numbers. Caves, arches, and escarpments provide a dramatic background for spring's palette. Professional and amateur botanists exult over slopes of trillium, harebell, fire pinks, hepatica, moccasin flower, colt's foot, astilbe and rare kinds of violets.

(cont.)

The caves are especially interesting. Not deep and labyrinthine, they are called "recess caves" where softer rock has leached out from under the surface layers, leaving great overhangs and vaults. Ash Cave is considered the finest example of such a cave on our continent. Its name is derived from the deep mounds of ashes left by Indians who sheltered there. Mesmerized by a slender waterfall and a cathedral atmosphere, visitors always become silent in Ash Cave. It's the largest of the caves and the most easily accessible. The trail is short, unobstructed and there's no climbing.

The northernmost park is Cantwell Cliffs. Enormous rocks lean, split, hang, overlap. There are wide crevices, serpentine fissures and stone steps so small and steep only the surest well-shod feet should try them. Miles of fairly level wildlife trails lie at the bottom of the valley.

Rock House is next. A cavern rather than a cave, the first glimpse of Rock House is reminiscent of movies about explorers who stumble on the remains of ancient jungle civilizations. Ladder steps carved into the face of the precipice look forbidding but the descent into the hollow is worth the effort even if you decide not to climb those sheer rock steps to enter the cavern itself. The form and enormity of it can't be appreciated from the upper rim. Long and tubular, the inside corridor is studded with "windows" where the softer Black Hand sandstone has weathered

(cont.)

and washed out. Columns supporting the ceiling were formed the same way. Large portions of the rock appear to be painted with abstract murals due to colorful minerals, oxidation and lichens. Ferns, columbines and mosses cling to the declivities among sinewy shapes of roots.

Rock House has a colorful past. It was once a hideout for early Indians, then later fugitives and felons both famous and infamous. For a while it was a haven for bootleggers. In 1835 a 16 room hotel with a grand ballroom, livery stable and post office was built where the park shelter now stands. It attracted socialites from the east who were eager to see the "untamed west." It was razed in 1925. A former sojourner wrote a few years afterward, "The vegetation is so thick, I can't believe we ever waltzed here." The surrounding forest is rich and varied as it was then, containing many songbirds, owls and woodpeckers.

Moving south on Highway 374 you arrive at Conkle's Hollow, named in 1797 by settlers for the person whose name they found carved in a rock at the high end of the gorge. Narrow and deep, it's one of the most spectacular areas. Rock formations loom like other worlds fallen from their orbits. Trees split and straddle stone, grow in and out of it in their quest for light. Trunks and logs crosshatch the evergreens and creepers at bizarre angles just the way nature dropped them, either in natural death or in the wake of a cyclonic wind that ripped through the

(cont.)

gorge 30 years ago. The weight of an unprecedented snow in March of '87 broke more trees. But out of the chaos comes a sense of wonder at each twist of the trail. New vistas open, new designs are revealed in the rocks. There are round holes that would accommodate small animals, and wide yawns big enough for men. Toward the sky at the top of the ledges, the hardwoods lift their new greens. In the mornings the color filters down the sunshafts to tint the damp haze at the bottom. This peculiar reflective quality of the mists is not lost on film. The rift terminates in another waterfall, sometimes two, and a rocky pool. Amplification of the cut causes a roar that sounds like a gale wind. You hear it long before the water is in view.

South again on zagging 374 takes you to the hub of the parks known as Old Man's Cave. There is a lodge with a diningroom, swimming pool, game rooms, guest rooms, guest cottages and campsites scattered in the nearby trees. The area has been formed by a creek cutting through the sandstone forming another recess cave and the Devil's Bathtub-- a huge swirling pothole, and upper and lower waterfalls. At Lower Falls the underlying Cuyahoga shale is exposed for comparison with the less resistant Black Hand sandstone, the dominant link between all the park units. It was named for a black hand painted on sandstone cliffs east of Columbus, supposedly pointing the Indians to a source of flint. The cave for which this gorge is named was, for many years, the home of a her-

(Cont.)

mit who, some say, was a deserter in the Civil War. When he died, the inevitable ghost sightings were reported-- still are, occasionally, usually on cloudy afternoons. The real ghosts are those found by anthropologists and geologists-- signs of prehistoric, pre-Indian man, or crossbedded rock that documents changing ocean currents of other eons, and slump blocks--huge boulders that fell from earlier heights into the widening fissures. The name Hocking comes from a later Indian word meaning "bottleneck." The trail is high and low, deviating among natural honeycombed sculpture and hilly forest. Canadian yew, roundleaf catchfly, black birch, eastern hemlock, myriad ferns, herbs and mosses leave nothing bare, not even living trunks and cold stone.

The highway jogs north before you can proceed south once more to drive to Cedar Falls. For the hardy and seasoned hiker, there are connecting trails from Old Man's Cave but most visitors should save themselves for the actual parks. Cedar Falls is the most rugged of all. Make no mistake, the entire complex of Hocking Hills state parks and the surrounding 10,000 acres of forest, is primitive. There are injuries or deaths each year. People who are not in condition for walking and climbing, or who don't stay on the trails are inviting trouble. Rangers regularly practice rappelling and handling rescue equipment to stay prepared for emergencies. Visitors must be careful at all times, especially at Cedar Falls. Man's

(cont.)

intervention in the raw natural beauty is kept at unseen levels. Wildness prevails as it did centuries ago.

Cedar Creek pours 50 feet over a semicircular cliff. Another recess cave has formed behind the falls from the sucking of the plunge pool. The falls with their burden of sand have ground a pair of troughs in the cliff face. On the right is a pothole, gouged out when the stream was much higher. Cedar Creek joins Queer Creek below the falls. Together they wander through the gorge choked with enormous conifers and slump blocks. The valley boasts a hemlock 150 feet tall, almost 4 feet in diameter, one of Ohio's record trees.

With the exception of the lodge at Old Man's Cave, accommodations are generally easy to get. Top O' The Caves Campground is located between Cedar Falls and Ash Cave on Chapel Ridge Road, not far from Highway 56, the southern boundary of the area. At the north end, the town of Logan on Highway 33 southeast of Columbus offers convenient access to the parks as well as nearby Lake Logan, a scenic spot for fishing, picnicking, and superb birdwatching-- from great blue herons to eastern bluebirds. A beach for swimming and rental boats are also available. The Inn Towner and the Shawnee are both inexpensive, comfortable motels. There are several restaurants in Logan, the best being the Colonial Inn which tends to close about 8 p.m. There are private homes offering bed and breakfast, social pleasantries and inside infor-

(cont.)

mation about craft shops and local artisans in the hills. Some of them are rare and wonderful-- like Dwight Stump, the 93 year old basket maker on Toad Run Road who still cuts his own oak splits then draws them through a steel plate to make them round for weaving sturdy baskets like his grandfather made. He is considered such a national treasure, the Smithsonian Institute had him spend a couple of weeks there summer before last demonstrating his craft. And there's Mr. Fossig who turns out fine handmade rocking chairs of native cherry, sassafras, willow and butternut woods designed to fit the customer. And Sue Kennedy who knits Icelandic wool sweaters, and the Bourgins' homegrown apples, peaches, homemade preserves and applebutter. The only way to find any of them is to pick up a visitor guide and Dogwood Trail map at one of the restaurants or where you stay. Even then, you'll find yourself driving the same roads and backtracking to see where you missed the turn-off. But all the roads are so beautiful in their frosting of dogwood, you really won't mind.

When you're in the park area, Aunt Carrie's is worth a stop for lunch or dinner and browsing. Snugged in a preserved country house on Jack Run Road off highway 180, it's not too hard to find and the food is excellent. They also have maps and directions.

Dogwood season is hard to pin down. The fat buds can remain tightly closed until the weather suits them but generally blossoming begins the last few days of April or the first of May.

(cont.)

Because the climate is cool and moist, the flowers last up to two weeks or more.

With so much bounty, one wonders at Hocking County's reluctance to promote itself more aggressively to the world, and particularly why signing is so poor and directions are so obscure. On the other hand it may be a smart nonmove. A large percentage of the tourists are Ohioans who come back year after year. Once you do discover your way around, it's smugly tempting to keep such delights to yourself. Part of the appeal is remoteness, the absence of commercial glitz and the feeling of being inaccessible to the madding crowd.

May that never change.

The Inn Towner Motel is located just off U. S. Rt. 33 and 93, in Logan, Ohio at 92 Mulberry Street. Double rooms \$30 and up. For reservations call (614) 385-2465.

The Shawnee Inn Motel with comparable rates is located at the Interchange of U.S. Rt. 33 and Ohio Rt. 664 near Logan. Take 664 Exit. Call (614) 385-5674.

Hocking Hills State Park offers camping and cottages. Write them at 20160 State Rt. 664 S., Logan, Ohio 43138.

For information about dogwood flowering, bed & breakfast and other tourist data call the Logan Area Chamber of Commerce at (614) 385-6836