



Enchanted GRANITE

2007
Sylvia K. Burack
Award Winner
By Andra Payne

YOU ARE TRAVELING north out of Prescott, Ariz., on U.S. Highway 89 at, we'll say, sunset. As you round the bend, nearing Watson Lake, you notice the glow. You are mesmerized by 1 billion tons of fiery, golden, glowing granite boulders illuminated by the low, setting sun. They jut up searing into the periwinkle dusk. You cannot help but think there is a little magic inside those heavy, warm rocks. And you are right. There is.

This is Granite Dells. This is where I grew up, and this is, in my heart of hearts, my true home. My memories from growing up there give me hope when the cold, hard side of life tests my smile. I can sift through these memories to look back on a time of warmth and

innocence. In these memories, it is always cozy and comfortable. This is a place where Huck Finn himself would doze, slumped against a shady tree, on a hot summer afternoon. The sprig of long grass is optional, although I always had one as I lounged in the sun of the Dells in summer.

I suppose I could start off by telling you why my family and I lived there. We lived there because my father's father lived there, just as his father's father had lived there. It was my great-great-grandfather who homesteaded this piece of beautiful, creek-cut land in 1886.

This is a place where Huck Finn himself would doze, slumped against a shady tree, on a hot summer afternoon. The sprig of long grass is optional.

From what I hear, he was a good man who would not judge another man by the color of his skin but by the weight of his word. I like that.

By the time the 1920s rolled around, they had constructed a dance hall, a bathhouse and a pool there on the family land. People came from miles around to dance and swim. I still run into old-timers in town that remember, with a glimmer of excitement in their eyes, the summers they spent at the Granite Dells pool. Unfortunately, by the late 1960s everything had been shut down. The bathhouse and dance hall still stand, but they are broken-down, vacant structures that only echo the sounds of a vibrant past. The pool has deteriorated into a silent, weed-filled hole gaping between the ancient pink rocks. But, to me, there is this lonely beauty there, in those old buildings and in the dirt. It is in the land and in my roots that run deep into it. It is in the rusty tools left behind by my great-grandfather. And it is in the familiar sight of the weightless cotton on the lazy summer breeze. This is the magic.

I can remember bits of this magic from every season that I lived there. We always lived just across the creek from the family—it was literally “over the river and through the woods” to my grandmother’s house. I remember visiting my great-aunt Lorraine, who lived with my grandparents. She wore smiling orange lipstick and showered me with lemon drops every single time I came to see her.

In the summertime, I helped my mom weed and water her colossal vegetable garden—hoping to grow a green thumb like hers. As the locusts chattered in the cottonwoods, we were twins in our grubby overalls, and I loved her. I also spent most of every summer with blue- and purple-stained feet from squashing the little berries as my brother and I ran, chasing each other, under the old mulberry tree. Those summer days had a really nice scent, like sweet dust and sun-dried weeds, warm and thick in the air. The life we had seemed wholesome and simple.

When fall started to creep in, it was time to help dad cut wood to heat the house for the winter. The whole family helped. Mom and Dad cut and chopped, and my brother and I stacked the wood. We neatly filled the back of “Old Blue,” the tired classic Chevy that Dad bought from a man named Conklin before I was born. We always used the old truck for hauling firewood. To

About the author

THOUGH ANDRA Payne left the Granite Dells 10 years ago, she can still conjure the sense of place—of home—she felt there, as she does in her vividly crafted essay. She describes the area just outside of Prescott, Ariz., as “an instrumental location in the story of my life.”

She explains, “Growing up, my brother and I tried to cope with family discord and growing pains by finding adventures among the cottonwoods and willows. Whether it was smashing open round rocks as geode hunters or wading down the jade-gray creek and fancying it an Indiana Jones jungle, it was all amid the shadows of those granite giants.”

From the Prescott area, Andra moved 30 miles away to the small mining town of Jerome, which has been called the largest ghost town in America. There, she found an eerie magic in the thriving artistic community.

Andra is continuing her education at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff.

this day, the smell of wood smoke on a crisp winter morning instantly warms my heart.

I also remember the snowy winter in the woods there, the black-water creek winding, stark, through the whiteness. Its musical trickle echoed in the cold trees. This is when I would lie on my back, deep in the snow, and there was muffled silence. I could hear the flakes fall and melt on my scarf. That is the silence of snow, and this is part of that same magic.

When I visit the Dells today, it is still beautiful and fragrant to me, although things are very different. I’m very different. The far-stretching woods seem a little tamer, and the curving creek is more silent, than in my memories. But when I stand in that place, under the wise, swaying cottonwoods, I can still feel my roots reaching down from my feet into the center of the warm earth. My dead ancestors whisper their lives in the wind. This is my home, and it is sacred to me. I feel like this is where I belong, and I am always welcomed by those shimmering, granite boulders.

Editor’s note: *The Sylvia K. Burack Award is named for the former editor in chief and publisher of The Writer. She served the magazine for 60 years and was known for encouraging writers at all stages of their careers. We asked students to write on a topic they felt passionate about, and Andra’s essay was selected from more than 650 entries. She received \$500 and a subscription to The Writer.*

 www.WriterMag.com

Guidelines and entry information for the 2008 Sylvia K. Burack Award are available on *The Writer* Web site. This year we are asking students to write an essay on the experience that most changed their lives.