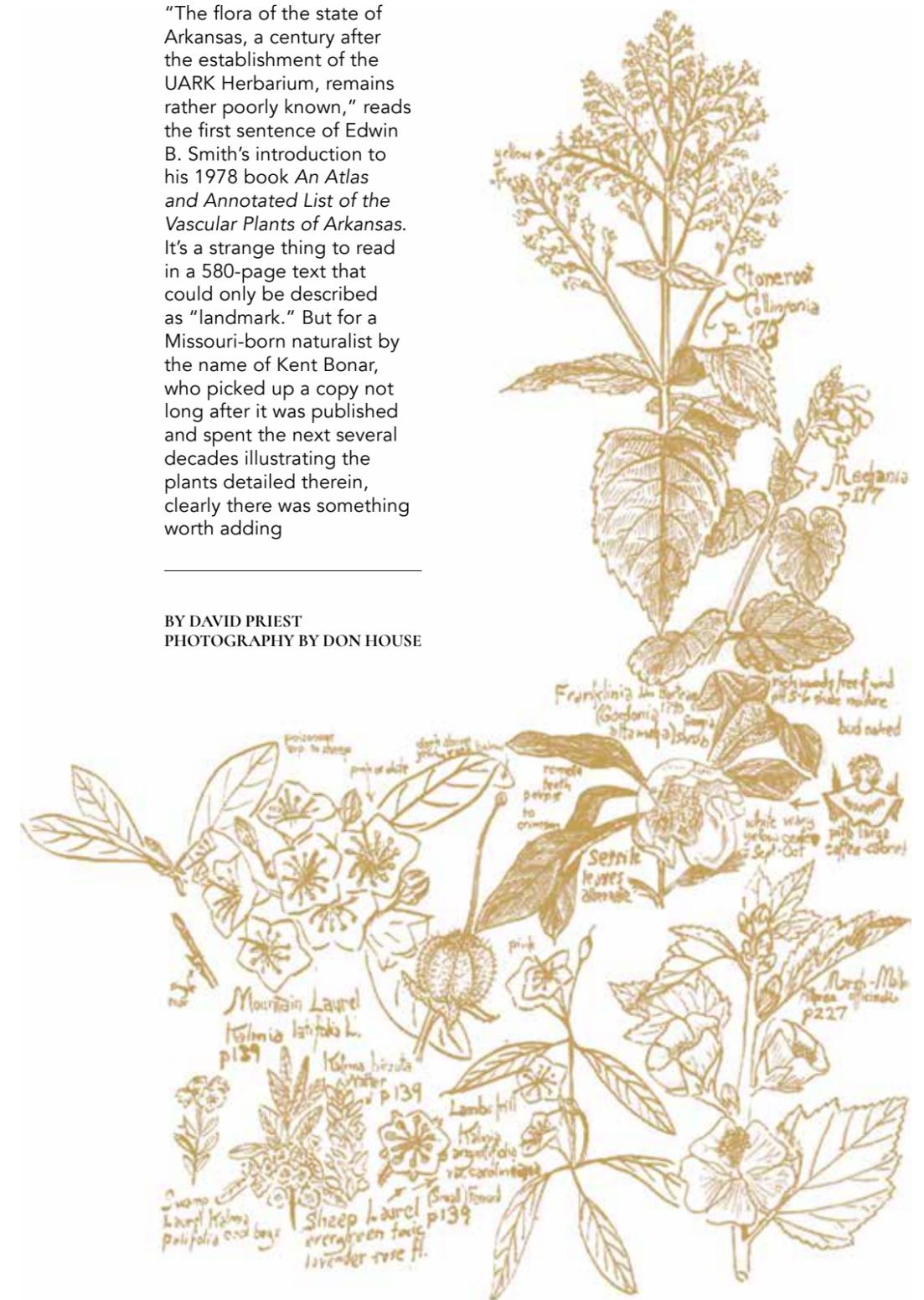




"The flora of the state of Arkansas, a century after the establishment of the UARK Herbarium, remains rather poorly known," reads the first sentence of Edwin B. Smith's introduction to his 1978 book *An Atlas and Annotated List of the Vascular Plants of Arkansas*. It's a strange thing to read in a 580-page text that could only be described as "landmark." But for a Missouri-born naturalist by the name of Kent Bonar, who picked up a copy not long after it was published and spent the next several decades illustrating the plants detailed therein, clearly there was something worth adding

BY DAVID PRIEST
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DON HOUSE



THE NATURALIST



“SOME OF THE SKETCHES ARE REAL BASIC,” HE SAYS.



“I don’t want to add details that weren’t there. I don’t embellish. And for bigger wildlife, all you get’s a few seconds.”

Kent Bonar is perched on the edge of a massive boulder in the forest of Round Mountain, leaning his back against the stout black oak that is rootbound to the rock. He wears camouflage pants, heavy hiking boots, a layering of flannels and khaki button-downs on top. An old pair of glasses, arms replaced with a leather thong and frame covered on the left side with a makeshift eyepatch, adorns his face.

“Hold on,” he says, setting aside his bush hat to reveal a pale, bald head. He carefully extracts a monocular—a product of bartering with a friend—and slips its leather strap over his head before replacing the hat.

My photographer, Don House, jokes that the monocular finally makes him look like a bona fide naturalist. Kent’s thin face cracks open a grin, revealing two top teeth.

“Not that I had any credibility to begin with,” he quips.

KENT BONAR LIVES in rural Northwest Arkansas and has spent the past four decades, give or take, hoofing it across the state, recording and sketching thousands of species of mosses, insects, mammals and

vascular plants—the last of which he kept in a single volume: a first-edition copy of Dr. Edwin B. Smith’s 580-page survey of Arkansas flora. Now, over 30 years into the project, Kent has donated his 5-pound field guide to the University of Arkansas, which plans to publish it under the new title, *An Arkansas Florilegium: The Atlas of Botanist Edwin Smith, Illustrated by Naturalist Kent Bonar*.

The day I hike with Kent, I wake up at 6 a.m. and begin to drive southeast from Fayetteville, where I live. On the way, I pick up Don, himself a Northwest Arkansas fixture since the ’80s. He offers a thermos of coffee; I decline.

Driving into the Ozark forests, we pass towns with three-digit populations. Tiny white Baptist churches dot the sides of the highway, along with the odd drug store or two-pump gas station. Electrical wires zigzag over the road, brittle tendrils coiling like arboreal snakes around them.

Everyone I’ve talked to in the past month seems to have a Kent Bonar story. Bob Cochran, the English professor behind the publication of *Florilegium*, told me that Kent, who doesn’t own a car, often gets rides into town from a psychic friend named Dreama—who travels only when the spirits are favorable.

Don, sipping coffee in my passenger seat, tells me about an interview over 10 years ago in which Kent famously told the Forest Service to “Read their own money”—an admonition to stop trying to control nature and trust God’s processes (and as a kicker, a hint at increasing corporate interests inside the agency).

KENT LIVES BETWEEN a town called Nail and a town called Deer. Nail is little more than a loose constellation of homes and farms orbiting the Nail Store. Deer is slightly larger, with a school and a short strip of businesses at its heart. Between them, an orange gravel road angles off the highway. Our destination is the first property on the right.

Almost as soon as we leave the highway, a pack of more than 30 dogs swarms the car, barking and trotting alongside us. In the brush at the road’s edge, a mother lies on her side awaiting pups bobbing at the edge of the crowd. The pack parts, and I

pull into the drive.

Before us lies a circle of decaying architecture. Kent’s home is not so much a house as a sort of holler, a clearing in the woods. A series of trailers, combined haphazardly with wooden lean-tos, create a palimpsestic ring around the clearing. One semi-intact trailer rests upon what looks to be the stone foundation of a long-gone structure. The dogs inhabit the other broken-down shacks.

Kent slept in but invites us to look around while he gets dressed and feeds the animals. Don and I wander. A giant thermometer is affixed to one wooden board, with a mound of old cans and spent milk cartons spread nearby.

Digging two bucketfuls of dry dog food from an old aluminum trashcan behind one collapsed shed, Kent doles it out into a dozen or so trashcan lids, hubcaps, plastic sheets and bowls scattered in the center of the clearing.

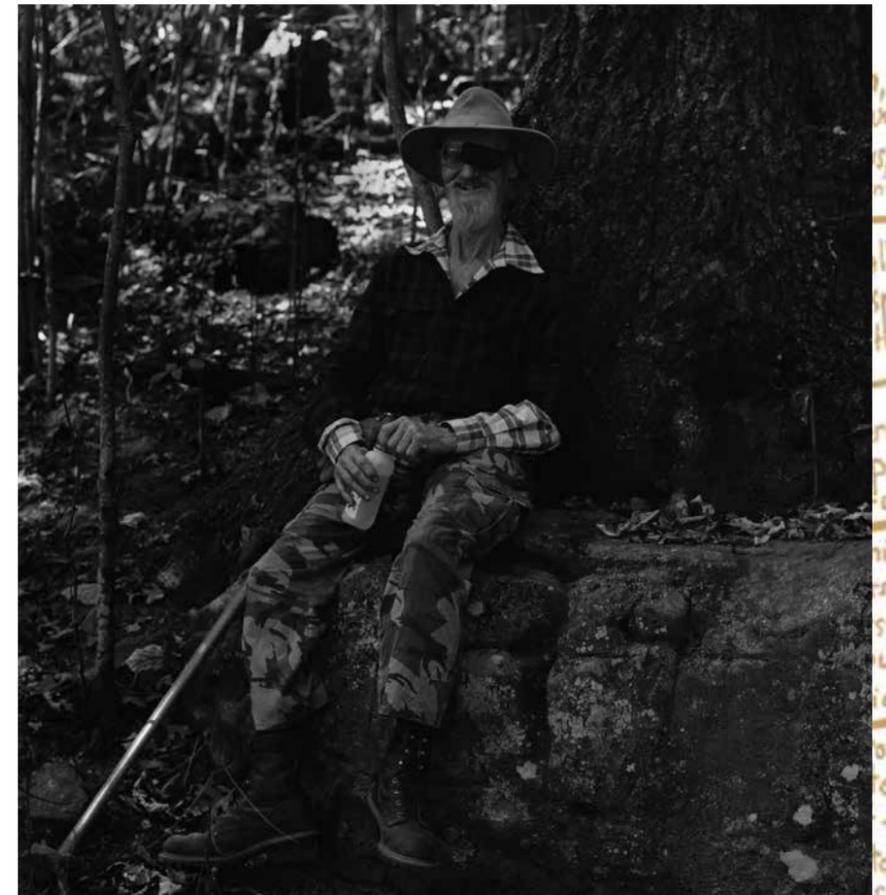
The dogs keep away the bears, he explains, distributing the chow, and protect the cats, which eat the rats. Suddenly I notice nearly a dozen cats hopping down from the roofs, stretching on trees bent like ramps up to their perches. Kent fills a number of bowls suspended above the clumsy mutts, balanced on tree limbs and boards, hung from nails.

“I used to have bloodhounds,” he says over his shoulder. But a bear attack six years ago left half the pack dead, including his last hound. The pack is only now returning to its previous size.

After a quick trek up to a pond in back for the animals’ water, we head out for Round Mountain.

KENT GREW UP in Missouri. His parents farmed, but few people of their generation could make ends meet without some extra income. Thus, his father “worked out,” traveling to town

For nearly four decades, naturalist Kent Bonar has been taking note of his surroundings, sketching Arkansas flora in a copy of Edwin B. Smith’s *An Atlas and Annotated List of the Vascular Plants of Arkansas*.



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Kent uses recycled milk jugs for water storage at his Newton County home between Deer and Nail.



TREES GROW
SUNWARD,
THEIR CANOPY
A SHARED
MEMBRANE,
UNDER WHICH WE
TRAVEL LIKE WATER
CELLS IN A MASSIVE
VASCULAR PLANT.
BRIGHT ORANGE
SUN STREAMS
DOWN FROM
BREAKS IN THE
LEAVES, BUT FOR
THE MOST PART,
THE FILTERED LIGHT
IS TINGED GREEN.

to run a business as a barber. A military base was nearby, crew-cuts were in, and business thrived.

But Kent spent most of his time with his grandparents. His grandfather would take him out to the forest ("practically before I could walk," he says) and set him on a fallen tree. The old man, before heading off to hunt squirrels, would tell him to remember everything he saw. Upon returning, his grandfather would ask for a report.

"It was a family thing," he says. "Observation is what I've always done."

Kent is 66 now. His father and mother have died. His brother lives in his parents' old home, works as a painter. His sister, who has a doctorate in English literature, lectures across the world for the Jane Austen Society. But Kent stayed in the forest.

WE PULL INTO the visitor lot at the base of Round Mountain by 10:30 a.m., and the temperature is a breezy 70 degrees. After polishing off a few chicken tenders and fries bought from the Jasper gas station, we hike.

A series of trails cuts up the mountain, crisscrossing to make the climb manageable. Trees grow sunward, their canopy a shared membrane under which we travel like water cells in a massive vascular plant. Bright orange sun streams down from breaks in the leaves, but for the most part, the filtered light is tinged green.

Kent walks ahead of Don and me, unaccustomed to waiting for others' slow pace. Stick bugs edge across the trail periodically and seem to pause to watch us go by.

As we walk, Kent points out trees: black and red oak, paw-paw, birch. He tells us about succession. When old trees are cleared out or die, the first replacements tend to be certain species: cherry or black locust, for instance. With time, and as squirrels and jays and crows bury seeds in sunlit areas, late successional species sprout up and grow: oaks, hickories.

Kent suggests I read *The Succession of Forest Trees*, one of Thoreau's late manuscripts. Understanding succession matters, he explains, because preserving particular species requires proper time and care. When corporations come into Arkansas and propose timber projects that clear too much acreage, it can take decades for late successional tree species to return. More often than not, he says, these large projects result in de facto conversion of hardwood forest to pine—even when that isn't the express goal—all because we don't wait for the natural process of succession to occur.

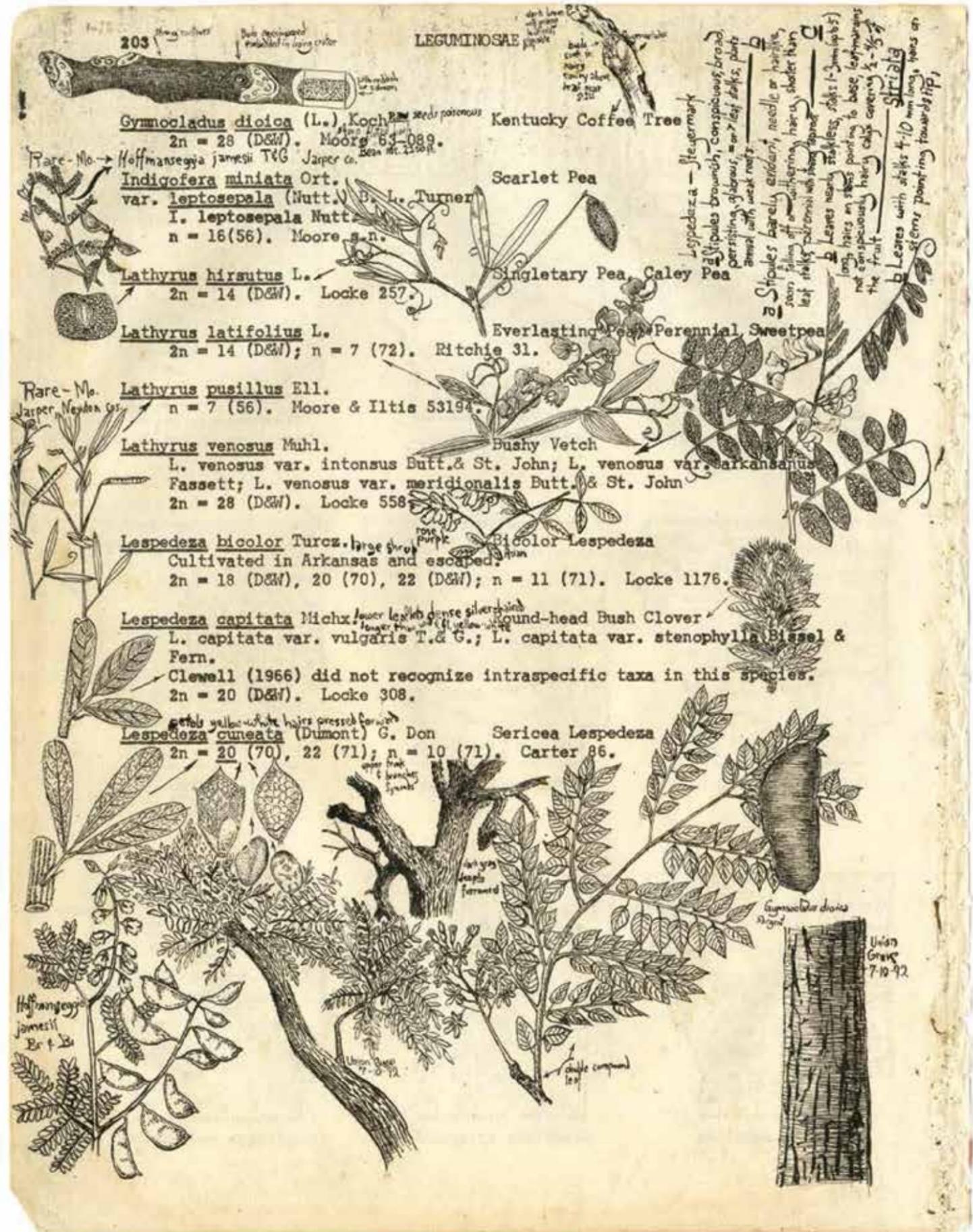
Pausing to pick a leaf from a bush, Kent crushes it and smells it.

"Needs water," he says, and keeps walking.

IN 1974, FOUR years before he began illustrating half the plants in the state, Kent agreed to help a friend move for a job. They loaded two pickup trucks with furniture and boxes and began to drive. After spotting rain clouds on the horizon, they pulled over to check for tarps stashed in either truck. They came up empty-handed.

Racing against the rain, they headed for the next covered gas station: a small spot just down the mountain and across a one-lane bridge. The rain met them halfway, and sheets of water began pounding both trucks. Kent's partner crossed

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White snakeroot flowers, a plant Kent describes as the source for milk sickness.



“PEOPLE SAY I SHOULD BE FALLING APART,” HE SHRUGS, “BUT IF YOU BELIEVE WHAT THEY TELL YOU, YOU’RE DOOMED FROM THE START.”

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the bridge first and pulled into the station. Kent, wipers at full blast and using a towel to mop up condensation on the inside of the windshield, waited for better visibility.

When it didn't come, he headed across. Halfway there, a milk transport truck driving the opposite direction collided with his pickup and pushed it back across the bridge and onto the embankment.

The friend waited till the rain let up, thinking Kent had blown a tire. When he crossed the bridge, he found both vehicles and the truck driver, who hadn't checked on the pickup at all, figuring any passengers had been killed on impact.

Upon approaching the smashed pickup, Kent's friend discovered him lying across the seats, trapped, and holding the towel soaked from mopping the windshield against his left eye. In the accident, he had fallen to the side just as his pickup's steering column lurched back, impaling the driver's side seat. His left foot was caught and partially crushed against the metal of the door. As he fell, the gearshift punched the left side of his face.

Kent squeezed out of the truck after prying his foot free with a crowbar offered by his friend, and together they climbed the rain-slicked embankment to the road. An ambulance was on the way.

Waiting there, his friend asked to see his face. Removing the towel was the last thing Kent remembers.

Four days later, he woke from a coma. His left eye, which had fallen out with the towel, was gone. The left side of his face, which his friend said “sort of collapsed” as the towel fell away, had to be reconstructed, along with his left foot.

Within months, Kent was back in the field, wearing a handmade eyepatch. Still, it would be years till he met Dr. Edwin Smith and began illustrating the state's flora.

TO KENT, EVERYTHING is connected. We pass a forking persimmon-tree branch, wrapped in silken web like a giant cocoon,



and I ask what created it. He tells me it's the work of tent caterpillars.

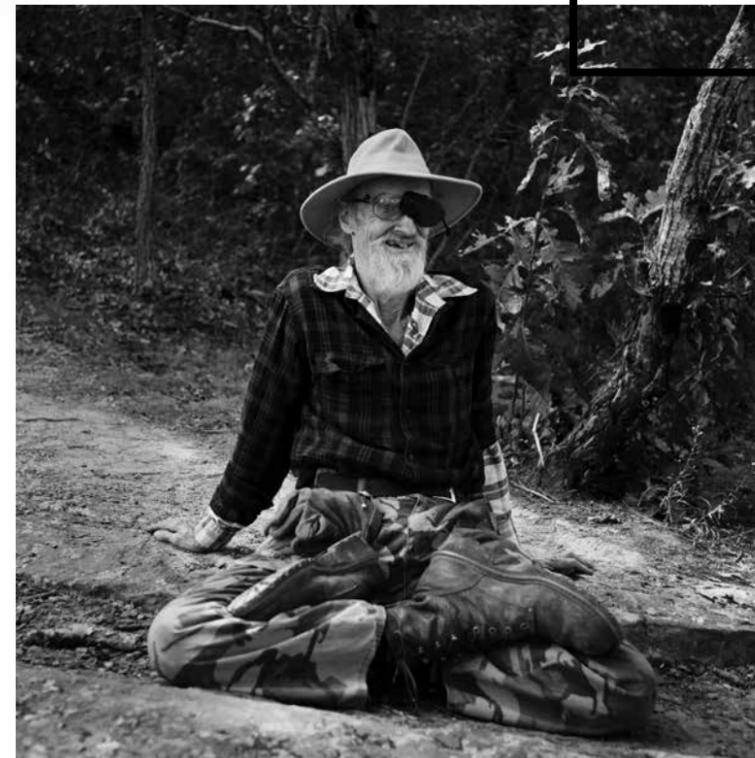
Rain crows, says Kent, eat dog-day locusts for most of the summer, even as the caterpillars sun themselves on tree branches and eat leaves out in the open. He indicates the stripped branches as he talks. When the late-season rains come, though, the caterpillars take shelter in their webbed tents, and the crows show up for a prepackaged meal.

“And that's why they're called rain crows,” he says, as I watch the shredded silk flap stiffly in the breeze. It's already becoming brittle.

BEFORE KENT BECAME a naturalist for the state of Arkansas in 1972, he was a student worker at the University of Missouri library. Between getting the job in Arkansas and moving there, he spent hours researching the flora and fauna of the state. What he found was dated and partial.

“Birds and mammals, the game and fish community had down pretty well,” he says. “But insects and plants, there was a lot of information out there, and not a whole lot of verification on any of it.”

When he finally made the move, Kent wanted what scientists at the state universities wanted: a better sense of what actually lived in the state, and where.



“It was a losing situation on the job pay scale,” he jokes. “But I wasn't worried about that as much as doing what I wanted to do.”

Using surveys from the first half of the 20th century, Kent began leading students from various universities on trips to verify the presence of plant populations in all corners of the state. He kept his own notes on the species he encountered, but his resources were limited. Then, at a meeting for the Arkansas Academy of Sciences, he met Dr. Edwin Smith.

Kent was struck by Dr. Smith, who would walk outside the building during breaks, only to discover new plants to be verified for the region.

“He was brilliant,” says Kent. “And his book [*An Atlas and Annotated List of the Vascular Plants of Arkansas*, released soon after that meeting in 1978,] was light years ahead of anything else out there. ... The previous list had been from 1943.”

Kent bought the atlas within a month of its release, and on his next job, he began sketching plants in it.

Dr. Gary Tucker, a botanist at Arkansas Tech University, subcontracted Kent to do an inventory of the endangered plants in the Buffalo Ranger district.

“So I started illustrating all [the endangered species],” he says. “Then I had to start illustrating everything I might confuse them with, and then it just went from there.”

WHEN WE REACH the lookout on top of Round Mountain, we pause to take in the view. Forest, tinted blue in a thin fog, blankets the mountains all around us. Jasper, the nearest town, nestles in the crook of the valley to the north.

A buzzard soars past, and Kent says it usually perches on a boulder jutting out from the mountain nearby. Hikers must've scared it into the sky, he says.

Before such a wide vista, I notice again how thin Kent is. His muscles are ropey, his skin weather-beaten. His goatee is pure white. I ask him what he thinks about the future, about retirement.

“People say I should be falling apart,” he shrugs, “but if you believe what they tell you, you're doomed from the start.”

Kent aspires to follow in the steps of past generations.

“They went till they dropped,” he says. “That's probably what'll happen to me.”

We look down the valley, noticing that we can hear sounds from Jasper but not from the highway snaking below our feet, half a mile down.

Suddenly, Kent sits on the ground, crosses his legs and folds his feet up onto his thighs. He flops forward onto his belly, legs pretzeled behind him, and laces his fingers behind his back, stretching them up to the sky. His face presses into the earth.

Don tries to snap a photo, but his subject reverses the procedure and stands before the shot is framed.

“Anytime I get feeling old,” he grins, “I do a yoga pose.”

After a minute of cajoling, Don finally convinces him to repeat the pose for posterity.

ON THE WAY back down the mountain, I nearly step on a snake, which spreads its neck like a cobra and rears up, hissing. Kent laughs at my reaction, as I nearly fall down a set of stone steps.

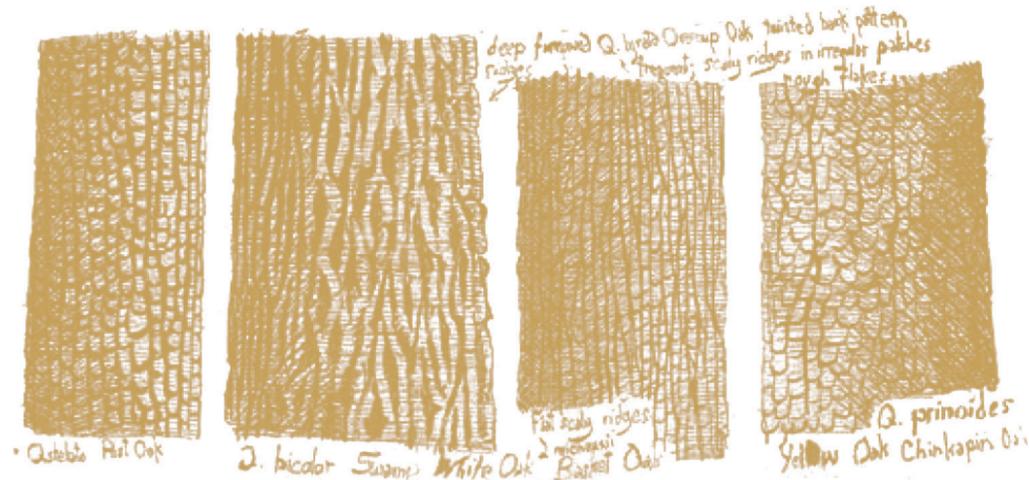
Turns out, it's just a hognose. They flatten their heads and hiss, but don't bite—not people, at least. As a hognose swallows toads, Kent says, fangs located far back in its mouth pierce and poison its prey.

“Just don't stick your finger down its throat,” he says.

Don asks if we can stop for a photo against a giant oak growing out of a boulder. Kent pulls out his monocular as Don frames up the shot.

On the drive back from Round Mountain, Kent asks if Don and I would like to go out of the way to see some “really great views.” I decline, mentioning I left a sick toddler at home with a tired mom.

We compromise by stopping in Swain, one of the oldest towns in the area, for a



An Arkansas Florilegium: The Atlas of Botanist Edwin Smith Illustrated by Kent Bonar will be released this winter from the University of Arkansas Press. For more information, visit uapress.com.

view of a different valley. Kent has traveled most of this county by foot, and he still finds time to marvel.

I park behind an old cemetery and Masonic hall, and we walk to the bluff of a small mountain. Kent tells us about the towns in the area, says Swain's historic post office burned down awhile back.

"The history is erasing itself in these parts," he says. And he's right. The Masonic hall behind us looks out of place on a slope otherwise populated by trees and meadows. The hall's builders are long gone, many likely buried in the cemetery beside it.

Even Kent might be moving soon. His mother died recently, leaving him enough money to find a more habitable place. He says he knows a man who's lived in a cave for the past two years, but his daughter is forcing him to move into town.

"Maybe I can get his cave," Kent says.

AT ONE TIME, tiny metal antlers adorned Deer High School class rings. Kent knows this because he was once punched in the face with a fistful of them.

It happened in '97. Two kids from town had gotten drunk

and come up to his cabin—this was back when he'd had a cabin. The first boy knocked on the front door, "real polite."

"I think they wanted to rob the place," Kent says. "They were just checking if I was home."

When he opened the door, the boy socked him in the face. Kent threw the kid off the porch and, still in his prime, jumped into the fray. After losing his balance and taking a few steel-toed kicks to the ribs, Kent knew he was in trouble. He grabbed and broke one kid's fingers and swung a piece of lumber at the other boy's head, scoring a glancing blow.

As Kent tells it, the boys fled to their car, and he went inside to call the sheriff, who rounded them up that afternoon.

Kent headed to the hospital, thankful to have sustained only a cracked rib and bruised face.

One month later, he left town to visit his father, whose health was degenerating quickly in Missouri.

"Anyway," he says, "when I'm out of town, when their probation was up, the house burned."

I ask what happened to the kids. Kent tells me one of them actually lives on the next farm over.

"He's apologized since," Kent says, moving to the next topic. For his part, Kent seems to have embraced forgiveness, though by virtue or necessity, I can't tell. Either way, the past two decades, he has slept and woken on the bare foundation of a home erased—not by history, but by people.

KENT WORKS FOR the Newton County Wildlife Association, a local watchdog group that checks the environmental impact of corporate construction and timber proposals. The last big proposal, which offered naturalists only 30 days to formulate site-specific assessments on more than 90,000 acres of Arkansas land, went public around the time of the presidential election.

"Everyone was looking the other way," he says. He was the only one to submit an analysis, and he knows he won't be able to shoulder such responsibilities alone much longer.

Like Dr. Smith's once-cutting-edge, now-obsolete atlas, Kent is quickly becoming little more than an artifact of the Ozarks. Everyone seems to have a Kent Bonar story—even me.

But most stories belong only to Kent. They are told by the

concrete slab beneath his trailer, by the way he leans into your perspective to see what you're pointing at, by his laugh as he shows how a hognose will play dead if you poke it right. These stories are momentary, and like wildlife, their subject won't sit still for the perfect framing. One angle: Kent Bonar is eternal momentum. Nature is his passion. Shedding is his ritual.

A second angle: Kent Bonar is 66, nature is his refuge, his ritual is loss.

In the same way he resists embellishment, he refuses reduction. Each time I ask about the *Florilegium*, he subtly deflects, refuses either to mythologize or belittle his own work. His liturgy speaks for itself, offers yet a third angle:

Kent Bonar walks miles each day, outlines plants and insects in pencil on whatever book he has handy. At night, he uses two candles and a mirror to cast light onto a page. With a quill made from a roadrunner feather and a Japanese glass pen (which he wraps in leather for safe keeping), Kent carefully inks the sketches, like a medieval monk preserving ancient translations.

"In order to be motivated enough to try to take care of anything," he says, "you have to appreciate it. And in order to appreciate it, you have to understand and be aware of it. Adam and Eve's first job was naming the animals, because recognition implies some degree of appreciation. So that's kind of how I see it. People aren't going to be inclined to protect something if they don't even know what it is." ♦



WITH A QUILL MADE FROM A ROADRUNNER FEATHER AND A JAPANESE GLASS PEN (WHICH HE WRAPS IN LEATHER FOR SAFE KEEPING), KENT CAREFULLY INKS THE SKETCHES, LIKE A MEDIEVAL MONK PRESERVING ANCIENT TRANSLATIONS.