

# Lovable Tush Hog

In Memoriam: Howard Peacock—man of letters, avowed tree hugger, friend of the Big Thicket.

Text by **Randy Mallory**

IN APRIL TEXAS LOST TWO STALWARTS of environmentalism, Geraldine Watson and Howard Peacock. Count them among conservationists of the 1960s who saved remnants of the “biological crossroads of North America,” what eco-tourists now enjoy as the Big Thicket National Preserve in southeast Texas.

I did not have the pleasure of knowing Geraldine Watson, one of the great experts on Thicket ecology. But I knew Howard Peacock for more than 30 years, first as a fellow travel writer, then as a dear friend. Howard and I both started writing for *Texas Highways* magazine in 1980. Appropriately my first article (on bluegrass music) appears alongside his first (on, what else, the Big Thicket). Howard’s article touts some of his favorite Thicket things—the wild orchids, azaleas, silky camellias, and insect-eating plants (the pitcher plant, butterwort, sundew, and bladderwort, four of America’s five carnivorous genera).

In the ensuing decades *Texas Highways* published more than 100 of Howard’s articles (some accompanied by his photos) on nature and culture, food and history, topics he covered elsewhere in a half-century of freelance work. Howard went on to publish *The Big Thicket of Texas: America’s Ecological Wonder* in 1984 and *Nature Lover’s Guide to the Big Thicket* in 1994. He also edited *The Nature of Texas: A Feast of Native Beauty from Texas Highways Magazine* in 1990. Through museum seminars, nature workshops, and TV and film appearances, Howard taught others about the Thicket’s treasures.

Howard never tired of telling and retelling the Big Thicket story: How it harbors 10 major ecosystems, more than any other place its size in North America and perhaps the world. How

indiscriminant logging, industry, and development all but destroyed it. How activists, scientists, and politicians studied and struggled to save important pieces of what remained.

Howard's dedication to the Thicket movement earned him the nickname "Tush Hog," defined as "the meanest old rooter of the woods," says Maxine Johnston of Batson, a seminal activist who Howard called his "forever friend." But Maxine and all of his friends knew Howard was the most lovable of all tush hogs and a consummate tree hugger...literally. "I admit I not only hug beech trees, but also kiss them," he wrote in his last article on the Big Thicket (*Texas Highways*, October 2005). "Not many of them, of course; just the prettiest. They look so grand in their sleek silvery sheaths of figured bark."

Howard stood among a long line of tree huggers determined to protect the Thicket. Beginning in the 1920s conservationist R.E. Jackson and self-taught naturalist Lance Rosier took scientists and powerful people on fieldtrips to show off the Thicket. Sixties-era environmentalists—including Howard, Geraldine Watson, Maxine Johnston, Harold Nicholas, and others—did the same after forming the Big Thicket Association. Fellow activist, Big Thicket author, and University of North Texas professor emeritus, Pete Gunter of Denton, says: "Some of us were in attack mode against the timber companies. Howard was inherently gentle and poetic. He wanted to show you the heart of the forest."

Finally, in 1974 Congress created the Big Thicket National Preserve, America's first. Since then it has grown to 100,000 protected acres in nine separate land units and six water corridors in Hardin and surrounding counties. Howard served as Big Thicket Association president (1975-1976) and remained active the rest of his life. One of his last public appearances in the Thicket came in 2008 during the association's Big Thicket Day in Kountze. "Howard and the association served as the public voice of the Thicket," says Big Thicket National Preserve chief of interpretations, Leslie Dubey, "and they still do."

## Curious like a Cat

Howard shared the same birthday, July 12, with one of his literary heroes, the American naturalist and writer, Henry David Thoreau.

Howard surely was channeling Thoreau in his 2005 *Texas Highways* article when he suggested: “The best way to walk in the woods is like a curious but contented cat. You’re alert to sounds, smells, sights, textures, and yes, if you know your wild berries, your taste...Walking that way, you see trees, leaves, lizards, tracks, and birds in a new light.”

Such curiosity walks—alert moments focused in nature—helped show powerful politicians the true power of a walk in the woods. Contemplative walks also gave Howard purpose and solace, even as a child, a fact he recounted two years ago in a brief timeline of his life, a document residing with his archives at the Sam Houston Regional Library in Liberty.

Born in Beaumont in 1925 Howard’s childhood was troubled by an alcoholic father. His parents divorced in 1932, and Howard drifted into a “mental fog.” Perhaps as a soothing balm, he began writing stories in a Big Chief tablet about scouting outings in the Big Thicket. Writing became his passion. In high school he was editor of the school paper and sold his first magazine article.

During World War II he served on a U.S. Navy ammunition ship in the Philippines, then returned to civilian life as a reporter at the Beaumont *Journal*. His mental fog began to lift in 1949 when he married Kitty Galiano, his true love for the next 52 years.

They moved to Houston where his career jig-jagged as a writer and fundraiser for several organizations. Ever the rational thinker, he produced 100 episodes of an early TV talk show called “Ideas in Focus,” a project of the Texas Bill of Rights Foundation to engage opposing political positions in sharp but well-mannered dialogue. He even served as an administrator at the University of Houston Law School.

All the while Howard wrote in his folksy way to promote the Big Thicket. In 1974 the Peacocks moved with their cats to a dogtrot farmhouse under a beech tree in Woodville to be closer to the Save the Thicket action. Fellow Big Thicket author and historian Francis E. Abernethy of Nacogdoches adds, “I think he moved to Woodville...to save his soul from gasoline fumes and packed traffic. One of his personalities was quite private, which lent itself to solitary wanderings in the woods.”

### **Zen in the Woods**

Kitty Peacock died in 2001, after years of illness, and Howard moved to a senior citizens home on San Antonio’s picturesque River Walk. There he explored its dappled riverine pathways as he had the dappled trails of the Thicket. A pocket park called Portal San Fernando proved a favorite stop, as he noted in a February 2004 *Texas Highways* article, “Fiesta, Flowers, and Song: A Walk Along the River.” He frequented the spot to sit on a limestone block in a cool breeze perfumed by yellow *esperanza* flowers, where he lost himself in thought.

Several years ago my wife, Sallie Evans, and I began visiting Howard in San Antonio. Typically we took him to lunch at a favorite Mexican hangout—perhaps Mi Tierra or El Mirador. We once sauntered along the River Walk to famed coronetist Jim Cullum’s jazz club, the Landing, where Howard closed his eyes, swayed back and forth, and got lost in the music.

Howard regaled us about his faithful Texas friends, the ones he met regularly for fine food and playful conversation, as well as more distant friends who helped sustain his spirits during his final months of failing health.

For the last two years Sallie and I had plotted with Howard to take him on one final visit to the Big Thicket to walk among the beeches that lord over the canopy forest.

Howard and I walked amid the beeches on a magical day in 2000 with mutual friend and author Christopher Cook, a Beaumont native now living in Prague, Czech Republic.

Christopher interviewed Howard and I shot photos as he reviewed his time in the Thicket. At a smooth-barked tree he explained the subtle difference between hornbeam, crepe myrtle, and ironwood. Then he surprised us: "I am trying to forget names of trees and flowers and birds and everything like that...I found out that the names get in the way. When you are looking at a flower and trying to figure the name, you are not enjoying the flower." Later Christopher remarked about the purity and Zen-like quality of Howard's observation.

A few years ago, I began sending Howard a page-a-day calendar with Zen sayings, the same one that Sallie and I bought each year. We sometimes discussed ones we kept and referred to later, as well as ones we couldn't understand.

One of the Zen sayings, one I keep on my refrigerator door, asks: "If enlightenment is not where you are standing, where will you look?" I believe Howard saw the light when he wrote in 2005 about walking in the woods: "The last thing you do is hurry. You're not going somewhere; you like being where you are."

On July 12 Howard Peacock would have turned 86. He died on April 22, which was, appropriately, Earth Day.

#### RESOURCES:

--Texas Highways articles by Howard Peacock

--*The Nature of Texas*, ed. By Howard Peacock (esp. author info on jacket cover)

--Robert Schaadt, executor to Howard's estate: retired director, Sam Houston Regional Library & Research Center; cell 936-391-5892; including materials supplied from Howard's archive

--Maxine Johnston; 936-262-8522; maxine@mxjohnston.com (email is best)

--Pete Gunter, prof emeritus UNT; 940-387-8984

--Dr. F.E. Abernethy; fabernethy@sfasu.edu

--Handbook of Texas Online

--Leslie Dubey, BTNP; Leslie\_Dubey@nps.gov; 409-951-6805

--Christopher Cook; clcook2000@earthlink.net  
--transcription of his interview with Howard:  
<http://legacy.ischool.utexas.edu/archive/peacock.html>

--David Lodge; 210-391-0965; davidlodge69@gmail.com

--David Ribble; 210-999-7011; dribble@trinity.edu

--Naomi Nye, 210-222-0504; poet and writer friend of Howard

--HP archives: Sam Houston Regional Library & Research Center; 936-336-8821

--Joanna Foster, 210.212.7279 (Wine & Bible Study; took food to Howard)

--Helen Ballew, SA friend (as were her parents via TBOR Fnd); hballew2@gmail.com

**--Pam Turner, Austin**