Indiana's Self-reliant Uplanders

By JAMES ALEXANDER THOM

Photographs by
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ONE WINTER EVENING I stood on a wooded ridge in southern Indiana and watched the last orange tint of sunset dissolve into lilac-gray twilight. Not an electric light, a car, a plane anywhere. In the darkening valleys I could hear an ax biting into wood, the ring of a hammer on an anvil. It was one of those hushed moments that make a man wonder about his relation to time and place.

Most of my adult life I have lived in cities, writing about the complexities and anxieties of modern society. Now and then I need to return to these old uplands where I was born and raised, because here time seems to pause and let me think.

When I was a boy, Etta Macy, then in her eighties, used to live with other elderly Quakers in a sagging, vine-covered pioneer house on this ridge. They had almost no income, but ate well, laughed much, and needed little beyond what they grew themselves. Etta was famed for her recitations of poems; when townsfolk stopped at the farm to hear her, she would advise them:

"If thee needs anything and cannot find it, just come to me and I'll tell thee how to get along without it."

Etta found contentment in knowing that she could get by with little and take care of herself. I think this trait runs strong in many Indiana uplanders because of the kind of country this is.

I turned up my overcoat collar and looked around. Every horizon was another long, level, deep-blue ridge. Most of Indiana, flattened and filled by Ice Age glaciers, is rich farmland. But the glaciers bypassed the uplands, leaving a spine of forested sandstone and shale hills flanking a limestone plain honeycombed with caves and sinkholes. The uplands (map, page 345) are not adapted to large-scale farming; the gun, ax, and anvil, as much as the plow, were the survival tools of settlers.

The people who began settling in the uplands about 1820 were of English, German, Scotch, and Irish blood. Many were sons or grandsons of pioneers who had first pushed westward through Cumberland Gap.* They were true frontiersmen who had learned to live by their hands and wits. They could hack

*See "The People of Cumberland Gap," by John Fetterman, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, November 1971.

Knee-deep in June, Leo Coleman ranges the hilly fields near his Owen County home, searching for ginseng and other herbs that can bring more than $60 a pound. Coleman shows the spirit that brought settlers into this area in the 1800's, many of them by way of the Cumberland Gap. "I was raised on blackberries and gooseberries," he says. "I don't want a million bucks. There's absolutely no reason for a man to have more than he's going to need."

With the same attitude toward the soil, uplanders carefully husband their small plots (**overleaf**). On a misty morning, a cornfield set between hardwood hills swerves around a pocket of marsh.

out a living in deep woods and on hillsides. We know the sort of people that kind of life can forge: Abraham Lincoln lived and worked in the southern Indiana woodlands from his eighth to his twenty-second year.

THE INDIANA HILLS are part of modern America now, of course, and all of civilization's trappings are here. But many people in this region still would rather meet their basic needs as their forebears did. They don't rely much on producers and middlemen; they would rather not pay good money for work they can perform themselves. They like knowing that they could survive if our technological society failed.

When my mother, Dr. Julia Thom, retired from a career as a psychiatrist, she moved to the old Macy land. One of my brothers designed a house for her; it stands on the site of the Macy home, utilizing the old sandstone fireplace. I stay there on my visits.

About a mile below the ridge lives Estel Freeman, a descendant of early Owen County settlers. When I hailed him from the road on a spring afternoon, Mr. Freeman was riding in one of his fields, breaking clods of freshly plowed earth with a wooden frame-like contraption pulled by a pair of big draft horses (below). Fists full of reins, his slight, 78-year-old body balanced lightly on the drag, he looked like a water-skier being towed slowly across the field, absorbing the jolts with flexing knees. Since he was 12 years old, he has been working his land just this way.

"Never had any want of a tractor," he said, taking off his cap and wiping his forehead. "Folks who get started buying tractors and all, their trouble is they get too involved with money. They get to depending on it."

We talked for a long time while the horses waited, dark with sweat. I learned just how Estel Freeman feels about his horses and his tools, about crooks and honest men, about his obligations to God and his fellow man, and about his two main accomplishments in life: "I've always given at least a dollar's worth of work for a dollar of pay." And, "I'll leave my land better than I found it."

Standing in the sun-drenched field with this tireless plowman, I perceived a sense of time measured not by clocks but by the rolling of the seasons.

Mr. Freeman said that he's slacking off work as he approaches 80. "Got a friend. He brags to me, 'Estel, I can still work as hard as I did fifty years ago.' I told him, 'So can I. But I don't get near as much done.' "

Chuckling, he gathered up the reins to get his horses under way. "Man stopped me one day, asked how I get such straight furrows. I said I followed Jesus' advice: Put your hand to the plow and don't look back. Gee-yup!"

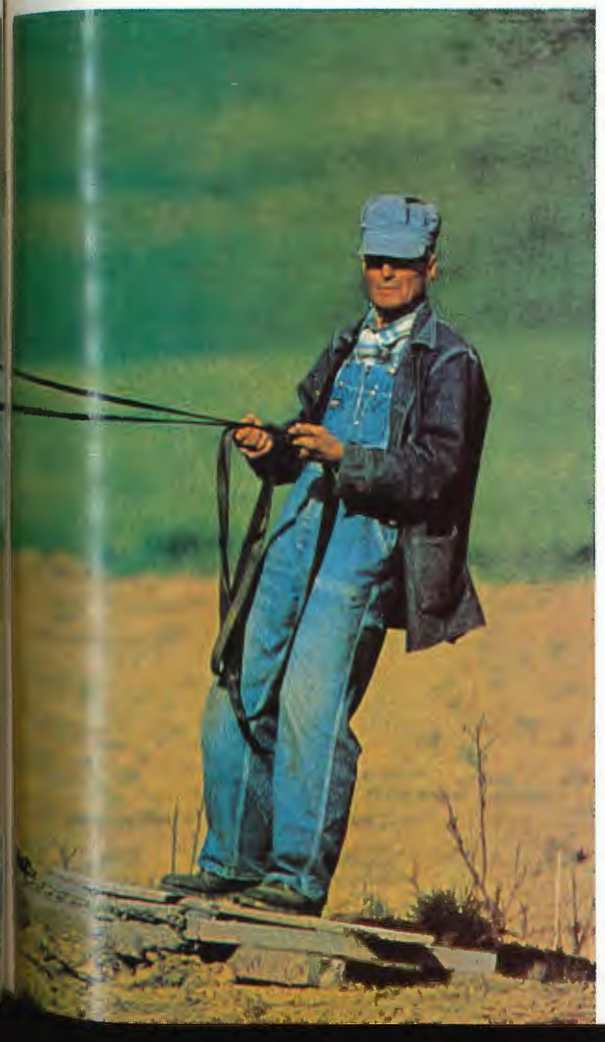
Thousands are lured to Monroe County by Indiana University, at Bloomington, and by Monroe Lake, a 10,750-acre recreational reservoir that twists through the valley of dammed-up Salt Creek (pages 348-9). But down the unpaved back roads, in the hills and hollows, native uplanders live out their long, uncomplicated lives, seldom seeing or being seen by students or vacationists.

Cora Stafford, whose great-grandparents came to southern Indiana from Kentucky early in the 1800's, is admired by people in the Little Salt Creek area for her independence. Never married, now 75, she lives in a weathered house (pages 356-7) on about 60 acres of land a few miles from the reservoir.

Cora lights her home with kerosene lamps, heats it with iron stoves, and draws water by bucket from a well. A few chickens and one guinea hen chase and fuss about. Several white-faced cows amble among the log outbuildings and graze the sloping lawn.

When I first saw her she was mending fence to keep those cows in. She came along the barbed wire, a stake in one hand, an ax in the

"I'd loan you anything but my team," says Estel Freeman of his matched Belgians, Mike and John. They run on feed and affection.



other. I offered to carry the ax as we toiled uphill to the house.

"Nope. I'm usin' it for a cane."

Cora believes people would get by on less money if they mended things instead of throwing them away. "Some used to say my people were stingy. Well, they weren't stingy. But they wouldn't go buy a thing just t'be a-buyin'. Only if they'd need it."

She receives no money from the government and wants none. "Shame how folks scheme t'get money out of th' government. One feller, I told him, 'You, y'd rather have 50 cents y'd schemed for than a dollar y'd earned.' "

AMERICANS COULD ALSO LEARN from Hebert Deckard, a 65-year-old bachelor who lives near the end of a long, unpaved valley road. Heb has found that the best way to get along without worrying about money is to do for himself. He gets by on a farm of about 40 acres. He was squatting on the floor of his garage, repairing the starter of a mower, on the rainy spring day when I met him. He spoke pure southern Hoosier dialect: twangy, lively, and emphatic.

"I try t'get out a good garden. That's 'bout half of a livin', is a good garden. Fruit's about half my livin', too. I like dried apples and canned peaches." As for meat, "A man can get it all from th' woods, if he likes t'hunt." But Heb is particular about game meat. He doesn't care much for squirrel. As for venison: "Them

It took a heap of houses to make this home. Paul and Janet Elliott of Pumpkin Center trucked in a one-story log cabin and a two-story barn, then joined and shored up and finished them with parts of 11 other buildings. Snug outside and in, it is their dream realized. "We built this place for two other reasons," Paul says. "One was cost. The second: When someone walks through that door they'll feel at home." Homey details include spinning wheel and wood stove. A jukebox adds an offbeat touch.

dag-gone deers . . . they hain't no count. A feller cut me up a mess of venison last fall; I didn't like it a'tall. I told him, said, 'By gum, I wouldn't give a half-grown rabbit f'r th' whole deer.' Now, y'take rabbits, why, yes, I like 'em pretty well."

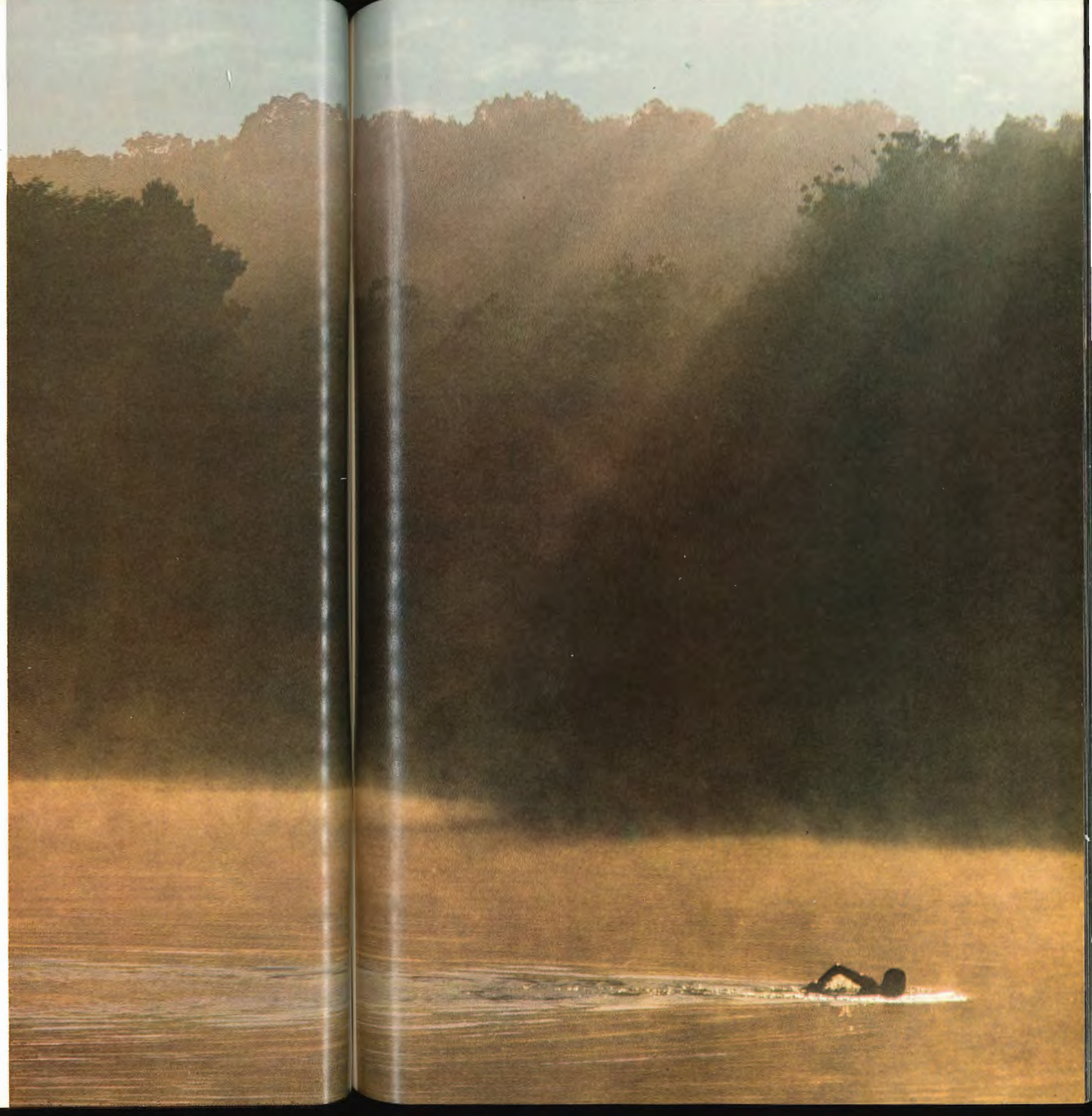
Heb saves money by heating his home with firewood. He also repairs his old tractor and car. "Now, y'take anything into a garage, they really charge ye. Do it y'self, y'save that. If y'got th' time. I got th' time."

MANY Indiana University students find these hills a living laboratory for the natural ways of doing things. In a Bloomington restaurant or coffee shop you're likely to find a dozen students gathered around William Addison, the local Pied Piper of organic farming. Fiftyish, with long hair, grizzled beard, and a dazzling white grin, Addison is a nonstop teller of outrageously funny tales and a zealous back-to-earth advocate.

About three years ago Addison started talking to a few ecology-conscious adults who believed that organic matter should be returned to the soil. They became stockholders of Scarab Compost Company, a small firm that under his management began converting large portions of Bloomington's biodegradable waste into compost.

Addison maintains that compost is the world's best fertilizer. Using the city's annual accumulation of autumn leaves and virtually any other organic waste, he and a few part-time employees—sometimes including the stockholders themselves—create rich, black compost in 14 days (page 354). Mechanized piling and turning is scientifically timed. Thus, the Scarab company solves some municipal waste-disposal problems while manufacturing compost in large quantities. Other Indiana communities have sought Addison's counsel for development of similar plants.

So far only the soil is getting rich. Scarab's stockholders say that's their main concern anyway. *(Continued on page 352)*



"And the sunshine and shadder fell over it all." Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley's old swimmin' hole has been revived on a grand scale at Monroe Lake, largest in the state. Recreational facilities help expand tourism and feed the uplands' economy.

With eyes for calipers, upland craftsmen still fashion art from need. In Indiana limestone, Jake Peterson (**top**) chisels freehand pieces such as a model of A. J. Foyt's winning car in the 1967 Indianapolis 500. One of the area's last few master stone carvers, Peterson turns out stonework for buildings across the country.

Sparks splay from the grinding wheel of John Foglesong (**right**), blacksmith and collector of antique tools and engines. Come autumn, Foglesong assembles like-minded artisans for a day of talking and doing. Whisking a drawknife across split hickory, Frank Fancher shapes one of his specialties—an ax handle smooth as a baby, balanced as a fly rod, tougher than store-bought.

Indiana University and the surrounding uplands enjoy a sort of symbiotic relationship. The university, keenly interested in the region's culture, arranges for local craftsmen —weavers, toolmakers, stone carvers, and others—to teach their skills to students. And the hill country has become home to many educated young people who have decided there's no place they'd rather live. Some natives look askance at their bearded free-thinking new neighbors. But one old-timer chuckled and told me, "Now, I'll admit we could stand to have our minds opened up a bit. And them kids'll do it."

RON AND SARA NEHRIG have made their life here an adventure in self-reliance. They live in a large, snug log house they built with their own hands on three and a half acres of land. Ron, a muscular 27-year-old with an engaging grin, studied economics and political science in college. "I feel that being self-sufficient brings us closer to our basic needs," he said.

The Nehrigs grow and preserve their own vegetables, milk a cow named Blossom, and make almost everything they need, even the complicated looms upon which Sara weaves. She has mastered intricate patterns, such as a design of squares and wavy lines known as "snail trail and cat track."

Their house is not rough or primitive. Its polished floorboards gleam. Through the picture window Blossom gazes curiously into the living room. The structure is so tightly built that the Nehrigs heat the two floors with a small stove, which Ron often fuels with chunks, shavings, and sawdust out of his woodworking shop.

Ron earns most of the little money they require with his custom-built lamps and fine hardwood furniture. They tan hides, from which Sara makes shoes for herself and Ron and their 3-year-old blond daughter, Rachel (opposite). Sara's cobbling also contributes to their income.

"We've been able to get our expenses down to just about nothing," Ron said. "The largest expenditure we have is our property tax."

Brown County, bordering on Monroe County, gives most outsiders quaint impressions of Indiana's uplands. Attracted by the stunningly beautiful springs and autumns and the rustic county seat at Nashville, tourists learn of places with such names as Gnaw Bone, Beanblossom, Needmore, and Possum Trot Road.

They may find a little village called Pikes Peak, and they wonder whether their leg is being pulled when they hear how it got its name. Old-timers say a covered wagon was headed for Colorado with a sign that said "Pikes Peak or Bust." Unable to make it farther than Brown County, the pioneers just named the place Pikes Peak, and that took care of that.

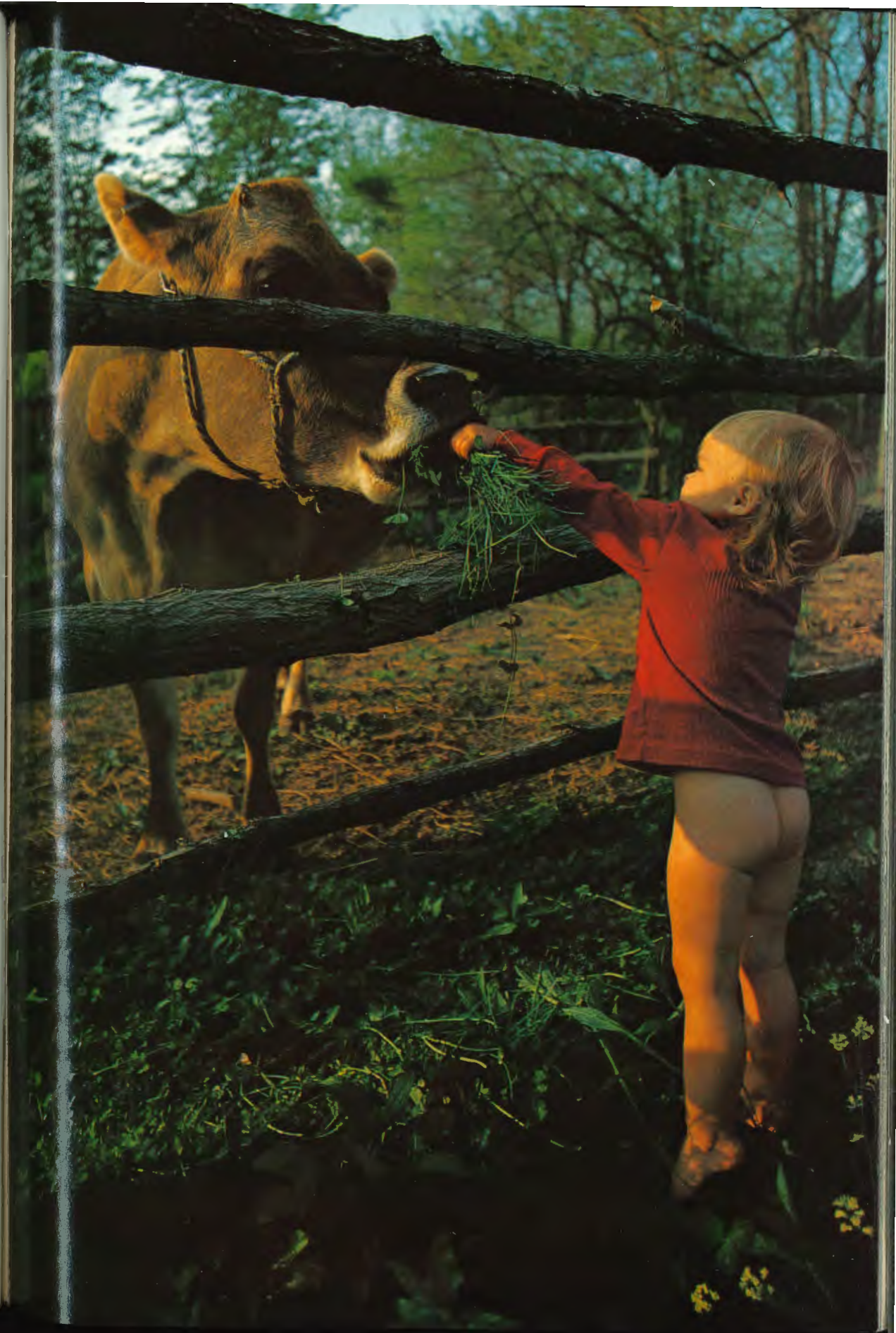
Brown County lies in a picturesque section of a stream-dissected plateau called the Norman Upland. It has narrow ridges, steep slopes, and deep, forested, V-shaped valleys. In spring the profuse redbud and dogwood blossoms look like plumes of pink and white smoke among the oak and hickory trees. In autumn the foliage blazes with colors.

But Brown County is just one small section of the uplands. The hills extend south to the Ohio River, the southern edge of the state, and each county claims that its vistas are best.

Between the Norman Upland and a parallel formation, the Crawford Upland, is the Mitchell Plain, an area of thick limestone deposits riddled with caves, sinkholes, dry valleys, and sinking streams. In a single square mile near Orleans in Orange County, 1,022 sinkholes have been counted. About 1,400 caves have been explored in southern Indiana, the most famous being the Wyandotte, Marengo, Squire Boone, and Blue Spring caves with their miles of winding passageways and cathedral-like rooms.

Quarries in the Bloomington-Bedford area produce the famous Indiana limestone, a choice building material since the early 1800's. Many of the older men in this vicinity were quarrymen or stone-mill workers sometime in their lives.

But the advancement of concrete building techniques stole much of the market



A bouquet for Blossom repays the gifts of milk and butter to a child of nature, Rachel Nehrig. Part of a quiet trend, her college-educated parents have gone back to the basics of a self-reliant life. Says her mother, "I plant a seed and nourish myself."

from the limestone industry, and the quarries and mills gradually declined.

Twenty-five years ago my high-school friends and I used to look down into the great quarry at Romona in Owen County when it was full of shouting men and clangorous machinery, and hazy with white dust. Now it is as quiet as a canyon. The mammoth junk that was its heavy equipment is ruddy with rust. The only recent signs of man are a few spent shotgun shells and the wafflelike tire tracks of cross-country motorcycles.

Jake Peterson of Spencer, a 37-year-old stone carver (page 350), believes that the secret of being independent rests in having a skill people will pay you reasonably for, and not wanting more than your earnings will buy.

Jake's limestone balusters decorate state capitols and other buildings as far away as California and the Carolinas. On big lathes in his shop he turns out balusters for the limestone companies for which he, like his father, used to work as a stonecutter.

"I do a lot, but I do it at my pace," Jake said. "What I like best is to carve me some freehand pieces." These are limestone gateposts, flower boxes, birdbaths, and other ornamental objects, many of which imitate stumps and tree trunks. Jake gets much of his inspiration from the woods.

"It's kinda nice," he mused, "to know that work I did will still be around after I'm gone, still a-lookin' good."

Often Jake's shop is closed on nice days. Like many of the men in these parts, he goes out and fishes or hunts to put food on the dinner table.

ONE DAY before the leaves were on the trees, Rich Brault, a young hunter, fisherman, and mechanic from Hobbieville, came by to visit. His brother, a Marine on leave, was with him. Rich found that I hadn't had supper yet and asked if I liked rabbit. Very much, I replied. "I'll get you one," he said. The brothers went to their van. I thought they were going to get a rabbit out; instead, they let out a dog. With guns they disappeared into the woods.

I'd always thought rabbit hunting had to be part luck, so I began wondering what else I might fix for supper. But in minutes they returned to the house with a kitchen-ready rabbit. They had bagged and skinned it as routinely as one goes to the supermarket for a chicken.

Every Saturday morning from November through February, pickups, vans, and cars line Court House Square at Spencer, laden with pelts—muskrat, squirrel, fox, mink, raccoon.

Mechanical beetle controlled by Bill Addison overturns refuse steaming with the heat of its own decomposition. President of the Scarab Compost Company in Bloomington, Addison produces garden compost in commercial quantities at record speeds. Frequent, meticulously timed turning accelerates organic breakdown. Home-grown produce nourished on Scarab compost and canned by Bill's wife, Terry (**right**), stocks their root cellar. They store two years' food supply as a hedge against crop failure.

Bloomington, largest city in the uplands and home of Indiana University, provides a climate where intellect and practicality serve each other. Addison's composting provides good, cheap fertilizer for city residents and alleviates a municipal headache—unwanted leaves.

Buyers come, stroll around, bid, and buy. No one sponsors or runs this Owen County fur market; nobody knows how it started. But it has been going on every winter Saturday morning for well over a century.

Hunting, fishing, and trapping are just a few of the many things these people do well. The jack-of-all-trades is alive and well in the hills of southern Indiana.

John Foglesong of Gypsy Hollow near Owensburg is an example. John drives a school bus. " 'Course, you can't make a good living at that." But the schedule permits him to spend the best hours of his days operating his lucrative milling, timbering, and blacksmithing businesses (page 351).

He admitted that he can make or repair just about anything. "Growing up during the

No newcomer, no electricity, no bills, and no nonsense. All describe Cora Stafford who, with more than 70 years on the same farm, looks to her own needs from chopping firewood to mending fences.

His most useful restorations are the half-century-old single-cylinder gasoline engines that power his grist mills, blacksmith shop, and sorghum press. Their rhythmic popping and chuffing is familiar music at Gypsy Hollow. Stone-ground cornmeal and wheat flour, sold in cotton bags, are the main supplements to his income.

John is dedicated to keeping as many farm and home crafts alive as he can. With the help of his brother, Carson, and his friend Ray Baker of Springville, John organizes informal fairs at Gypsy Hollow. These gatherings bring together the region's many weavers, gunsmiths, beekeepers, woodworkers, home canners, and various collectors, who come to show, tell, and sell.

I remember their first fair, on a clear day in 1974. John entertained on the anvil, demonstrating his skill. Old engines jiggled and banged, cornmeal sifted out of the mill, and scores of visitors prowled among the exhibits.

Ray explained why the fairs have become a labor of love: "We want people to come see how things used to be done, so they won't be forgotten. As for me personally, well, I work in computers over at Crane Naval Weapons Support Center all day. So when I get done there, well, gosh, I just need to get my hands onto something real."

ONE OF THE CRAFTSMEN John admires most is Frank Fancher of Grantsburg, who is considered to be probably the last of the old-time master handle makers. A friend and I drove down to see Frank, a lean 63-year-old. We needed to replace ax handles we had broken while cutting hardwoods for fuel.

Using a sledgehammer, steel wedges, a mallet, and a froe, Frank split a hickory log. Despite a severe limp he manhandled the heavy wood without interrupting his monologue. "When I was in the eighth grade, I would've had to walk three and a half miles to school, so I gave that up and started doing this. That was 47 years ago."

Depression, I learned to make things 'cause we were poor. You just couldn't find a dollar. So we made everything we used." John designed and built a modern sawmill he can operate single-handed. At his forge he hammers out knives, cleavers, and tools of tempered steel, welds ornamental items, and restores such archaic tools as hay saws, adzes, and cradle scythes.

Frank roughed out the handles with an old broad-bladed hand ax. He measured only by eye and touch. Then he locked one of the pieces of hickory in a sturdy homemade rig called a shaving horse and pulled his razor-sharp drawknife toward him along the length of the piece, pausing only to study the grain of the wood. The knife hissed; long, white shavings curled and piled up at his feet. Not a motion was wasted (page 350).

"I used to shave one of these out in eight minutes," he said, "but I don't work that hard anymore."

In Frank's opinion there are three things wrong with the mass-produced ax handles normally sold in hardware stores: "They're sawed out. They're kiln-dried, and that makes them brittle so they break easy. And they cost too much."

Frank sells his handles directly to customers who come to him, eliminating the middleman's share. He has all the orders he can keep up with, and demonstrates his skill at fairs and expositions.

"I shaved handles at an arts and crafts festival down in Madison," he said. "They had a trophy. They gave it to me when we were done. An artist alongside me said, 'I sure was after that trophy, Frank.' I told him, 'Well, I didn't even know there was a trophy.' That's the way it goes, I guess. If you're working for trophies, you likely won't get 'em. If you're working for the work, maybe you will."

Our handles were finished. His knife had shaved them so smooth that no sanding was necessary. I held them together; they were within an eighth of an inch of being identical. This master craftsman charged us less than half what we would have paid for store-bought handles.

Frank rewarded his labors by hand-rolling a cigarette. I asked if he had come by his limp through a woodcutting accident. No, he said, his leg and back were bent by infantile paralysis when he was young. Suddenly I understood why he hadn't been able to walk to school 47 years ago. "A doctor looked at me not long ago," he said with a grin. "Told me he didn't see how I'd ever been able to do a day's work in my life."

LIKE GENERATIONS of southern Indiana natives, Frank has survived on his knowledge of wood. Hardwood is one of the major resources of this region, where trees cover about half of the land.

In Martin County wood proved to be the salvation a few years ago of an unusual community called Padanaram. I drove into a

His chickens his claque, David Ort fiddles in the mellow light of after-chore hours (**left**). "You have to be away from machinery to find a peaceful existence," he says, and so the Orts chose a life of no conveniences. By mid-May their organic garden has already produced a healthy crop for Cindy to harvest (**right**). A dam now being built will back a new lake to within a mile. "That's too close," says Ort, thinking of yet another spot for seclusion.

secluded valley to visit this communal village, whose buildings of logs and rough-sawn lumber, dirt streets, bearded men, sheltered women, and active children suggest those of an American pioneer town (facing page). There are no television sets.

Yet Padanaram roars with modern technology. Large diesel-powered forklifts charge around the log yard, grabbing up hardwood logs. From the tin-roofed sawmill come rumblings, rattles and thumps, the metallic whine of high-speed saws, the yells and whistles of busy men, a yellow plume of sawdust, and stacks of graded lumber.

An independent logger, waiting while his trailer rig was unloaded, shook his head in admiration and said, "It's about the cuttin'est mill I know of."

THE MILLION-DOLLAR-A-YEAR sawmill and the village it supports are the inspirations of 57-year-old Daniel Wright, who had been an itinerant preacher (below). The ideal of a self-sufficient utopian society is the motivation of Padanaram's 140 citizens, and the closest thing to a common religion. They speak fervently of their unique brotherhood and their freedom from the "inequalities" of the outside world.

"I can't imagine myself ever leaving here," said Larry Hopkins, a young carpenter, gazing over the green valley. "It's like it's God's plan."

Daniel Wright is certain that Padanaram is God's plan. In 1966, after interpreting a series of mystical visions, Daniel tried to sustain an agrarian commune here on 86 acres with 11 followers. Months of bad weather and crop failures ensued.

"Then," Daniel said, "for the first time we really *saw* the timber we had here, and we decided to build a sawmill." The mill made $4,000 in its first year. Padanaram now owns about a thousand acres of mortgage-free timberlands and fields, in which all adult males have equal shares.

The people of Padanaram have faced the hostility and suspicion of neighbors, politicians, and some newspapers critical of communal living. Some voiced alarm because the commune was adjacent to the Crane Naval Weapons Support Center.

Little by little those attitudes have changed. The commune is open to visitors on Sundays and by special invitation, and the settlement is now tolerated by most and admired by many. Delinquent and homeless boys and girls sometimes are placed in the care of the commune by local authorities.

The settlement, named after a region mentioned in the Book of Genesis, is like an Old Testament patriarchy. "The men do the hard work and make the decisions here," said Daniel. "The wives serve their men, cook and wash, and bear and tend babies."

More than forty children have been born in Padanaram, usually by natural childbirth with midwives and husbands in attendance. Growing up close to nature and hard work, Padanaram youngsters might be seen quietly

Patriarch of Padanaram, a self-sufficient community he founded in 1966, Daniel Wright (**left**) nurtures the settlement of 140 people. Built on principles that blend Biblical strictures, socialism, and the utterly practical ("He that won't work won't eat"), the settlement thrives. So well, according to Wright, that "our biggest problem is getting people to stop working!"

Stacked three rooms high, the schoolhouse (**right**) looks like fun. Classes are often held outdoors, and students come and go as they wish. Says teacher Steven Fuson, "They're all active and bright because we don't try to subdue them."

Earth mother, once a suburbanite, Shirley Buehler manages a home, a hay-baling operation, and six sons, one still breast-feeding. Husband Bill farms and teaches engineering technology. Born to it or weaned to it, uplanders believe that by making do with less, they get more of what really counts.

fishing or herb-gathering, or running about with their arms extended forward, imitating a forklift.

I left Padanaram after a few days, my head full of unusual impressions, but one image, especially, sticks in my mind:

Black-bearded Tim Johnson, early in the morning of a two-shift workday, was using his few spare moments for a special project. Standing in the children's play yard, he was wielding a snarling, smoking chain saw to sculpt a hobbyhorse out of a log.

To me, this contrast of ruggedness and tenderness was the essence of Padanaram.

DWELLERS IN PADANARAM, I think, feel secure because they're part of a brotherhood of capable people. I sensed that kind of security one drizzly winter Wednesday in a valley below the country home of Ole Steffen Dahl, as I helped put fence posts and barbed wire around a livestock pond. It was strenuous work in cold, ankle-deep mud, but in good company, and our little group of fence builders finished the day with food and brandy in front of Ole's fireplace.

A Danish-born master violin maker who practices his art in a shop near Indiana University, Ole is one of a group of friends who get together on Wednesdays to pitch in on work projects that one person or another can't easily do alone. One week they might dig a root cellar, the next, harvest a field.

Besides saving money, they learn practical skills from each other, and their friendships grow. "It's a kind of insurance," said one member. "We just share the load."

The pioneers knew that the folks one can rely on are those who rely on themselves. I imagine it was reassuring, when a settler stood on a wooded ridge on a winter evening early in the last century, to hear the sounds of a gun, an ax, and an anvil, and know that such people were nearby in the wilderness—just in case they might be needed. □