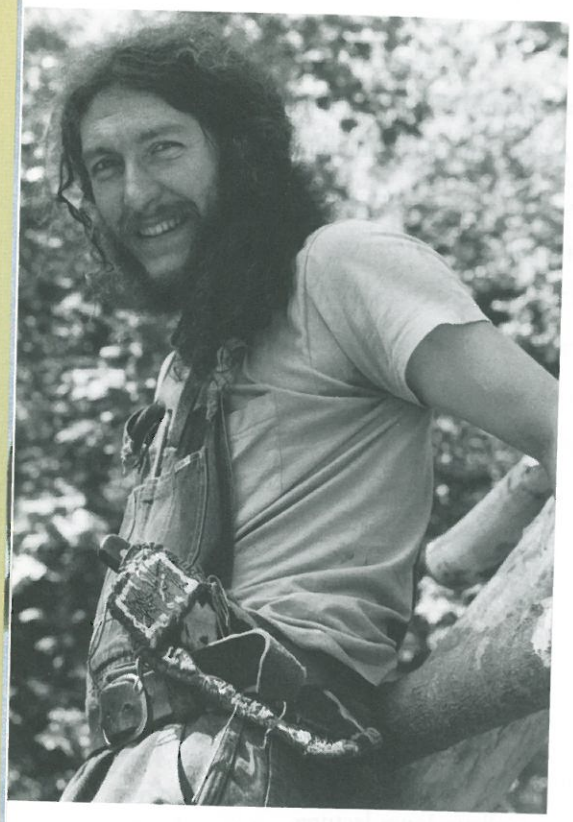
EUSTACE CONWAY

Attending the Past

by McKay Jenkins



DONNA PATRICK

DEEP INSIDE a darkly forested Smoky Mountain watershed, set in among the black birch, silver maple, and shagbark hickory, Eustace Conway is making a doubletree. The roof beams of his open-air blacksmith shop drip with leather and iron: froes, adzes, and spokeshaves; saddles, buggy wheel rims, and rasps. Stuck in every nook are once and future tools: buggy springs, canteens, tongs for the forge. One old bucket holds a dozen horseshoes; another a bunch of rusted hinges; a third a deerskin soaking in creek water. Conway built the shop for five dollars, roofing nails the only things he couldn't fashion himself.

To the left of the shop is an open-air, tin-roofed kitchen, outfitted with three wood stoves and a black locust trough that collects spring water from a hand-made siphon. Cord upon cord of white pine lies stacked nearby; beside the hand-hewn eating tables and benches, a slab of drying venison hangs from one peg, woven white oak baskets from another. To the right of the shop is a split-log corncrib and stable, its resident Standard-bred sleepily acknowledging the guinea hens and a domesticated wild turkey scurrying around outside.

Conway will use the doubletree, a T-shaped device with a chain stem and an iron crossbar, to link a plow to a draft horse and mule so he can disc up his neighbor's potato field. In exchange, he will receive two gallons of milk, straight from their cow. His plot, and theirs, is set along a narrow, stream-threaded valley floor beneath steep forest walls thick with mountain laurel and hemlock, tulip poplar and persimmon. The dirt road connecting the two is pocked with horse prints and buggy tracks. Dropped in blindfolded, one would know for certain that this was southern Appalachia, but one would not know if the year was 1997 or 1697. The world of Eustace Conway is marked at once by an existence outside of time and by an unmistakable particularity of place.

Turtle Island Preserve, the land Conway oversees, was founded ten years ago when he purchased 107 acres of remote watershed several miles outside Boone, North Carolina. Since then, he has purchased an additional 500 acres, and another 500 or so has been secured by like-minded friends and neighbors hoping to buffer the preserve from encroaching development. Conway has turned Turtle Island into a base from which he and his assistants teach week-long programs for elementary and high school students, weekend skills workshops for adults hoping to learn everything from basketmaking to blacksmithing, and seminars for teachers seeking to integrate Native American history and ecology into their classrooms.

The governing pedagogy Conway employs is what he calls "The Old Ways": traditional methods of hunting, farming, carpentry, and wilderness survival found in the traditions of both Native Americans and Appalachian mountain people. In its respect for the land, suspicion of modern technology, and admiration for the mastery of all forms of physical work, Conway's working reserve is both a labor-intensive retreat and an unmistakable nod to anti-industrialism of the Southern Agrarians of the 1920s. One of his newest programs offers free year-long residences in exchange for work. This is not work for the faint of heart, or for those enamored with a sentimentalized notion of rural living. Turtle Island has no running water other than the creeks; no electricity save an endless extension cord—connected to a neighbor's line—that runs a single phone answering machine; and no heat, other than that found in wood stoves and cookfires.

The work is unending and can be punishing; on a recent April weekend, two students in their twenties were cutting floor joists—by hand—for a new timberframe house; another was learning to use the doubletree—and the massive animals it was attached to—to plow a garden patch. Other chores include shingling existing shelters; timbering pasture-land (with saw, ax, and horse-drawn

wooden sled); and tending large vegetable gardens that provide enough potatoes, onions, and turnips to balance the venison, goat, fish and fowl that keep the crew's uncanny appetites in check. (The calories required to keep Turtle Island running are impressive: at a recent Saturday morning breakfast, Conway and three students finished off eighty pancakes.) The pace of life at Turtle Island is both remarkably slow and remarkably sustained; beginning students may take an entire day to make a single wooden spoon, or they may spend an entire week doing nothing but stripping shingles.

To be sure, the lessons learned at Turtle Island are a long way from those taught in conventional classrooms. Primitive conditions are part of the experience here, Conway says. "It's not primitive because we can't do better, it's primitive because we want it like that—that's the teaching. You can recognize the sacredness of food if you go out and hunt yourself, if you take the time to plant the seeds yourself. People say you can't escape the real world—we're teaching them about getting in touch with reality. We give them a chance to kill a chicken, milk a cow, plant a bean. I use material things to get to them. I teach them how to build a bench or make a bowl—something they can understand because it's part of their culture."

CONWAY HIMSELF is a both a living anachronism and a teacher and adventurer of some regional legend; his graying, Mennonite-style beard and twinkling eyes give him the look of an elder despite his thirty-four years. Until three years ago, when he built himself a split-log home (for five dollars), he had lived in a teepee for eighteen years. He eats entirely off his land, raising vegetables and hunting with bow, a shotgun, and even, on occasion, a blowgun. He makes bowstrings from the sinew of deer he drops and butchers himself; he hauls rocks from pastureland with a draft horse and a wooden sled; he starts fires with tinder and a spinning stick. He makes or refurbishes iron tools on his own forge, and takes guests along the forest trails near his camp in a horse and buggy.

Even his earthly desires have a tone of nostalgic yearning; Conway says he has been looking for a wife for eighteen years, and wishes he could "go back 200 years" to find her.

If the community Conway has created in the North Carolina mountains seems a fully imagined and fully functioning alternative to contemporary life, it is also, predictably, under contemporary pressures. With the proceeds from his camps and his lectures, Conway is still waiting to buy the back of his valley to complete the watershed, but trouble is brewing. Land in his valley sells for $500 per acre, but not long ago, a neighbor who had promised to sell land to Conway was offered $35,000 an acre for it by developers, and she sold. In the valley next door, developers of a high-end resort community are beginning to sell improved lots for $65,000 an acre.

Conway thinks of himself as a blend of Appalachian folk wisdom and Native American tradition. In many ways he is: his roots, he says, thread back to Jamestown; his name, Eustace, was the name of Pocahantas's father's brother. Conway's maternal grandfather, C. Walton Johnson, was a leading figure in American summer camps, establishing Camp Sequoyah near Weaverville, North Carolina in 1924 and advising hundreds of other camps as well. Both of Conway's parents hold advanced degrees and have worked as educators themselves.

When he graduated from Appalachian State University himself in 1986, Conway's first impulse was to disappear into the mountains to create a new life for himself apart from the contemporary culture, and for years he did just that. But in time Conway felt the need to pass his learnings along to others. Conway's teaching is administered in an even, warm, and forgiving voice. His demeanor, both in the woods and in public, is remarkable for its utter lack of self-consciousness; if Conway is shy, he is also immediately disarming, his huge grin almost never leaving his face. His own knowledge of the wilderness is remarkably complete. He has hiked the length of the Appalachian Trail; paddled the Mississippi River from St. Louis to New Orleans; kayaked 1,000 miles of Alaska's inner-coastal waterway; and lived among native peoples throughout the Southwestern United States, Mexico, and Guatemala. Once, on a bet, he lived for eighteen months without burning a single match.

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TWO WINTERS AGO, Conway, his hunting-guide brother, and another friend rode horses across the United States—from Jekyll Island, Georgia to just south of San Diego—in 103 days, apparently a record. Calling themselves the Long Riders, the group rode along service roads, railroads, and canals, and followed power lines wherever they could. They slept in farmfields, and ate whatever came their way. Once, coming across a recently killed deer on the side of a road, the group butchered it and feasted on its meat for two weeks. At first, with just four horses, they covered thirty miles a day, but decided that was too much for the animals; they bought a riding mule in Mississippi and a horse and a mule in Louisiana. By rotating through, they were able to ride fifty miles per day.

"Long Rider heaven was when we found roads along irrigation canals," Conway said. "The only time we rode on paved roads was when we were

forced to, like over bridges. And we never walked our horses. Others who have done long rides never trot—most people never get out of first gear—but we were going fast the whole time. People who know horses won't believe this, but we didn't have a single injury to a horse the whole time." Despite their appearance—shaggy hair and beards above, guns and knives on their belts below—the Long Riders found themselves welcome wherever they rode. "Horses open doors for you," Conway said. "Even if we looked totally rough, people figured if we had horses, we were all right. We were staying with traditional, conservative people with crewcuts—they let us use corrals and pasture without any trouble."

Conway has added tales of the Long Riders journey to the list of talks he gives to Southeastern schools and colleges, who hire him for lectures and demonstrations on everything from Native American history to environmental studies. On occasion, his visits to civilization provide proof that you can take the man from the woods, but not the woods from the man. During a recent lecture before some 200 people at a summer camp near North Carolinas Pisgah National Forest, standing on a stage in an auditorium, Conway briefly forgot where he was. Turning his head, he blew what he calls a "snot rocket" onto the floor by his feet. Instantly realizing his faux pas, he apologized ("That gave an air of reality to it!") and continued his talk.

In a country with a real monastic tradition, one might conceive of a man like Conway as both a vessel and a conduit of sacred ritual: we are somehow strengthened knowing there are those doing this work. Here in the West, we might conceive of a man like Conway not as a monk but as a place, perhaps a place like Alaska: a place as symbolic as it is geographic. True to character, Conway's own spirituality comes by example rather than word. "Real spirituality has to do with economy and experience. It is not something you do one day a week. You can have heightened moments of spirituality, or you can teach someone to have more of an ongoing, real spiritual experience—without them even realizing it—by teaching them to grow something from a seed. That's the cornerstone of existence. That's the magic of life. If people had one tomato plant in a bucket, their life would be richer. You get spiritual awareness from the bottom up—that's where the nutrients come from—the roots."

Eustace Conway driving horses at Turtle Island Preserve in North Carolina, where he teaches traditional ways of living.

JOE YOUNG