A frequent visitor to the Second College Grant muses about its magical appeal.

BY NELSON BRYANT ‘46

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A surge of anticipatory pleasure always greets me when—while driving north from the Massachusetts seacoast to Dartmouth’s Second College Grant in northeastern New Hampshire—I reach the stretch of Route 16 south of Etna, New Hampshire, where the highway and the Androscoggin River run side by side. I savor the river, the pools, rapids and runs that I have waded or canoed in years past. Flying through snow or landing descending, I savored the skylines of pointed trees, spires, fits and larches. I am at the start of a Shakespearean sonnet. The stage has been set. On recent fall visits to the Grant, the opening quatrains that comes to mind is the bard’s own.

“Time of your thin moustes is now behind
When yellow leaves, or as it is, forsooth,
Upon these branches which shake against the cold,
 Bare, naked trees where late the sweet birds sang”

Cities and traffic, rare for an occasional pickup truck—often with a canoe on top—are behind me. I am embraced by my own and the natural world’s autumn, and a few miles ahead in Wentworth Location is the entrance to the Grant, a 2,700-acre, 22-square-mile tract of wilderness that was given the struggling College in 1807 by the New Hampshire legislature.

When I first attended Dartmouth—a summer semester in 1942 before I joined the Royal Airforce in the Battle of Britain in World War II—I wasn’t even aware of the Grant. Coming from a small town on the island of Martha’s Vineyard, where I lived for many years, and where I met my wife, I was quite overwhelmed by college life, by my classes and by the freedom of new experiences. But at night, to get away from it all, I would hike, camp, climb and canoe to the Merrimack River in the early winter. There was a foot of snow on the ground, I am sure, but if I could see the moon, I could find my way to the river with the aid of the stars. The Merrimack was a friend, a companion, a mentor.

One trip to the Grant will let you know why settlers weren’t clamoring to homestead the region. There are only a handful of places in it that enough or sufficiently free of rocks to sustain a hayfield or field of potatoes. The Grant is a range of wooded islands. Residents, including deer and raccoon, bear, bobcat, fisher, beaver, lynx, varying hare, ruffed grouse, a variety of birds and wild trout.

A good way to encounter those trout is to put in a canoe at the pool just below Hellgate Gorge at the Grant’s upper end and drift, paddle and fish your way down to the management center at the lower end, a distance of about 10 miles. It’s a reasonable chance that you’ll surprise a wading moose; aquatic weeds dangling from its mouth. Or, if stillwater trout fishing is your forte, you could take the uphill trail from the Hellgate clearing to tiny Hellgate Pond, stocked each year with about 400 brook trout fingerlings by the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department.

For many Grant devotees, the urge to return does not weaken with the years, nor is it necessarily linked with hunting or fishing. And sometimes, as in the case of Put Blodgett’s, who first hunted out of the Merrimack Brook cabin in 1910, the desire to hunt de-pends.

Once of the most dedicated deer hunters I’ve ever met, Put away his rifle a few years back and now hikes the remotest reaches of the Grant in search of hardwoods butts that he fashions into bows at his home in Lyme, New Hampshire.

On a deer hunting trip to Merrill Brook in the late 1910s, his brother Dan and I were guests of Put and his uncle, Pete Blodgett’s. Pete—the acknowledged leader of the group—arrived in late afternoon, burst into the cabin, seated himself at the head of the table and talked animatedly about his hunting prospects until dark. He suddenly got up and said that he was too old to hunt, that all he could do was walk along the logging roads. He then announced he was leaving.

Stunned and saddened, we watched the tailights of his car go down the road, over Merrill Brook and out of sight.

The magic of the Grant is powerful, however. Several times after that Put returned—as a non-hunter—to the Merrill Brook cabin for reunions with the Blodgett clan before his death in 1949. The last reunion Put attended was in 1996, 74 years after he first hunted the Grant. On that first Grant hunt in 1922, Put stayed at a logging camp cabin in the Hellgate area. Now an anonymous donor is—Put’s home—paying to have that still-standing but rotten cabin moved a short distance southeast in the clearing and rebuilt a proper symbol of man’s lasting affection for a wild and precious place.

You never know what you will learn when you visit the Grant. Often discoveries are of small consequence, but they stick with you. Once during a trundled time, I crossed the pool of Merrill Brook in early winter. There was a foot of snow on the ground, and I occupied myself one afternoon by following a bobcat’s track into the alder swamp between the cabin and the Devil’s Ammond and came upon the spot where it had killed a beaver, eating everything safe of some of the peat and the tail. I spent a lot of time skinning the tail and made a big pot of soup that was quite good. It and its preparation seemed to mitigate my spiritual malaise. There was no so much soup left that I brought it to Grace Tower, who was the Grant guidekeeper at that time. She accepted my gift, and laughed when I complained to her about the difficulty of removing the skin. All you have to do, she said, is throw the tail skin on a bed of hot coals until the skin sloughs off. Grace never had another bear skin in my possession, but I’ll do, I’ll be prepared.

NELSON BRYANT began writing the “Wood, Field and Stream” column (now called “Outdoors”) for The New York Times in 1967. Although he retired a decade ago, he continues to contribute to that column on a freelance basis.