

5/76

THE GOOD EARTH

Mel Ellis

Little Kathy—environmental lawyer



Kathy Falk, then aged 10, played with a dog, Sergeant, on Mel Ellis' property. Now a law student, she also works for Wisconsin Environmental Decade, a Madison law firm that specializes in environmental issues.

Kathy Falk
Madison, Wis.

Dear Kathy:

Can it be nearly 20 years since I crept through the prickly ash to watch through a stable window as you, two of my brood, and another neighborhood child occupied yourselves with pretty stones, leaf collections, and making crayon bulletins about planting trees, picking up litter, protecting wild flowers, and being kind to all animals — as pet rabbits, turtles and frogs sat watching?

What had intrigued me was a sign on the stable door that read, "Conservation Club." If the sign had read, "Johnny Handsome's Fan Club," I'd have gone right on by to get on with my fishing so there'd be time to clean them for supper.

But, "Conservation Club?"

How old were you? Maybe 8? It's a wonder you could spell the word. But you could, you with your black, black hair, and Debbie with her tawny colored tresses. Little barefoot girls in shorts with bruised knees, red bramble scratches from yesterday's berry picking expedition, and tiny, delicate — but strong — hands with broken nails and good, clean creek mud still on them.

I'll never forget that afternoon.

It was hot, and Joker, the mare, had come into a stall to get out of the sun and away from the flies, and the cicadas were screaming in the bush pantry. I could hear older children shouting as they dove into the icy spring water of a nearby pond.

But most of all, I remember it because it occurred to me that something very special was happening, except I didn't know until yesterday how really special it would turn out to be.

You see, Kathy, the day I spied on you was a long time before the first Earth Day, more than a decade before the ecological movement got up a head of steam, and before the doomsayers had begun frightening even some of the hard-headed into becoming conservationists.

Rachel Carson had not yet published "Silent Spring." Schools were not yet involved, except in a desultory way, usually on Arbor Day with the planting of a spindly tree, followed by an often insipid lecture, which left children itching to get away.

Boys and girls your age usually were playing with dolls or toy trucks, or exploring, using the age old ruse of playing doctor.

But, "Conservation Club?" "Sportsman's Club" maybe, because hunters and fishermen were

becoming alarmed about the decrease in the number of pheasants available for harvest and the number of trout waiting to come to creel.

It is true, Aldo Leopold had already written "Sand County Almanac," but it had a meager sale, and never the circulation it got when brought back into print almost a quarter century later.

Certainly there were ecologists sounding warnings, though the word "ecology" hadn't yet become fashionable, and the voices of the pioneers were lost in a wilderness of materialism where you needed a compass called profits.

Anyway, Kathy, it was a long time ago, and I didn't stay long at the window because it was not the proper thing to do. If you had discovered me, it might have melted the magic which made your club so special. So I eased back through the ash, went on down through the young cedars, and proceeded to fish, though my thoughts were back in the stable.

It wasn't long after that you moved, and I lost track of you and your family. I did see you once (or was it twice?), and I marveled at how tall and beautiful you'd become.

Then yesterday, quite by accident, I ran into your mother, and her eyes sparkled, and she smiled with pride, as she told me that you would graduate in December from the University of Wisconsin as a lawyer trained in environmental law.

Little Kathy Falk, the girl on her knees in the stable, an attorney in environmental law!

I thought about it all the way home, and I was very glad, because the people of my generation have become so weary fighting those who are only too glad to have the young pick up the cudgel.

It'll be tough, Kathy, though I'm sure you know that. Chauvinists will be waiting to clobber you because you had the guts to invade what they still consider a man's domain. And you'll never believe the many others you'll have to deal with, men and women who still consider any environmental effort as business for the birds.

So, when the going gets really rough, get a box of crayons. You'd be surprised how you can sometimes doodle away your worries with memories of how it all began, back there in the stable with the mare's tail swishing rhythmically at the blue bottle flies.