



### **A River Tale** by Susan Griffin Ward

There's a new chapter being written in the story of Payne Hollow, but years ago the river currents pulled me pulled to Anna and Harlan's home, and this is that story. There are a handful of places I have visited where the air and light feels infused with a rare energy. It is not a stretch to say Payne Hollow feels sacred. I'll warn you now, this tale is long and winding, much like a lazy river in the summertime.

Often on Sunday summer afternoons we travel upriver from the marina where we dock our boat. To get to our favorite spot we first pass by Charlestown, Indiana where the golf carts line up at JoJo's Bar and Grill, home of the best fried fish sandwich and cold beer on the river. The next river marker is 18 Mile Island where kids fly on a rope swing, closely followed by the town of Westport where I mourn the poet's house and its lighthouse tower that lies in ruins. Then we cruise quickly by the sand quarries where loud music pulses in the party coves. Just a bit further is quiet Pattons Creek, home to a pair of nesting eagles, and the sleepy town of Bethlehem, Indiana. Next up on the Kentucky side is Wise's Landing where a pristine country church, with its pretty white clapboard steeple, stands in the shadows of the smoking, spewing towers of the Trimble County power plant.

Finally, after about a half hour of cruising at full throttle, David cut the engine and we dropped anchor beside the soft shoulders of the Kentucky hillsides that roll down to the river's edge. This is a quiet spot with a view up and down the wide sweeping curve of the river. On the

opposite bank is Lee Bottom Flying Field, a grassy landing strip for small airplanes which appears to be a real life setting for Richard Bach's book, *Illusions*. In the distance, just before Hanover College, is Plowhandle Point. Except for working barges, there is almost no boat traffic this far up the river. The Ohio River is 981 miles long, and this is the place that always feels most like home to us.



Here the boat is our private island. We read books and the Sunday newspapers, and more often than not, take a nap or two. If it is hot, we float in rafts tied with ropes to the back of the boat, so the current doesn't send us drifting on a Huck Finn like adventure. If we get a little restless, we take the sea kayak for a paddle to search the shore for fossils, river glass and the ultimate treasure, an arrowhead. These are lazy afternoons, the way Sundays are meant to be, but rarely are. At home it is hard to ignore chores and the pull of the computer. So on the water we rest, we watch the sky, we watch the light dance across the water. We let the river work her magic.

And magic is in abundance here. As it turns out we are not the only ones to feel drawn to this curve of river.

One Sunday, I paddled over to the shore directly across from where we anchored the boat. For the first time, I noticed a path through the cottonwoods and sycamores along the shore. I explored further and found a house perched high on the hillside. Secreted away from the world, this is the house of my fantasies. I slipped quietly back to the river.

The following winter, while half-watching TV, I saw a house flash across the screen. It was THE HOUSE, the fantasy house from our spot on the river. And low and behold, the place on the river, the place we had been drawn to repeatedly had a name, Payne Hollow. It had been the home of Anna and Harlan Hubbard, pioneers in every sense of the word.



I was enchanted. It was the start of a great armchair adventure. I learned Harlan was a writer and a painter, an artist who lived on the edge of his beloved river. I read everything I could written by Harlan and written by others about Harlan and Anna. They spent 8 years living on a shantyboat (a houseboat without a motor that relies on river current to drift downstream) built by Harlan himself. They spent 5 of those years drifting downriver from Cincinnati to New Orleans. Eventually they settled at Payne Hollow on the curve of the river in the very place we considered "ours". They lived a quiet life full of very hard work, but also great beauty and abundance. They lived without electricity or running water, grew and caught their food, and made their own tools. They lived the life Thoreau only experimented with at Walden Pond. In Harlan's words, it was a life lived, "on the fringe of society."



The following summer we went back to anchor off the banks of Payne Hollow. David took the kayak over to see the house for himself. He disappeared up the path, but not for long. As he came sprinting back down to shore a loud bell was ringing, clanging over and over. Clearly, it was a warning. Jumping in the kayak, David hurriedly began to paddle back towards our boat anchored offshore. He said there was a man in a window who saw him. And suddenly the man was on shore, shirtless, barefoot, wearing cut-offs and looking more than a little wild with his long hair and white beard and holding a giant sickle attached to a 6-foot handle.

David, still in the kayak, began to yell across the water that we were fans of the Hubbards; that we loved reading *Shantyboat* and *Payne Hollow*. As words floated back and forth across the water, nerves settled, David paddled closer to shore, but not quite within reach of the sickle. The man introduced himself and told us Harlan left Payne Hollow to him when he died. He was nervous, rightfully so, because his home at Payne Hollow had been broken into recently. We were invited up to visit, but David declined (solely because of the sickle). They exchanged phone numbers and parted on friendly terms.

I became a full-fledged mega-fan of Anna and Harlan Hubbard. I wondered how it was that I had never heard of these people? Why was the only Harlan I had ever heard of the one on the side of a bucket of chicken? Harlan's books should be on every Kentucky school's required reading list. I read and reread Harlan Hubbard's books. We bought the only 2 print reproductions of his paintings we could locate. I gave away dozens of copies of *Shantyboat* and *Payne Hollow* to friends and family.

Over the next couple of years, we hoped to be invited to visit. David left messages at the phone number we had been given. I worried we had missed our chance to see Payne Hollow. Then on a March day, while driving on Hwy U.S. 1 from Key Largo to Key West, a phone call came seemingly out of the clear blue island skies inviting us to visit Payne Hollow.

It took a few more months, but suddenly a plan was in place. We would go on a Sunday. As it happened, the wind was howling that day; the river was rocking with whitecaps and huge swells. It was so rough, David wondered if we would make it, but we did. Three years later after the start of this adventure, we beached the boat and used driftwood logs to create a bridge to shore and climbed the hill up to Payne Hollow.

It did not disappoint. Unlike many experiences or things, I build up in my mind due to anticipation, this exceeded my hopes. In fact, it was probably the first time ever I did not want to look at my photographs when the day was over. I knew they could not capture the spirit and beauty of the place or our experience.

The house itself is part Frank Lloyd Wright, part Shaker, and part Japanese origami box. And yet, it is a home in every sense of the word. There is much so much to say about Payne Hollow and Anna and Harlan, more than I could ever express with the eloquence deserved. My advice? Read Harlan's own words. That's all you really need.

Near the end of our visit, I was standing under a canopy of trees above the house on a grassy hill (kept clear with the infamous sickle) looking down on the rooftop of the house and the stone chimney Harlan had built by hand, while the river flowed below. Tiger lilies were at my feet, the wind sang in the trees, and points of light sparked off the river. I was in a holy place, a cathedral without walls. I soaked up the greenness, the sounds, the light, the magic for as long as I could, knowing this place and the story of Anna and Harlan would be inspiration for my life and whatever was around the next bend of the river.