



The Foothills Naturalist

By JAY SHULER

I was privileged to watch a master at work. We had a glimpse of him as we edged across a rickety one-plank bridge at the end of an oxbow in the Congaree swamp. With one eye to the perilous footing, I took in with the other the authoritative way he pulled a cypress branch aside. Then he stepped behind his camera and his head disappeared beneath an old-fashioned black hood.

He was, I thought at that moment, alone with his vision. On a ground-glass screen he was arranging the pictorial elements before him (fluted cypress trunks, grotesque rattan vines, silver glazed sheets of black water) within the limits of lens and film. He had taken care of technical adjustments. All that remained was application of his art.

It was mildly frustrating, like being given a look at Rembrandt in his studio and realizing that one could learn no more than that he put paint to canvas with brushes.

Even so, it would have been exciting to watch Rembrandt at his easel, and it was inspiring to see Eliot Porter behind his camera. In his youth Dr. Porter gave up a career in medicine to devote his life to making nature photography an art. Critics acclaim his success.

He was taking pictures in the 20,000 acre tract of swamp-land below Columbia that has been proposed as a new National Monument. We were on a Sierra Club "outing" arranged by Ted Snyder of Greenville.

That afternoon Porter hiked with us. As befits a man of great achievement, he proved to be modest, willing to talk about his work without affectation, and patiently answered elementary questions. Only when the time came for him to take a picture did he become preoccupied. Conversation trailed off like light at the end of day as he unpacked his knapsack and busied himself with his tripod.

His subject was a clump of chicken mushroom growing on a tree. Martha was the first to find the clump and she was very embarrassed that she had broken off a bit for us to taste. Porter assured Martha that her nibble made no difference; he planned to photograph it from the other side anyway.

Every amateur photographer on the outing took out his camera to try the subject that had caught the master's eye. My light meter indicated that it was too dark to use natural light, but Porter was undeterred.

He took out a magenta filter and put it on his camera to compensate for the effects of the late afternoon light and the long exposure. He closed the lens down to f22, and opened the shutter for seven minutes — long enough to expose over 25,000 pictures with an Instamatic camera!

I hope I see that picture soon in Audubon Magazine and that the article it illustrates proves to be a turning point in the campaign to set aside the awesome Congaree wilderness.

It would be fitting for art to save nature.