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Letter from John Muir to Moores ?, 1867 Jul

John Muir

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[Madison] July, 1867

[1861-64]

Since writing last we have been on many a hill, and walked "o'er moors and mosses many o", but the best of all our rambles was one which was completed last Friday. We took the train from here Thursday morning for Kilbourn, a small town on the Wisconsin river towards LaCrosse, rambled all day among the glorious tangled valleys and lofty perpendicular rocks of the famous Dells, ^{II} stayed over night in Kilbourn, and voyaged to Portage next day upon a raft of our own construction. The thousandth part of what we enjoyed was pleasure beyond telling. At the Dells the river is squeezed between lofty frowning sandstone rocks. The invincible (Wis.) has been fighting for ages for a free passage to the Mississippi, and only this crooked and narrow slit has been granted or gained. ^{II} At present all is peace, but the river, though calm, does not appear contented. ^{II} Only a few foam-bells are seen, but they float with an air of tardy settled sullenness past the black yawning fissures and beetling, threatening rock-brows above. But when winter, has ^{yielded} passed with its locking ice together with the authoritative looks of the high summer sun, just at the darkest of the year before any flowers are overhead or any of the rock ferns have unrolled their precious bundles, then the war is renewed with the most terrific, roaring, foaming, gnashing fury. Fierce legions come pouring in from many an upland swamp and lake, in irresistible haste, through broken gorge and valley gateways. All in one they rush to battle clad in foam — rise high upon their ever-resisting enemy, and with constant victory year by year gain themselves a wider and a straighter way.

Kilbourn station is about two miles below the Dells. We went to the river side and at once began to find new plants. The banks are rocky and romantic for many miles both above and below the Dells. On going up the river we were delightfully opposed and threatened by a great many semi-gorge ravines running at right angles to the river, too steep to cross at every point and much too long to be avoided if to wish to avoid them were possible. Those ravines are the most perfect, the most heavenly plant conservatories I ever saw. Thousands of happy flowers are there, but ferns and mosses are the favored ones. No human language will ever describe them. We traveled two miles in eight hours, and such scenery, such sweating, scrambling, climbing, and happy hunting and happy finding of dear plant beings we never before enjoyed. ^{II} The last ravine we encountered was the most beautiful and deepest and longest and narrowest. The rocks overhang and bear a perfect selection of trees which hold themselves towards one another from side to side with inimitable grace, forming a flower veil of undescrivable beauty. The light is measured and mellowed. For every flower springs, too, and pools, are there in their places to moisten them. The walls are fringed and painted most divinely with the bright green polypodium and asplenium and mosses and liverworts and gray lichens, and here and there a slump of flowers and little bushes. The floor was barred and banded and sheltered by bossy, shining, moss-clad logs cast in as needed from above. ^{II} Over all and above all and in all the glorious ferns, tall, perfect, godlike, here and there amid their fronds a long cylindrical spike of the grand fringed purple orchis. ^{II} But who can describe a greenhouse planned and made and planted and tended by the Great Creator himself. ^{II} Mrs. Davis wished a fernery. Tell her I wish she could see this one and this rock-work. We cannot remove such places to our homes, but they cut themselves keenly into our memories and remain pictured in us forever.

[John Muir]

^{Print} *Sometimes there is a perpendicular rise at the Dells of 40 ft.