river banks, and as few road crossings as possible. Slowly, patiently, and sometimes expensively the Conservation Department has been buying land, removing cottages, warding off unnecessary roads, and in general pushing the clock back, as far as possible, toward the original wilderness.

The good soil that enabled the Flambeau to grow the best cork pine for Paul Bunyan likewise enabled Rusk County, during recent decades, to sprout a dairy industry. These dairy farmers wanted cheaper electric power than that offered by local power companies, hence they organized a co-operative REA and in 1947 applied for a power dam, which, when built, would clip off the lower reaches of a fifty-mile stretch in process of restoration as canoe-water.

There was a sharp and bitter political fight. The Legislature, sensitive to farmer-pressure but oblivious of wilderness values, not only approved the REA dam, but deprived the Conservation Commission of any future voice in the disposition of power sites. It thus seems likely that the remaining canoe-water on the Flambeau, as well as every other stretch of wild river in the state, will ultimately be harnessed for power.

Perhaps our grandsons, having never seen a wild river, will never miss the chance to set a canoe in singing waters.

Deadening

The old oak had been girdled and was dead.

There are degrees of death in abandoned farms. Some old houses cock an eye at you as if to say ‘Somebody will move in. Wait and see.’

But this farm was different. Girdling the old oak to squeeze one last crop out of the barnyard has the same finality as burning the furniture to keep warm.

Illinois Bus Ride

A farmer and his son are out in the yard, pulling a crosscut saw through the innards of an ancient cottonwood. The tree is so large and so old that only a foot of blade is left to pull on.

Time was when that tree was a buoy in the prairie sea. George Rogers Clark may have camped under it; buffalo may have nooned in its shade, switching flies. Every spring it roosted fluttering pigeons. It is the best historical library short of the State College, but once a year it sheds cotton on the farmer’s window screens. Of these two facts, only the second is important.

The State College tells farmers that Chinese elms do not clog screens, and hence are preferable to cottonwoods. It likewise pontificates on cherry preserves, Bang’s disease, hybrid corn, and beautifying the farm home. The only thing it does not know about farms is where they came from. Its job is to make Illinois safe for soybeans.

I am sitting in a 60-mile-an-hour bus sailing over a highway originally laid out for horse and buggy. The ribbon of concrete has been widened and widened until the field fences threaten to topple into the road cuts. In the narrow thread of sod between the shaved banks and the topping fences grow the relics of what once was Illinois: the prairie. No one in the bus sees these relics. A worried farmer, his
fertilizer bill projecting from his shirt pocket, looks blankly at the lupines, lespedeza, or Baptisia that originally pumped nitrogen out of the prairie air and into his black loamy acres. He does not distinguish them from the parvenu quack-grass in which they grow. Were I to ask him why his corn makes a hundred bushels, while that of non-prairie states does well to make thirty, he would probably answer that Illinois soil is better. Were I to ask him the name of that white spike of pea-like flowers hugging the fence, he would shake his head. A weed, likely.

A cemetery flashes by, its borders alight with prairie puccoons. There are no puccoons elsewhere; dog-fennels and sowthistles supply the yellow motif for the modern landscape. Puccoons converse only with the dead.

Through the open window I hear the heart-stirring whistle of an upland plover; time was when his forebears followed the buffalo as they trudged shoulder-deep through an illimitable garden of forgotten blooms. A boy spies the bird and remarks to his father: there goes a snipe.

The sign says, 'You are entering the Green River Soil Conservation District.' In smaller type is a list of who is cooperating; the letters are too small to be read from a moving bus. It must be a roster of who's who in conservation.

The sign is neatly painted. It stands in a creek-bottom pasture so short you could play golf on it. Near by is the graceful loop of an old dry creek bed. The new creek bed is ditched straight as a ruler; it has been 'uncurled' by the county engineer to hurry the run-off. On the hill in the background are contoured strip-crops; they have been 'curled' by the erosion engineer to retard the run-off. The water must be confused by so much advice.

Everything on this farm spells money in the bank. The farmstead abounds in fresh paint, steel, and concrete. A date on the barn commemorates the founding fathers. The roof bristles with lightning rods, the weathercock is proud with new gilt. Even the pigs look solvent.

The old oaks in the woodlot are without issue. There are no hedges, brush patches, fencerows, or other signs of shiftless husbandry. The cornfield has fat steers, but probably no quail. The fences stand on narrow ribbons of sod; whoever plowed that close to barbed wires must have been saying, 'Waste not, want not.'

In the creek-bottom pasture, flood trash is lodged high in the bushes. The creek banks are raw; chunks of Illinois have sloughed off and moved seaward. Patches of giant ragweed mark where freshets have thrown down the silt they could not carry. Just who is solvent? For how long?

The highway stretches like a taut tape across the corn, oats, and clover fields; the bus ticks off the opulent miles; the passengers talk and talk and talk. About what? About baseball, taxes, sons-in-law, movies, motors, and funerals, but never about the heaving groundswell of Illinois that washes the windows of the speeding bus. Illinois has no genesis, no history, no shoals or deeps, no tides of life and death. To them Illinois is only the sea on which they sail to ports unknown.