

VAGABONDING THROUGH DIXIE: AN ANALYSIS (DRAFT)



Path Through The Florida Pines. Oil on Canvas Mounted on Panel.

Signed G. Inness and dated 1894. Property of the Estate of Helen G. Clarke, from the
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Over the years, the life of Edward Flanders Robb Ricketts has received much attention. A bit of this attention has been the consequence of his having been the inspiration for the character *Doc* in John Steinbeck's novel *Cannery Row*. As a result, much effort has been directed toward understanding the influence Edward F. Ricketts had on his friend John Steinbeck. Less attention has been spent appreciating Edward F. Ricketts' career as a scientist and co-author of the book *Between Pacific Tides*.

On May 14, 1897, Edward Flanders Robb Ricketts was born to Charles Abbott Ricketts and Alice Beverly Flanders Ricketts in Chicago, Illinois. Besides one year the family spent living in Marshall North Dakota, EF Ricketts was raised in Chicago, graduating from the west side's – John Marshall High School in 1914. Edward F. Ricketts then enrolled in the Illinois State Normal University where stayed one year. In 1917, Edward Ricketts was drafted into the U. S. Army Medical Corps, which resulted in a short tour of duty that extended from November 1918 to March 1919.¹

In the summer of 1919, Ricketts enrolled in the University of Chicago. During spring of 1920, after six months of attending college full time and living with his family, Ricketts joined two roommates, James Nelson Gowanloch and Albert E. Galigher in renting an apartment on Chicago's south side.² As much has been written of the life of EF Ricketts, it has never been clear just how long he shared the apartment with JN Gowanloch and AE Galigher.

What is known is that Ed Ricketts did not attend classes in the fall of 1921, but instead choose to experience a walking trek through the Southeast that traversed across

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Indiana, Kentucky, North Carolina and Georgia; a ramble similar to that of John Muir's *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*. This walk through the South was later remembered by EF Ricketts in the short article *Vagabonding Through Dixie*. Appearing in the June 1925 issue of the magazine *Travel*, this detailed recounting of his trek marked Ricketts' first writing to be accepted for publication.³

A careful analysis of the article *Vagabonding Through Dixie* leads one to appreciate that EF Ricketts likely entered the world of nature through the humanities, in addition to academic course work in the natural sciences. At various points within the remembrance of his walk, Ricketts presents vivid descriptions of the southern landscape regions he visits: the Kentucky countryside, the foothills of the Cumberlands, the Smokies, the Carolinas, and Georgia.

The whole landscape melts into a bluish-brown haze, very restful, but at the same time a little discouraging to one who would gain an idea of the country. The mountains themselves bear a varied and luxuriant flora: oak, hemlock, pine and laurel, with underbrush of several types. Even the rocks are covered with mosses and ferns. Distant mountains are black with timber and stand out sharply against the sky. Down in the valley, hemlock and pine contrast with the brown, earthy tones of winter oaks and tilled soil.

The narrative vocabulary Ricketts selected to describe the countryside presents the reader with an imagery akin to that presented by many prominent American landscape painters of the 19th century. Not so coincidentally, three quarters into the article, EF Ricketts presents the reader with the following sentence *Near Millen, I camped in a clump of pines that continually reminded me of George Inness' "Path*

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Through Florida Pines.” At this point in the reading one may find themselves asking – how is it that Ed Ricketts is familiar with the works of the famous American landscape painter, George Inness?

Well, it turns out Ed's father, Charles Abbott Ricketts, had an younger brother named Robb Roy Ricketts, who for a time during the first several decades of the 20th century was a prominent art dealer and picturesque member of Chicago's bohemian artists colony.⁴ As head of the firm Moulton and Ricketts, Robb Roy Ricketts worked to maintain art galleries in Chicago, Milwaukee and New York. These galleries exhibited and sold the paintings of some of the most renowned European and American artists of the late 19th and early 20th century, including those of George Inness. Upon further investigation one finds that Robb Roy Ricketts was particularly skilled with selling the landscape paintings of the artist, George Inness.

As part of his operating the business, Robb Roy Ricketts employed his younger brother Charles Abbott Ricketts, be it for a limited time, at the Chicago gallery of Moulton and Ricketts. One can presume with reasonable confidence that Edward F. Ricketts was exposed to the gallery of Moulton and Ricketts and this impressionable world of art at a young age. This suggestion of Robb Roy Ricketts close association with the art world, as an influence on young EF Ricketts, is supported by his referencing *George Inness' "Path Through Florida Pines"* as this somewhat obscure painting is the first artwork to appear in the Moulton and Ricketts Catalogue of 1913.⁵

The publication, titled *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Important Works by George Inness, Alexander Wyant, Ralph Blakelock*, presents an introduction to each artist including the spirit haunted mysticism and poetic elements associated with their works.

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Thus we learn, as well as having selected Walt Whitman – the Father of American poetry as a favorite poet in his youth, Edward F. Ricketts was introduced to the works of a number of America's most influential landscape painters, including those of George Inness – the Father of American landscape painting.

A bit further along in the article *Vagabonding Through Dixie* one finds another hint as to the introduction to the humanities of a youthful EF Ricketts with the sentence: *Surely the “God of Fools” watched over us that night.* With EF Ricketts known love for poetry, one can assume with some confidence those quoted words refer to the poem *The God of Fools* by Harold E. Begbie. As such, this poetic reference expands one's appreciation for the broadened education EF Ricketts acquired during his youth.

And as for Edward F. Ricketts' introduction to the world of philosophy, one finds in the Moulton and Ricketts Catalogue of 1913, in the section *George Inness, N. A. An Appreciation By James William Pattison* the mentioning of Emanuel Swedenborg: a Swedish scientist, philosopher, theologian and mystic whose doctrines strongly influenced the painting style of George Inness.

Many years later, in the seminal work *Sea of Cortez* by Steinbeck and Ricketts, one finds the following reference to the Swedish scientist: *There are interesting parallels here: to the triangle, to the Christian ideas of trinity, to Hegel's dialectic, and to Swedenborg's metaphysic of divine love (feeling) and divine wisdom (thinking);* a sentence which further suggests the influence of the Moulton and Ricketts Catalogue may have had on the impressionable mind of a young EF Ricketts.

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Quoting Steinbeck Biographer Jackson Benson: *Art, music, literature, philosophy -the fact that the humanities were as much a part of his life as the natural sciences was a great part of what made Ed Ricketts so unusual. Indeed, his basic approach to life and to the problem of understanding it was one of synthesis; his approach to biology was often as much philosophical as it was scientific. He wanted to see each marine animal along the shore within the scheme of the shore as a whole, its total environment of physical conditions and other creatures. His mind stretched from the tidepool to the music of the entire universe, and he saw the arts and sciences as all of one piece.*⁶

It may well have been his Uncle Robb Roy who first ignited his nephews interest in nature very early, as Ed Ricketts himself once recalled. *At the age of six, I was ruined for any ordinary activities when an uncle who should have known better gave me some natural history curios and an old zoological textbook. Here I saw for the first time those magic and incorrect words 'coral insects'.*⁷

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