

Fern wars

30 April, 2020

The woods near my childhood home were effectively a petri dish for every genus and species of flora indigenous to the coastal plains that lay between the Cascades range and Puget Sound. Lots of Douglas Firs and Western Hemlocks with a few deciduous varieties sprinkled in here and there – my mother's favorite was a gloriously spring blooming dogwood visible from our house – stood among a bewildering assortment of berries, wild flowers and indeterminate 'bushes.'

Among the most prevalent were ferns of various types, some with huge fans, some terminating in curlicues that closely resembled bishops' croziers, tall and short, wide and narrow. The ferns most highly valued by us kids were a variety we called 'spear ferns' for their long, straight main stalks and the spearhead-shaped root. Our name for them arose from their resemblance once denuded of branching elements to the lances favored by soldiers of olden days, at least as represented in the Saturday movies we watched for a dime at the John Danz theatre. (Yeah, you read that right. Saturday matinees were designed to relieve parents of children so they could shop. For a quarter, my brother and I could see the movie and share a tube of chocolate Flicks.)

This was before cable, before personal computers, wa-a-ay before the Internet except in a few college and military labs. With the exception of J.P. Patches and Mickey Mouse Club on TV and those Saturday matinees, we were pretty much on our own as to entertainment. We invented games, most involving imaginary derring-do. We had to make up our own settings, stories, and implements. Hence the popularity of a lowly plant that with a quick alteration became a formidable weapon.

We would divvy up sides using a schoolyard pick, then set about making our implements de battle. The teams would retire to neutral corners of the woods to plot our strategies before one of the kids would signal the beginning of hostilities by shouting "I declare war!" After which there would be a lull while the antagonists crawled and crept into optimal fern throwing positions.

Eventually, the ferns would fly. As you learned in an earlier post, I was no good at throwing balls but for some odd reason my accuracy and range when chucking ferns was up there with the best – Dave Hunt and the Hitchcocks had nothing over me when it came to all-out war with spore-bearing projectiles. And ferns offered a clear advantage over other pretend weapons in that the muddy root end would leave a clear mark on the recipient's tee shirt, thus denying the victim the opportunity to simply assert a miss to avoid being out of the game.

Yeah, you might hear "You missed me!" shouted in games of dodge ball, fast draw shootouts with cap pistols or invisible sword duels but not in fern wars. You hit your opponent and he was dead, dead, dead. With a big, muddy mark to prove the point.

Come to think of it, we were bloodthirsty little savages. But we had fun. And since fern wars were by definition conducted out of doors, we weren't home driving our parents insane.

So, there's that.

