

The Boyhood of JOHN MUR

A Feature Production of Florentine Films

Produced by
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Teacher's Guide

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To the Teacher:

Welcome to our production “The Boyhood of John Muir,” a seventy-eight minute dramatic feature for based on John Muir’s early years. This program was funded by the National Endowment for Children’s Educational Television, the Town Creek Foundation, and the Wisconsin Sesquicentennial Commission.

John Muir is known today as the founder of Yosemite National Park, the Sierra Club, and as this nation’s first environmentalist. It was in his youth that the foundation for his love of wilderness was laid. Muir’s early life embodies themes seen again and again in 19th century America: immigration, the taming of wilderness and frontier lands, the conflict between generations. Set in the landscape of the 19th century American frontier, John spends his youth on a farm, but eventually escapes to factory work, another theme that resonates in rural American mythology. But in the factory Muir loses his sight — during his convalescence he relives his life and decides on a new course for his future.

Muir’s boyhood represents strikingly different aspects of the American experience. First, he is of the typical immigrant-settler community that shaped this country in its earliest years. Coming to Wisconsin the state when it had been a state for less than a year, young John works for his father, clearing nearly one hundred acres on two different farm sites, working the “seventeen hours of broiling, back-breaking labor” that he describes in his memoirs.

But if Muir’s farm childhood is typical, the outcome is not. He eventually becomes this country’s first great spokesman for wilderness, he is the first in an eminent line of philosophers and scholars who have shaped wilderness thought in this country, and indeed in the world. It is in John Muir’s young story that we uncover those roots of environmental philosophy, and see the origins of the American conservation movement.

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Sincerely,

Diane Garey
Lawrence R. Hott

Overview

THE BOYHOOD OF JOHN MUIR tells the early story of Scottish emigrant John Muir, known today as the founder of Yosemite National Park, the Sierra Club, and as America's first environmentalist. It was in his youth that the foundation for his later love of wilderness was laid.

John Muir's early life is a story of immigration, of family conflict and personal discovery. Set in the landscape of 19th century Wisconsin, the story takes John from his early days on a hard scrabble farm to his work as a carriage factory foreman in Indiana. It is in the factory that Muir loses his sight, and it is during his convalescence that he relives his life and decides on a new course for his future.

The film is divided into three parts. In the first part, the dramatic battle lines are drawn: the free-spirited boy John Muir is pitted against his well-intentioned but unforgiving father, and the joy of nature is John's escape from the pious solemnity of their rugged life on a Wisconsin farm in the 1850s.

In the second part, John gets help in his struggle from both his mother and from an older neighbor called the Yankee — help that helps him live with his father and learn the beautiful and just laws of the natural world.

In the third part, John begins to make inventions, a skill that carries him away from the backbreaking labor of the farm; but a trick of fate shows him what he really cares about. At last he abandons mechanical science to pursue his overwhelming love of nature and God's creatures.

Scene Synopsis

OPENING — CARRIAGE FACTORY

The scene is a tiny darkened room above an Indiana carriage factory — a room where John Muir's life, and the history of America, will change forever. The American Environmental movement is about to be born.

John Muir is a gaunt teenager. He lies on a narrow cot, his eyes

tightly wrapped with blood-soaked gauze. We don't know what's happened to him, and won't know until the film's end. John is totally still — except for his hands, which constantly explore a small piece of wood: a tiny, intricately-carved bird — a Sandhill Crane. A well-dressed older man (Judson Osgood, the owner of the factory) appears in the door frame.

“Well, John, what do they tell you? Are your eyes going to get better?”

“They say they don't know,” John says. Osgood watches John's hands fumble.

“John. What are you doing with that thing?”

John holds it up as if looking at it; “I'm seeing things,” he says — and the scene cuts quickly to black.

DUNBAR, SCOTLAND - ROCKY OCEAN SHORE/MUIR HOME

The silent darkness lifts slowly. We see a tight close-up of the inside of a cupped pair of human hands: a periwinkle shell is sitting on one palm. Then the shell abruptly gets up and walks — it's a hermit crab. At that moment, the silence breaks as the sound of crashing ocean waves comes up. John is 13 years old, sitting on a rock by the North Sea in Scotland. Waves crash almost at his feet, but he's totally absorbed by the crab scuttling in his hands. Suddenly a large male hand in a black sleeve comes down from behind and grabs John's shoulder. John drops the crab, turns in fear and looks into his father's angry face.

Sourly his father says, “You've the very devil in you, John Muir. This is the Sabbath-day. You should be home at prayer, not idling about, doing the devil's work for him.” But as they head down the beach Daniel Muir adds, “Now John. I want you to stay calm, do you hear me? But you'll not be going to school tomorrow. We have to get ready to go.”

“Go where?”

“To America,” Daniel says grudgingly.

John immediately erupts in astonishment and happiness, throws his hat in the air, and shouts “America! America! America!” Daniel Muir only shakes his head.

The scene cuts to a small, quiet room inside the Muir home in Dunbar,. John's mother, Ann, sits John down beside her; she takes John's hand tells him that she'll be staying behind with the four youngest children until a house is ready in America. Ann is gentle, patient, soft-spoken, but determined. She tells John that he is the oldest boy, so he must be the one to take care of his brother and

sister, who will go on the journey to America. She talks to him about the meaning of an old Scottish tale — the story of Robert the Bruce and the spider. She has something for him; he may need it one day. She slips a gold sovereign in his hand.

WISCONSIN - DISCOVERING WILDERNESS

The glittering sovereign dissolves to the golden sun, shining on a rolling landscape of oak trees and lush meadows in blooming springtime. The Wisconsin wilderness is immense, lovely, apparently infinite — a paradise for children. In several quick scenes we watch John, older sister Sarah, and younger brother David as they joyfully discover the wild wonders of their new home. They race barefoot through grassy fields shouting “No more school, ever!”; they pick wild strawberries, chase a garter snake; they explore the lake at the bottom of the hill, with its tall reeds and white water-lilies. They roll up their pants and catch frogs and polliwogs in the muck at the edge of the lake; John climbs an oak tree and finds a Blue Jay’s nest with 3 green eggs. They climb over a knoll and watch in astonishment as, in the boggy meadow stretching off in the distance, dozens of strange, gangly Sandhill Cranes stride peacefully in the tall grass.

WORK BEGINS

But the joyful wandering in the woods and fields does not last long. Daniel Muir does not believe in pleasure. He is a strict and demanding father, intense, full of rage. He immediately puts John to work: so the quiet and magical scene at dusk cuts to the harsh glare of roaring flames.

Daniel and John are burning brush they’ve cleared from the fields. As they drag fallen trees to the flames Daniel hammers home the lessons of his Spartan code. “Now John, just think what an awful thing it would be to be thrown into that fire. And then think of the fires of Hell, which is so many times hotter than this. That’s where bad boys are thrown, and sinners of every sort, all people who live for pleasure — into the hell-fire. And their sufferings will never end — they burn, but they don’t burn up — because the fire goes on forever.”

The next job is the plowing of the new fields. Though John can hardly handle the plow, he must learn. His teacher is neighbor, “The Yankee,” a farmer down on his luck. John learns to plow,

then sets about breaking up ground in the rocky, stump-filled fields. Plowing gives way to sowing: John and Sarah chatter away as they plant wheat, corn and potatoes from burlap sacks. But Daniel puts a quick stop to their talk, sending them to work at opposite ends of the field. The long field stretches away before the boy, an endless expanse of dirt and work. But the Yankee teaches John a bit about nature as well as plowing, and the boy's love of the natural world begins to grow.

PUNISHMENT AND HELP

John, Sarah and Daniel kneel together in somber family worship when a mouse scampers across the floor and along the wall. The puppy races after him, barking wildly; Daniel continues to read aloud from the Bible, but John can't control his gleeful laughter. Daniel puts down the Bible: "John. Fetch me my ox whip," he says quietly. Without a word, John gets the whip, then follows his father outside.

The scene cuts to later that night: Sarah is sleeping but John is awake. Daniel prays in the kitchen. "Dear God," he says. "Give me guidance. The boy is full of the Devil. I don't want to be cruel. But I cannot let the Devil stay within him."

The scene cuts to John milking in the barn. He sees a spider there, and remembers the story his mother told him about Robert the Bruce and the spider. John remembers his mother's words about "patience, courage and hope." The scene shifts to summer on the farm. John's mother comes with the younger children at last, and John takes much comfort in her presence. Ann is able to help John come to terms with his stern father. "Your father is a good man," she says; "and he truly loves you." "How can you say that? You're so different from him," John says. "Well, perhaps it's because we believe different things," she says; "I believe that God loves the trees and the flowers and all the creatures of the earth, just as He loves human beings?"

THE WELL

The new house needs water. John is assigned the task of digging the well — by hand, chipping away at hard sandstone. The Yankee suggests blasting the rock with dynamite. "You know what choke-damp is, don'tcha?" the Yankee asks; "When I was a miner, I saw

men die from staying too long in a deep mineshaft.” “I’ll not spend good money to make a hole in the ground,” Daniel Muir says; “John can make us a well.” Every day Daniel lowers John in a bucket with a hammer and chisel, and leaves him there to chip and dig away. John works in his hole for months, going deeper and deeper into darkness. One morning, he’s lowered eighty feet down; he climbs out of the bucket, and immediately begins to sway back and forth. Then he passes out, overcome by poison — “choke damp,” or carbonic acid gas.

Daniel and Ann, worried that John is so quiet, call down to him. “What’s keeping you so still?” Daniel calls out fearfully. “Get in the bucket, boy!” he commands, but when he pulls up the bucket, it’s empty. Daniel yells for the Yankee, they both run for water, and throw it down the well, roaring, “Get in the BUCKET, John!” Finally they splash John in the face, waking him. John manages to crawl and scramble slowly into the bucket, and Daniel pulls him up to the surface. John is unconscious, but breathing; he’s alive.

Only two days later, John is sent back down the well-shaft. This time they throw down water first, to absorb the gas. John soon strikes the side of the well with his pick, the last layer of rock crumbles, and water begins to seep, then pour into the well. The boy dances a Highland jig in the darkness, singing at the top of his lungs, as cool water streams in and soaks his head.

SUMMER ON THE FARM

High summer. Quick-cutting scenes show John doing his many summer chores: grinding scythes, feeding animals, chopping stove-wood, carrying water, mowing and cradling wheat, all part of a workday that lasts 17 hours. The scene cuts to midday; John comes in from the field for dinner (what we call lunch) with his shirt stuck to his back with sweat. He sits and eats corn beside the his father; in the distance, the lake glitters.

“I wish I knew how to swim,” John says.

Daniel, offers to teach him. “Just watch the frogs,” he says to John during the swimming lesson. “They’ll show you how.”

The scene cuts to John halfway in the lake, struggling to swim. He finally succeeds. He shouts in joy, and begins to swim all around the bright clear lake, watching water-striders stroke on the surface of the water, water lilies blossoming — a moment of absolute beauty and happiness. John Muir is a part of the natural world.

But all is not calmness — Daniel Muir and the Yankee quarrel, and Daniel sends the Yankee away. John feels that he's lost his dearest friend. The scene cuts to a winter evening, after family worship; John is reading by candlelight. Daniel calls him to bed.

"Can I read for a few minutes?" John asks.

"I will have no irregularity in this family. You must go to bed with the rest of the children."

"Can I read in the morning?" John asks.

"As you know well, I call you at six each morning for chores," Daniel says. "But if you desire to get up early, you are entirely welcome. Before six in the morning, you can do what you want. Of course you may not light the stove."

Night. Upstairs, in the room where John and David sleep. John wakes up in darkness, before his father's call. He springs out of bed, jumps into his clothing, rushes downstairs. He holds up a candle to consult the clock on the kitchen wall, and discovers that it's exactly one o'clock in the morning. "Five hours to myself!" he whispers. "Five huge, solid hours! Mine!"

When Daniel comes downstairs some hours later, he finds John still reading one of the books the Yankee has given him — a science text. Daniel says, "I said you could read, but I didn't say you could read this. The Bible is the only book you need." John's answer is this: "But just think, Father, you can't read your Bible without spectacles. And spectacles can't be made without someone knowing the science of optics." Daniel answers, "There will always be plenty of worldly people to make spectacles." "But the Bible says that a time will come when all shall know the Lord, from the least even to the greatest. And then who will make the spectacles you need to read your Bible?" "Ach! The very devil's in you, boy!" Daniel Muir says, but he turns away, defeated.

INVENTIONS

But one day it's too cold to read in the unheated house at night. Instead John begins tinkering with tools in the basement. Early in the morning his filing and chiseling wakes Daniel, in the bedroom directly overhead. Daniel turns over, annoyed, to find Ann fully awake. Daniel says, "I never imagined he would get up in the middle of the night." Ann asks Daniel what he's going to do.

“Nothing,” Daniel says; “I gave him that miserable permission. A promise is a promise. The boy can do what he wants down there.”

So every morning John goes on working, among the bins of potatoes and apples in the stone-walled cellar, creating amazingly-elaborate objects under the light of a single candle. One day his father asks what he’s making down there.

“Well, today I made a Loafer’s Chair,” John says.

“What would that be?” Daniel asks.

“Try it,” John says, innocently.

The chair looks ordinary enough; but when Daniel sits down, the weight of his body triggers a revolver hidden beneath the seat: it fires a blank cartridge, and Daniel jumps to his feet. “Guess it works,” John says laconically.

Another of his inventions, the automatic cattle-feeding device, also works, and news of his inventions spreads around the neighborhood. The Yankee seeks out John at work in a field. “You don’t belong out here in the wilderness, John Muir,” he says; “You should show your inventions to the world. “I’d like to do that,” John admits, “but I don’t know how.” “The State Fair,” the Yankee says. “In Madison. That’s the place. Bring your machines there, and they’ll open the door to the great world, for sure. There’s nothing like your inventions in the world.”

At dinner, Daniel Muir discourages John: “You can’t go. You’d need money just to get to Madison, and then money to sleep in a room there, and you might even need something to eat. And that means money as well.” But John goes upstairs, reaches under his mattress, and pulls out: the gold sovereign that Ann gave him in Scotland, long ago. The scene immediately cuts to the crowded, bustling State Fair in Madison.

Here John is demonstrating another of his inventions: a “self-regulating desk” that selects and then opens a book — gives the reader a set amount of time — then slaps the book shut and gets out a second one. (This invention still exists in the State Historical Museum in Madison.). We see Judson Osgood, the wealthy owner of a carriage factory, as he eats his soft-boiled egg and reads the newspaper. Osgood comes to the fair and immediately offers the boy a job.

THE CARRIAGE FACTORY

We see John working in the frame factory. John draws up elaborate time-and-motion plans (with headings such as “The Chart of One Day’s Labor”) that still exist. Sitting down with Osgood, the boy tells the boss: “Sir, you’re throwing away your greenbacks. There’s no unity in this factory. Nobody knows what anyone else is doing. If you eliminated waste, you’d increase production by at least three times.” Osgood tells him: “Muir, starting today you are my foreman. I’ll give you six months. If you do what you say you can, the job is yours forever. If not, you’re fired.”

Productivity in the shop soon triples, just as John has promised. But more than ever, he’s a slave to work. We see him making labor-saving devices to create wheels: automatic hub-makers, automatic spoke-makers. He’s grown gaunt, thin, pale. As he strides quickly to the factory one morning, a Sandhill Crane flies overhead, but John doesn’t even lift his head; we see parts of machines, dollar signs and greenbacks, flying around inside his mind. John Muir is going machine-crazy.

One night, he is working late at the factory, as usual. But fate suddenly intervenes in John Muir’s life. He’s adjusting a moving conveyor belt when a sharp file suddenly springs up and pierces the cornea of his eye. The eye is immediately blinded; a few hours later the other eye too becomes blind from sympathetic shock. His head is wrapped up tightly and he’s helped into bed.

THE SICKROOM

For weeks, John stays in his cot, blinded — perhaps for the rest of his life. He fumbles with his small Sandhill Crane, and does not move. The film’s opening scene repeats: Judson Osgood shows up and asks, “Well, John, what do they tell you? Are you going to get better?” “They say they don’t know,” John says.

“Your job is waiting for you at the factory, you know,” Osgood says. “Very kind of you, Mr. Osgood,” John says, “but I’m not waiting for it.” When his parents come for him, he refuses to go back to the farm. “If my eyes ever heal, I want to live for the things

that I really love.” “What things are those?” His father asks, and John replies: “Everything that is wild. God has to nearly kill us sometimes, to teach us lessons.”

ENDING - THE THOUSAND-MILE WALK BEGINS

In the film’s final scene, John Muir sets out to leave the room above the carriage factory. His eyes have healed; his mother and his father are beside him.

“Where are you going?” Ann Muir asks.

“To the Gulf of Mexico,” John says. He kisses his mother and shakes his father’s hand, and he starts off.

“The railway station is the other direction, Boy,” Daniel calls after him.

“I’m not going by train. I’m walking.”

“But it’s a thousand miles away from here.”

John smiles: “Then it will be a good long walk,” John says. “A good walk.”

His parents watch him head down the dirt road. “The very devil’s in that boy,” Daniel Muir says, but even Daniel is smiling.

As the credits roll a voice-over narrator says that John Muir’s walk was the beginning of a journey that would eventually make him America’s first great fighter for the preservation of wilderness, and the founder of Yosemite National Park.

Programming in the Classroom

The film is 78 minutes in length. If you wish to show in the film in two parts, there is a natural break point at about forty minutes in. John has just reached water in the well-digging scene and the film fades to black for a short time. This would be an ideal time to turn off the film; viewing could be resumed the next day with the new scene.

The film fits addresses issues in several areas:

- Ecology
- Natural sciences,
- American history
- Family studies

Young John Muir faces and solves problems in his family life. His

father is a stern Calvinist, his mother a quiet but strong woman who shares her husband's faith, but not his temperament. John, along with his brother David and sister Sarah, fears his father's anger, but finds, in his surroundings, joy in life.

As educator Susan Etheredge writes, "teachers concur that children of all ages are drawn to and are fascinated by the stories of real people, ...especially the stories of their childhood." John's friendship with the "Yankee," his success at tricking his father with the Loafer's Chair, his fear at being blinded indefinitely are elements that build on this fascination. The film's lively pace, the tension and the humor will result in a program that will draw children who watch television alone, and appeal to those parents who choose shows for their kids.

Muir's boyhood touches on important subjects — immigration, family studies, social history, and the roots of environmentalism. Historian Stephen Fox writes that "Muir's life echoes larger themes of American life at the time: the immigrant making his way through a new culture, the family settling virgin land in Wisconsin, the eldest son in collision with a domineering father, that larger clash between human use and natural preservation, and finally Muir leaving home and finding his own way at last."

The film will show that leaders can come from unlikely places, and that skilled adults are often building on their childhood avocations. There is an empowering thread that runs through John's story. The fact that his father orders him to dig an eighty-foot well by hand might stun the young viewer. The fact that John succeeds, and rejoices in his success, will astonish, please, and inspire the viewer.

John's boyhood story incorporates content material included in many grade school curricula. His early interest in wildlife, his love of inventions, his love of reading, his factory time-and motion studies reflect the integrated approach to education we see in successful school models.

While the primary content is drawn from history, other content areas will inform the film as well. Project consultant Susan Etheredge notes that the program "could stimulate discussion, debate, questioning, and reflection on social studies, sciences and language arts," as well as history.

Student Objectives

Students viewing this program and participating in the outlined activities will:

- .examine and understand the link between John Muir's early farm experiences and his love of nature
- .recognize the impact of agriculture on the American frontier
- . identify the dominant characteristics of the 19th century Scots immigrant family structure
- .analyze the major influences that motivated the principal characters in the Muir family household

Introducing the Program in the Classroom

Immigration, Scotland, John Muir, Sierra Club, Yosemite

Discussion Starters in the Classroom

1. How did the three principal adults in John's life - his father, his mother, and "the Yankee" - influence him? Connect these influences to John's final decision to live in nature.
2. What impact did agriculture have on the American frontier in the 1850s? Was there a conflict between farming and nature?
3. What parts of Scottish culture did the Muirs bring with them from Scotland?
4. The Muirs were very well off as immigrants. They were able to build a good house, equip it and run a very ambitious farm. How does this fit in with your images of European immigrants coming to America?
5. What are the skills that John had to develop in order to become so proficient a factory foreman?
6. Suggest some labor-saving devices that would work for you around your house.

7. What is nature like around the place where you live? What are some aspects of the natural world that you would like to learn more about?

Activities

1. Immigration — Use a family tree chart to go back three generations in your family. Where were your parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents born? How many countries of origin are represented in the classroom?

2. Nature studies — Choose an outdoor area (playground, city street, path) and scout it for natural and man-made objects in the area. Collect and identify any objects you can (rocks, pieces of asphalt, leaves, litter). Keep a list of any changes in these objects over a period of time.

3. Family studies — Watch the scene in which John argues with his father about reading science books, then write a short script about an argument a young man or woman you know might have with his or her parents. Get people from the class to act the scene. Discuss with the class the outcome of the scene.

4. Time-and-Motion Study — Make a list of classroom tasks: cleaning blackboards, organizing books, collecting lunch money, distributing materials. Go to the library and find copies of time-and-motion study charts. Set up a time-and motion chart for your own classroom compares different approaches to the same task.

5. Film study — Watch the plowing scene from the movie, then choose an event from your own life. List the characters involved in the scene, and draw “storyboards,” rough sketches that show the different shots you need to cover the scene. If possible, shoot the scene with a still or video camera.

Suggested Reading

The Story of My Boyhood and Youth, by John Muir, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1913

A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf, by John Muir, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1916

The American Conservation Movement: John Muir and His Legacy, by Stephen Fox, Boston, Little Brown, 1981

The History of the Sierra Club, by Michael Cohen, San Francisco, Sierra Club Books, 1988

John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir, edited by Linnie Wolf Marsh, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1938

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