

"Billy Joe Tatum: Arkansas' Wildflower"

by Margaret Arnold

from "PROFILES - Real Arkansas Characters"

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"Come on in, Billy Joe Tatum called out from the kitchen. "I was just going to put on some beans and start a load of laundry." She darted around the kitchen like a bird, stirring a pot of venison chili, grabbing the morning's mail, checking on the health of her youngest son, 17-year-old Toby, who was home from school with the flu. "You know, some people would just die to put good venison in a pressure cooker," she said, "but I believe that on some days, like today, the fastest way to cook something is the best way." She moved quickly into the living room, and added a new log to the smoldering fireplace. As with a bird, it was easier to keep up with her by listening than watching, for like many writers, Billy Joe is an enthusiastic talker.

"Now make yourself comfortable," she said with a quick casualness. "I'll be back in a minute." Then, lifting a trap door in a corner of the living room, she descended its spiral stairway to the bedroom and study below. The last of her to disappear was a grey vulture's feather which she has worn in her hair — now braided and waist-length — as "a symbol of independence" for over 15, sometimes very troubled, years.

Since the publication in 1976 of her popular *Wild Foods Cookbook & Field Guide*, Billy Joe Tatum has enjoyed national recognition as one of the few wild foods experts writing today and is considered in a league with the late Euell Gibbons. Recently she appeared on the Johnny Carson *Tonight Show* and was the subject of a profile by *People Magazine*. Such fame, however, is not all that distinguishes her. Her dress (in addition to the feather, she is almost always seen with a multi-purpose pouch hanging from her waist), her house and even the lifestyle she and her family have adopted are, as one resident of nearby Melbourne put it, "a little unusual for these parts."

"We all have our own interests," she said, coming back up the stairs and pausing a moment to glance at 18-month-old Rory, her only grandchild, who was playing on the floor. She, her physician-husband Hally (a sobriquet for Harold) and their

children have always made it a point, she said, to do things alone as well as together: "We're kind of like that baby. We pretty much do what we want to do. But we also have our interests in common, or else, why be a family?"

The house, with its emphasis on glass and patios and decks, looks more like something hung out over the cliffs at Big Sur than nestled in the Izard County Ozarks. The Tatums have named the house "Wildflower" but it is as compact as a ship — everything has its niche — yet is expansive, and when the occasion arises, as it frequently does in spring and summer, chairs and sofas are shoved against the walls; fiddles, guitars and banjos are brought from their cases, and suddenly the living room will accommodate as many as fifty dancers, all of them jigging, stomping or waltzing to mountain music.

Similarly, the kitchen also seems small at first, but it is gnomishly organized and with a distinctly whimsical taste. Sprigs of dozens of varieties of wild teas — sassafras, peppermint and sumac — hang drying from beams overhead; jars of wild mustard, wild ginger, peppergrass seeds, dittany and chinquapin nuts line the shelves. In one corner a lighted display case shows off an improbable collection of miniatures, and rows of handwoven baskets give texture to the ceiling. The rest is crockery, glass, the usual kitchen appliances and, here and there, a basket or a vase of feathers.

"When you live in a conventional house with conventional walls and conventional windows, you tend to lead a more conventional life" she said, turning to watch her eldest daughter, Angel, who had come into the living room. The girl was demonstrating an old family rainyday art of making an empty milk carton belch softball-sized puffs of smoke as it slowly burned in the fireplace. "You may laugh," Billy Joe said indicating the smoking carton, "but during the wintertime things like that and sitting at the window watching birds are the main forms of entertainment we have around here. Oh, we have television like everyone else, but I absolutely abhor it. I don't put my likes and dislikes off on anybody else, but to me, it's just immoral. What I hate is that it puts everybody into the same mold; it makes them wear the same clothes, do the same dances and talk about the same things."

To be with Billy Joe is to be caught up in the current of a woman rushing to beat life to the finish line. "The first thing I do every day is take off my skin. I want to be supersensitive. I don't want to miss a thing or do anything half-way. So much of the time we're not sensitive to what's going on around us, and it

all gets by without us ever having noticed.”

Her special sensitivity is to Nature, particularly plants — wild, uncultivated ones — those seen by many Americans as weeds or, more often, not seen by them at all. Probably few comings and goings escape modern attention so completely as do those of the nettles and berries, thistles and ferns that emerge, flourish and die, silently, year in and year out, in the mountains and vacant lots, and along the streambeds and roadsides all around us. But those places and the plants that grow there have captivated Billy Joe for years now, and she knows them as few people have since the days of Arkansas’ Indians and earliest settlers. For her own peace and pleasure she has studied them, learning about mushrooms, when May apples ripen, how to harvest wild rice, and she has explored such secrets as where the exotic papaw trees can be found. It was her father, a Baptist minister, who “unconsciously” taught her “to love what the land yields,” she said, but because her mother had also taught her a love for entertaining and that “every meal can be a feast,” it was natural that Billy Joe would also learn the recipes, medicinal uses and folklore that have always gone hand in hand with an understanding of plants.

On the day we visited, the door to the Tatum house was decorated in quilted yellow fabric; a “By Invitation only” sign hung in the kitchen, both mementos of a wild foods dinner party she and her husband had given a week earlier. The party had been one of the items donated to the Arkansas Arts Center’s semiannual Tabriz auction in February 1978 and had originally been intended for only the purchaser and eight guests. But Winthrop Paul Rockefeller, a friend of the Tatums, bought the affair — for an amount whispered to be in the neighborhood of \$5,000 — and during the months of planning the list of guests — honored and otherwise — had grown so that by the time the event was finally held in late April of this year, over fifty people were on hand, including Gov. Bill Clinton, Hillary Rodham, and a writer-photographer crew from *People Magazine* there for the article on Billy Joe.

But that was only the first party of what the people at Wildflower lovingly call “the season,” that time of year when they and other mountain-locked friends emerge from winter hibernation and when tourists begin their springtime pilgrimages to Mountain View and its Folk Center. The weekend after the Tabriz party, the Tatums gave another party to celebrate the Mountain View Folk Festival, and it was even larger than the one the week before. Spring is a time when a lot of old friends —



At a Tatum party food is almost always followed by fiddle music and country dancing, in this case the smooth, shuffling styles of friends Bill Clinton and Winthrop Paul Rockefeller.

craftsmen, writers, musicians, politicians, and a botanist or herbalist or two — come by, knowing that some of the best food and music in the county will be served up at the Tatum house. “A few years ago I started coming to Mountain View to play, and pretty soon I heard about the Tatums,” said a musician friend visiting from Michigan. “Before long I was hanging around with them. I don’t know what it is, but it seems that every now and then you’ll meet someone and it will feel like you’ve known them forever. Here, I met a whole family of them.”

Because so many things happen around her and she is so caught up in all of them, one could get the impression that Billy Joe Tatum is not very well organized. It is a deceptive surface impression, however, refuted by all she accomplishes. One of the items in her pouch, for instance, is a calendar. “I’ve never been a compulsive person,” she said, “always impulsive — but I’ve found in the last few years that a simple thing like a calendar makes everything a lot easier.” Still, she speaks in a rapid, scattergun pattern. “Next week, James Taylor’s mother is coming to go canoeing with us. She’s a weaver, and he’s a . . . what is he? Isn’t he a singer or something? Is he good? Well anyway, what some people do is they arrange a lecture series so that they can travel around the country and see their friends. That’s what I do. Generally, if I’m going to travel I like to have a good reason, something more than traveling just for the sake of travel. I have a letter from the head of the Herbalist Society in England — I can’t remember his name, something real English like Llewellen Llewellen, of course it’s not that — and he wants to know about wild herbs. I guess for something like that I could be away from home for six weeks if I had to, but I have a hard time with lecture series that call for that much traveling. I like being here. And more and more in recent years, the people I want to see come here. It’s like a psychic experience: I wish so-and-so would come and sure enough, pretty soon they’re there knocking on the door! Well, not really knocking, because we figure if someone knocks they don’t know us well enough to know they should just come in.”

Her fast pace, however, is only one side of Billy Joe Tatum’s life. Balancing it are hours spent in solitude in the woods or in composed discipline at the typewriter. The two go hand in hand. “When I write it’s absolutely necessary for me to spend the same number of hours outside as inside.” She usually rises at 3:30 a.m., writes until 7:30 breaks for a few hours outside, returns for a nap, then puts in a couple of more hours

writing. "If I don't get out like that, what I write isn't good. It doesn't have any of me in it. It's just 26 letters divided into groups of three or five and spread across a piece of paper."

Billy Joe's editor and collaborator is her older sister, Ann Taylor Packer, who lives in a house called "Tameweed" just around a slight bend in the mountain and within easy walking distance from the Tatum place. They have a close working and personal relationship. "Early on winter mornings," Billie Joe said, "when it's cold and dark and there are no leaves on the trees, I can see the light in Ann's window from my study. Very often I've drawn a lot of strength from that, knowing that she was up working, too." When Billy Joe was a child, her mother was ill for a number of years, and her sister helped raise her. "Ann was the first memory of a mother I had. It was she who made me a verbal person. She makes me think and say what I feel."

Billy Joe seems to have her life in order now, but it was not always so. Several years ago, she was treated for mental illness. "I'm an arrested schizophrenic," she said. "I'd spend a month out of every year for three or four years in the hospital. The longest was four months. And then I spent a lot of time out in California, either a month in the psychiatric ward or a month in the Haight-Ashbury District or in Southern California. It was a time (in the 1960s) of a lot of havoc for me. But I don't mind talking about it — I figure it's my bit for mental health — because those were the years when I was trying to escape. I'm 47 now, and it took me until I was 35 to recognize that there is no escaping if you don't like yourself."

One of her problems, she said, was that "it took me a long time to come to grips with being a female. I did want to be a boy awfully bad. It took me a lot of years to learn that you have to be happy with yourself." Her goal now, she said, was "to be a real, complete person. I still have migraines, but I keep working on them because I believe we were not made to be sick. We were made to be healthy and happy. Having been schizophrenic for years and out of control has only made me appreciate that all the more."

She believes that in the land there is a healing power and that Nature's role as far as she is concerned is helping her to keep things in perspective. "I think many people are like me in a way. We look inside ourselves and wonder how can I achieve this, and be more calm and able to project this and that. But when I go outside, I don't do that. I wonder why this fungus is yellow, or why that water goes round and round and how these

rocks came to be piled up like that. I think we should be self-seeking, but sometimes we get too involved with it. When I do anything, whether it's writing or being a mother or a person or anything, being outside is like a refilling.

"For many years now I've said that in order to be a philosopher you should study botany — get to know the varieties of plants, their names and where they live — because plants live in harmony with their environment. The native Americans and, I guess, all primitive people understood that."

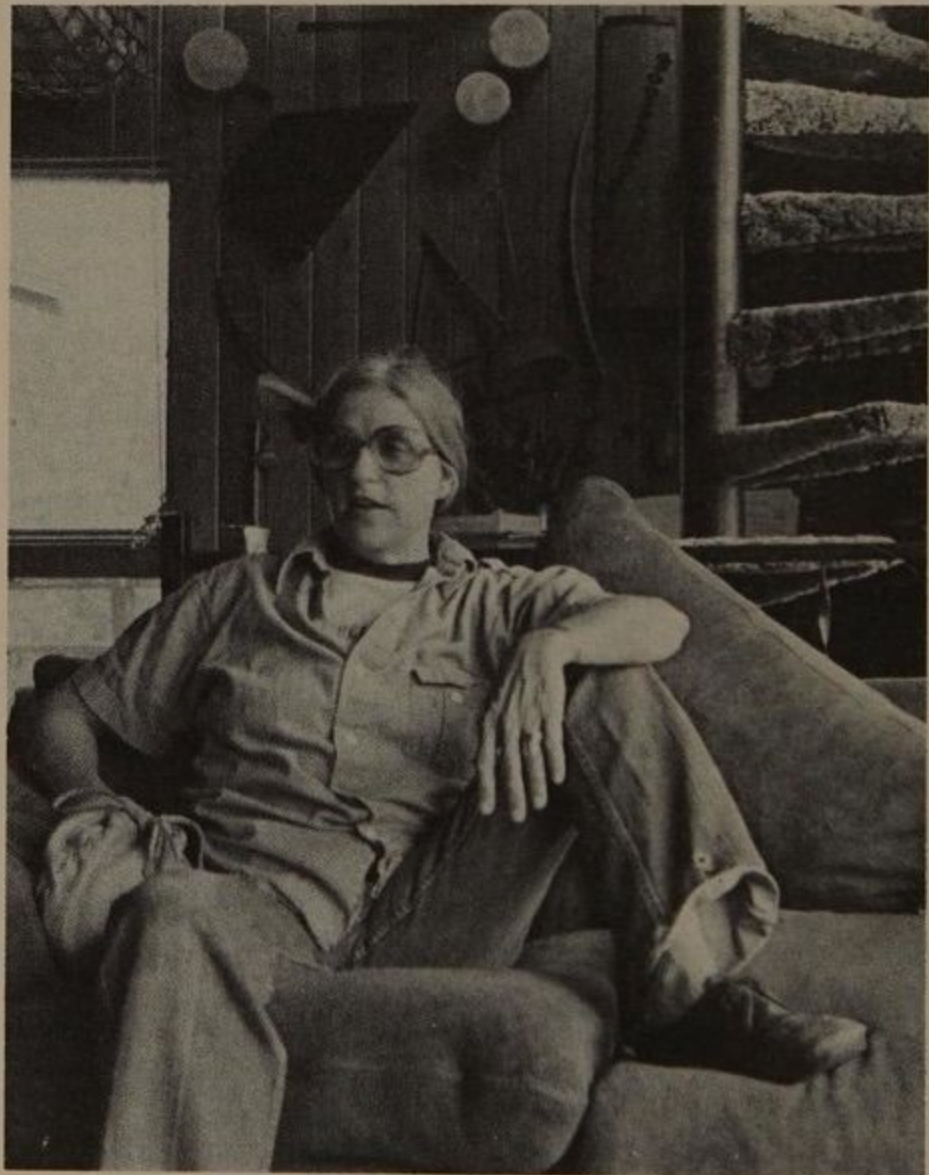
As she spoke, she looked out of a large window over a twenty-mile vista of mountains and valleys. "I'd like to learn more about the native Americans' philosophy. Fortunately, more of their poetry is being printed. I have a feeling they had a perfect interplay with every part of their world. I think simplicity's the thing, but I know I love my Oriental rugs. I don't know if I could live as simply as they did. I don't know how I'd do without my books. But then I don't really think it's incongruous that I should love Nature and simplicity and still love my books and Oriental rugs."

The fire had burned down in the fireplace and the chili was cooked. She moved to the kitchen to give it some seasoning, "You know," she said, her verbal pace unslowed, "we were just talking the other day about what we'd stockpile in case of an emergency and about all I could think I'd definitely want to store up on was good black pepper. Most things don't matter that much, but I think black pepper brings out the flavor in food even more than salt." Then, in her scattergun style: "Oh, and those zip-lock bags. I don't know what I'd do without them either."

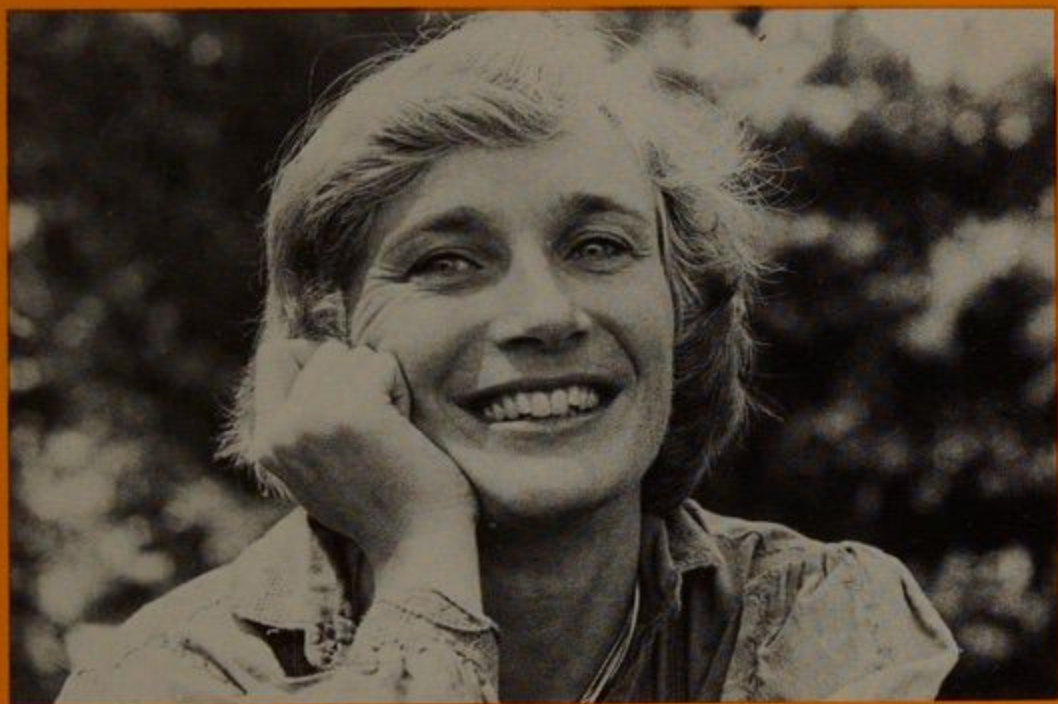
The recipes in her book include instructions for every kind of wild dish from fried puffballs to hashed brown spring beauty tubers and from pokeweed sprouts au gratin to Spanish cat-tail bud pie, but Billy Joe Tatum's approach to life is essentially practical. "Sometimes," she said, "you can go to great and elegant lengths for a gourmet meal, but other times it's best just to get some food in people's stomachs. I guess I'm not as discerning as many people when it comes to food. Oh, I can tell good food from bad, like people — I guess you can tell good people from bad people, though I like all kinds of people — but when you're hungry, anything tastes good. And sometimes, believe it or not, all I want in the world to eat is one of those store-packaged hot dogs, all loaded with red dye and full of preservatives . . ."

Abruptly, she interrupted herself, pointing excitedly out the

window. "Oh look! Come here everybody! A scarlet tanager!" Passing through Arkansas, through Melbourne, on its spring flight north, the bird had stopped to rest briefly in a tree outside the house, arousing a flurry of interest within. After a few minutes it continued on its way. As we were about to leave, an entire household was grabbing bird books to see whether the bird had been a male or a female.



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Thaddeus Honeycutt
Vernon Hildebrand
Billy Joe Tatum
Riverside Drive
Bill Clinton
Mary Sims
Calvin Jones