Treehouses: Civilizing the Wildness of Men and Nature

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Treehouses: Civilizing the Wildness of Men and Nature

At the Dallas Big Brother Organization’s Camp Tami Bami in 1940, three boys asked their camp director for permission to build a treehouse. In the spirit of the camp, he “gave them a hammer and saw and said ‘Go to it.’” The only restriction he gave the boys was that the treehouse must not exceed eight feet from the ground to the treehouse floor. Their project soon became one of defiance. Upon first inspection, Chief Tom discovered that they had built the tree 40 feet above the ground. He told them their tree house was too high and dangerous and reminded them of the eight-foot height limit. The boys then lowered the house, but only to 25 feet. Once again, Tom told them that it was too high. Three days later he returned to find the boys “sitting silent and dignified as crows on the platform” and scolded, “I told you boys that you couldn’t have the treehouse that high.” A 12-year-old boy shot back the response, “This ain’t no tree house no more, Chief Tom, This is a lookout.”

The boy is declaring that an adult’s rules don’t apply to his creation. As the builders of the structure, the boys make the rules of the game. Journalist Paul Crume praised their defiant spirit, calling it “self-reliance and manliness.” Here, the treehouse is a space for an appropriate amount of rebellion. Regardless of rules, in the treehouse “boys will be boys.”

But, what does “boys will be boys” mean? In other words, what qualities and behaviors of American boys do treehouses promote?

1 Crume, Paul. “Self Reliance and Manliness Come First At Camp Being Operated by Big Brothers.” Dallas Morning News, 1940.
2 The OED traces the origin of the idiom back to 1770. “Boys will be boys: phrase used to express resignation regarding an undesirable aspect of the behavior of a boy or young man, as being supposedly characteristic of his age or sex.” (Oxford English Dictionary, P1).
The Framework

In this paper, I will explore how treehouses operate symbolically in tandem with culture. I will focus primarily on treehouses as imagined in modern America, with the added context of the treehouse’s cultural significance throughout history. The act of building a treehouse is synonymous with the dominating ideas about boyhood in modern America. Treehouses are pervasive in children’s literature and entertainment, as they serve to promote childhood imagination and freedom. The treehouse-building project became bound to boyhood at the turn of the twentieth century as the naturalist movement spread and youth organizations embraced treehouses as part of their vision for the development of boys. The prevailing ideas we have about treehouses today were mostly set at this historical moment. Today, if an adult talks about entering a treehouse, usually it’s with a sense of childhood nostalgia. However, treehouse history goes much deeper than the twentieth century. In fact, adults, historically, have spent more time in treehouses than children. In the West, four ages of treehouse building can be identified: ancient Roman times, Renaissance Europe, the Romantic period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the turn of the twentieth century to today. While Westerners have been building treehouses as a fun exploration into nature, there have also been communities of native islanders living in trees for practical purposes. Explorers are always perplexed and amazed to encounter these people, confronted by the juxtaposition of the “primitive” way of life and civility.

3 For example, best-selling children’s books A.A. Milne’s Winnie the Pooh (1926) and Mary Pope Osborne’s Magic Tree House Series (1992) feature treehouses in their stories.
4 Dan Beard, the National Boy Scouts Commissioner, even wrote a 1921 article in the Kalamazoo Gazette advising boys on how to build a treehouse and declared, “A club house in the trees, next to a club house on the water, is about the finest sort of club house for a group of boys to have.”
A significant factor in the appeal of the treehouse for children at the turn of the twentieth century was from the spirit of adventure and individualism promoted by the castaway novels *Swiss Family Robinson* and *Robinson Crusoe*. Daniel Defoe wrote *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719, telling the story of a British explorer named Crusoe who becomes stranded on a desert island following a shipwreck. Crusoe resourcefully learns how to survive on the island, reestablishing a sense of civilization and declaring himself king. Despite the fact that Crusoe never builds a treehouse, the concept became attached to his story due to J.D. Wyss’s spin-off children’s book, *Swiss Family Robinson* (1812).\(^5\) *Swiss Family Robinson* channeled Crusoe’s ingenuity through the family’s imaginative treehouse building project. Their treehouse is the most iconic image of the book, its grandeur the focal point of movie adaptations, theme parks, and readers’ responses.

Perhaps building treehouses has become such an iconic symbol for childhood development because we all know that learning is a construction project; that is of constructing meaning. Early-Childhood Learning scholar Kellie Dowdell explains, “Hands-on interaction with the environment is important, as young children don’t learn by having someone telling them about the world around them. They learn and construct meaning through their own physical and mental activities.”\(^6\) Because every tree is different, a child building a treehouse must learn how to evaluate his or her environment and adapt to it. Once the house it built, the child then has the freedom to define its purpose. It could be a fort, clubhouse, or even castle. A child’s imagination is a source of independence. An adult may guide the building process, but once the child enters to play, he/she is the one constructing meaning.

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\(^5\) *Swiss Family Robinson* participates in an entire genre of *Robinson Crusoe*-inspired fiction called “Robinsonades.”

Treehouse culture thrives due to the idea that living in tandem with nature cultivates a higher morality, a more authentic state of being. Boy Scouts founder Robert Baden-Powell quotes, “Give me the man who has been raised among the great things of Nature; he cultivates truth, independence, and self-reliance; he has generous impulses; he is true to his friends, and true to the flag of his country.” Treehouses by their very design set up an unusual relationship between people and nature. A treehouse allows a person to live in the wild without rejecting all of the aspects of a civilized lifestyle. A boy who builds a treehouse is not only raised among Nature, but has the opportunity to prove his independence and self-reliance through the building project. A boy who embarks on a building project is seen as productive and outward thinking. His urge to spend time in nature suggests that he values his relationship to the world outside of himself: (nature, friends, nation, humanity). The symbolism of treehouses endures because it is so palpable. This activity associated with a child’s personal growth takes place in an actual growing organism.

The treehouse offers the opportunity for adults and children to trade roles. While twentieth century adults enter the treehouse to play at being children again, children get a chance to play at being adults. The treehouse imagined as a clubhouse lets boys make their own secret society complete with rules of membership. Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) captures this dynamic. Tom Sawyer says, "Now, we'll start this band of robbers and call it Tom Sawyer's Gang. Everybody that wants to join has got to take an oath, and write his name in blood." A 1968 article in Dallas features 13-year old Terry Manning, architect of an impressive

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7 This quote from p.173 of Baden-Powell’s guide *Scouting for Boys* (1908) was taken from William Thomas Hamilton’s (“Wild Cat Bill”) memoir, *My Sixty Years in the Plains* (1905), an account of life outdoors in the American Old West.

8 *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ch.2, par.10
three-story treehouse. At its most basic level, Terry’s treehouse functions as a club house where the boys engage in activities like a “sleep-in” and “secret stuff like watching one of the eight year olds jump from the second level.” But like any good clubhouse, this treehouse is a fort, prepared to defend against any invaders, especially girls. Terry makes it clear that his treehouse is a no-girls-allowed zone. He says, “A dog named Freckles has visitor privileges, but the rules state no girls.” Terry was even sure to build the treehouse “across the creek and in a chigger patch to keep mothers from snooping.” He also made sure to include screens over the window “so rocks won’t come in” thrown by potential invaders.

The treehouse has a militaristic appeal to young boys that has resonated for at least two hundred years. In the final chapter of The Swiss Family Robinson (1812), the father boasts of “ten years [...] of conquest and establishment. We had constructed several homes and built a solid wall across the defile, which would secure us against invasion from the wild beasts which infested the desert.” Like Robinson Crusoe’s shelter, each house defends the family from the unidentified beasts and enemies on the island. The houses set up a barrier of protection between the civilized and the “savage.” The father describes this sense of security, saying, “It seemed to the boys as if we were in one of the strong castles of old times, in which, when the drawbridge was raised, no enemy cold get in.” After tracking young readers’ responses to The Swiss Family Robinson and the Crusoe story that stands behind it, Sanchez-Eppler argues that the “fear of racial others and conceptions of their own colonial and racial power is one thing that white child readers take from the castaway plot.” Just like Tom Sawyer, the white children in

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Sanchez-Eppler’s study seemed enthralled by the idea of fighting pirates, “savages,” and cannibals.

Treehouses by their very design force civilization upon the wild. Just as Robinson Crusoe fortifies his island, treehouse builders claim space in the wild using ingenuity and limited resources. Playing Robinson Crusoe also means playing the colonizer. In *Swiss Family Robinson* (1812), the children do not shy away from that task. The children are experts at domesticating wildness—especially the youngest, Fritz. “Do you know,” says [the father] to the boys, “how the natives of India secure a newly captured elephant?” “Oh, yes!” says Fritz. “They fasten him between two tame elephants. We'll do that to this fine fellow, and tame him double quick.” “The only difficulty will be,” remarks Jack, “that we have no tame ostriches.” As depicted in the 1891 illustration (see fig. 1), Fritz rides those ostriches in no time. Sanchez-Eppler argues, “The pleasure young readers are presumed to take from these stories stems less from wildness than from the family's success at making wildness yield.” Treehouse builders are described as conquerors and explorers; they’re in nature but not of it.

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13 Crusoe’s name for his shelter changes from “tent” or “habitation” to “fortification” to “castle” to “apartment.” Sometimes he uses a mix of these names. He calls it a “fortification” after building his protective wall. He calls it a “castle” years later after discovering the footprint in the sand and establishing himself as king of the island. When a Spanish Captain arrives, he no longer has sole authority, so he downgrades his “castle” to “apartment.”

14 Chapter 13, Wyss, 1893

15 Sanchez-Eppler, 2011
[Figure 1: This drawing from an 1891 edition of *Swiss Family Robinson* depicts Fritz riding an ostrich, surrounded by his brothers and father. Image from: *The Swiss Family Robinson: A New Translation from the Original German*. London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1891, p. 365]
The Boy Building a Treehouse is Cultivated By Nature

While there is a common idea that it is the role of man to cultivate nature or the wild,16 with treehouses, the antithesis is also imagined. Many adults conceive nature as a force with the power to cultivate boys into admirable men. In a sense, building a treehouse flips power dynamic between men and nature. The land cultivates men. Cultivating land requires breaking down the soil to make the land fertile enough to grow crops. Cultivating a civilized man requires breaking down a boy’s character with “rough” conditions to create a fertile ground for personal growth. Crume, for example, writes that the rough environment at Camp Tami Babi is what makes transformation possible for the boys: “In the rough give and take of pioneer conditions revived, boys blossom out.”17 It is a common sentiment throughout youth outreach literature that “rough” conditions are ideal for character building. Crume boasts how it wasn’t unusual for neighbors of the area to spot “a band of Tami Babi boys, dusty and sweaty, straggling down some country road miles away from camp.” The pioneer conditions and construction projects are seen as opportunities for the boys to prove themselves and gain confidence. Crume tells the story of a previously uncommunicative, withdrawn child who did not have any friends. But “At camp,” Crume writes, “Bill suddenly awoke. A native talent for building made him an idol in some of the younger boys’ eyes.”

16 Man’s role to cultivate nature is a key theme in Robinson Crusoe. Crusoe explains, “Accordingly I dug up a Piece of Ground as well as I could with my wooden Spade, and diving it into two Parts, I sow’d my Grain; but as I was sowing, it casually occur’d to my Thoughts, That I would not sow it all at first, because I did not know when was the proper Time for it; so I sow’d about two Thirds of the Seed, leaving about a Handful of each” (p.88). Crusoe’s goal is to cultivate the land so that it yields crops for his survival. The natural world is depicted as something to be developed by humans.
History of the Boy Scouts

The 12-year-old boy who stood up to Chief Tom was using his treehouse like a scout, imagining it as a military lookout to spot potential threats. The scouting movement got its start at the turn of the 20th century when British Army officer, Robert Baden-Powell, stationed in India, found that his men lacked basic frontier skills and wrote a manual called *Aids to Scouting for NCOs and Men* (1899). Shortly after sending his book to the publisher, he was relocated to South Africa as Commander-in-Chief of the North-West Frontier Forces there. He returned from the Anglo-Boer War in 1902 a military hero for defending Mafeking, a small South African town, during a 217-day siege while outnumbered by 8,000 Boer soldiers to 500 British. At Mafeking he famously called upon a group of 9 to 12-year-old boys, “The Mafeking Cadet Corps,” to carry messages, act as lookouts, and free his soldiers up for more dangerous military duties.\(^\text{18}\)

When he returned from the war, he was surprised to find that the primary audience for *Aids to Scouting for NCOs and Men* was not soldiers; it was young boys fascinated with the practice of scouting. Intrigued by the idea of training young men as scouts, in 1907 he took a group of about 20 boys on a two-week camping trip.\(^\text{19}\) After a successful trip, he wrote a guide specifically for boys called *Scouting for Boys* (1908). *Scouting for Boys* was an instant cultural phenomenon, so he set up a Boy Scouts office to register new scouts and design a uniform. By 1910 there were over 107,000 boy scouts in Britain and the movement had spread to New Zealand, Canada, India, and the United States.

Building confidence in boys in *Scouting for Boys* is really about building confidence in Britain and Britain’s future as a world power. Professor Elleke Boehmer points out how “the appearance of *Scouting for Boys* coincided with a period of wavering imperial self-confidence in

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\(^{18}\) Elleke Boehmer, Professor of World Literature in English at the University of Oxford, provides this history in her introduction to the 2004 edition of *Scouting for Boys*.

\(^{19}\) The Boy Scouts Organization now calls this trip “the first official Boy Scout meeting.”
Britain following the pyrrhic victory of the Anglo-Boer War.” Scouting for Boys met national anxieties about Britain’s failing strength with a practical handbook for physical training and military strategy. It encouraged the younger generation to think about serving in the British Army in their future and start developing frontier skills young.

Despite Baden-Powell’s British focus, Scouting for Boys resonated in American culture in large part as a response to the change in society caused by urbanization and industrialization. Boehmer argues that “Western civilization, threatened with degeneration, [was] to be preserved by way of the reclamation of ‘uncivilized’ native practices and scouting skills. [...] Primitive cultures are to revivify advanced societies.” Seeing value in Baden-Powell’s Boy Scouts and witnessing the enthusiasm of American boys, on February 8, 1910 Chicago businessman William D. Boyce incorporated the Boy Scouts of America, bringing together a groups of boys from the Woodcraft Indians Organization (founded by naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton) and the Sons of Daniel Boone (founded by outdoor enthusiast Daniel Beard).

The character traits Baden-Powell deems important for boys in his foundational texts for Boy Scouts are the same traits written about boys building tree houses in the early twentieth century. Aids to Scouting emphasizes that the main key to success in scouting is “pluck, self-reliance, and discretion.” A scout with “pluck,” he says, “goes on some risky enterprise alone, on his own account, taking his life in his hand [...] because he thinks the result to his side will be

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20 The story goes that Chicago businessman William D. Boyce was “groping his way through the fog when a boy appeared and offered to take him to his destination. When they arrived, Boyce tried to tip the boy, but the boy refused and courteously explained that he was a Scout and could not accept payment for a Good Turn. Intrigued, the publisher questioned the boy and learned more about Scouting. He visited with Baden-Powell as well and became captured by the idea of Scouting. When Boyce boarded the transatlantic steamer for home, he had a suitcase filled with information and ideas. The “unknown Scout” who helped him in the fog was never heard from again, but he will never be forgotten” (The Boy Scouts of America official website).
worth the risk.” He defines “self-reliance” as the ability to “act for yourself and use your common sense.” He then qualifies those with the third quality, “discretion,” or the “cool-headedness” to not confuse pluck with rashness. He argues that these qualities are not innate, but gained by building self-confidence through scout training and practice.

The Naturalist Movement in Education: Rousseau and Crusoe

Scouting for Boys draws its inspiration from the naturalist movement, incorporating texts from Ernest Thompson Seton, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Charles Darwin and encouraging a mastery of primitive survival skills. French philosopher of the Enlightenment era Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1788) fathered the naturalist movement in education philosophy with his treatise, Emile: or On Education (1762). To explain how one would approach his method of education, he invents an imaginary student, Emile, and explains how he teaches him according to his principles. The only book he allows Emile to read is Robinson Crusoe. He writes, “I hate books; they only teach us to talk about things we know nothing about. [...] Since we must have books, there is one book which, to my thinking, which supplies the best treatise on an education according to nature [...] Robinson Crusoe.” To Rousseau, becoming Crusoe is the ideal outcome of education. Crusoe is what he calls the “natural man,” a man guided and directed by the laws of his own nature. Naturalism as a philosophy assumes that nature represents the wholeness of reality and explains all existence, including human beings and human nature. While many Christians believe that human nature is inherently evil and must be disciplined, Rousseau believed that God made human nature inherently good and it should be allowed to develop.

21 Baden-Powell is influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson, leader of the American Transcendentalist movement who wrote the essay “Self-Reliance” in 1841 Selected Essays, speaking to the importance of “individualism, personal responsibility, and nonconformity.”

22 Christian who argue that humans are “born in sin” often cite Psalm 51:5: “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”
freely. While he never used the term, he promoted the idea of “the noble savage,” a romantic glorification of the “uncivilized” human.\textsuperscript{23} Viewing civilization as the corruption of human nature, his ideal education requires retuning to the natural world. He sees the role of the educator as shielding children from the corruption of the civilized world, but preparing them to inevitably enter the social realm where it prevails.

*Scouting for Boys* is an attempt to educate boys into something like Rousseau’s “natural man.” Echoing Rousseau’s idea of the “noble savage,” Baden-Powell declares, “I find that those men who come from the furthest frontiers of the Empire, from what we should call a rude and savage life, are among the most generous and chivalrous of their race, especially towards women and weaker folk. They become ‘gentle men’ by their contact with nature.” Baden-Powell does not speak about nature “roughing up” men for the sake of making their skin tougher, but about nature softening men in a positive way. He also argues that boys should not have to “rough it” in nature, because they should be clever enough to make themselves comfortable.\textsuperscript{24}

The progressive movement in educational philosophy of the twentieth century drew its inspiration from Rousseau’s naturalism. For example, in *The Discovery of a Child* (1909), Maria Montessori, founder of the famous pedagogy method, emphasizes the importance of incorporating nature into educational programs. She writes, “When children come into contact with nature, they reveal their strength.” Montessori echoes the naturalist sentiment that nature has the power to awaken one’s best qualities. Montessori believed that children learn best when you build upon their natural curiosities. Her philosophy criticized the rigidity of the public school, advocating instead for independence and self-driven learning. Montessori did not

\textsuperscript{23} John Dryden first used the term “noble savage” in his play *The Conquest of Granada*, writing, “I am as free as Nature first made man/’Ere the base Laws of Servitude began/ When wild in woods the noble savage ran” (OED, n1: “noble savage”)

\textsuperscript{24} Baden-Powell’s ideas participate in a new pastoralism that rose in response to the industrial revolution. Back-to-nature movements, pastoral escapism, and naturalistic art were all prevalent at the time.
comment on treehouses specifically, but the process of building them, especially when children take ownership of the build, certainly aligns with her philosophy.

The twenty-first century of education philosophy supports the naturalists’ claims of the benefits of nature-learning with science. In 2011 article “Nature and Its Influence On Outdoor Play,” for instance, Kellie Dowdell emphasizes the importance of contact with nature for the cognitive, emotional, and physical development of children. She cites various studies which support the claim that contact with nature improves reasoning, observation skills, creativity, concentration, imagination, coordination, balance, agility, and the body’s immune system. Modern education scholars and twentieth century scholars alike advocate for prioritizing contact with nature in a child’s education. They appear to share the anxiety that allowing children to become alienated from nature has detrimental educational consequences.

Treehouses: A Naturalist’s Solution to the Ills of Modernity

Technology occupies the same place in adult imagination now as urbanization did at the turn of the twentieth century. The increase of technological entertainment in the twenty-first century has parents, teachers, and scholars crying out, “Why don’t these kids go play outside?” In Last Child in the Woods (2005), Richard Louv coins the term “nature-deficit disorder,” linking the lack of contact with nature to many of childhood’s most alarming trends, such as depression, obesity, and attention disorders. He writes, “Unlike television, nature does not steal time; it amplifies it. Nature offers healing for a child living in a destructive family or neighborhood.” According to Louv, “Time in nature is not leisure time; it’s an essential investment in our children's health (and also, by the way, in our own).”

A treehouse project not only encourages children to spend more time outdoors, assuaging the anxieties of Louv and others, but it also invokes other key tenets of a naturalist education.
Like Robinson Crusoe, the boys must use nature as a guide and limited resources to survive alone without all of their usual civilized comforts. They are given a chance to connect to nature without fully immersing themselves in “the wild.” The house provides the reassurance that the boys have not completely left civilized life; they can and will return, stronger and better men for it. In his 1900 guide for building treehouses, Daniel Beard highlights the natural process of learning that occurs in a treehouse. He tells the boys, “While having fun, you will have unconsciously materially added to your education.” He then teases, “The boys who are desperately opposed to education must not build [...] treetop houses, for first thing they know they will find themselves competent boy builders and engineers, and that would be a terrible thing for a youth who does not want to be educated.”

Building Character: Self-Reliance

Despite Dan Beard’s or anyone else’s published building tips, there’s really no adequate manual for building a treehouse. Every tree is different; therefore, every treehouse build is its own experiment. Forging into the unknown with no manual is imagined as a test for manliness. While Swiss Family Robinson focuses on the father’s role as the director of the building project, almost every article telling stories of boys building treehouses in twentieth century America highlights the ability of the boys to lead the project themselves. As evidence for this, all of Dan Beard’s instructions for treehouse building are written to boys, not to their parents. In a 1903 Christian journal article clearly expressing anxieties about the urbanization of America,

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25 Keep in mind the Rousseau’s concept of “the natural man” involves teaching a student to follow their own nature, while still being prepared to re-enter civilization.
26 “New Ideas for Boys: A Club House in the Treetops”
27 Through the father’s orders and his sons’ obedience, the Swiss Family Robinson works together to create a successful result. The father of The Swiss Family Robinson details the process, emphasizing that the plan relies on the his direction: “I told Fritz to cut the canes we had brought in pieces each two feet in length. As he did this, Ernest handed them to me one after another [...] Jack, at the same time, by my order, drove into each a long nail at both ends”(89 Wyss).
William Byron Forbush writes that children are initially helpless alone in nature because they’ve become too disconnected from it, but he also offers the reassurance that they’re quick learners.28 “We built a tree house together in an old apple tree one morning this spring,” he writes, “and a few days later two of my boys built a better one alone.” Quality time in nature transformed his “helpless” boys into boys self-reliant enough to build a better house alone.

For another example of self-reliance being taught through treehouses I think once again of Camp Tami Bami (1940). At Tami Bami, self-reliance was the law. Journalist Paul Crume writes, “Every two weeks the Dallas Big Brothers herd thirty-five teenage boys on this eighty-six-acre reservation, give them an ax and some food, and say ‘Okay, buddy, it’s up to you. Sink or swim, cook or starve: get along together or fight it out.’ The boys learn life lessons through their independence. “[They must] set up their own quarters, cook their own food, plan their own day’s work, without benefit of adult orders.” Crume tells about a time when the camp director, Tom Grimland, dropped the boys off on the campsite and ordered them to pitch their tents without explaining how. After disregarding the order and not pitching their tents Grimland says, “Morning found seven small boys shivering like wet mice in a soaked camp. Nobody ever referred to the incident again, but the tents were rigged up that morning in record time.” Crume concludes, “That is the way the whole Big Brothers organization works. Big Brothers take the underprivileged, fatherless boy, gives him the raw materials and the companionship from which he can build a life, and then says, ‘From now on, you’re on your own. The world doesn’t owe

you a plugged nickel.” Crume implies that if a boy can build a treehouse and survive the wilderness, then he’s also self-reliant enough to build a life and survive its many trials.

In a 1905 letter-to-the-editor, ten-year-old Portland boy Penn Rowe highlights his own self-reliance in a testimony about his experience building a treehouse:

“Dear St. Nicholas: Here is a picture of a treehouse built by brother Alan and me in a tall fir-tree in our backyard. The tree is over one hundred feet high, and we put an American flag on the top. The house is built in among the lower branches, about twenty feet from the ground. We rigged up a rope hoist to pull up the heavy timbers for the floor-joists. The house is eight feet long and seven feet wide and five feet high. We made a bookcase out of a box, and kept all of our books and papers up there, where we spent most of our time during our summer vacation. We made two beds in the main room, and slept up there on warm nights. We invited our father to spend a night with us and he said the bed was more comfortable than a Pullman-car berth. He liked it so well he slept with us several nights. Alan is twelve years old, and I am ten. We planned and built the house by ourselves and enjoy it. Our sister takes St. Nicholas, and we all read it and like it very much. Yours truly, Penn Rowe.”

Penn emphasizes that he and his older brother built the house on their own and can now enjoy the product of their labor. He proves his architectural knowledge through the details of the dimensions. He also uses his treehouse as an opportunity to display patriotism, as he is quick to mention the placement of American flag. He seems to see his treehouse as an alternate house, a place to read, sleep, and relax. What separates this house, however, is that he is the owner; he is the man of the house. His father only enters as a guest. Also, Penn is kind enough to share his treehouse with his little sister, but she is not involved in the building process.

29 Self-reliance aligns with conservative politics about low government involvement. The Big Brothers organization seems especially interested in building men capable of thriving without relying on too much assistance from the government or family.
30 Rowe’s entry is found in St. Nicholas; an Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks (1873-1907), Jul 1905.
Treehouses and Class

The reference of Penn’s father to the “Pullman-car” is significant as Pullman sleeping cars were considered the most luxurious and elegant form of railway travel at the time.\textsuperscript{31} Penn’s treehouse allows him to transcend class. Perceptions of class often influence the ways in which the benefits of treehouses are imagined for American boys. Logistically, the modern treehouse project in America is mostly accessible to middle class suburban boys.\textsuperscript{32} However, lower class boys are sometimes given the opportunity to build treehouses at camps or through mentorship programs like the Big Brothers.

The projects of youth organizations of the twentieth century seem to be motivated by the desire to resolve class tension. In fact, Baden-Powell wrote \textit{Scouting for Boys} (1908) with the goal in mind of reducing class tension in Britain. The fourth scout law reads: “A scout is a friend to all, and a brother to every other scout, no matter what social class the other belongs.” Baden-Powell tells instructors that he designed his guide for boys of every class in order:

To help the lowest from drifting into hooliganism and to give them health, character, and aims. To teach the middle class how to work well, and to be patriotic first and political second. To teach the wealthier to be chivalrous and sympathetic with their less-favoured brothers, and ultimately to help in spreading the training.\textsuperscript{33}

Baden-Powell makes class-based assumptions about the needs and character of boys. He believes that his goals will help break down barriers and unite boys for the common cause of expanding

\textsuperscript{31} Pullman cars were invented for the special use of President Lincoln in 1867. \textit{Oxford English Dictionary}, (“pullman, n.1)

\textsuperscript{32} The simplest treehouses do not require many tools or materials. A few boards and nails can suffice. Boys do, however, need access to a tree they can build it on, which usually requires a backyard.

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Scouting for Boys} (p.302)
the British Empire. Baden-Powell’s goals of occupying the time of “hooligans,” teaching “work ethic,” and making the wealthy more “cultured” are all benefits to treehouses espoused by twentieth century journalists.

The popularity of treehouse building projects of the twentieth century demonstrates a widespread cultural belief that carpentry knowledge is valuable to a boy’s education. Baden-Powell states this explicitly in Scouting for Boys with the rule: “The Scout is always a handy-man.” Baden-Powell values carpentry knowledge because he associates it with self-reliance and self-motivation—both necessary qualities for attaining employment. When it comes to the kind of men Baden-Powell’s trying to build, he’s clear. He wants “good citizens,” prepared for the workforce or military. He writes in a side note to scout mentors, “We want to save lads from drifting into this class of loafer who swells the ranks of the unemployed.” He also tells them, “Keep before your mind in all your teaching that the whole ulterior object of this scheme is to form character in the boys—to make them manly, good citizens.” Baden-Powell’s writing demonstrates how teaching a boy to be guided by his own nature becomes more complicated when class-based assumptions are placed upon the perception of boy’s nature. Even so, the treehouse building project spread at the turn of the twentieth century as an accessible and common tool for “cultivating” boys into strong, self-reliant, “natural-men.”

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34 The skills he teaches in scouting for boys are intended to create stronger and smarter future soldiers, unlike the “ill-prepared” frontiersmen he served with.
35 For instance, the main priority of the director of the Dallas Big Brothers organization in 1940 was to prepare the “underprivileged boys” for the workforce. The article is even subtitled, “Boys Taught Lessons That Help Them in Landing Jobs Later.”
36 Scouting for Boys (p. 319)
Treehouses and Civility

Playing Tarzan: The Tree-Boy

The boy building a treehouse is getting in touch with a stronger, more masculine primitive man. Hattie A. Walker walks through a first grade lesson plan in 1923 based on the “outdoor imaginative play” of different types of primitive habitations. She explains that she uses the study of primitive people such as “the tree-man, caveman, and the Eskimo” to throw the present-day conditions into conscious contrast. The “simpler” lives of primitive people provide the foundation for children to begin to notice and understand the complex processes of the industrial world. In the lesson plan, she guides the children in building different forms of shelter: cave, nest, and tepee. She teaches the children that before men lived in houses, they lived in trees. She then introduces concepts of evolution asking children, “In order to see animals a long distance, what sort of eyes must a tree boy have? What kind of ears must he have to hear an animal coming softly through the forest? What sort of legs and arms must he have to prevent an animal from overtaking him?” She next guides the children in forming the following connection: “The tree boy has keen eyes. He has sharp ears. He has strong arms. He has strong legs. [Therefore,] the tree boy can run fast. He can jump from rock to rock. He can climb quickly. He can swing from branch to branch. No animal can catch him.” Her assertions of “the tree boy” are more imaginative than factual. She follows the notion that there was a stronger, wilder prehistoric human species. Treehouses give boys a chance to play that wild, stronger “tree boy,” or even more specifically, Tarzan.

37 “First Grade Social Activities” in Francis W. Parker Social Studies in Education
38 Tarzan of the Apes was written by Edgar Rice Burroughs in 1912, the same time treehouses were skyrocketing in American culture.
Half-Civilized Natives: The Noble Savage

As I researched treehouse articles, I developed the impression that for the last about 150 years, native people living in treehouses have been the subject of the intense fascination, especially by Americans. While communities of people living in trees is certainly interesting, it still seemed like a disproportionate amount of press for the subject. It turns out, however, that American interest in the tree-dwellers in the Philippines skyrocketed in 1904 in response to a treehouse village recreation at the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition in St. Louis, also known as the World Fair.⁴⁹

Following the Spanish-America War, the United States acquired Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico from Spain with the Treaty of Paris of 1898. William Taft, Governor of the newly occupied Philippines, planned a massive exhibit to gain support of America’s occupations of the Philippines. He organized the exhibit to progress from the “savage,” naked, weapon-wielding Filipinos of pre-American involvement to the civilized, clothed, educated Filipinos deemed improved by Americans. The United States government dedicated 1 million of the World Fair’s 15 million dollar budget directly to the Philippine Exhibit.

According to the St. Louis correspondent of the Scientific American, “If one were called upon to name the one exhibit at St. Louis which, in its completeness and intrinsic value and interest, takes precedence over any other, his choice must surely fall upon the Philippine Exhibit” (see fig.2). The exhibit occupied 47 acres of woodland; contained over 100 buildings; featured 70,000 catalogued exhibits; and included over 1,200 representatives of Filipino tribes displayed like zoo animals. The U.S. government shipped in building materials from the Philippines and reconstructed their villages for Americans to visit. The correspondent marvels, “The visitor can

stroll through village after village, and see these naked savages wearing nothing but the loin cloth, following the round of their daily life, cooking, sleeping, and engaging in their pastimes and sports, exactly as they do in their native islands.”

[Figure 2: Image of pamphlet from 1904 World’s Fair Exhibition, St. Louis. It advertises the exhibit as “better than a trip to the Philippine Islands.” American-tourists can examine “the other” without having to leave the comfort of America. (Source: the Jonathan Best and John Silva Collection)]
One of the biggest attractions of the “savage” side of the exhibit was the “fierce” Muslim Moros. The correspondent writes, “In another village are the fierce Moros, one hundred of these fiery followers of Mohammed being present at the Exhibition. The Samal Moros [...] are the sea rovers or pirates. This tribe is about the most intelligent of all the tribes inhabiting the islands.” The article includes a photo of the exhibit’s treehouse, in which five Moro people reportedly lived (see fig.3). The Moros occupy a space closer to “savage” on the tour through the Philippines, but making their way toward civility. The treehouse for the Moros embodies the same idea. The treehouse is redemptive for the Moros in a sense, proving that they can strive for civilization.

[Figure 3: Photos featured in the 1904 Scientific American article. The first photo captioned “Two Moro Sub-Chiefs” is placed next to the second photo captioned “Model Tree House in Which Five Moros Are Living.”]
In a 1907 article in the *Hobart Daily Republican*, the journalist calls the New Guinea natives “half-civilized.” In a rather humorous comparison of life among the trees in New Guinea to life in America, the author remarks

Life in New Guinea, for a savage, is ideal, since it is not necessary to work for a living, and the wearing of clothes is not considered necessary. The forest supplies food in abundance, in the way of bananas, yams, and sago, while hogs flourish in the wild growth, and form the staple meat diet of the people.\(^4^0\)

While the statement oversimplifies matters, the author is tapping into the fact that although people go to great lengths to condemn “savage life,” there’s something undeniably appealing about the lifestyle. Perhaps the indignation with wildness is fueled by jealousy. The journalist continues his description of “half-civilized” life, saying, “Since nobody wears clothing, the housewife need neither sew, darn nor mend. As a cook her accomplishments need not extend beyond the preparation of sago porridge and the roasting of a pig.” The characterization of the Moro people as “half-civilized” relates directly to the idealization of “the noble savage.”

Onlookers, like this journalist, idealize the lives of people who live outside of modern civilization. While characterizing people as “savages” makes them seem less human, reimagining them with characteristics of classic domestic life makes them seem more relatable and redeemable. The redeemable, “half-civilized” part of so-called “savages” fuels missionaries and governments to attempt to civilize the other half.

In 1913 wealthy widow Katherine Force Spencer announced that she was leaving fashionable New York Society to go live among the treetops as a missionary to the Moros.\(^4^1\) She


\(^4^1\) “Mrs. Vanderbilt’s Next Door Neighbor to Give Up Social Frivolities and Become a Missionary Among the Savages of the Philippines,” *Plain Dealer,* 1913. Early American Newspapers.
first encountered the Moro people on a trip she took around the world to help grieve the loss her husband, a Manhattan banker. When she returned from New York she could not overcome the feeling that there was more she needed to do to help the people. The journalist writes, “But even at the gayest dance she would have those savage Moros on her mind.” Mrs. Spencer, refined woman of society, wants to venture into the same land where white women like her have been reported eaten by cannibals. The journalist dramatically writes, “Danger! Yes. Not alone the passive danger of disease, engendered by the filth of the people and the heat of the islands, but the active dangers, due to the warlike characteristics of the Moros, the wild men of the hills, as they are sometimes called.” Drawing attention to the absurdity of Spencer’s dramatic life change, the journalist points out that Mrs. Spencer has traded the Vanderbilts as neighbors for the Moros. The journalist continues, “In the future her nearest neighbors will be the warlike, ferocious and ignorant Moros. [...] From the unglazed windows of her mission hut she will look out at dirty, unclad natives living in trees like great, unclean birds.” It’s important that the journalist calls the Moros “ignorant” instead of “stupid.” In other words, they lack education. They’re “ignorant,” but they can be educated; “dirty,” but they can be cleaned; “unclad,” but they can be clothed. Spencer makes it her mission to bring high society to the wild.

One can see the enthrallment with encountering a less civilized “other” at work with the contemporary world’s fascination with the Korowai people (see fig.4). Not only are the Korowai people living in the trees, but they’re also cannibals. Interacting with the Korowai, then, creates the ultimate opportunity for first-world audiences to leave civilized life and encounter “the savage.” In an account of his trip to meet the Korowai people, journalist Raffaele Paul paints himself as a hero, writing:
Slippery logs as long as ten yards bridge the many dips in the land. Inching across like a tightrope walker, I wonder how the porters would get me out of the jungle were I to fall and break a leg. "What the hell am I doing here?" I keep muttering, though I know the answer: I want to encounter a people who are said to still practice cannibalism.\footnote{Smithsonian Magazine, 2006}

Paul approaches the Korowai people like an adrenaline-junkie approaches a sky dive. He is more interested in the presumed danger and adventure of encountering the people than about learning the actual logistics of their lives.

[Figure 4: The Korowai tribe is the most famous community of people still living in treehouses. This photo shows a Korowai treehouse that reaches about 35 meters high. Most of the Korowai treehouses are built 10-12 meters above ground.\footnote{Henderson & Mornement, “Fragile Traditions: The Korowai People,” Treehouses, 2005. p.57} Retrieved from Amusingplanet.com.]
Unlike Paul’s quick weekend of encountering the Korowai culture, in 2011 cultural anthropologist Rupert Stasch spent eighteen months living with the Korowai people. His research focuses on the “Korowai and tourists’ culturally motivated hopes and dreams about each other, the great value each side finds in their interaction despite mutual incomprehension and misconstrual, and the processes of learning and transformation that different persons go through in these intercultural encounters.” Stasch’s research reveals that travel photographers and journalists see what they (and their audiences) want to see. They fantasize the lives of the Korowai people by highlighting and exaggerating their otherness. Stasch points out, “Captioners and viewers frequently bring to Korowai treehouses the idea that they are defensive structures, iconic of the savage brutality of life beyond civilization.” According to Stasch, however, the Korowai people do not fear each other; they fear witches (who they believe cause all human deaths) and demons (who they believe people can become after death). Nevertheless, the ability of a treehouse to simultaneously exist in the wild and protect from the “wild savages” is part of the fantasy.

**Risk and Gender**

*“Don’t Chop Your Own Leg”*

Staring at the Korowai treehouse 35 meters off the ground (see fig. 4) draws attention to the riskiness of treehouse structures. When it comes to treehouses, risk is the name of the game. According to Nationwide Children’s Hospital’s statistics for 2018, almost 2,800 children are treated in emergency departments for treehouse-related injuries every year, mostly from children jumping or falling from their treehouses. The most common injuries are fractures, followed by bumps, bruises and cuts. Other dangers include strangulation by ropes or chains, and cuts from

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broken glass or exposed nails. Anticipating danger but accepting the risk in *Scouting for Boys* (1908), Baden-Powell tells boys that they must know how to use an axe and chop down trees. He then casually adds the warning, “It is a matter of practice to become a wood-cutter, but you have to be very careful at first lest in chopping you miss the tree and chop your own leg.”

Discussions about the development of boys from the turn of the twentieth century to today navigate a delicate balance of risk-taking opportunities. Boys are supposed to engage in a socially deemed healthy amount of danger. Baden-Powell included “pluck,” the determined courage to enter risky situations alone, as one of his core qualities for Boy Scouts. Similarly, educational scholarship of the twenty-first century encourages risk-taking opportunities for children. In 2008 article “Outdoor play: Does avoiding the risks reduce the benefits?” Australian early-childhood educators Helen Little and Shirley Wyver make an argument for maintaining “positive risk-taking experiences” in children’s outdoor play. In what seems like a lesson aimed at over-protective parents they argue,

> Risky play opportunities introduce excitement and challenge for children to test their skills and try new activities. They gain mastery and a sense of accomplishment, thus further encouraging them to face new challenges. Furthermore, risk-taking has been found to be positively related to self-confidence and creative ability.

Similarly, Kelly Dowdell asks in 2011, “Why has childhood play and adventure been increasingly edited out of the modern-day experience? And, what are the consequences of this if evidence reveals that nature has an innate restorative capacity for adults and particularly for children?” Dowdell implies that time spent in nature is time spent engaging in adventure and

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46 *Scouting for Boys* (p.149)  
47 *Scouting for Boys* (p.311)
risk. “Editing out” nature from the modern-day experience leaves the predictable, risk-
discouraging, rules of society.

Some adults, sharing Dowdell’s anxieties, have responded to the technology-centered
youth culture of the twenty-first century with a call for boys to spend more time in nature
pursuing risky activities. In *The Dangerous Book for Boys* (2007), Conn and Hal Igguldon
respond to what they see as the boys of today out of touch with the boyhood that they were able
to experience as youth. They argue that an obsession with electronics and today’s more gender-
neutral “politically correct” climate keeps “boys from being boys.” In the introduction to the
book, they say, “In this age of video games and cell phones, there must still be a place for knots,
tree houses, and stories of incredible courage.” The book is a collection of tutorials, similar to a
scouting guide, of skills, facts, and stories that the Igguldon brothers believe every boy should
know. The brothers had to make a careful selection of the most “essential boyhood skills.” Their
topics include:

- The Greatest Paper Airplane in the World
- The Seven Wonders of the World
- The Five Knots Every Boy Should Know
- Stickball
- Slingshots
- Fossils
- Building a Treehouse
- Making a Bow and Arrow
- Fishing
- Timers and Tripwires
- Baseball's "Most Valuable Players"
- Famous Battles-Including Lexington and Concord, The Alamo, and Gettysburg
- Spies- Codes and Ciphers
- Making a Go-Cart
- Navajo Code Talkers' Dictionary
- Girls
- Cloud Formations
- The States of the U.S.
- Mountains of the U.S.

48 There is a U.K. and a U.S. version of the book, both bestsellers.
The topics are a combination of patriotic information and documents, primitive-inspired activities, and desert-island survival skills. The Igguldens anticipate a possible critique of their conservatism in the introduction, saying, “Is it old-fashioned? Well, that depends. Men and boys today are the same as they always were, and interested in the same things. They may conquer different worlds when they grow up, but they’ll still want these stories for themselves and for their songs.” Their book has an attitude of preservation. They say, “There are few things as satisfying as tying a decent bowline knot when someone needs a loop, or simply knowing what happened at Gettysburg and the Alamo. The tales must be told and retold, or the memories slowly die.” I’m particularly interested in the word choice: “dangerous.” It’s clear that the risk associated with treehouses is part of what makes it deemed commendable for a boy to pursue. Hal Iggulden told Amazon, “Boys need to learn about risk. They need to fall off things occasionally, or – and this is the important bit – they’ll take worse risks on their own.” In a Fox News review Wendy McElroy writes,

In celebrating old-fashioned boyhood and providing a blueprint on how to reclaim it, The Dangerous Book is revolutionary. It discards decades of social engineering that approaches children as being psychologically gender neutral. The book implicitly rebukes school texts that strip out gender references. Instead, it says ‘boys will be boys’; they always have been, they always will be, and that’s a good thing.
Perhaps the fact that the Igguldens felt that there was a need to reclaim “old-fashioned boyhood” demonstrates that it is culturally on the decline. Current research shows that on average families are certainly spending less time outside than previous generations. Or, maybe despite fears or amount of time spent outside, the fact that the Igguldens sold 1.5 million copies promoting “old-fashioned boyhood” signifies that the dominant ideas about boyhood are pervasive and will continue to persist for a long time.

“The Woman’s Place Is In the Treehouse”

Even though treehouses are so deeply linked imaginatively to boyhood, many girls have taken up the project. However, when articles are written about girls in treehouses, the treehouse is usually framed as an extension of the domestic space, not an escape from it. Girls aren’t described as defending borders, reaching a higher truth, bonding with nature, becoming handy-women, or channeling Tarzan. They’re in treehouses excelling at entertaining guests and spending time with valuable male influences in the process. Even the “half-civilized” New Guinea tree-house-dwelling woman couldn’t escape having the expectations of the domestic woman projected onto her treehouse life, the journalist remarking, “Since nobody wears clothing, the [New Guinea] housewife need neither sew, darn nor mend.” Jack Mahoney, the actor portraying Tarzan in the 1962 Tarzan sequel that chose leave Jane out of the story, even joked on his promotional tour: “The woman’s place is in the treehouse.”

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49 A longitudinal UCLA study completed in 2012 followed 32 California families for 10 years. It found that despite pleasant weather children averaged fewer than 40 minutes per week in their yards and adults less than 15 minutes. (Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century)
50 This characterization is expanded upon on page 23.
Treehouses are conventionally a no-girls-allowed zone. In a 1910 *Idaho Statesmen* article, the columnist clearly only associates treehouses with boys. He writes, “One of the most attractive things to build is a tree house, and this any boy who can handle tools at all can put up without much trouble.” He also comes up with an alternative means of entertainment for girls, offering, “If there are little sisters in the family and the yard is large enough there should by all means be a mud pie bakery put up for their accommodation.” This way, both boys and girls can play in the backyard but in roles best suited to their socially-defined gender roles.

A 1913 article in the *Lexington Herald* announced in its title that “Boys and Girls Are Building Portable Tree Houses for Occupancy.” There were plenty of articles written about boys in treehouses, though, so this journalist focuses on a young girl’s project. It features a photo of a girl climbing up a ladder to a treehouse with the caption “A Tree House Made by a Clever Girl” (see fig. 5).

![Figure 5: Girl climbing ladder into treehouses. Featured in 1913 *Lexington Herald* article.]

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52 Young Terry Manning, for example, proclaimed this sentiment when he said only his dog, Freckles, was allowed in his house. I tell his full story from the 1968 Dallas article on page 5.
The girl photographed is the daughter of Charlotte Vetter Gulick, one of the founders of the nationwide Campfire Girls organization. Unlike articles that just mention a girl playing in a treehouse, this journalist really gives young Gulick the credit for building it. The journalist marvels, “Not only did little Miss Gulick build this home, but when the family moved from one summer home and took up their abode in another she took down the house from its lofty quarters and carried it with her and put it up in a tree near her home.” The description of young Gulick transporting an entire treehouse by herself certainly characterizes her as self-reliant. The journalist gives her a lot of credit for her work.

However, the way in which the journalist describes the functionality of Gulick’s treehouse contrasts sharply with articles about treehouses built by boys. While articles describing boys’ treehouses discuss adventure, self-reliance, and danger, this article describes the treehouse as a “charming” space for hospitality and entertainment. Instead of discussing trap doors and ladders as the boy articles tend to do, the journalist declares, “Above all things, there should be a pantry in the tree house retreat. It is a most disappointing thing for visitors to climb up a rope ladder to the tree house and receive a warm welcome and nothing to eat.” The journalist adds, “Almost everybody who gives successful entertainments in tree houses has a musical instrument of some sort stowed away up in the branches.” As imagined by the journalist, Young Gulick does not escape the domestic sphere as she climbs into her treehouse, she merely finds a new place to entertain guests.

This journalist even goes so far as to create a new term for a treehouse equipped with a door bell, running water, and lights: “the tree mansion.” The journalist writes, “The tree mansion, in fact, is one of the most attractive retreats that a boy or girl can have, and for entertaining one’s own friends, far from the realms of grown-up land, it cannot be surpassed.”
The journalist goes on to distinguish between “If one is a girl, a sewing basket can be kept there, for it is a very nice place to sit and sew in, and if one is a boy, it is a very good place for whittling, making small boats, etc.” This quote claims that even if boys and girls are both building treehouses, the space is not to be used in the same way for both genders.

While many articles like Gulick’s draw sharp lines between the experiences of girls and boys in treehouses, some allow for the lines to blur. In a 1958 Dallas article not so subtly entitled “Father Should Be the Boss Even in All-Girl Household,” journalist Vivien Brown associates girls in treehouses with the sense of adventure normally only linked to boys. She describes four sisters who play in their treehouse like only boys do conventionally. Their mother is Rosemary Decamp, a TV and film star known for portraying “the quintessential small-town American mother.” In 1948 The Institute of Family Relations granted her the Mother of Distinction award for doing “more to glorify American motherhood through her film portrayals than any other woman.” Decamp told Brown, “The girls, Margaret, 13, Martha 10, Valerie 9, and Anita Louise 5, are outdoor types but ‘not tomboys.’ ‘They have a treehouse 30 feet up with a magnificent view on the Pacific Ocean, and get as much fun out of it as boys.’” Her need to clarify “not tomboys” shows her fighting against an assumption that girls who run around outdoors are unfeminine.

Decamp explains how she believes the treehouse helps instill positive values for her girls, saying, “In our house Dad’s word is law, just as it is in the courtroom. It’ll help make our girls better wives. We are determined that our girls grow up fearlessly, too, not in prissy sheltered fashion.” While today the notion about the girls growing up to follow their husband’s orders seems limiting and outdated, she’s also voicing a desire for her girls to develop the bravery, confidence, and trailblazing attitude only conventionally nurtured in men.

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53 From Rosemary Decamp’s summary on IMDB.com
article’s title, she argues that although treehouse building is a typically male activity, as her girls build a treehouse with their father they are learning how to follow a man’s orders. They are also learning lessons they missed from not growing up with brothers. She emphasizes, “Mother should not take over complete supervision of girls. You don’t want to make little pinafore types out of them, just because they don’t have brothers to teach them about toads and spiders.”

In 1917, Florence A. Quirk, a Minneapolis woman vacationing in a cottage in Pass Christian, Mississippi, hosted a fundraiser for the Red Cross Association in a playhouse built for her son upon an oak tree. When the treehouse began to draw in foot traffic, she recognized an opportunity to raise money and familiarize visitors with Red Cross. She greeted guests at the ground floor and walked them through the tree house, where she displayed relics of Red Cross’s involvement in various wars. The journalist charmingly recounts the daughter’s role in the fundraiser: “So when little Margot, guardian of the strong box of the treehouse, finally relinquished her charge, it was gratifying to all concerned to hear that the many ‘mickles’ contributed had made a satisfactory ‘muckle’ of nearly $12.00; for no more now than in the day it first originated does ‘money grow on a bush.’” Here, Florence A. Quirk took the entertainment value of the tree and monetized it for good.

Quirk’s treehouse fundraiser epitomizes the kind of domestic activity conventionally promoted for girls to pursue in treehouses. Risk-taking and self-reliance, on the other hand, are not values conventionally promoted for girls. Following the success of *The Dangerous Book for Boys*, Harper Collins was eager to publish a girl’s version. It is entitled *The Daring Book for Girls* (2007). Treehouses did not make the girls’ tome. *The Daring Book for Girls* by Andrea Buchanan and Miriam Peskowitz invites girls to experience and celebrate adventure and is careful to take a stance against just limiting women to the domestic sphere: “[This] is the manual
for everything that girls need to know--and that doesn't mean sewing buttonholes!” However, they couldn’t entitle the book “Dangerous Book for Girls.” “‘Dangerous,’” Peskowitz says, "has a different connotation for girls. You think of 13-year-olds going off in cars with boys.”

While most of the modern American articles discuss the behavior of girls and women in treehouses as harmless and domestic, it seems that at times journalists imagine the treehouse as a space where elite women are allowed to be less proper, wilder. For example, a 1912 story in the Oregonian tells the story of celebrity actress Blanche Bates demonstrating how to do “the Texas Tommy” at a weekend house party in a tree house connected to Dr. Russell T. Cool’s estate in Los Gatos. Bates even has the gumption to dance barefoot (*gasp*)! Reportedly, Dick Hotaling, “actor-millionaire” applauded, along with other wealthy guests. The article describes “Miss Bates” and her friend “Mrs. Lucie May Hayes” making a ‘Jack-in-the-Bean Stalk’ climb” up the tree. That certainly does not sound like the behavior of a conventional lady; it’s the behavior of an adventurous boy.

High Tea: A History of Treetop Dining

Ancient Rome

While stories about women entertaining in treehouses occupy only a small part of the cultural discussion of modern American treehouses, the treehouse as a space for dining and entertaining dates all the way back to Ancient Rome. In his Natural History (77 AD), Roman philosopher Pliny the Elder describes men hosting grand banquets in massive plane trees. According to Pliny, the elder Dionysius brought the first plane tree over from Sicily and planted it in his garden to provide shade for social gatherings. Dionysius’s tree did not thrive, tainting the tree’s reputation—that is until Plane trees were planted to adorn the Academy at Athens. Over time, Plane trees acquired so much admiration that Romans started pouring wine on their plane

54 2007 Interview by Kristin Chase at Blog Talk Radio.
tree’s roots, thinking it would strengthen the roots. He jokes, “Thus have we taught the very
trees, even, to be wine-bibbers!”

The first tree house he describes belonged to high-ranking Roman military officer,
Licinius Mucianus. Mucianus decided that the one of the plane trees at the Academy was so
magnificent that he and his eighteen persons of his retinue should enjoy a banquet in its interior.
Rather than build upon the tree’s branches, he built a room within a hollow cavity in the trunk “a
cave of 81 foot in compass.” Pliny remarks that he enjoys himself more among the foliage “than
he would have done amid the resplendence of marble, a multiplicity of paintings, and beneath a
ceiling refulgent with gold.”

Pliny’s biggest name drop concerns another man inspired to host a banquet in a tree:
Emperor Caligula. He compares Caligula’s tree to a house with branches situated like stories.
Pliny writes that Caligula saw a plane tree and “was so struck with admiration that he held a
banquet in it- himself adding very materially to the shade it threw, the triclinium being formed
for the reception of fifteen guests and the necessary attendants.” Pliny’s diction “adding very
materially” is both a criticism of Caligula’s profligacy and indication that he is building onto the
tree. He also can’t resist throwing in the jab that the plump Catigula must have “constituted a
considerable portion of the shadow” cast by the tree that day (talk about “throwing shade.”)
Catigula called this house his “nest,” comparing himself to a bird capable of living in nature. As
architectural historian Paula Henderson explains, “Pliny was one of the most esteemed writers of
antiquity and his accounts gave treehouses their classical pedigree, which may help to explain
the sudden burst of enthusiasm for the form a thousand years later in Renaissance Europe.”

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55 *Natural History of Pliny*, Book VII, Ch. 1, “The Honorable Place Occupied By Trees in the System of
Nature.”
56 *Natural History of Pliny*, Book VII, Ch. 5, “Remarkable Facts Connected With the Plane Tree.”
57 From *Treehouses* (2005) by Paula Henderson and Adam Mornement
One of the most influential families in the Italian Renaissance, the Medici family, incorporated treehouses into their lavish gardens. Cosimo Medici (1519-1574), the Grand Duke of Tuscany, constructed a state-of-the-art treehouse complete with a series of fountains and plumbing. He named the treehouse “Fountain of Oak.” His son, Francesco Medici (1541-1587), upstaged his treehouse with a house that stood twenty-five feet in the air with two massive spiral staircases, a marble dining house, a marble bench, and an impressive fountain (see fig. 6).

[Figure 6: Pratolino treehouse. Stefano della Bella’s seventeenth-century engraving of Francesco Medici’s treehouse his villa, Pratolino features a magnificent winding staircase. For a clearer image, visit source: https://www.mfa.org/collections/object/the-tree-house-medici-villa-at-pratolino-288296]
Although Francesco was an adult at the time that he built his treehouse, the son whose treehouse upstages his father’s treehouse is a familiar story.\(^{58}\)

Intricate treehouses are an ideal avenue to display one’s wealth, as the very concept of building a dining hall in a tree is impractical and wasteful. Despite the grandeur of the treehouses, they cannot be built to last because a foundation that grows is not stable. While most Italian families did not have the resources to build a Medici-level treehouse, treehouses became the must-have Florence garden ornament for the nobility.\(^{59}\)

In addition to their extravagance, Aristocratic treehouses generated criticism for the behavior and attitudes of its inhabitants. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, the most significant artist of Dutch and Flemish Renaissance painting, criticized the elite, depicting treehouses as a space for debauchery and idleness in his illustration, *Spring* (1570) (see fig. 7). Hieronymous Bosch illustrates a jarring, unnatural union of man and tree via treehouse in his depiction of *Hell*, part of a triptych representing the *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c.1510) (see fig. 8). Possibly influenced by Bosch’s treehouse, Brueghel incorporates a treehouse in his depiction of *Lust*, part of his series *The Seven Deadly Sins* (c.1558).

Despite criticism, in Elizabethan England (1558-1603) treehouses remained a space for entertainment as Englanders continued to follow the Medici family’s trend of building treehouses, especially in their formal gardens. One of the most famous was a three-story house in built in a massive linden tree in Kent. According to tree-house enthusiast Pete Nelson, “The branches bent downward to create three enclosed arbors eight feet high, one on top of the other. The middle arbor, which served a banquet hall, could hold over 50 people, and Queen Elizabeth once attended a dinner there” (Nelson 1994).

\(^{58}\) Think back to p.15 of this paper when the Forbush boys “built a better [treehouse] alone” than with their father.
\(^{59}\) *Treehouses*, p. 27
[Figure 6: *Spring* (1570). Published by Hieronymous Cock and illustrated by Pieter Bruegel. In the foreground laborers toil away plowing the gardens and weave vines on to the trellis of a pergola. Meanwhile, in the back left corner, men and women enjoy the pleasures of a treehouse. Most of the treehouse revelers have their backs to the laborers as they indulge in music, drink, and food. Retrieved from https://www.mfa.org/collections/object/spring-from-a-four-seasons-series-83406 ]
[Fig. 7: *Hell, Garden of Earthly Delights* (c.1510), Hieronymus Bosch. Bosch illustrates a treehouse formed as a part of the human body. The illustration seems to highlight the strange forced union of man and nature that treehouses create, and places the tree/man house as the center of hell. It shows men dining within the tree and one man hanging off the edge with a look of lament. High resolution of full panel available at: [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bosch_Hell_07.jpg).]
[Figure 8: Lust, The Seven Deadly Sins (c. 1558), Bosch. Within the tree shell/house, two humanoid creatures have sex, surrounded in the painting by sexual debauchery of every form. It is significant that the house part of the treehouse structure is a mussel shell. Mussel shells shouldn’t be on trees; they should be in water. The same could be said for treehouses and land. Bosch’s use of the shell highlights the treehouse’s crossover of dominions, extending the union it creates from man and land to man, land, and sea. Retrieved from The British Museum. ]
Romantic Period: Paris 1850s

Given the place of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Swiss Family Robinson* in the widespread admiration of treehouses, I was fascinated to learn about Crusoe-themed party destination for Parisians of the 1850s, Les Guingettes de Robinson. Guinguettes were small cabarets in 19th and twentieth century Parisian suburbs. On Sundays, summer, and Festival days especially, revelers would flock to the outskirts of the city to drink, dance, eat, see, and be seen. Les Guingettes de Robinson began in 1848 in Paris suburb, Le Plessis-Piquet when Joseph Guesquin, tapping into the commercial power of the Robinson Crusoe fantasy, made the brilliant business decision to build a tavern upon an enormous chestnut tree. He named the establishment Au Grand Robinson and it was an immediate success.

Guesquin went to lengths to create a whimsical and fantastical ambience at Au Grand Robinson. He even set up a pulley stem so that customers could receive their champagne and roasted chicken via baskets without being bothered by waiters (see fig. 9). Responding to Au Grand Robinson’s success, the treehouse concept multiplied along Malabry Street in Le Plessis-Piquet, creating a collection of competing bars and restaurants selling Robinson charm in this unusual forest setting. Several statues of Robinson Crusoe were erected across the village to reinforce the theme (see fig.10). As visitors ventured into the forested outskirts of the city, they could feel like they were embarking on their own Crusoean adventure.

In 1888, there were so many competitors imitating Guesquin’s treehouse concept (like the Grand Arbre) that he renamed Au Grand Robinson as Le Vrai Arbre de Robinson (The True Tree of Robinson) (see fig. 11). Despite Guesquin’s assertion that his restaurant was the “true

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60 History retrieved from Plessis-Robinson’s town website
61 *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, 1750
tree,” the additional attractions (also including a ballroom and swings) transformed one restaurant into a destination for guinguettes.

[Figure 9: Pulley System at Le Vrai Arbre de Robinson. Photo by P. Javelle. Retrieved from messynessychic.com]

[Figure 10: Robinson Statue. Photo by P. Javelle. Retrieved from messynessychic.com]
Figure 11: Le Vrai Arbre de Robinson. Four well-dressed party-goers stand beneath the first establishment at Plessis-Robinson. Retrieved from www.messynessychic.com
Les Guinguettes de Robinson drew success from their ability to connect adults to their inner-child. While Crusoe is an adult, the adventurous spirit he possesses connects to ideas about childhood. Just as Rousseau considered Robinson Crusoe the ideal text to teach Emile self-reliance, adventure stories are often associated more with children than adults. Adults are expected to follow the rules of society, while children can strike out into the wilderness like Crusoe and learn valuable skills along the way. After the liquid courage of a bottle of champagne, adults like these four could glide down a slide to exit their treehouse like children on a playground (see fig. 12).

[Figure 12: Plessis-Robinson Treehouse Slide. Retrieved from messynessychic.com]
Channeling the “inner-child” was certainly entertaining, as the Robinson Crusoe village continued to serve as a fashionable escape from city life for over a century. In 1909 the city changed its name to Le Plessis-Robinson, acknowledging the notoriety acquired in 60 years by this district. The carefree spirit of the guingette went out of vogue with the gravity of World War II. The dance halls and taverns closed one by one, and then private homes moved into the space. Today, only the skeleton remains of Guesquin’s “Vraie Arbre de Robinson.” One platform, a few planks of rotted wood, and a wall of the old dance hall are the only remnants of the village’s vibrant history. Perhaps that’s part of its popularity. The visitors knew the treehouse structures were not built to withstand the test of time. Just like any trend, it would die out and come back somewhere else in another form.

**Re-tree-t and Transcend**

*Divine Inspiration*

While adults currently and historically have used treehouses for pleasure, they also have a history of using treehouses for more serious affairs: spiritual and intellectual reflection. As people climb the ladders of their treehouses, they figuratively transcend the rest of society. The higher the treehouse, the more impressive people find it. The potential danger of falling increases with each step, but people reach for the clouds anyways. Perhaps higher elevation is figuratively associated with higher truth.

The transcendentalist movement started in the 1830s within the Unitarian church, as a reaction to the emphasis on reason and rationality over spirituality. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the son of a Unitarian minister, outlined many of the tenets for transcendentalism in his 1836 essay, “Nature.” Transcendentalists sought a spirituality that could transcend reason and the material world. The transcendentalists believe in the power of God, nature, and individualism. Henry
David Thoreau (1817-1862), one of the most influential American transcendentalists, encourages the notion that people can enter nature and experience the sensation that they are connecting to something more authentic and true. He writes, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

One of the most fascinating examples of a treehouse as spiritual reflection exists today is Chêne Millénaire, an oak tree in Normandy, France that has been standing for an entire millennium. It stands 18 meters high with a base 15 meters in circumference (see fig.13). When the tree was around 500 years old, it was struck by lightning that slowly burned through the center of the tree and hollowed it out. The village priest claimed that the lightning strike was divine, so in 1696 they built a hermitage dedicated to the Virgin Mary in the hollow. They built a second chapel above the first and wrapped a spiral staircase around the outside of the tree to access it.

During the French Revolution, this tree became an emblem of the tyranny of the church and old governance. Crowds charged the tree, intent on burning it to the ground. Story has it that a local renamed the tree “Temple of Reason,” and because the tree was then associated with Enlightenment ideals, it was spared.

During the 18th century Chêne Millénaire was visited by Louis XV and Charles II of England. On October 3, 1854 it reached the peak of its fame as it was officially inaugurated as a seat of worship. Henderson and Mornement explain, “To the one thousand residents of Allouville the tree is both icon and spiritual heart, a small-scale equivalent of the Sagrada

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62 *Walden* (1854), p. 70
63 *Treehouses*, p. 80-85
Familia’s hold over Barcelona” (Henderson & Mornement). Locals celebrate mass twice a year inside of the thousand-year-old trunk.

[Figure 13: The Chêne Millénere. Photo by Youtuber David Onvqf, 2014. Retrieved from http://onvqf.over-blog.com/ch%C3%A9ne-d-allouville-bellefosse-seine-martime-76]
Artistic & Intellectual Inspiration

As in Chêne-Millénère, treehouses in Renaissance gardens were not only used for dining and merrymaking. They could also be places for serious contemplation. For example, in 1640 John Evelyn built a treehouse in the garden of his family estate in Surrey. He sketches the layout in a 1640 journal, illustrating two buildings by a pond: a study and a tall treehouse with a domed lookout chamber. In his 1643 diary, Evelyn calls his treehouse the perfect place for “solitude” and “retirement.”

Nearly 300 years later, architect Phebe Westcott Humphreys describes the treehouse as a place for inspiration in her Practical Book of Garden Architecture (1914). Humphreys devotes an entire chapter to treehouse building. She speaks of using tree houses for artistic inspiration, remarking, “Amid such surroundings [of an open “crow’s nest” design] one’s inspiration should come as spontaneously as the bird songs caroled in the upper branches.” Interestingly, however, Humphreys only speaks of men using the treehouse for serious thinking. According to Humphreys, male and female architects design treehouses differently. She comments, “It is probably unnecessary to state that the plainly sheathed and slab-covered tree-house in the Catskill Mountains is a man’s studio; while that of closet conveniences built throughout the entire wall space was designed by a woman.” She admires both tree houses, describing the man’s design as “heavy,” “large,” “strongly supported,” and functional as a work space and the female design as “dainty,” with “delightful paraphernalia for tea making,” and “ample space for various housekeeping requirements.” She emphasizes the importance of solitude (a transcendentalist value), saying that choosing a secluded area for the house is important as treehouses can “provide delightful seclusion among the breezes in a shelter of tree branches.”

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64 Treehouses, p. 27
Flocking to the Trees: Elitist Escape

Just as the Parisians flocked to Plessis-Robinson and Katherine Force Spencer left New York City for the Moros, there’s a common theme of people using treehouses to escape the pressures of high society. These individuals usually describe their treehouse as a castle or nest. They may have not been royalty, but Massachusetts couple, Frank and Henrietta Felton, said they lived in a castle. In 1907 the Feltons captivated public attention by moving out of their traditional house and into “Willow Castle,” an adjoining house they built in a willow tree. Willow Castle connected to their home by an incline plane and contained a kitchen, dining room, and bedroom. The journalists across several sources all seemed most interested with the idea that the Feltons believed that fresh air is the “preventative of all ailments.” They posed the possibility that the Feltons had found the solution to a happier, healthier life.

Just like Emperor Caligula’s treehouse, journalists compared the Feltons’ treehouse to a nest. The Boston Journal declared, “They have driven away the birds from the boughs and branches and have built a nest—just big enough for two—where they bask in the sunshine and flee from the storm, and drink in deep breaths of nature’s panacea for the ills of mankind.” The sensual language paints their lives as luxurious, romantic, and indulgent. There’s also an aggressive colonizer element to the idea that they have “driven the birds” away and built their own home in their place. The stories report that the Willow tree supporting the home got its start thirty years prior when Henrietta’s father stuck his walking stick into the ground and left it there. Reportedly, “to their amazement the walking stick grew and grew until now it has grown to be a house for them.” The walking stick detail adds the familial, father-child element that feels

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65 I found their story reported all across America: the Kansas City Star, Boston Journal, Idaho Statesman, and Hobart Oklahoma Republican.
66 The Feltons appear to share the belief that Louv espouses nearly a hundred years later: that nature is “an essential investment [...] in health” (2005).
necessary to include in treehouse stories of the twentieth century. Henrietta’s father planted a tree that went on to figuratively and literally support her marriage.

A 1899 journalist makes the compelling point that the treehouses provide the best of both worlds: “the necessities of metropolitan life are afforded the dwellers without destroying the primitive charms which have always existed.” The article calls attention to Mill Valley, a suburban hamlet near San Francisco, where wealthy San Franciscan merchants “escape the fogs and dust of the city” in beautiful treehouse retreats. The article includes a photo of a four-room treehouse built 50 feet in the air around an enormous redwood tree (see fig. 14).

[Figure 14: “A Novel Tree House in California,” 1899]

67 “Tree Dwelling in California,” *The Scientific American*, 1899
The According to the journalist, the Mill Valley treehouses are used as a display of wealth and artistic pursuit. Like the Medici father and son, “A friendly rivalry exists among the people as to which shall exhibit the greatest novelty in the architecture of their homes. In no community of its size is there a greater display of eccentricity in this respect manifested.” Californians can escape the fast-pace and polluted air of “city life” and enjoy the fresh air in style.

Even today, the British royal family uses the treehouse to escape from responsibilities. However, that attempt had the opposite result for Queen Elizabeth II. In 1952, 25-year-old Elizabeth learned the news that her father had died and it was time to assume the throne while staying at the Treetops Hotel in Kenya. Her cabin was perched 20 meters above ground in an enormous fig tree. The media resurfaces the compelling story at anniversaries of her reign, writing headlines like “How Elizabeth II Went Up a Tree a Princess, and Came Down a Queen.” One of the Treetop Hotel residents, Jim Corbett, wrote in the hotel’s log book, “For the first time in the history of the world, a young girl climbed into a tree one day as a Princess and after having what she described as her most thrilling experience she climbed down from the tree next day a Queen — God bless her.” Corbett’s quote demonstrates how people connect to the story not just because it’s unusual, but also because the treehouse symbolizes her youth. She’s merely a “young girl” sitting in a tree house when she is called to adulthood, to assume authority of the British throne. She’s taken from the humble, primitive treehouse and given a seat in the palace.

In 1989, Charles, Prince of Wales, hired an architect to built a spectacular treehouse for his sons William and Henry at their Highgrove Estate. At age 5, Prince William reportedly told the architect, "I want it to be as high as possible so I can get away from everyone and I want a
rope ladder which I can pull up so no one can get at me.” Even as a young child, Prince William knew that he needed an escape from the pressures of the royal family. In 2015, Charles, had the childhood treehouse refurbished for William’s 2-year-old son, George, to enjoy. While the royal family does not engage in the process of actually building the houses themselves, they sure love visiting them.

**Conclusion**

In news articles and literature from the early twentieth century to today, American and British adults express the same fear: that their boys possess a raw, dangerous energy. Like young Jedis, they have not yet learned to wield their power responsibly, which has the potential for great harm. They must learn the ways of “the force,” which for boys means, the colonizer. A Christian column in the late 1950s, summarizes the widespread anxiety well:

> We know that [boys] are at the age when being ‘in the gang’ is an important phase of growing up. And yet when we read or hear of a juvenile gang our first thoughts are of the wanton destruction and often-terrible violence that a group of young people can do. Rather than condemn them, isn’t it our job...our duty...to provide our children with guidance and facilities to steer their youthful energy into constructive channels. To teach them to build rather than destroy.⁷⁰

The project of building treehouses spread throughout America as a purported solution for the adult fears about the behavior and development of American boys. It’s not just about building the house. It’s building character. It’s building imagination. It’s becoming a man.

From Plessis-Robinson to Queen Elizabeth II, treehouses have a rich history of serving as a playground for the elite. Girls in modern America occupy a similar space in the twentieth

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⁷⁰ “A Church Going Family is a Growing Family Spiritually as Well as Physically.” *Dallas Morning News*, 1959.
century cultural imaginations, as the dominant culture continues to bind them to a domestic sphere of entertainment and frivolity. However, despite all of the meanings associated with treehouses, ultimately treehouses are still linked strongest to imagination. The builders and tree-dwellers still have the power to define what it means to them. Treehouses throughout history are all united by the desire to dwell in nature, to become more connected to the natural world without completely rejecting the comforts and structure of civilization. Thanks to the continuing popularity of treehouses in Western culture, if so led, you can go rent a night in a treehouse on Airbnb,⁷¹ and think about how Emperor Caligula, Queen Elizabeth, the Medicis, fathers, sons, and daughters, have all embarked on the same adventure, all yearned for an escape from the civilized society into the wild branches of trees.

⁷¹ AirBnb recommendations: https://www.rodalesorganiclife.com/wellbeing/treehouse-vacations/slide/3
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Mrs. Vanderbilt’s Next Door Neighbor to Give Up Social Frivolities and Become a Missionary Among the Savages of the Philippines,” *Plain Dealer,* 1913. Retrieved from Early American Newspapers.


