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By Principal®

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## Hidden Gems: Sarah Neidhardt remembers life in the Ozarks in new UA Press book



“Tellingly, my very first, faint memory is of a pile of trash and dirty laundry in a room of the ramshackle farmhouse we stayed in for free while my dad finished the cabin. My mom told me while I was writing the book that this was most likely dirty cloth diapers she couldn’t keep up with washing by hand on the wood stove in boiling water,” says author Sarah Neidhardt. “Most of my earliest memories, though, are of the land itself — the paths and roads and

plants, the bugs and the animals around us. I still see it all in my minds eye." (Courtesy Photo/Kennon Guerry)

"I never had any desire to replicate our experience in the woods," author Sarah Neidhardt says of the back-to-the-land experience she shared with her parents in the Arkansas Ozarks of the 1970s. "I saw it mostly as a mistake my parents had made that set us back financially. But in my journals, I was jotting down my memories of the cabin years. These memories weren't informing my choices, but they certainly informed my inner life, my comfort around diverse kinds of people, my desire for something more than a fully conventional life, and my sense that I didn't have to be one thing or follow one path."

Neidhardt's book, "Twenty Acres: A Seventies Childhood in the Woods," has just been released by the University of Arkansas Press. She will read from it and sign copies at 4:30 p.m. today at Pearl's Books, 28 E. Center St. in Fayetteville.

Her parents, she says, are thrilled.

"It was an important period of their lives, and I think it's very vindicating for them to realize that what could be considered a mistake ... has had such a long-lasting and mostly positive impact on their children."

Here, Neidhardt talks about her life for Hidden Gems.

Q. First tell me about your parents, please. What were their lives like before their move to the Ozarks? And what inspired them to go "back to the land"?

A. My father is from Columbia, S.C., and grew up in an upper-middle class, conservative family. But he began to rebel in his teens in the early 1960s, listening to and playing folk music and getting involved with the civil rights movement. In his first year of college, after a run-in with a KKK recruiter, he decided he had to get out of the South and hitchhiked to New York City, where he got involved in the local party and music scene, until that was cut short by the Vietnam draft in 1965. He served his time in Germany and Colorado, where he met my mother. She had spent most of her childhood in New York while her father taught at Columbia, but her family had a long history in Colorado, and she had graduated from

Colorado College. Before Colorado College, she had attended an elite private school for girls in Denver, so her life to that point had been quite privileged. My parents were both working at a Colorado Springs bookstore, the Chinook, when they met.

My father had loved the outdoors since his childhood in South Carolina. In Colorado, he spent his free time mountain climbing. Meanwhile, there was regular talk of going back to the land in the counterculture scene around him, and books were coming into the Chinook on the subject. It was in the air enough that even mainstream media was starting to pick up on the trend. My mother was not paying much attention, however, and was only following my father to the land -- she already had me and was pregnant with my sister when he confessed this dream. But she was also looking for a nontraditional life.

Q. Where did they settle in the Ozarks? And how did they find that place?

A. They settled in north central Arkansas in a little town called Fox in Stone County, up the hill from the better known town of Mountain View. They found it through a young leatherworker named Larry who had moved to Stone County and was visiting a mutual friend in Colorado Springs in the summer of 1972. His truck got stolen, and he needed a ride back to Arkansas, so my father and a friend, with my mother and me in tow, drove him back to Stone County that summer. They were taken with the beauty of the hills and the local music scene, so my dad visited a real estate agent in Mountain View and bought our 20 acres of land that visit. Initially, we shared the land with another couple, the friend who came with us and his wife and baby.

Q. In our current, overly connected age, how would you explain the life you grew up in to people who cannot even conceive of that life?

A. We lived at the end of a rough, 3-mile-long dirt road with no TV or phone or even, for a time, electricity and running water. When we got electricity, we did have a radio and got a local public radio station with music and news. And family sent us magazines and books. But all our communication was through handwritten letters, recorded audiocassettes, and very infrequent phone calls made from neighbors' houses miles away (and those were usually shared party lines). If the dirt road was icy or muddy, we didn't go to school, sometimes for weeks. The mind-numbing connection we have now would have been inconceivable, but

even compared to other Americans in the 1970s, we were very isolated. While other kids of my generation were watching "Sesame Street" and "The Electric Company," eating Lucky Charms and Fruit Loops, and listening to '70s pop, I was eating beans and whole wheat cakes and making playhouses in the woods and listening to folk music.

Q. When and how did you return to "conventional" society? What was it like -- for you and for your family?

A. We returned to conventional society in 1981 when I was in third grade, although we only moved about an hour away to another rural Arkansas town. But this time we lived in a rented doublewide trailer and then a solid, fairly modern farmhouse, both of which seemed fancy to me after the roughness of the cabin. The years of woods and musical get-togethers were over. I strangely have no memories of our move, but I do remember my years in the new town where I felt like a true outsider for the first time. In Fox, we had been there since I was a baby, so I felt I belonged, and there were a handful of other hippie types at our school. But in the new town, everyone was from small-town Arkansas, and we were renters, not Baptist, and carried ourselves all wrong. We had a few friends but never really fit in.

Q. Tell me about your choices entering adulthood?

A. I was a thoroughly modern American teenager of the 1980s in Little Rock and California. (We left Arkansas in 1986 when I was 14.) I was not entirely conventional, but fitting in was irresistible, and I learned from childhood how to adapt seamlessly to the outside world and laugh with my friends at my eccentric family. My backwoods experience and bohemian, educated parents left me with a sense of otherness not unlike parts of the immigrant experience.

After high school, I scrapped plans for college in order to focus on work and friends. (I had started hanging out with a crowd that wasn't college-bound.) For six years, I worked at a Waldenbooks and other odd jobs. I fell into a mind-numbing fog of mall retail and the empty days of the suburban doldrums. But I was also privately immersed in a parallel world between the pages of books, the constant of my life, and watching foreign films, dreaming of distant locales.

I never really thought about a career. I simply followed my own interests, just as my parents had done. But I did eventually realize I needed more out of life and that college was the way out, so, following a boyfriend who lived in Ohio, I enrolled at Oberlin College and got my degree. (And in a complete coincidence, and a coming full circle, found at Oberlin two people from our Fox years.)

Q. How did this book come about?

A. I started writing notes down in journals in my 20s about our woods years, realizing that it was an experience I needed to remember, that it spoke to who I was. I knew it interested people too because friends were always asking questions, and I found myself telling the stories over and over again. Then in my 30s I started writing more seriously about that time and took a creative nonfiction course, but it still didn't really feel like enough for anything more than some short pieces. It wasn't until my son went to school in 2012, and I started transcribing a large collection of letters my mother had written at the time -- and some cassette tapes we made and other letters -- that I found a story arc and enough material to start seriously writing a book.

Q. What do you hope it brings to readers?

A. I hope it brings to readers a real sense of this unique time and place in American history -- a blend of the hippie world of the 1970s and the mountain backwoods, a time of prolific letter writing and of live music everywhere. I hope it will conjure readers' own nostalgia about childhood and sense of place. And I hope it brings to light the complexity of a place like Arkansas, that all kinds of people make their home here and all kinds of lives are lived here.





# Twenty Acres



A SEVENTIES CHILDHOOD  
IN THE WOODS

Sarah Neidhardt



Go & Do Reading & Book Signing When: 4:30 p.m. today Where: Pearls Books, 28 E. Center St. in Fayetteville Books: \$29.95 at [uapress.com](http://uapress.com) or available at Pearls

*Print Headline: Back-to-the-land childhood shaped author's perspective on the world*

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