What better way to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964 than to walk in the footsteps of the old-time prospectors in the Wichita Mountains?

A hoop that once held together the wooden staves of a barrel now hangs high in the limbs of this dead tree. It’s one of the forgotten legacies of the old-time prospectors in the Wichita Mountains.

A bend in the trail from remnants of the gold miners is this plastic cross affixed to the base of a granite rock. Nobody knew it was there until the big fire of September 2011 burned out most of the vegetation in the area, and it’s still a mystery who put it there and why.

A knap stone held together the numerous staves of a barrel now lumpy high in the forest of this dead oak stump. It’s one of the forgotten legacies of the old-time prospectors in the Wichita Mountains.

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On a rest stop Joe Moore of Lawton tells a millipede joke, while others chime in. What Worthington tells them is worth repeating here: “Do not take anything up a sprig of sedge, Hale poses the same question he does to the kids who come to the refuges as they’re returning from their first exploration about this plant? It’s a great game one that never grew old.

Some of the strangest and most unusual things the group encounters the remains of several pit mines. The gold-seekers may not have found treasures, but they left some for later generations to ponder.

The Mountains unit is in the Special Use Area where access and use is limited mostly to scientific and educational purposes. Charon’s Gardens is located in the North Mountain unit, where public use is limited by a permit system for permitted camping, photography and rock sports. In addition, a limited number of backpacking camping permits are available for overnight visits into the wilderness area. Except for permitted camping, public use is limited to day-light hours. The new Comprehensive Conservation Plan puts Charon’s Gardens in a low-density area, which means groups are limited to 15 in size.

Hale began the hike by sharing the four characteristics of a wilderness area, as set forth in the Wilderness Act of 1964:

- It is untrammeled by man and generally appears to have been affected principally by the forces of nature with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable.
- It is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions.
- It is an area of undisturbed federal land without permanent improvements or human habitation and where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.
- It has outstanding opportunities for solitude and a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.
LOCAL

Trail yields treasures

Some of the strangest spectacles on the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge can be found in the Charon’s Gardens Wilderness Area.

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