

OUR BERKSHIRES 11/12/70

A HOUSATONIC TRAIL

By Morgan Bulkeley

NOT THAT we are against railroad service; that should certainly be continued and improved wherever economically feasible; but there are routes that are becoming obsolete.

The spur line of the Penn Central Railroad from the shore line up the lovely Housatonic Valley to Pittsfield is an example. The company has petitioned for discontinuance of all passenger service, and the two freights a day may be next. The line is approaching an economic point of no return. From a management point of view it is a line from nowhere to nowhere. What, in 1840, was a bonanza in Berkshire has been superseded by other modes of transportation and travel. The north-south artery is becoming a varicose vein.

* * *

THIS MAY present a singular opportunity of turning a public loss into a public gain. The abandoned roadbed would make an ideal and scenic hiking and biking trail from Central Berkshire to Long Island Sound, which might even be extended northward on old trolley beds through the Hoosic Valley across the southwest corner of Vermont to the Hudson River.

To keep this within the realm of immediate possibility, let us consider only the stretch from Pittsfield to Connecticut. In its 32 miles, the rail route goes through the townships of Pittsfield, Lenox, Lee, Stockbridge, Great Barrington and Sheffield, along the way picking up the additional communities of New Lenox, Lenox Dale, South Lee, Glendale, Housatonic, Risingdale, Van Deusenville, Sheffield

Plain and Ashley Falls, In other words, unlike the Appalachian Trail which mainly graces the mountaintops, it would serve population centers. As a valley counterpart of that trail, it would be readily accessible to many more people.

This brings us to alternatives of use. Like the proverbial hobo we have tripped on almost every tie along the way and can vouch that no trail could be more scenic. From each community the track plunges almost immediately into a wilderness in our midst that has been left to the railroad alone. No strip development there.

The way skirts wild riverbanks that in the future may be beloved by fisherman and boatman as they already are in the Falls Village, Cornwall and Kent areas. One can tramp long stretches with only an occasional peek at a house.

The way is varied, now through ferny, cedar-topped limestone cuts, now through buttercup pastures or dark pine woods alternating with luminous hardwood groves. Often it penetrates swamps teeming with wildlife and botanical treasures as showy as yellow or blue flag or fiery as cardinal flower.

* * *

IT IS a quiet way, usually apart from the roar of traffic, and should be kept that way out of respect for traversed properties. All motor-driven vehicles should be banned in favor of bikers, hikers, horseback riders, snowshoers and cross-country skiers. It could form an ideal linkage of public properties along the way, a necklace of campsites and perhaps of youth hostels in abandoned depots.

Presumably the railroad would wish to remove its rails and perhaps the ties. But it should be economically simple for a civilization that is paying the nation to build one last dirt road. The

monotonous straightness and flatness could be tempered a little to curves and topography to take advantage of convenient scenic knolls.

* * *

THE FORTUNATE part of this proposal is that the right-of-way already exists, and that we have established conservation commissions with authority to acquire and manage such a project. All that is needed is broad public support and probably state and federal aid that is available to such commissions.

It is not too early to consider an eventuality that may very suddenly materialize. There will be great rival pressures for acquisition on the part of county and towns for road purposes and on the part of individual land abutters.

In a pre-eminently recreational county like Berkshire, a green corridor would constitute the highest possible land use.

Imagine the Housatonic Trail -- all yours as far as you want to take it, as wide as the ties are long, with a generous 20-foot margin on each side for volunteer trees and wildflowers, running from fresh Berkshire springs to the salt sea. Just the thought is enough to make a man buy a pair of moccasins. A pipe dream? Maybe, maybe not.