

OUR BERKSHIRES 6/15/67

A TEN-MILE DISAPPOINTMENT

By Morgan Bulkeley

WHERE WE LAUNCHED the canoe at historic Canoe Meadows, the Housatonic ran clear enough to show a clean, sandy bottom. It was a promising start compared to six years before when we had slipped on the slimy, sludgy bank as we pushed off into murky, oil-filmed water. Obviously Pittsfield and Dalton, the General Electric plant and the paper mills had made strides toward cleaning the river.

A harassed crow flew upstream with a chattering kingbird riding on his back--an ancient feud that seemed to symbolize dark waters tyrannized by man.

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THE CANOE lazed out easily on the gentle current heading downstream for distant Wood's Pond. The river zephyrs and the shade of arching silver maples rendered the 90-degree June day most pleasant. Where maple withes dipped in the water, they had caught little snatches of flotsam showing that the spring freshet was fully four feet above the present, placid surface. Along the high, curving banks already the fiddlehead ferns had unrolled into upright ostrich plumes that in another month would be reaching seven-foot fronds to the very water.

Three black ducks, startled from a waving bed of watergrass and duckweed, quacked off downstream. Killdeer piped on muddy flats marked with 'coon tracks. The canoe slid along easily from one birdsong to another, now an indigo bunting at the meadow's edge, now an oriole in a tall elm, now bobolinks in cow-pasture, a rose-breasted

grosbeak, vireo or thrush in deep woods, cardinal whistles from brushy tangles, and always overhead the lisping of cedar wax-wings and prattle of goldfinches. Once a pileated woodpecker flashed black and white along the bank, clutched to a gaunt elm arm and posed like a handsome weathervane against the sky. It was a fluvial dream-world of song and splash and breeze.

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THEN WE CAME abruptly on a complete river obstruction, where an undermined elm had toppled, holding one bank with its roots and the opposite with its top, backing debris upstream for 30 years. This dam of branches and rubbish was surveyed by a grizzled old woodchuck that overlooked the mess like a sage from his doorstep high up on the riverbank.

The accumulation had a good deal to say about who had built this solid bridge for the woodchuck. Even discounting all the submerged items, metallic, waterlogged, etcetera, the surface showed how many individuals were implicated in the dam.

There were boards, planks, poles, and sections of buildings. There were barrels, tanks, tires and oil drums; boxes, crates and chests; liquor bottles, paint cans, pill boxes, light bulbs; coats and stockings, dolls and toys and enough balls to stock a sporting goods store, all kinds; soccer, football, volleyball, basketball, tennis, croquet and pingpong. In addition, there were all sizes and colors in rubber and plastic. The conglomeration suggested that children first lost their treasures in the river, then grew up and tossed in their trash.

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WE PORTAGED around the strainer, as it were, finding the river

clean again below. A female wood duck whistled off leaving a tiny duckling paddling by a snag that held little rafts of that diminutive leaf that resembles miniscule lily-pads. From some woodland cavity she had air-lifted her chick to this espied source of food and would return with others of the brood. Instinctively he dove in his snag harbor to escape us.

A fish jumped ahead, and a kingfisher rattled away downstream. Large bullfrogs disturbed by the wash of the canoe squawked and plumped into the river. Muskrat tracks and holes abounded. In short there was an encouraging increase in wildlife in the last six years.

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THEN WE CAME to the rushing outfall of the Pittsfield sewage plant, the high cost of which promised so much. Disappointingly, the character of the river changed. Clarity and life disappeared. The banks became coated with black odoriferous muck. Plainly the plant was not yet doing an adequate job. At Lenox the story was the same. Another offensive influx of effluent all but clogged its estuary. The headwaters of Wood's Pond reflecting the massed white blossoms of buttonbush were beautifully deceptive. Beneath the surface paddles dipped and stuck in vast shoals of sewage sludge.

Before this exceptional greenbelt could be parkland, men would have to cease being children, and sewage treatment would have to be upgraded. When, oh when?