

OUR BERKSHIRES (9/28/61)

JOE PYE

By Morgan Bulkeley

Mount Washington

ON OUR HOUSATONIC canoe trip we very nearly passed the giant Lenox frog on the river bank without seeing it, though our portage passed under its very nose. The gaily - painted, seven-foot rock crouched concealed in a dense patch of joe-pye weed, the five- to ten-foot skyscraper of summer wild flowers. Feathery, wine-colored clusters of flowers topped the erect stems, which were regularly marked off by whorls of leaves at the different story levels all the way up to 15. The whole patch was bright with butterflies.

This plant, which thrives from New Brunswick to the Gulf of Mexico and westward to Manitoba and Texas, bears the name of a Stockbridge Indian. Very few wild flowers have been named for individuals, though it is common practice with cultivated roses. It so happens that the scientific name of joe-pye weed, Eupatorium purpureum, also comes from an individual, Mithridates Eupator, the ancient king of Pontus who, according to Pliny, found one species to be an antidote against poison. Various common names for our plant of wet roadside, low field and river bank are trumpet weed, gravel root, purple boneset and queen of the meadow; but the favorite in common parlance is joe-pye weed.

Various botanies, pirating from each other, report that Joe Pye was a Massachusetts Indian medicine man who earned fame and fortune by curing typhus fever and other horrors with decoctions made from this plant. The dried flower heads along with boneset still

hang from some New England rafters, ready to be brewed into a
nauseous tea and cure-all.

An old tavern ledger kept by Captain Isaac Marsh in Stock-
bridge shows a charge for Joe Pye on July 26, 1775, for 1 quart
rum, 1 shilling and 6 pence. There are other rum charges and two
cash advances that year. In 1782, debts are partly erased by credit
of one hat and one bushel of wheat. Joe Pye is listed along with
other Stockbridge Indians as debtors from whom Captain Marsh re-
ceived in 1789 a parcel of land in Vermont in full settlement. This
became the town of Marshfield, near Montpelier.

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IT is clear that the Stockbridge Indians were having their
troubles with rum and money, for 18 Indian Revolutionary volunteers
petitioned Congress that their wages be paid in trust to Timothy
Edwards and Jahleel Woodbridge of Stockbridge, to be paid out in
necessity. Captain Marsh also had his troubles, eventually selling
his tavern and two acres of land for 47 cents. What became of Joe
Pye is unknown.

There is further evidence, however, that he was a Stockbridge
Indian and not just a transient. The Indians had a fierce tribal
pride of locality which heightened the tragedy of their removal from
ancestral lands. The main body of Stockbridge Indians, otherwise
known as Mahicans (from muhhekaneew meaning wolf), moved in 1785 to
a tract of land in New York given them by the Oneidas.

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WHEN THIS land became too valuable, they were shunted to the
Green Bay area of Wisconsin where an 1848 act of Congress lists seven
Pyes as heads of families. Ten years later eight Pyes were listed

as having shares in \$18,000 due the tribe from the State of New York. Next they were pushed to a reservation in Minnesota. So the name Pye was eventually spread to very near the range of joe-pye weed as the medicine man's grandchildren were forced west. His unusually brief name among Indian polysyllabics stands as firmly rooted in the Stockbridge tribe as the plant is in the banks of the Housatonic.

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IT SEEMS unlikely that much else can be discovered about Joe Pye at this late date. We can only guess that his rum purchases went into his remedies and not into his stomach. He must have attained all possible eminence for an Indian doctor among Yankees, to have his name attached first locally to a wild flower, then spread countrywide. Wherever the tall purple blossoms blow, there is immortality of a sort for Joe Pye.