

OUR BERKSHIRES 5/1/69

RIDING THE SPRING FLOOD

By Morgan Bulkeley

NO TIME is quite so pleasant for the canoeist as springtime. Then, if ever, come perfect days. He rides down the chill waters of winter on the ebb, into the south wind and the tide of summer birds coming in. He rides high because the river is at the flood, to the brim of the banks and overflowing. He seems buoyed like Noah up to blue hills and blue skies -- as if he were the last man, since he will encounter few others along the river. His river is miraculously wild at this late date in civilization; there are miles of windings where he will not see a house. The freshet has swept away or swallowed up the trash along the banks; it has diluted the pollution to a clarity where below can be seen the silvery green of new grass blades as the canoe glides across some flooded promontory.

\* \* \*

SO IT WAS in April as we pushed out onto the highest flood in 10 years. We launched the canoe in the little meadow pool where Dr. Holmes once kept his goldfish. This pond, usually separated from the Housatonic by an intervening dirt road and a quarter-mile of woods and sproutland, was now a backwater cove. Through great vases of pussy willows we slithered where the woodcock had lately been probing on dry land. A bright goldfish 8 inches long fanned his fins lazily in a pocket of submerged brown grass, the evacuated home of meadow mice, not long since under a yard of snow. Never before had we noticed that a goldfish could look like a dandelion.

Over the road we drifted on a few inches of water, finding it

smoother than any other traveler. Its narrow band showing under the bright, broad surface that stretched all about and disappeared among tree trunks to the east, suggested how confined the ways of men. One canoe shadow measured its width; one paddle stroke left it behind.

Now we were among tree columns that arose abruptly from reflected counterparts. The canoe slithered silently along, now and again surprising a pair of wood ducks that went squealing off. At one point we paddled lightly over the top of a barbed wire fence without snagging the canoe canvas, or seat of the pants so to speak.

\* \* \*

BENEATH A FLOOD property lines mean nothing. This of all times would be the best to establish exact flood-plain zoning at high-water mark. Even the most enthusiastic developer would hesitate to dig a cellarhole that would regularly become a well. Violators of the Hatch Act and their clients suffer their own watery penalties. The river is its own best defender. It fences its own greenbelt and the best humans can do is to cooperate and get that submarginal and submersible land into the public domain.

In no time at all we reached the banks of the river proper, which could be told by its swift current and the defining line of silver maples that dipped their red-budded twigs and marked the invisible shores. We were wafted downstream southward through a realm of new spring songs. Loud-voiced cardinals proclaimed which thickets were theirs. A musical thrasher in specific emphasis sang each phrase twice over in his endlessly varied repertoire. Ever-present redwings made up in quantity what they lacked in quality, and once within an impenetrable maze of buttonbushes we heard the frog-like croaks and

creaky chorus of rusty blackbirds like so many squeaky hinges.

The only humans we encountered all the way to Woods Pond were a man and a boy putting upriver in an outboard, taking potshots at the new spring birds. A kingfisher rattled derisively away from them, and a great blue heron flapped lazily upstream, safely high overhead.

\* \* \*

IN THE GREAT COVE below the Post Farm, so happily acquired by the town of Lenox, the canoe startled two black-crowned night herons that lifted from the flooded cattails and settled in trees where we could see them better. These birds, so grievously reduced by swamp draining and spraying, were the first we had seen in the county in 12 years. An osprey, another bird whose numbers have been decimated by DDT, flew over with a large fish in his talons, and we wondered if he were bearing his own doom -- a fish, like that the canoe had just passed over, which was standing grotesquely on its tail on the bottom, leering dead eyes upward.

How harmless seemed the bullseyes of the out-of-season potshotters compared to the great industries distributing persistent pesticides, and compared to all those spray-guns spreading them! How narrow the perspective of man, who, while seeking to control the mosquito, stamps out the bald eagle, the very symbol of his nation!