

RIVER REPORT I

By Morgan Bulkeley

Mount Washington

WHEN MOUNTAINEERS descend to the river bottoms, it is not with any high expectations. It might be called condescending for they are accustomed to clear, clean springs that supply water even in mid-summer. We know one New Yorker who visits one of these fern-draped springs like Ponce de Leon to take some jugs back to the city with him. The mountain brooks, like the springs, run clear and sparkling over polished quartz and granite pebbles and between boulders of porphyry as gayly speckled as the small trout darting under them. The lofty fields are never flooded but are continually brushed and cleansed by low clouds sweeping the mountain.

Accordingly when two of us set out by canoe during the first week in August for a two-day junket from Pittsfield to Sheffield, it was not with the poetic thoughts of observers 100 years before. Had not Holmes called the Housatonic the best of all tonic? In a prose paroxysm he found it a "dark stream but clear, like lucid orbs that shine between the lids of auburn-haired, sherry-wine-eyed demi-blondes. . ." Longfellow called his favorite oxbow at Stockbridge "this silver Dian's bow of the Housatonic." Fanny Kemble thought it so pure that "it should be used only for baptism."

* * *

WE DID NOT find it thus as we launched our canoe at the bridge on Holmes Road. A fall on the greasy bank was our baptism. We shoved off into the miasmal morning mists as though down the river Styx. The

three headwaters of the Housatonic had picked up their complement of civilization; the water was a dirty gray-brown, slithering between slimy banks strewn with assorted rubbish. We were aware of the \$6 - million - dollar Dalton-Pittsfield sewage disposal program now underway and the Crane & Co. and Byron Weston Co. industrial waste disposal plan 40 per cent completed. The trip could be more pleasant in the future; we wished to see the before and after.

As the sun broke through over Canoe Meadows, the former Holmes property where Indian hunting parties once pulled out their birch-barks it revealed an iridescent oil shimmer on the water. In many places the banks were graced by extensive beds of ostrich fern; great 10-foot plumes hung over into the river looking lush and tropical.

But the tips were oil-blackened. Indeed, any vegetation at water level was coated with oil. The oil slick, sewage and waste obviously repelled all wildlife in the river all the way down to Woods Pond at Lenox Station. There were no water insects, no mosquitoes, no deerflies. If suckers and carp were present, they could not be seen in the discolored water. There were no animal tracks on the fouled banks. Even birds seemed to shun the river.

* * *

THE FIRST frogs appeared on new fill supporting the experimental high-tension line of the General Electric Co. The gravel was still fairly clean, and the amphibians could live in the backwaters, if not in midstream. We paddled along several miles under the highest transmitted voltage on earth; the six heavy wires snapped and crackled while our paddles splashed.

The confining banks lowered here, and cattail marshes began to appear. Wood ducks and blacks flew up, two or three at a time. The

river was trying to cleanse itself. There were no houses dumping over the banks as yet. The water-living buttonbush was a mass of white blossom; showy steeples of firewood were reflected in long patches at the river's brink. The water began to clear enough to reveal a few large goldfish whose progenitors had probably escaped down someone's drain.

But the clearing did not fool us; this was only a settling-out stretch of the river a few miles below the Pittsfield sewage beds. October Mountain clad in sunny greenery rose above us on the east; some large hawks wheeled lazily over it. Lagoons covered with lily pads led invitingly to the west teeming with prodigious perch, pickerel, and bass that some caught but none dared to eat. A rickety bridge, pieced of drift scraps, spanned one inlet with a sign saying: "Food, Guests, Pool," nailed on for bracing, reminding us that at least the canoeist escapes advertising.

We slid quietly through watery islands of white arrowhead blossoms and blue pickerel weed into the long expanse of Woods Pond, created by the first dam of the Smith Paper Co. This was portage number one of 10 major dams to be bypassed, plus carries around the skeleton of an old timber dam, a washed-out cement dam, and 100 yards of tree jam in Sheffield. We learned to damn all dams. Most had mills completely blocking one bank and nettles, poison ivy, thick brush and steep slippery banks blocking the other.

* * *

FINALLY, SOMEHOW, the canoe was on the shoulder of this first dam, and off of ours. We could look back toward Woods Pond and up the valley past October Mountain. It was 5½ crow-flight miles and 11 meandering canoe miles back to the starting point. It was probably

the easiest canoeing of the trip, being free of rocks, shallows, snags, and fallen trees. Few houses could be seen from the stream, so it might have been the wildest part of the trip--except that there was little wildlife. With the ostrich fern, the overhanging trees, and mountain vistas, it might have been the most beautiful part of the trip -- but that was 100 years ago.