

RIVER REPORT II

WITHIN THE COUNTY the Housatonic, like Gaul, is divided in partes tres. The part above Lenox Station and the part below the Great Barrington dam are easily navigable. A canvas-covered canoe can safely run the few riffles at low water by following the smooth vees that point between rocks or snags.

Not so the middle section between Lenox and Great Barrington, which measures 11½ crow-flight miles and 25 canoe miles. At low water a canvas canoe would be useless and an aluminum one would be badly dented, if not ripped open. We used an old canoe purchased for \$12, re-covered with two layers of fiber-glass cloth, well painted with plastic filler. Being keelless, this presented a smooth bottom as hard as bone and practically indestructible. It slid and bounced easily over and off countless boulders, shallows and snags without cracking a single rib.

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THE RIVER TRAVELER is in for surprises at every bend. He has taken to an abandoned highway at the world's back door. The paddle pace is conducive to observation and reflection. There are constant reminders that the watery artery was once the heart of the county's traffic and industry. We glided smoothly over one large millstone showing like a moon in the dark waters. We saw a pot-bellied stove and a buggy chassis with wheels half out of the water. Antique collectors might help clean up the river.

Below the first portage opposite a derelict paper mill, we

were surprised by the Lenox frog crouched in a patch of boneset; this is a giant, shapely boulder painted green and yellow with saucer-like eyes forever regarding the river. Passengers on the New Haven Railroad were once amused by this local wonder that now sees only one freight a day or tracks that may soon be as rusty as the river.

When we brushed with civilization at some bridge or mill, we were reminded of our archaic mode of travel, usually by Indian war whoops. One woman, through whose yard we portaged, had seen but one other canoe pass by in years. Another startled individual, trying to rationalize, asked if we were surveyors. Lewis and Clark perhaps!

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WE WERE BROUGHT up to date rather suddenly below Lenox Dale by some fast water that spun the canoe sidewise against a rock having a stranded pole and a six-by-six timber astraddle to catch us under the arms. The canoe tipped toward the current and rapidly swamped. We improved these circumstances by dumping the canoe and crawling out on the rock to eat soggy sandwiches. The river was clean for a mile or two here, from the filtering effect of Woods Pond. We glided on led by sandpipers, kingfishers, occasional ducks and herons, all indicators of clean banks and clear water. The sun began to dry us,

Then a thunder shower blew up, and the Lee sewage corrupted the river. Gaunt skeletons killed by Dutch elm disease loomed along the banks clad to the waist in poison ivy. The twisted torso of a windowless car stared over the waters like a skull. We sought shelter from the downpour under a railroad bridge but were forced to shove

our bow into the bank sewage for the better protection of a silver maple.

The rain lessened, and we resumed our watery way to where the Massachusetts Turnpike crossed our shunpike at Lee. A steady stream of traffic roared over the high cement bridge, under which was a weird symbol; a spindle-backed chair firmly planted midstream, lacking only the policeman to direct an occasional canoe around the westward swing to Stockbridge.

EARLY NEXT MORNING we were on our way through the lovely Stockbridge oxbows where Longfellow owned property but built only castles in the air. A sleepy owl flushed from a tree over the river and was soon the center of a mob of angry crows. The river again was trying to clean itself here. Washed gravel bars showed in the lazy meanders, but unfortunately some estates dumped refuse over the banks, and any tree reaching out into the current collected a floating mess of cans, bottles and modern tinsel. It appeared that cleaning up the river was everyone's affair, not just a problem for the cities and mills.

Below the old mill dam at Glendale we slid the canoe down a long incline through banks of maidenhair fern into a portion of the river more stone than water. It was necessary in this dry summer to rope the canoe nearly a mile through these rocks while we slipped and waded after it, startling trout. There was sporty canoeing from where Monument Mountain crowded the river to where we shot into the quiet pond at Housatonic.

Below the Rising Paper Co. dam once more the river wound gently through meadow and pasture to the final dam in Great Barrington. The ten dams with their settling ponds and the serating rapids of this rambunctious section of the river obviously had a cleansing effect on the waters, giving us high hopes for the final run to the Connecticut line.