

IN AUGUST OF 1676 Maj. John Talcott was the first English man to see the "Ausotunnoog River" within Berkshire County. In an aftermath of King Philip's War he pursued 200 Indian fugitives from the Connecticut Valley over the Indian trail to the ford at the Great Wigwam, now the approximate site of Great Barrington. The name Housatonuk, meaning "place-beyond-the mountains," was first applied to this site, then to the Indians, and finally to the entire river. Talcott's massacre of 25 Indians "dabbled the bushes with blood and reddened the river." White men have been staining it ever since.

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INTO THESE DARK waters at the ford we launched the canoe for the final tortuous course through the Sheffield Plain to the county line below Bartholomew's Cobble, a distance of 11.3 crow-flight miles and 22 canoe miles. As June Mountain fell back on the east, the broader, deeper river slithered its serpentine way through the wide plain dominated by Mt. Everett on the west.

One twist after another showed the truth of Thoreau's observation: "There is a male and female shore to the river, one abrupt, the other flat and meadowy -- on the one hand eating into the bank, on the other depositing sediment." Large trees were often toppled into the river on the eroded side, creating a temporary impasse for us and convenient shelter for wood ducks.

Around one bend we surprised a paddling of these shy ducks in midstream. The young, not yet able to fly, skittered over the

surface to the protection of a snag beside the bank, while the parent birds floundered down river barely ahead of us peeping anxiously, one along each shore, using wings laboriously and splashingly like broken paddle wheels. When their stratagem had led us far enough downstream, they arose effortlessly, if not derisively, and circled back through the woods.

The water cleared progressively as we rode the lazy current out onto the Sheffield Plain. The steep banks became sandy, offering easy excavating to bank swallow, kingfisher and muskrat. The latter often slid quietly into the river ahead of us, leaving fresh diggings, caches of clam shells or simply a favored sunning spot. Painted turtles slipped silently from logs ahead of us.

Around one bend we surprised a gaggle of two dozen Canada geese on a gravel promontory, handsome birds, yet inconspicuous with body feathering blending into the pebbly background and a camouflage pattern of black and white breaking up the head and neck forms. The canoe drifted by like a lifeless log, and the geese stalked off with stately gait into the tall grass.

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THE RIVER, having learned of pollution at its origin, after a flirtation with Route 7 recoiled east below the covered bridges avoiding Sheffield and by twisting west skirted Ashley Falls, thereby preserving a brown clarity that must have been its color when Maj. Talcott first saw it.

Life in all forms was increasingly abundant. The water surface was teeming in places with a new hatch of some ephemeras. The empty sarcophagi of dragonflies clung to the sedges. Fish now and again broke the surface, beneath which could be seen green water plants.

A great blue heron arose lazily from a sand bar ahead, and we measured his huge footprints with our hands that were smaller. We came upon two boys catching rock bass while their grandfather dozed on the grassy bank.

Below Bartholomew's Cobble approximately on the state line, as if for a grace note at the end of our trip, an American egret sprang from the water's edge and lifted into the sunshine against a cumulus cloud rendered dingy by comparison. His pure white was somehow symbolic of a clean river.

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OUR TWO-DAY TRIP totaling 58 canoe miles from Pittsfield to Weatogue showed the river at its worst and at its best. There was certainly a measure of hope in the fact that the down-county section seemed wild and clean in spite of man's abuse upstream. This was no passing languishing creature, but a sinuous beautiful snake ready to slough off a scarred skin with the assistance of the communities close to the bank. Here was a living entity not irreparably damaged by past misuse. In fact it seemed that one roaring spring flood would be sufficient to purge it, if all defilement could be stopped in the future.