OUR BERKSHIRES 10/3/68 RIVER TONIC OR TOXIN? By Morgan Bulkeley

THE FIFTY who participated in the autumn canoe trip of the Housatonic River Watershed Association, everywhere along the winding 18 miles from Brookside in Great Barrington to Bartholomew's Cobble in Ashley Falls, saw, by turns, the two possibilities that the river presents. Now the silvery, reflecting surface was heads; now the dull, tarnished currency was tails.

The question was: how would the public call it? What would society make of it: recreation, park and sanctuary or development, dump and sewer?

The final spin is coming up, and it is not too much to say that the whole individuality of Berkshire depends upon who calls the toss. Will it be the optimists or the opportunists?

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THERE WAS only one possible answer for those paddling into the diaphanous morning mists which made the river seem mystic. Bars of the first sunlight over June Mountain glanced between tree canopies, dividing great draperies of fog; smaller shafts subdivided these into luminescent folds. Along the eastern bank, cobwebs heavily beaded with dew hung like glistening tiaras from invisible suspensions between fall goldenrod and asters, between red osier and fox grape, and even higher, between silver maple and cottonwood. A startled great blue heron lumbered off through the fog. We had launched into a nether world, as if into some antediluvian realm on the first morning that ever was. Soon enough the all-encompassing mist was gradually dispersed by the rising sun. The river ceased its steaming as air and water temperature equalized. We were brought back to earth by the stained waters of bordering communities that still persist in defiling the public waterway. By 1972 it may be otherwise, if present legislation can accomplish what offenders have been reluctant to do for themselves.

HOW BEGUILING a river can be! First you are wafted along on a mirror surface, flecked with the first yellows and reds of autumn, seaward-bound with a miniature fleet, all shapes, all sizes, many colors. One moment your canoe matches the lanceolate shape of wildcherry leaves adrift. Next you have joined a flotilla of gracefully palmate wild-grape leaves, perhaps all launched by the same puff of wind and spread-winged like the teal that just passed overhead. Now you are among rotund elm and linden leaves that loll like fat geese or dumpy dinghies. The silver-maple leaves match the green canoes; upside down they match the aluminum ones. Wine-hued ash leaves rub the faded, red canvas that is, appropriately enough, stretched upon ashen ribs.

But before you are quite swept away with the autumn leaves, there will be some insolent intrusion: a plastic bottle caught and bobbing like a bloated cat, a tire tossed over the bank like a dead snake, a half-submerged, rusty oil drum, the residue of industry, or an outfall of sewage -- the dregs of civilization.

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AS THE SCENIC VISTAS of the Sheffield plain opened to us down ox-bow meanders, the water was plainly cleansing itself by filtration

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through so much sand. In places pure sand banks, perforated with muskrat, kingfisher and swallow holes, rose 18 feet to the rich alluvial topsoil that supported pastures of sleek cattle and fields of tall, ripening corn. We passed under the old covered bridge as into some idyllic landscape of the River School.

But it was a snare and a delusion, for here where the scenery promised most, offenses upon the banks, although committed in scattered places, were as outrageous as anywhere in the county. Besides unsightly farm dumps, there were three places where junked cars had been pushed over the bank: in one place 10, in another 6, and in a third 50, that is, above the water line. It may be impossible to stop individuals from defiling the river with dumps and sewer lines on their own property, when whole communities and businesses are doing the same, but law has put a time limit on the groups, and soon enough it will be time to publicize the names of the individuals.

THE CQIN is inclining to heads, not tails. If you would serve the best interests of Berkshire County, join the Housatonic River Watershed Association by mailing the \$5 annual dues to 11 Housatonic Street, Lenox.

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