

OUR BERKSHIRES 3/9/67

THE LIVE RIVER

By Morgan Bulkeley

Mount Washington

ONE OF THE popular misconceptions about a polluted river is that it must be cleaned up progressively from the sources down. Those downstream feel that any efforts on their part to improve their stretch of river will be wasted because of what will be passed on down to them. This is a convenient method of passing the bucket of polluted water, but it is about as logical as not shoveling a driveway on account of the storm that may follow.

The supposition is based on the false premise that a river is homogeneous from its sweet source springs to its salty delta. This would be true of a river of lava, a dead river; but a river of water is a living, breathing thing, a biome able to cleanse itself if given half a chance.

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THE HOUSATONIC (and the same can be said of the Hoosic) is a lively example compared to bigger, sluggish rivers. In fact it is a vast, natural sewage and waste-treatment system so efficient in handling the wastes of Berkshire that one can still catch and eat trout in its naturally processed waters in the Cornwall-Kent area to the south.

The river works thus effectively in our area for three reasons: It makes natural use of settlement, aeration, and filtration. Settlement takes place behind the 10 dams between Pittsfield and the Connecticut line as well as in countless coves, oxbows and backwaters.

Aeration occurs at every interrupting rock, rapids and falls, especially in such long, broad, shallow stretches as from Glendale to Housatonic. Filtration occurs through the entire county river basin, because of the permeability of the sand-and-gravel, alluvial soils and the limestone; this subsurface effect is far more significant than might be supposed, as proved by the fact that wells drilled within the flood plain will yield over 1 million gallons per day.

Since the headwaters and some 50 miles of meanders of the Housatonic are the alimentary canal of the county and since the river is so active and effective in cleansing itself, the body of the county, as well as each community along the way, stands to profit directly from every effort made in pollution abatement. There is no excuse for buck-passing. Berkshire is particularly and geographically fortunate in containing and controlling its own river destiny. Interstate rivers which amount to dead sluice pipes are cause enough for buck-passing, but not the lively Housatonic.

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THIS WINTER we observed two illustrations of the upper dirty river becoming a cleaner river below, class D becoming class C. Wildlife is as sensitive as the hydrologist's test tube to these gradations, and it comes in or moves out accordingly.

The first judgment was told by tracks in the snow. A half mile within the Pittsfield town limit, a deer had crossed from the direction of Yokun Seat heading east toward Washington Mountain. At the bank of the Housatonic he had stamped around considerably, testing the water emanations with his nose. He then followed along the bank a quarter mile southward, passing several easy swimming places but was evidently repelled by odor each time, for he gave up

and headed back toward South Mountain. Yet just three miles to the south, the river had improved itself to such an extent that an otter had created a snowslide on the bank and was happily thriving in waters that kept him in carp and goldfish.

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THE SECOND INSTANCE of some purification was seen near the south county line, where the popular notion would assume compounded pollution to be at its very worst. As a matter of fact, the long Sheffield stretch, cleanest in the county, has been supporting little paddlings of black ducks and mallards in open places all winter.

But the real surprise was a whistling swan that drifted majestically, whiter than a snowy ice cake, in the vicinity of Bartholomew's Cobble. This rare, giant bird of the Arctic wilds stayed the last five days of January, dabbling contentedly along the river edges, evidently finding plenty of submarine vegetation and aquatic life to live on. Like the American egret that we saw in the same area five summers ago, it symbolized for winter one of the many benefits of a Class B river, the opportunity to view the wildest of wild things at our very doorstep.