

CHAPTER X

WALDEN AT LAST

"It is a clear and deep green well, a perennial spring in the midst of pine and oak woods... The surrounding hills are exclusively woodland.

WALDEN, by H. D. Thoreau

In the late 1950's I decided it was about time I became acquainted with Henry David Thoreau and his Walden Pond. Back in my late teens I started reading his book WALDEN and was disappointed and baffled by it. My understanding had been that Thoreau was a nature writer, but all I could make out of the first chapter of WALDEN was heavy economics and philosophy. There seemed to be ^{nothing} about the birds and the trees and wildflowers and the bugs and animals of the woods or fields. I lay the book down, tired of forcing myself to read it, for at that time of my life economics was the most boring and useless subject in the world. Not realizing that I just wasn't ready for it, I literally didn't pick up a copy of WALDEN again until nearly thirty years later.

By the late 1950's, having by then considerable background, experience, natural history training and tussles with my own economics, and having developed a flair myself for philosophizing, I

deliberately planned my life for awhile around catching up with Henry Thoreau. Over the years I had come across some very beguiling quotations from his writings which made me suspicious of my earlier judgment. I had decided to wait until I had time to concentrate on his brilliant sentences in order to do him full justice. There had been that other period in my life, the year I was camping on the Fenton, when I did a little thinking about Thoreau. Being woefully ignorant then, and sadly misinformed, I had decided that Thoreau was not for me. What a sissy he was! Living out in the woods in a cabin with a solid roof over his head, and strong walls and a door to lock, when there I was, in a cloth tent with roof and walls flapping and no lockable door between me and man or beast.

But I was ready this time! More than ready! ^{WALDEN} ~~Walden~~ sent me into a tizzy, from which I never expect to recover. I went overboard the other way and got out of libraries every book I could find on or by Thoreau, as well as countless pamphlets and modern articles on him. There even came moments when I would rather read Thoreau than go for a hike in the woods, for he articulates for me that which I go out there to try so futilely to express for myself.

Henry Thoreau was the first person I "met" whose thinking was on the same wave length as mine. After a lifetime pursuing an interest which I had to follow almost alone here was a kindred spirit, and one with all the fine tuning which mine yearns for but lacks. This man's thoughts were so refreshing and uplifting after the tainted material one is almost forced to read from present-day presses, it was like going from a fetid place into bracing forest air.

When I finally did read WALDEN, and Canby's then definitive biography of Thoreau, the weird feeling grew in me that I had lived Thoreau's life, that I was Henry reincarnated. Not that I have ever been able to take the notion of reincarnation seriously, intriguing as it is. But my life certainly paralleled his in a startling number of ways. It has since pleased me that I was so tardy in reading Thoreau for now no one can accuse me of imitating him. Besides, after the first surprise, I was well aware that I was only a water^{ed}-down Thoreau. Minus most of his talents. No magic wand of genius ever touched me as it did him, and there was never an Emerson in my formative years to set my mind on so lofty a path.

I have since learned that many people have been compared to Henry Thoreau; many are called "the modern Thoreau." But Henry Thoreau will always be just himself. He died well over a hundred years ago as I write this, having departed this planet in 1862. But, since he did write, and exceedingly well, and I and others can read, he created a solid bridge between his century, his mind, his interests, and those of mine and other kindred spirits.

For me, before I met Thoreau, it had been a lonely span on earth without knowing anyone, dead or alive, like myself. Thoreau himself found this true, a fact which I have long felt to be responsible, at least in part, for some of his tendency to be prickly in dealing with others, sometimes, outside of his family, for it can be jarring ■ to have to keep pulling down to the level of others.

He did that, however, which I have always yearned to do. He made philosophy and literature out of nature. My godchild, who is

not essentially an outdoor person, but who read Thoreau in high school, said that he has universal appeal, that he expresses the inner thoughts of all people who do ~~not~~ any original thinking but who do not have the command of language to express those thoughts. Since many of his deep, rich sentences are woven around natural history, perhaps some of his universality is due to his being able to interpret wild nature in human terms, as the wild is the warp and woof and soul of life, even for the most unwitting city dweller.

After reading WALDEN, it was inevitable that before too long I would put my kayak on his famous pond, and that I would visit many of his woodland and waterway haunts. But there was no crystal globe to let me know what it would lead to.

What can I or anyone say about Walden Pond? It is such a font of literary, scientific, and philosophic ponderance! When you are versed in its history you cannot walk there alone, if you are a thinker. You walk with the Indians who wore down the original path around the pond. You follow in the shadows of Emerson, and Thoreau, and of Alcott and Channing. It isn't just this tree or shrub that you see, or that rock or wildflower, but the whole pulsing cosmos and the men who made it glow. Here, as has been done nowhere else on earth so successfully, Thoreau connected the relationship of humanity to the creation, showing incontrovertibly that mankind is inseparable from nature.

I saw Walden Pond for the first time when I was just passing through Concord on my way to a job in Maine. It was August 31, 1957. I had heard tales of the damage to Walden at its public beach, and of the inappropriate concession across the road. But

it was a pleasant surprise to find real woods covering most of the slopes. I took heart from this and walked in through the woods from where my car was parked on Rte. 126. Soon I saw a network of ~~me~~ cow-like paths all through the woods, with innumerable bare soil spots which looked as if mobs of people walked or ran uncaring through these sacred trees.

The pond was not in sight, at first, but I walked toward a cacophany of voices. I reached the brow of a steep slope and looked down, at last, upon Walden Pond. There, below me, were four lines of children sitting on a very open sand beach, waving and stretching their arms and legs in response to an instructor who was training them with "dry" swimming lessons before they entered the water. They faced a marked-off set of swimming cribs, just as at any kid's camp. To the left of the children, was a beach where two hundred or more adults were sprawled out on blankets, and another hundred ~~or~~ or so were in the water. Beyond them I could see a boat ramp, at least the lower part of it. At that moment a car was being backed down toward the water as a man was launching from a dolly a bright red, brand-new-looking boat. Shades of Henry, and his homemade rowboat in this wild loon habitat!

This was my first and never forgotten first sight of Walden Pond. Just another summer resort. No one is more in favor than I of swimming classes for children, and of the opportunity for city people to enjoy fresh water out in the open air and sun. And people have a right to their kind of boating pleasures, especially those ~~fun~~ confined to indoor jobs all week. But why at Walden? How could the people of Concord, and the state

of Massachusetts permit this kind of invasion in one of the holiest of all holies on earth? If ever there was a natural church, a place of worship designed by God, not by man, and proclaimed so, effectively, by the world, Walden is it. Walden is not only a natural habitat for wild plants and animals but it is also a sanctuary of the human spirit, its waters and woods revered for its serenity the world over. How could authorities have allowed this shrine to be reduced to a playground?

How true it is, as has been so aptly said, that man would destroy even the angels if they could get their hands on them, or shoot one with a gun if one alighted in a tree. They would destroy the stars too, were it possible to reach them. If Walden were in India, or France, or Japan, it would be a national shrine. In America it is just another Coney Island. I was to eventually learn that people all around the world are as shocked as I was that day when they learn ^{Walden} is an abused child of mankind.

I stayed up on the top of the ridge and walked westward, finding the undergrowth very thin and the maze of cowpaths overtrampled. Oaks and pitch ~~and~~ pine predominated, of a size suggesting third or fourth growth. No one tree in there could have been there in Thoreau's day at the pond, for few were over forty years old and in 1957 Thoreau was gone for ninety-five years. I followed the paths down the slope toward the far end of the pond.

There was a short earthen causeway between a muddy spot and a small pond on my right, and a cove of the pond ^{on the left} where boneset and arrowleaf were growing on both sides. Like many others, I'd had the notion that Thoreau's cabin had been close to the shore, near this cove. There were four people at the far end of the causeway,

who were as dressed up as if attending a social lawn party. They distracted my thinking, so I decided to go back to my car, where my mother cat Missy, and her two kittens, ~~Dinah~~ and Jody, might be getting nervous with the crowds milling around. The time to visit Walden, I could see, would be between dawn and sunrise. I would return.

I walked back on the path along the pond. Glacial debris, which trickled down from the eroding slopes above, caught my eye. Could it be that some of these stones had felt the pressure of Emerson's and Thoreau's steps? How much erosion has gone on along these slopes in the last hundred years? The accretion from above must be gradually becoming attrition in the pond. Is this path still at the same level above the water as when Henry Thoreau walked here? Are all of Henry's footsteps washed away, into the pond?

What about the molecules of water in the pond? As to size, this body of water is really a small lake. I knew it was down to a hundred feet out in the middle, having read so. It is a half mile across at the widest and one and a half miles around. It had a reputation for being cold and clear, with big springs in the bottom. Subsequent acquaintance with Walden, however, was to prove there are no springs, at least not today. As with any body of water its surface evaporates off moisture into the air and becomes a part of the moisture-laden winds that drift around the earth. This is balanced when rain and run-off is added to the pond, itself composed of water molecules from the same traveling air currents. Thoreau spoke of Walden receiving water from the Pacific, and he probably wasn't exaggerating, for the prevailing moisture-laden wind is from the west, and blows right down the

whole length of Walden, down a corridor between hills.

Consider the thermocline, that cool center layer of a deep lake, which is sandwiched, in summer, between a warmer surface layer known as the epilimnion, and an even colder bottom layer called the hypolimnion. They are churned, and their waters mixed, in spring and fall winds, especially the two top layers. In a hundred years have all the molecules of the thermocline gone off on travels on the aircurrents, or are some of those middle layer molecules of Thoreau's time still there? If not of the thermocline, what of the bottom layer. Are any ^{hypolimnion} molecules still present which slid off of Henry as he bathed at the Cove, or have they all taken off for India and Africa or the Antarctic? Did his plumb-bob, which he used to map the water depth, slide down through a hypolimnion which is still there, like fossil water?

This preoccupation of mine with earth changes of a hundred years or so, egged on the background nudgings of my mind which have long wondered how my favorite Eden haunts will appear a hundred years after I am gone. I have already seen what has happened to some of them, where woodlots and wild coastlines have vanished because housing lots and malls and roads took over. But I couldn't ruminate much longer; I had a journey of miles ahead to northern Maine before dark.

It was a year before I got back to Concord again. Before I went to see anyone, or did anything else, I drove out to Walden to search for Thoreau's cabin site, which I had learned was now marked with white granite posts. Again I was so overwhelmed with thoughts of this unusual heritage site, having read even more

Thoreau, Emerson and their companions at Walden since I was here last, that almost every land contour and plant species stirred memories and complex ideas.

Following directions I climbed up a steep slope above the ~~southwest~~ northwest corner of the pond, at the cove end, and even though I knew what I was looking for I gasped in surprise at first sight of those squared white stone posts. A very heavy chain was draped, sagging, between the posts. An unseen magnet pulled me inside the enclosure, through the non-chained "doorway." Later I couldn't remember getting in there. I was thankful that I was alone. This cabin site had been at the bottom of my dreams since I lived alone in that tent by the Fenton. The only kind of person I could ~~have~~ ^{have} had to have with me would have been Henry himself, or Emerson or Alcott, or maybe Richard Jeffries, or John Muir, or Olaus Murie, or Loren Eiseley; Aldo Leopold, whom I'd worked with once very briefly, would have fit in, too.

I stood about, or moved about, like a person in a restless dream. I could hardly move. As if iron weights were holding me down. My mind was alternately blank, or racing with thoughts of Henry living right here on this spot. I made myself walk out of the mystical spot and went in search of the bean field, which I later learned I had found but didn't recognize, for like the Bungalow clearing, it was now a young woodlot. I did come upon many large, dead tree stumps, which meant there had been heavier shade there than at present. Not until later did I realize the significance of those stumps.

I visited the so-called hut site again a few days later,

and this time, knowing what I'd see, I approached the site with deliberate objectivity. I walked into the enclosure and studied the fireplace plaque. It was a large, flat stone, engraved with the quotation, "Go thou my incense up from this hearth." A quote from one of Henry's poems. I knew from my reading that this stone had come from Thoreau's birthplace on Virginia Road, in an eastern part of Concord.

Out in front of the cabin site was a cairn of stones, begun about 1878 by Bronson Alcott and a woman friend from Ohio. It looked like a ragged pile of stones to the uninitiated, but some of the stones had been carried there from nearly every state in the union, some from overseas, some from Thoreau's contemporaries. When I first saw this pile there was a large boulder in front of it, with a large bronze plaque bearing the words, "Henry Thoreau lived here from July 4, 1845 to September 6, 1847." But the plaque, an expensive and dignified memorial, was poked and bent, a sad mess, from cairn stones thrown at it by the "who cares" fringe of our civilization. Maybe someday this American shrine will win proper protection.

I Picked up the picnic litter, dropped there by ubiquitous American litterbugs, and put it into the trash can but a few feet away. I sat on one of the benches to think. Mostly I was remembering the many times in my life when I had scoffed at "sissy" Thoreau and his cabin. Now I would give my eye teeth to see that cabin, ~~to~~ walk into it. It was the rareness of the soul who had lived here, not the fact that he was safe from elements and beasties. His advice to "Simplify, simplify" will have to be followed by mankind all over this planet

before too long as neither the supply of natural resources nor the lack of pshyologically available lebensraum are going to permit unlimited growth of the greedy human race.

That July, a husky but bewitchingly attractive young teenager friend from California came to visit me for a few days. I had overheard her mother say, "When I go out to call Erica for school in the morning I never know which bush I will find her under in her sleeping bag." I promptly invited Erica to share my kayak on my first use of it on Walden Pond. We put the boat in at the ramp where I had seen that bright red boat the day of my first glimpse of Walden.

It was a hot summer day so there were crowds of presumably happy but screaming, shreiking humans on the beaches and in the water at the bathing beach area. Leisurely we paddled along the quieter edge of the Pond on the Lincoln side, opposite the crowd.

Erica, a very attractive, mentally alert and well co-ordinated 15-year-old, quickly caught on to the double-paddle rhythm of kayak propulsion. It was rather late in the morning when we got started, so we reached only the cove on the Lincoln side by noon and stopped there to eat our picnic lunch in the kayak, where it was shady from overhanging trees.

We had no privacy. The path around the Pond almost touches the water edge there, and no sooner did one couple, or group of people, pass by than another appeared. I had to remind myself they belonged there as much as I, yet it never seemed they earned their presence when I walked the path after them, that day and many days

afterwards, for always they strewed behind themselves lunch papers, cigarettes, chewing gum wrappers, plastic containers, cans, bottles, and all other such debris as such people drip along woodland paths. I have never understood how they have room and energy for getting those things into the woods when they are full, but no energy to take them out when empty.

After lunch, and exploring the close-by path a ways, we paddled diagonally across the relatively calm water to the cabin cove. I didn't dare leave the kayak untended, even in this hallowed spot, so I gave Erica directions to the Thoreau cabin site and sent her up the wooded slope alone. She seemed gone an inexplicably long time and I was becoming concerned, for three or four young men seemed to be milling around in the woods up there. One appeared to be working, or was whacking at something with a long stick. I was debating whether to go for help when suddenly Erica came running down the path through the trees. I spoke to her of my fears and nodded toward the fellows up in the woods. "Oh," she said, "they are raking the woods." "Whaaat?" I asked, incredulously.

I handed her the kayak painter and went up the slope to see for myself. Sure enough! Those guys were raking up Walden woods! No wonder the network of paths looked so bare and exposed to erosion! Not even at Walden can there be natural humus to feed trees? Henry! Can you stand this? In talking to the young men they explained it was a forest fire control task. How well I knew what they meant ^{because} of the carelessness of smokers. From Massachusetts to Florida to California. The choice here was, leaves to rustle your feet in and nourish tree roots, or rake it all up to save the

trees from fire.

We beached the boat back at the landing place by mid afternoon. Erica was busily removing air cushions, paddles and other paraphernalia from kayak to the ground while I went up to bring the car down. No sooner was the car backed into place than four good-looking brawny fellows appeared and made light work of transferring the kayak from ground to ski racks, without even being asked. One of them followed me around to the front of the car where I was tying a rope. "Is that Shirley McClaine with you?" So that's how I got so much help without even trying.

"Nope," I shook my head. "This gal IS from California, but she is only fifteen and she is no actress."

I glanced out over the water of Walden, very blue under a very blue sky, as I spoke to him. The fantastic changes one century can make in the customs of the same nation! How truly remote was our Hollywood-dominated world from Thoreau's generation which ~~was~~ ^{had been} still living in the shadow of the Puritans. Which type of culture has produced the more worthwhile humans? Is there any way to judge? But what we must ask of our Hollywood oriented society is, are we losing the ability to protect what is left of America's wild environments? Will the Hollywood way destroy it?

The next day was still hot, but Erica's time in the east was limited. We couldn't sit around waiting for a heat wave to break. We lauchⁿed the Shorebird on the Sudbury River at the South Bⁿidge boathouse on Main St., in Concord, not far from where Henry Thoreau used to keep his rowboat on the river bank. There ~~was~~ was a large dock here, and the car had to be parked in back of the boathouse.

It was quite a distance to carry the boat down to the dock, as we didn't have a dolly to roll it there. Two men working at the dock took the kayak down for us and carried it to the launching ramp.

The air was so hot and muggy that once we were afloat we paddled the short distance to South Bridge, and dallied there, to cool off in its subtle breezes. Our goal was Fairhaven Bay, a short paddle upstream, where the river spread out to small lake size. Thoreau wrote so much about Fairhaven it is a famous spot in literature and transcendental literature. From under the cool cement arch of South Bridge we could peer upstream to the nearby railroad bridge and beyond. It was all open river, out in the merciless sun with no shade at that hour. The river was at a flood stage, from an unusual number of heavy showers during the summer. The water spread out over vast shallow expanses of low buttonbush shrubs, where there were low marshy banks when the stream was lower. Great rafts of duckweed floated by, proof of pollution that began in Thoreau's time; it moved so slowly it marked the χ famous sluggishness of this river, there being barely a current.

We couldn't sit here under the bridge all day, tantalizingly cool as it was. With brave determination we let go our oarhold on the overhead arch, dipped the oars into the river and started pushing upstream. With two paddling, and a sluggish current, the kayak moved fairly rapidly, but there was more work to it than the current created for this was a grassy river, from which it gets its name further down, the Musketequid. The Indian name for river of grass, much of it being eel grass. Aquatic grass gets tangled in oars, making work out of ~~what~~ what might otherwise be too easy.

A couple of men were huddled in a large old rowboat in close to a clump of osier and buttonbush on our left, intent on the motionless type of fishing. Worm dunking. Their hats were pulled down over their faces as protection against ^{the} beating sun, seemingly unaware of our passage. But they were to become violently aware of our existence before the day was over.

The light-green duckweed, Lemna minor, often ^e preventing us from spotting dense dark green grass beneath as it slid by, became more abundant as we moved upstream. Every now and then the long weedy grass wrapped around our oars, pulling us backward. It was during Thoreau's day, and in some cases even earlier, that the industries came into existence upstream which started the pollution which still fosters this crop of duckweed and other undesirable plants. Grist mills, saw mills, woollen mills. All dumping their waste into the Sudbury and the Assabet, from the 1700's into this century, when wetlands were considered useless areas, ^{their being} instead of recognized as storage areas for clean fresh water and nurseries for fish and other wildlife. Along some of the way the mucky-bottomed river had a bad odor from this pollution factor, a most unfortunate fact in so otherwise lovely a world.

The buttobush ⁿ was in blossom, its round white balls no different from Thoreu's description. It blossomed just like this, too, in the days of the redmen, which wasn't too long before Thoreau's time as even in his day Indians traveled this river and camped at night in isolated spots within the town limits. It could well be that some of the rootstocks of these buttobush, like those of royal fern and skunk cabbage, were over a hundred years old,

stretching them back into days when Henny Thoreau paddled this river. Isolated clumps here and there of tall purple loosestrife were in full bloom.

We had difficulty picking out the river channel, narrow as the river is. Duckweed kept it hidden from view and we kept inadvertently navigating into miniature bayous, finding ourselves caught in vegetation-choked water pockets which aren't too easy to get out of without backing out. But gradually we picked our way upstream and were relieved to reach the next bridge, at Clam Shell Bluff, which spans the river over Rte. 2. We had seen the bridge ahead of us for some time, and had been ocularly measuring its distance between the hot open stretch of water still ahead of us and its cool shelter.

It is amazing, in a day as late as this, on a river ⁱⁿ so developed an area, how readily you find yourself in a different world. Just to be where you can't see roads and automobiles and streets lined with houses and delineated with poles and electric wires, surrounded only by wild river vegetation and water, is a complete dropping out of civilization for a short duration. As we approached the bridge we could see the tops of cars rushing over it and we felt like visitors from another world. Although we had arrived at this ~~stream~~ ourselves by one of those swift-moving contraptions rushing by on the bridge, we felt as if we were sitting on an invisible magic carpet watching ^{from afar} ~~the~~ doings of a strange, remote world.

There was nothing particularly striking about the scenery through here. Low banks crowded with bushes, a few spread-out open fields and swamps. Then another bridge, especially appreciated ~~for~~

for the sun was now higher and hotter. This one, I was sure, was Heath's Bridge. But it was all very outdoorsy, trees, bushes, and herbaceous plants all all rich green from the abundance of the water provided by the river, and late summer dust ~~as~~^{not} yet dulling the trees, with the soft blue sky tying us to outer space. The peace was ineffable. We tarried but a short time under this bridge, having gotten ~~n~~ into the swing of paddle work in unison, and eager to get to Fairhaven in time for lunch.

Shortly after leaving Hubbard's Bridge behind us we became aware of a definite though not very obvious widening of the river; the duckweed was now pushed against a more forested shoreline. On our right was a long narrow island, or a miniature cape, we could not be sure which. A small power boat was moored to its shore in a shady spot. Hills arose to our left, with canoes down on the waterfront. Farther back up along the hill we could see a few houses hidden among the trees. We found paddling much easier as the grass was thin or missing; we kept going full power ahead until suddenly we came to the end of the water. Or what looked like the end.

I knew that the Sudbury didn't stop abruptly like this, that it continued many miles southward from here. We relaxed in our seats and paddled leisurely along the edge of some marshy vegetation, searching for the river opening from almost frog's eye level. Just as we located it, and started to ~~to~~ paddle into its constricted entrance, I had an idea. I glanced ~~back~~, and sure enough, the outline of the shores of the slightly open water we had just traversed was familiar from ~~the~~^{maps} I had seen. It was Fairhaven Bay! Henry Thoreau's beloved Fairhaven Bay! That island had filled it enough to fool us. The hill with its houses was ~~the~~^{Fairhaven} Hill, - the Fairhaven Cliff

every transcendentalist knew about.

We backwatered and turned around. "Let's eat lunch over there," suggested Erica, pointing to where the powerboat was tied up. Which spot I recognized by then was Fairhaven Bay's island. We were quite hot and thirsty so we both sat up from our lazy slouch and paddled as if in a race. My kayak! The "Shorebird" Veteran of Biscayne Bay and the everglades, skimming over Thoreau's Fairhaven Bay!

There were a few overhanging trees along the edge of the island, where we found we had to share the would-be cool isolation with a courting couple who were sitting on the bank above their boat. I'm sure they felt intruded upon, though we settled on a spot some distance from them. It was just too hot to hunt for a spot elsewhere. Here it was easy, where we swung sideways in under the trees and tied the painter to a short-edge branch of willow, where we imagine Indians pushing their dugout boats in close to their beach campfires. We envisioned them sleeping under great tall trees which were now as lost in the past as themselves.

Our stay was but an idyll of a moment in our lives, in this Eden with a town hidden off there somewhere just beyond the bushes, for as soon as we had eaten we had to start back if I was to show Erica the Assabet River and maybe get down to Old North Bridge. Paddling downstream wasn't much easier than pushing upstream, as there wasn't enough current to help us fight the entangling river grass. To complicate matters, two speed boats, manned by small boys, tore up and down past us, forcing us into denser weeds to get safely out of their way, their wake broken by buttonbushes as we rocked in it.

When they arrived to where they were going in such a hurry, apparently there was nothing for them to do there but rush back. We eventually caught up with what they were speeding to, - a small dock at Conantum, or west side of the river. Conantum, an area named by Thoreau after a farmer named Conant who'd had a farm there, today is a housing development, but of a very woodsy character which was preserved by zoning. These kids were trying so hard to kill time; we were trying hard to hold onto time and not squander a moment of it.

It was mid afternoon by the time we passed the two fishermen in the old row boat. It was very hot and they still huddled down under their hats against the merciless sun. One slowly looked up at us, called his companion's attention to our existence, who gave us a snail's-pace glance, then continued their fishing concentration. We were soon under the railroad bridge, then back to South Bridge. But we paddled on past the dock, hoping to go as far downstream as the Minuteman at Old North Bridge, about a mile away. On both sides of us, the rain-swollen river stood in the flower and vegetable gardens in backyards, for we were now in the center of Concord where houses were many, especially on our right.

There was strong hint of a storm gathering in the sky behind us, which became more obvious as we went around the sharp right-angled turn of the river to the east. We soon could see the strong current up ahead where the Assabet joins the Sudbury to form the Concord River. The Assabet, as I well knew, came in from behind a high rise of ground on the left, with a rather large outcropping of rock known as Egg Rock.

As it was getting late, and the storm was approaching with

warning grumbles, and I wasn't too sure of the distance to Old North Bridge, we decided to turn back. We just made the South Bridge boat dock as thunder cracked and rolled from dark clouds. We pulled the kayak part way up the ramp, quickly unpacked and carried our duffle up to the car. As we carried the boat up the rain began, so we turned it upside down on the ground near the car and jumped in to the shelter of the car's front seat. The lightning was so severe I backed the car out from under the tall trees for fear they might ~~might~~ ^{make} excellent lightning rods.

Just as the storm let up two young men appeared. They helped us put the kayak atop the car, then they strode down the dock ramp where they got into a sturdy, good-looking rowboat which we had noticed moored there. They untied it and pushed off. One fellow picked up the oars from the bottom of the boat, which he used to help push ~~w~~ away from the dock; the other busied himself assembling a fishing rod.

I was tying the kayak rope at the back of the car, the car having been moved back under the trees out of anyone's way, while Erica tied the front ~~rope~~ ^{rope}. I heard a groaning and moaning behind me. I glanced the short distance downstream at the two fellows in the rowboat. The one with the paddles was just finishing getting the boat headed downstream, the other was still fussing with his fishing gear. While I was looking right at them the moaning and grunting, and now gasping, sounds occurred again, in the direction of the river, but obviously not from the rowboat.

I stepped quickly over to the boathouse corner so I could look around at the rest of the dock. The groans and grunts were repeated, this time louder. I located the sounds at the dock edge just above the river, near the center of the dock. Then I saw two heads bobbing

up and down over the edge of the dock. I ran toward them.

I glanced at the two men in the rowboat intending to yell at them but apparently they had seen what I saw at the same time for the one with the oars was frantically trying to turn his boat around but his oars kept tangling in the river weeds. The one with the fishing rod had dropped it and was staring at the dock.

I shouted to Erica as I ran but she couldn't hear me as the car blocked the sound.

I couldn't see what the trouble was until I was well out on the dock. I was astounded to see a long, thin man clinging to the edge of the dock with his finger tips while his feet were hooked over the gunwale of an old rowboat while his legs were pushing the boat out into midstream. His body sagged between boat and dock, his stomach and knees touching the water. The other head belong to a heavy man who was in the river with only his head, shoulders and arms out of the water. He was clinging for dear life to the dock edge with the fingers of one hand, and to a mooring rope with the other. Both men were moaning for they were in very uncomfortable stress positions and they were tiring.

I grabbed the wrist of the fellow who was draped between boat and dock, then pulling on his arms I hauled him and his boat in to the dock, counseling him to pull with his feet, not ^{to} push. I held onto him until ^{he} got one knee up on the dock, then I turned quickly to the other one, whose gasping sounded as if he couldn't hold on much longer. He was much too heavy for me to help get him out of the water so I supported him the best I could for I could see that the two young men ^{were} landing their boat at the ramp, one instantly jumping out. Just at this point Erica dashed around the boathouse corner, paused to see what was going on then

~~and wanted~~ rushed to help pull up the man still in the water but I told her to just help hold him up until the two young fellows got there.

The two young men were very strong, but it took an extra effort by both to hoist the heavy river victim high enough out of the water so he could get a knee up on the dock. He was so exhausted he had to be helped ~~up~~ onto the dock. The two drapping men were obviously mighty pleased folk, and though both were still panting their smiles reached from ear to ear.

I was very much surprised to see that they were blacks, of light mullato color. Very few of their people lived in this area. Then I realized these were the two men we had passed twice in the old rowboat with the shading hats. Erica and I glanced down into their old boat, now safely tied to the dock. There were no poles and no hats.

When they caught their breath enough to talk they said they couldn't swim and they weren't very familiar with boats. As the two young men went off to relaunch their boat I explained to these soggy gentlemen that when you ~~start~~ start to step out of a boat after you have a handhold on something, you don't push against the boat with your feet, you use your feet and legs to pull the boat in. You have to jack^knife your keⁿes in a shallow draft boat for otherwise the boat floats almost on the surface and skids as if on ice. Better still, pull the boat out on a ramp or beach.

"We were wet anyway," one of them said, trying to make a joke of what could have been serious had no one been there. "We got caught in that thunder storm."

"Did you catch any fish?" Erica asked, trying to talk cheer-

~~and wanted to help pull them~~
fully get them to talk. We both looked over the edge of the dock into their boat. "Did you lose your rods?" she asked/ They nodded.

"Your hats, too," I asked, as there was no sign of hats or fishing rods, ~~again they nodded~~ or even oars. All were gone.

They were nice, quiet, courteously friendly folks. We sat and talked with them for awhile. The weird feeling of having come to some closer brush with Henry Thoreau swept over me. Henry had saved more than one run-a-way slave, who passed through Concord on the way to Canada on the underground railroad. Here I was, too, helping to save a couple of black men. Though thank heavens this time they were free human beings, due in part, even if only minisculely, to Henry Thoreau's abolitionist efforts. Sometimes incidents in one's life seem staged. Preordained. But if so, by whom? This time, by Henry Thoreau, up there in his earned heaven? Or God? As I mused thusly we pulled their boat to the ramp.

Yet, it was the old adage of being at the right spot at the right time. To save a bird, a frog, a fish, or a human being.

It wasn't until September, long after Erica's return to California, that I found time to see some of the rest of Thoreau's little rivers. A Concord friend, whose acquaintance I was renewing after a desultory yet never completely abandoned correspondence, begun about thirty years before, accompanied ^{me} on my next kayak trip. Ruth had family chores to attend to so it was mid morning before we put the kayak into the Sudbury River at the Concord Academy dock on Main Street. The river was no longer swollen, and when we reached the junction of the Assabet and Sudbury a ~~short way down stream~~ there was only a slight current visible at the confluence

of the Assabet.

We paddled around Egg Rock there, without much effort, and headed up the Assabet. Our goal was the Rte. 2 bridge near Howard Johnson's, and, since the Assabet does have an obvious current, and there was another heat wave on, we suspected it would take us until mid afternoon to get to our destination. The Assabet, however, is more confined in that area, having high banks. There is very little aquatic grass to attend to, and though there was a little duckweed it was minimal and wouldn't deter paddling in any case. Large trees lined long stretches of the banks; in one section a grove of tall hemlocks leaned out over the river on the left. These were the descendents of the hemlocks made famous along here by Hawthorne, Emerson and Thoreau. Thus we had considerable shade along this part of the river, making the air cooler than Erica and I had experienced on the Sudbury. This coolness made for air convections off the river which fanned and cooled us. There was a light breeze on the river, anyway, so that later, downstream, we were surprised at the heat.

We stirred up quite a bit of bird life, including three little green herons, a kingfisher, several black ducks, the ubiquitous blue jays, and several smaller birds, mostly warblers.

Ruth recognized many of the landmarks, as she had lived in the area many years, but she was constantly amazed at the closer relationship this stream had to primitive times than she had realized when ^{leaving} driving the houses and farms on the road beyond the river bank. She was accustomed to seeing these streams from where civilization dominated. From the river, the wild aspect of the scene seemed to hint of Indians just around a bush or a bank.

To our surprise, we made the bridge in just over two hours, so we paddled back leisurely, and stopped for our picnic lunch at a shady bank which had intrigued us on our way upstream.

The woodlot where we picnicked proved to be just the type of spot I had been hoping to find, and eventually buy, as a home base where I could place a woodsy trailer. An old wagon road, led down to the river bank. Ruth knew the owner and said she would check the next day. Maybe he would rent the spot. But this idea was ripped to shreds in a couple of weeks when an escapee from the nearby prison was found hiding in that identical spot. It probably would have been zoned, soon, anyway, against use of a trailer.

We continued downstream after lunch, this time moving much faster as the current was strong enough to add some power to our paddling. We had most of the afternoon for exploring so we headed downstream into the Concord River at Egg Rock. In no time we were sliding under Lowell Road Bridge, known as Red Bridge; under its original Henry had carved his and Ellen Sewall's initials. There we passed under ^{was} a smaller bridge where we could just sit up without hitting our heads.

Not far up ahead was the handsome, simple wooden arch of Old North Bridge where, on July 4, 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson dedicated a Revolutionary War monument on the south bank of the river, a few years before the Minute Man Statue was created and erected on the north bank. We landed, tied the boat and went up to read ~~xxx~~ his immortal, expressive lines:

"By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmer stood
And fired the shot heard around the world."

We returned to our boat and floated under the replica of the original

wooden arched
bridge which had been mostly destroyed that day in 1775, was such a contrast to the other bridges of the three rivers, most of them made of stone or cement, ^{it} was a page out of a history book right in front of our eyes. The one distraction, which shattered the illusion for us, was a group of tourists leaning over the bridge railing, gazing down upon us. Maybe they felt rudely disillusioned by ^uor modern kayak when they would rather see a canoe and imagine Indians. Or, those who knew the story of Emerson's day, would surely have rather seen an old rowboat, so they could imagine Hawthorne or Thoreau in it.

We paddled down as far as Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, a great flat area on our right, which floods in spring and attracts thousands of migrating waterfowl and marsh birds, including great flocks of Canada geese. Thoreau speaks in his journal ~~of~~ over a hundred years before we were there, of this great natural spot for birds, but we arrived at ~~the~~ both the wrong season and the wrong time of day to see much of anything but marsh vegetation. It was mid afternoon, and what few birds were around were probably taking an afternoon siesta in the heat. But at this ^opoint, just when we were in the mood to be part of silent nature, we were suddenly buzzed by several small speedboats. We paddled the prow around and started slowly heading for home, the sense of being out in a quiet wild place being shattered.

I expend a great deal of mental energy, wondering what is to become of our dwindling wild spots by another hundred years. There sat Henry in his rowboat on these rivers a hundred years ago, surrounded by as yet ~~as~~ a still relatively primitive flora and fauna compared to today. Here we sat, trying to sustain an

illusion of the primitive among the weeds and bushes left, wondering what the earth-works of uncaring humanity will change this into by a hundred years hence.

I am sorry for the human beings born into the last quarter of the Twentieth Century, who have an inborn love of nature in their souls, to say nothing of humanity on beyond them, assuming the human race survives that long. As Henry Thoreau would say, I was born in the nick of time to see the last of it, for now most of the haunts of my childhood and youth are plastered over with cement, the walls of buildings shut out once open roadways, vast highways slash up the countryside, and industry and merchandising marts and housing developments have care^ved up miles of land that was still open in my youth.

Construction. Improvements. PROGRESS. Constantly and ever-faster filling in the few remaining open lots. Bigger and better bulldozers and cement mixers make faster development more possible. Even where there is community planning, building is seldom planned around wild spots; it just plows right through them. And the closer humanity builds up against the open spaces the more vandalism and uncaring behavior morally and physically pollutes the whole human race.

I sometimes call it the "manmade," overpowering the "God made." Well represented by those power boats that day on the Concord River.

There are days when I wish I could be around when nature comes into her own. Even without the atom bomb, the destruction of environment through abuse is going to lead to the day when there will not be enough of the life force left to support the human race. I wish I could be present when tree roots upend

cement roads and knock down mortar blocks, when fungi and ants reduce the debris of mankind to humus. I'd like that, could I but see it.

This whole concept of the destructive behavior of mankind was held up to me like a painting on a wall, at Walden Pond, my first year living in Concord. At that time the Walden Pond Reservation was under the management of the Middlesex County Commissioners. There were three of them, all city residents in towns around Boston. They decided to expand the recreation opportunities at Walden, where swimming was already allowed, and where the Red Cross gave swim lesson to children. Nowhere in their thinking did the history or ecological values of that world-famous pond have any consideration.

When the Red Cross innocently asked to have the beach extended a bit, they had in mind a couple of dump truck loads of sand. What the County did, was to bring in a bulldozer and power saws. They cut over a hundred trees off the forest slope above the beach, then they gouged out that slope with the bulldozer. They pushed some of the slope gravel into the pond, and some up the side of the slope to create a road down which buses could go, right to the water's edge. They even put in a bus turnaround.

Just as the last of the trees were cut, and the bulldozer was still digging into the slope, an officer of the Thoreau Society was told about it. She and a group of local people quickly set up an ad hoc Save Walden Committee for the Thoreau Society, and between them they got a court injunction which stopped both bulldozer and saws instantly. But it took three years to bring the matter into the courts, and have it work its way up to the State

Judicial Supreme Court, which ruled that the County was to return the Walden slopes and beach to the natural conditions of the days of Emerson and Thoreau.

As I lived there at the time, I offered to get in there and work on it myself, volunteer, having expertise in native plant cultivation, but I was told by a group of local citizens that the repair should only be done by Harvard and Yale landscapers. A little forester-type planting would have returned it to its natural conditions. Instead, with no money available for fancy landscaping, though the saws and bulldozers were stopped, it was more than two decades before that great gash was to be repaired.

Another example of poor land management happened at Walden at this time. The County had been assigned a large sum of money with which to develop Walden into a recreation park; they spent much of it by employing one hundred and fifteen young men for the summer. That was fine, as to giving youth summer employment, but how to keep such a large crew busy? They had to MAKE work. In this case it meant ripping out the natural vegetation from the pond banks and replacing it with creosoted railroad ties. The ties were laid in tiers, below the pond path, especially on the north side and west end. These were great for fishermen to climb up and sit on, but it meant two things: the vegetation, with deep-roots holding the banks, had been ripped out for something artificial and biodegradable. Even though the ties were creosoted, I knew they wouldn't last more than twenty years, whereas the natural vegetation had already been there several thousand years.

When I tried explaining this to the supervisors of the crew they just laughed at me. As with most such bureaucratic work, it was a combination of band-aid repair, and a chance to put a big story in

the newspapers about the employment of so many young people on such a needed job. The NEED having been invented by the bureaucrats.

Well, if they didn't come back in twenty years, I did. And that makes another chapter.

In 1965 the National Park Service accepted the Walden Pond Reservation as a National Historical Literary Landmark, the first of that designation in the country. This was the period when the Minute-man National Park, at the northeast end of Concord, was being created. Several Concord citizens tried to get Walden included in the Minute-man National Park but the Park Service decided that since Walden had not been involved in the Revolution, or even in the Civil War, it did not qualify to be included. A Registered Landmark was the best they could get for ~~Walden~~ Walden.

So there it all sat, the ten years I lived in Concord. Walden was obviously a stepchild. The County claimed it didn't have the funds with which to repair the slope it had damaged, as per the court order, so the slope took on the aspect of a gravel pit. The gullies wore deep, what with washing rains and people running up and down them, even bicycles and horses went up and down. With no control, as fast as any little wild plant tried to come up, and its roots hold the soil, it was trampled to death.

The paths around the pond wore down, until in spots they were gullying down the banks. No new little trees could come up in the woods along the slopes as they, too, were trampled to death. As the years went by, Walden became a monument to the inefficiency of bureaucracy, to the thoughtless damage of an uncaring and uninformed public, and to the tendency in recent years of Americans as a whole to desecrate our historical values. But if this seemed bad, much worse was yet to come, when the state took over Walden management.

end of Chapt.