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The Freedom and Felicity of Rivers

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The Freedom and Felicity of Rivers

Growing up in rural New Jersey along the Musconetcong River, I often spent my days by the water, as a place for me to be alone, and to seek comfort in others. In the fall of 2004, when I was just six months old, my family of six packed ourselves out of the city and relocated to the little town of New Hampton in western New Jersey, an old village that had once housed the factory workers who manufactured graphite crystals from the nearby mountain. We did not move to the valley because of the river, but the river soon became an inseparable part of our lives there. Each day as my father left for work and the rest of us began our days at home, the river rushed on.

I love many things about the river: the isolation I feel when all that I can see around me are trees, the roaring water that ushers out any other sound, and the way the land reveals that the people before us lived off the river, too. Well houses run up and down the riverbank, and old pottery and even arrowheads hint at the people of an earlier time. Three bridges connect our road to a nearby town, and the best part of the village is the old gristmill that sits just past the second bridge. ‘Shoddy Mill’, it is labeled in large white lettering against a brick backdrop.

When we first moved, we knew the river was there, but we didn’t discover all its merits until a few years after. There was a busy road between our house and the woods, and just beyond that was the river. My mom claims that this road stopped us from truly exploring the river, but I think it was more about the trees that blocked our view, and the dense brush and animals that prevented us from continuing down the side of the mountain.

When I was five or six, my siblings and I realized that if we walked the half mile up the road to the first bridge, there was a small clearing where it was easy to access the water. My oldest sister was ten at the time and would boldly lead us there. The river was low but moved quickly and pulled heavily on our little legs. Sometimes it successfully tugged us to our knees and the rocks left us scraped and bruised, yet each time we stood again and sought a more secure foothold in the riverbed. But usually, we made it across without incident to the swimming hole.

This swimming hole was the teenage invention of an old man who still lived in the valley. Often while we were swimming there, he would come out with his lawn chair and tell us stories about the river and the old valley. He told us how every summer for four years he had worked tirelessly to move the heaviest rocks from the depths of the river, forming a ring around the rushing water and slowing it nearly to a stop. Now the swimming hole stands as a testament to time and the enduring strength of rocks against the water. A couple years ago, some teenagers came into the water and started messing around with the swimming hole, moving the rocks so it was less of a circle and more of a dilapidated parallelogram. My dad was furious. He spent the next few weeks rebuilding and maintaining the hole. For several days, he even spent hours

camped out by the swimming hole to, “watch for vandals” as he called it. No one ever ventured over while he was there, but he diligently fulfilled his duties all the same.

This was our routine for many years, walking along the roadside, passing the smaller farms, offering a hello to the cows and sheep nestled in the clearings of the valley, and finally reaching our tumultuous entrance to the water. But along with the pandemic came a restless energy among the people of the town, and a yearning to become closer to this river that had lived alongside us, yet separate, our entire lives. One day we awoke and discovered that directly across the street a neighbor had hacked out a rough path that led right down to the riverbank. This drastically changed our river-going habits. Suddenly, it was easier than ever to spend hours by the water with a chair and a book. For those few months of isolation, the river was our hobby, our study, and our livelihood. The unusual circumstances also attracted more visitors than was customary. More fishermen than ever were seen flocking along either side of the first bridge. Old couples carried chairs out to their front yards, listening to the rushing of the water, and nearly every day as I sat on our bank and read, I would watch kayakers, canoers, and tubers pass by. Over these months, my relationship with the river changed. It was no longer just an interest of mine but was truly becoming a part of me. I knew its habits, and the curve of each rapid, but I didn’t know much about the history of the Musconetcong itself. After exploring this history, I now understand that rivers are not only a geographical aspect of a town, but that they affect communities structurally, industrially, and spiritually.

The Musconetcong River attracted a significant population of immigrants from Northwestern Europe in the mid-1700s (NJ Skylands). Within the next century, industrial towns began to grow along the river, including my town of New Hampton. Gristmills were built along the river, and waterpower soon became essential to the lives of everyone who lived there. An entire village was built surrounding the Musconetcong, with a general store and a school, the structures and memories of which remain standing to this day. But this was not the first time that the Musconetcong River was inhabited. The Plenge site, an archaeological dig along the Musconetcong, includes artifacts dating back to hunter-gather societies nearly 13,000 years ago (MWA). Each community since then has relied on the Musconetcong for its fish and plants. The water is rich with nutrients due to the limestone in the area, causing it to be particularly good for fishing (NJ Skylands). The Lenape Muskogee tribe once made their homes on the Musconetcong as well, living off the river and the surrounding woods.

For Indigenous American tribes, rivers are important not only from an ecological standpoint, but also because they hold spiritual meaning and are a part of many traditions. In the article “Why is water sacred to Native Americans?”, Rosalyn LaPier writes that “It was the home of divine beings and divine animals who taught the Blackfeet religious rituals and moral restrictions on human behavior” (124). Native tribes living on the Great Plains also learned about the environment in order to sustain its resources. LaPier writes that these tribes knew not to kill beavers, because they “learned through observation that beavers helped create an ecological oasis within a dry and arid landscape” (125). Through these methods and rituals, the

people and the earth can live in harmony, instead of the parasitism that European immigrants once inflicted on the land and that continues today.

Increasing efforts have been carried out on an individual and statewide scale in order to restore the relationship between people and rivers. In Daniel McCool's book *River Republic: The Fall and Rise of America's Rivers*, he writes about the importance of rivers to the prosperity of an area's occupants. In recalling the age of industrialization in the United States, he describes the overwhelming desire for and use of natural resources, followed by the realization that these resources would not always last, stating "there must be a balance between what we take and what we leave intact" (217). He then goes on to describe this balance, "where we appreciate the role of rivers as both human and nonhuman habitat, play raucously in or by rivers, and rediscover the value of a clean, healthy, flowing watercourse" (217).

Reflecting on my own childhood, it is clear to me that my parents held these same principles and worked hard to instill them in my life. My mother would take my siblings and I to collect trash along the side of the road so that it didn't end up washed into the river. My father joined the Musconetcong Watershed Association and helped to monitor water quality and assist river restoration projects. The Musconetcong represents this resurrection of the connection between people and rivers following the industrial age. McCool writes that playing in the river, and even just being near it, is something that inhabitants of both rural and urban areas desire. In the modern age, some cities have attempted to 'rebrand' a river, such as Councilmember Ed Reyes hoping to change the perception of the LA river from "being your back yard to your front yard" (222). These efforts strive for environmental justice as well as promoting mental and physical health.

I can still feel a noticeable difference on the days that I sit by or swim in the river, and the days that I don't. I am calmer, less irritable. I feel better about the ways that I have spent my time. Growing up, I would sometimes feel jealous of friends who had swimming pools. Now, I recognize my proximity to the Musconetcong for the unique privilege that it is, and I feel sorry for anyone who doesn't have access to a river. They are truly such special places, and every time I explore my own river, I discover new things. River glass hides among the rapids, waiting to be found by curious hands. There are creatures there too, eagles and herons, snakes and fish and small snails, but they never bother us. This beautiful environment is also their home. They are residents, neighbors, and friends. The river is both an artist and a muse, an inspiration for song, dance and poetry, and I have written my own music and my own prose about the sound of the water rushing along the roadside.

The poem "The River" by Ralph Waldo Emerson is a testament to the effect that rivers have had on transcendentalist writers. It describes the childish delight that is found within exploring a river, and the river's eternal presence. In the first two lines he writes "And I behold once more/ My old familiar haunts; here the blue river...here is the rock where, yet a simple child,/ I caught with bended pin my earliest fish,/ Much triumphing, —and these the fields/ Over whose flowers I chased the butterfly." He recalls, like many of us sometimes do, the wild freedom one can only experience as a child released into nature. Like the Indigenous tribes of the

Great Plains, and like all who have made their lives on the river, Emerson knows it intimately, saying “These trees and stones are audible to me,/ These idle flowers, that tremble in the wind,/ I understand their faery syllables,/ And all their sad significance.” The river is not just a place where Emerson finds solace but sounds of “grave parental love.” He ends the poem with the unwavering acceptance that is granted by nature, saying “I feel as I were welcome to these trees/ After long months of weary wandering,/ Acknowledged by their hospitable boughs;/ They know me as their son, for side by side,/ They were coeval with my ancestors.”

When I sit by the Musconetcong River in the current and feel the water moving under my limbs, I sense the ancestors of the soil and the trees all around me. Rural places hold stories in ways that cities don’t, in root patterns and the shape of river rapids and moss growth on the side of the mountains. In the old, discarded China plates, in the crab apple trees, in the wooden train tracks and the old stone trestle where the granite traveled from the mountain to the towns, thousands of voices are calling out, back to me, “We are here! We are still here!”

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