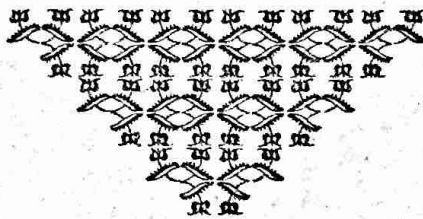


Four Days On The Webutuck River

By CHARLES E. BENTON

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY SINCLAIR LEWIS

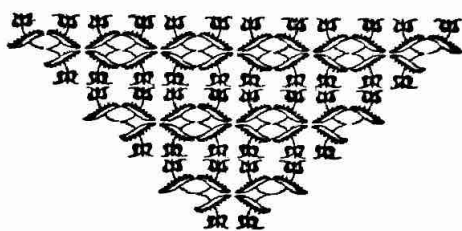


Troutbeck Leaflets
Number Six

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INTRODUCTION

WHEN I was a boy, in the prairies of Minnesota, there was no book which had for me a more peculiar and literal enchantment than "Walden" of Thoreau. As in the case of most books which exercise an altogether mystical charm, it is difficult to analyze the elements of that charm. It is merely there.

So to this boy, dreaming between the wheatfields and the sultry brook, Walden became a Mecca for which he longed more than for any other shrine in all the world—more even than for Kenilworth of Scott.

Dwelling beside Walden there was, as it came to the boy from the pages of Thoreau, a scholarly simplicity, an authentic American virtue, high song without the silly silken hose of alien troubadours.

The boy dreamed of saving the various nickles which he earned by hours of lawn-mowing that he might visit Walden and there find simple greatness. It is true that in later years when he did actually come to Walden Pond he found it—a pond! It was considerably less enticing than the lakes of Minnesota. The fact was, of course, that it was Thoreau, and not the Maker of the Universe, who created the pond. And it has always been the Thoreaus who have created the sentient world for civilized man.

To the erstwhile reader of Thoreau there is a reminiscent thrill about "Four Days on the Webutuck River." It is in the manner, the gallantry, if not quite in the profundity, of Father Thoreau himself.

There is here an importance beyond the immediate and local significance. It may be that these Troutbeck Leaflets, along with their fellow presentations of the genius loci of America to-day, are evoking for us here the magic light which for three thousand years the poets and dreamers and wanderers have evoked in Europe. It is an extraordinary fact, as yet unnoted by the physiologist, that the human eye sees most clearly not directly but through a medium.

The little road which wanders from London to Canterbury is perceived to-day and these many years, not just as a byway in Kent, but as the echoing path of Chaucer's pilgrims. London is not a collection of homes and offices, but a living show peopled by the characters of Dickens and Thackeray and Charles Lamb.

Thus it may be that by the Troutbeck Leaflets, and in particular by this "Four Days on the Webutuck River," the lovely streams and folded hills of York State will be revealed to our stupid eyes. This tale of two self-sufficient boys has made the Webutuck River, which has hitherto been to the direct eye a meaningless waterway, a stream forever now of legend and beauty and of memory.

Sinclair Lewis.

June, 1925.



Four Days on the Webutuck River

THE light of the evening lamp reveals various objects about the walls of my study, of a kind so often described as "of no value to any one but the owner;" but each has its value, not small, to that same owner, chiefly from its association with some past event. Among the objects is a small pencil drawing. The scene is a river, with a farm bridge in the foreground; in the background is a mountain outlined against the sky, its southern extremity terminating in an abrupt precipice. The title to this amateur sketch is "Peaked Mountain; Souvenir de Voyage. August 1860."

It happened in this wise: The writer and his brother were boys then, of that impressionable age when boyhood was just gliding into manhood. Perhaps they had been reading Thoreau's "Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers." At all events they had planned a similar voyage upon the Webutuck, which flows near the farmhouse in Dutchess County, N. Y., where they were born and had thus far spent their lives. The headwaters of the stream rise some 15 miles northward of this point, in the shadow of a mountain upon which Massachusetts, Connecticut and New York meet, a stone monument thereon marking the junction of three states. True, the Webutuck is not known to geographers as a navigable river, but we discovered that it was navigable, and doubtless we were ante-dated in that discovery several centuries at least, for within a stone's throw of where we launched our craft there was indubitable evidence in the form of innumerable flint implements that the knoll had been the site of a village of Indians whom tradition credits with

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calling the river by the name which it still bears. When the white men asked the meaning of the name they replied that it meant "pleasant hunting grounds." The state surveyors called it "Ten-Mile River" because it was about 10 miles west of the Housatonic, which is in Connecticut. Later came the Dutch farmers from along the Hudson, 25 miles distant. They were plagued by the minks along its banks, which caught their chickens, and named it "Mink-in-Kill."

But the Puritan element from New England, with a finer sense of the fitting, restored the musical synonym. Its sources are in brooks and miniature lakes near the mountain spoken of, which is an outbranch of the Green Mountain range, and at the place where our voyage began it emerges into a valley extending southward, which has been likened, in its quiet pastoral beauty, to the valley of the Clyde. One must have a kindlier feeling for the red men, knowing that they were so moved by an appreciation of its beauty as to give the appropriate name.

Of this particular tribe almost nothing is known. Whether they were allied to the Mohawks further west, or the King Philip tribes 100 miles to the east, or possibly to various scattered families known to have lived to the northward, can only be surmised. Doubtless their lives were filled with joys, sorrows, hopes and ambitions, the same as ours; but they have passed so completely away that almost their only legacy left to us is a few chips of flint and—a name. This, for the most part, is all that the aborigines of a whole continent are likely to bequeath us. Is it not singular that, with all the wars and struggles of a race, their tireless labors in quarrying and shaping of stone and copper, yet that which endures the longest is not carved stone or hammered metal, but only waves of sound which vanish as soon as they are uttered? Copper and stone are lost everywhere and buried under the drift of ages; but go where you will over the continent and you will find the air vibrating still with the sonorous syllables first applied to the

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mountains and streams by these people. A word, vanishing in the air, but seemingly more enduring than the rocks.

Thus we reflected as we carried various articles to the boat. There was food of various kinds, for we were prepared to sustain ourselves en route. Several small bags had been provided, one each for coffee, sugar, salt, etc., and these were packed in a tin pail for security, with biscuits, a little dried meat and salt pork. With two blankets, some fish-lines and a gun, our outfit was considered complete, though a few years later, when one of us was camping in good earnest, he many times laughed as he thought of his first camping outfit.

Plying our oars we floated down the stream, which here is so small that at almost any time we could have thrown our hats to the shore. Yet it was a real voyage of discovery, for as a line of travel it was as entirely new as that of any explorer. The boys who trapped muskrats and the farmers who build their own river fences had doubtless seen every foot of the way; and so, for that matter, had the local tribes seen every mile of country that Stanley has since passed over. But of the continuous route possibly we were the first whites to have a personal knowledge. Our voyage began at the little hamlet of Leedsville; and for the first few miles every tree and rock, every riffle in the river, was as familiar as household objects, for we had hunted, fished and sketched a goodly distance from home; but soon the only familiar sights were Oblong Mountain on the west, which bounded the valley on that side as by a wall, and on the east the sloping sides of another range, the crest of which is in Connecticut and which separates this valley from that of the Housatonic. Historically the strip of land of which this valley is a part is of some interest, as having once been a part of Connecticut. For many years the boundary was a bone of contention between the two states and in the final settlement this strip of land, known as the Oblong—and giving that name to the mountain—was ceded to New York in 1731.

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There are charms about such a journey that one who has never tried it could hardly suspect. As to the aspect of things, it makes all the difference in the world how we look at them; whether we look down upon them or whether we look up to them. We had for a long time looked down upon these scenes from every known point of vantage, but now we had taken another point of view; selecting the very lowest level we now looked up at the landscape. We had before looked down upon forest and field, seeing foliage and grain—that is, seeing results. Now we saw the trunks and roots that supported the foliage, and the river in its erosive action on the bank had cut it away in places, revealing the nature of the stratifications beneath the soil, thus opening to us a volume of the very secrets of the sources of vegetable life. In some respects the valley seemed a miniature world, where, as in the greater world, it is sometimes best to cease looking at results, and stepping down to the lowest level study for a time the sources of life and the causes back of great events.

The muskrat, cuddled under the over hanging meadow bank where he was accustomed to consider himself secure from the sight of passers, was surprised at these newcomers who had appropriated his own highway, and with a splash sought the water locked gate of his castle. Once we paused before a bank which had been undermined by the stream and lost a portion of its face, leaving a nearly perpendicular surface. In this bank were several horizontal holes about two inches in diameter. These were the home of a colony of bank swallows. While we were looking, one of the swallows darted out with a sudden swish of the wings that made us involuntarily close our eyes. It is many years now since I have seen the burrows of these birds and I often wonder if they have found more congenial homes elsewhere. The swallow family is noted for not being enslaved to tradition, either in the matter of dwelling place or in the management of household affairs. The cave swallows,

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Petrochelidon lunifrons, are an instance. They formerly built their house under the overhanging crags of the mountain range at the western border of our continent.

The name of the feathered troubadour who sang to them of a goodly land bordering on another sea far to the east, may be preserved in the oral history of the race, but it has never been disclosed to featherless bipeds.

Yet while Chicago was a fur-trading post and most of the country between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains was marked "desert" on the map, they somehow got the news and made their appearance in New England; first the reconnoissance of a few, then the immigration of literally millions. Here they accepted without hesitation the shelter of farm barns in which to build their nests, no doubt considering that they were provided by a special dispensation of divine Providence in their favor. Nor are they above making experiments in building. I remember one pair of barn swallows which deserted the wooden frame-work of the barn and built their nest of mud in the loop of a rope that hung from the rafter, doubtless determined to outwit the family cat; and another who rejected dead grass as a bed for their nestlings, and supplied its place with downy white feathers from the poultry-yard, thus adopting the ancient New England institution of the feather bed.

But our journey was not an idle pastime; it was a busy pastime rather, for the river was not without obstructions; the first was a mill-dam. This made a carry necessary. First the things were carried around, then the boat, with much lifting and dragging, was gotten around to the water below and again received freight. By the middle of the afternoon we had reached the village of Amenia Union. This village is equally divided by the state line, one-half of it being in the town of Sharon, Ct., and the other half in Amenia, N. Y. It has always seemed a pity that it did not assume the composite name first proposed and become known as Sharmenia. Here the Webutuck is augmented

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in volume by a tributary which flows from Connecticut. The water of this branch is perceptibly colder, as its sources are but a few miles distant and are mostly mountain streams and springs. The mingling here of these two streams would seem to typify somewhat the mingling of two streams of humanity which also come together in this vicinity, creating a community which is somewhat composite in its character and ancestry.

First there came the sturdy Dutch farmers, whose occupation of the land extended up the Hudson from New York, then known as New Amsterdam, thence spread across Dutchess County to this valley, but got no further east, for here it met the Puritan element from New England, the two as unlike in temperament and methods as people of the same race well could be. The Dutch farmers, with their fine horses, dwelt on farms whose fields they tilled all the day, and when evening came meditated with pipe and mug on the stoops of their broad, low houses, while their young people made the autumn one continuous harvest festival with evening husking parties, which always concluded with a supper and dance. They looked askance on the bustling newcomers from the East, whose first thought was for a church and school; who organized a town and elected officers before they fenced their fields; who were forever inventing some new machine, and every man of whom considered himself, at all times and under all circumstances, a member of a corporate body. But they mingled and intermarried without discord, and now it is a homogeneous community, the farmers from both states meeting here, with their sons and daughters, in the grange hall for mutual encouragement and profit.

Our course here did not bring us quite to the state line, and as we plied our oars we swept to the southwestward, and before sundown had tied our boat to a tree near the home of a friend who had invited us to stop a night at his house. At this part of the valley the river flows in a serpentine course through what are known as "river meadows." They are natural grass-

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lands that have never been touched by the plow, having been built up through the ages by the annual deposits of the overflow; for this little river has its spring overflow with the regularity of the Nile. At the breaking up of winter the spring rains, with the melting snows, swell the stream until it overflows its banks and converts these verdant meadows into a lake, while the sediment carried along in the water is deposited on the turf, keeping up its fertility.

We had not proceeded far on our second day's sail before we came to what is known as the "Nook." At this point the river goes to the very foot of Oblong Mountain and sweeps around in such a way as almost to encircle a few acres of meadow. Tradition says that on this peninsula the Indians met for their war dances and pow-pows. If the old hemlocks on the bank could speak they would doubtless tell of strange rites and incantations practiced there by a race in its childhood, groping blindly after the Infinite. We now reached the village of South Amenia and—another mill dam; but the hindrance was not a serious one and we soon after stopped for dinner. Here, while one sat in the boat and sketched the bridge and mountain, the other made a little excursion with the gun in search of suitable specimens on which to practice the art of taxidermy.

At a short distance below this place the valley turns sharply to the west and is intercepted by a ledge or rock running across it; or rather it appears to have once crossed it, but has been worn down by the river which seems to have cut its way through. There are some evidences that the valley down to this place was once a lake confined by this ledge, and that as the ledge wore down the lake was gradually changed to a valley. It is intensely interesting to study the geological changes through which this locality has passed, and to learn that man, with all his mighty works, is far from being the most potent living agent in promoting these changes. We are indebted to Darwin for having pointed out that the despised earth worm

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moves more material every year than does the whole race of man; that through its agency soil is formed and civilization made possible. These hills are not immovable. Their surface is flowing continually down to the streams and thence to the ocean. The streams are not streams of water alone; water is only a vehicle which carries its freight to the ocean and returns for another load. Even the most transparent and seemingly pure streams are loaded with rock in solution. Rivers are the highways upon which continents travel. It is estimated that at the present rate the whole area now drained by the Mississippi will have traveled to a new place on the globe in 60 millions of years, not so long a period from a geological point of view.

After passing through this first gateway in the rocks, we came to the junction of another considerable tributary, the Wassaic Creek. This is also said to be an Indian name, meaning "difficult," or requiring hard labor; so called because where it comes through the mountain range a few miles above this point, the Indians found it to be a very difficult ground on which to hunt or fish. Near the junction of these two streams is another large expanse of alluvial meadows. When the white men came here they found standing in the center of these meadows a tree of marvelous size and proportions; a very giant indeed, if seemingly trustworthy records are to be believed. It was the button-wood or sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*).

Without doubt it was the largest tree ever seen in our eastern states, but though even then it had begun its death struggle it stood in its place another century before it finally succumbed to age and decay. The trunk was hollow and there was a cleft at one side just large enough for a person to pass through, and it is related that a party of men, laborers in the meadows, 20 in number, stood inside the tree at one time; one of the men, said to be trustworthy, having been placed on record in testimony of truthfulness of this story. At this date I only know of one person living who has been in the tree, and from her recollec-

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tion of its appearance and size she thinks 20 persons could easily have stood in the cavity; she was herself one of a party of 10 merry-makers who entered it together and did not half fill the space. A resident known throughout the length and breadth of this valley as "the historian and preserver of ancient trees," has devoted considerable time to investigations concerning this monarch of other days. He writes as follows concerning it: "No accurate measurements have been preserved, but the story always most positively clung to was that a 12-foot rail could be turned around horizontally within the cavernous hollow of the 'Big Tree.' All the evidence is unequivocal that this was no distorted or abnormal growth of mere width without proportionate weight; nor was there any coalescing of neighboring trunks into one, like the famous chestnut of Mount Etna, but the body was well formed and cylindrical, and undoubtedly in its prime sustained a top of symmetrical proportions."

With the larger flow of water our progress was now more rapid, and would have been easy but for an occasional eel-weir dam. These are built of rough stone loosely piled in a row running diagonally across the stream. At the lower end the water is delivered into a box with slatted sides. As the eels make their autumnal migration towards the ocean they follow the flow of the current and land in the box, and while the water runs out between the slats they remain to embellish the table of the thrifty farmer. Herring were formerly abundant here, but with the first building of mill dams they abandoned the stream completely. Not so easily driven away were the eels. Though some seem to stay, yet it is certain that large numbers go down the streams every fall and return in the spring. It is thought they cannot reproduce their kind without at least one visit to the sea; yet how they manage to squirm around, over or through all the devices of man still remains a mystery.

Some four miles further down we came to the village of Dover Plains, where we were an object of some curiosity to a

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group of young ladies who stood on the bridge and watched the strokes of our oars as long as we were in sight. It was now drawing on towards night, and no friendly woods presenting themselves in which to make our camp, we at last drew our boat upon the meadow bank in the gathering darkness, and collecting some drift wood, soon had the camp-fire blazing. Before lying down for the night we noticed that a fog or mist was rising from the river, and the firelight seemed to be shut in as it were, and could not penetrate the night air. There was, too, a certain chill abroad on the lowlands, and when we lay down on the damp grass the blankets seemed a scant protection; yet youth overcame all obstacles to rest. At early dawn we rose and found that the fog had thickened and shut us completely into a little world by ourselves. The river had taken on a new aspect and looked as if it was large enough to carry a steamboat. A bush on the further bank seemed of a size like a forest tree. It is curious how a fog will distort and magnify objects and distances; yet while we floated on the sun drove away the mists and again the landscape wore a natural look.

This river has one peculiarity which seems like a little in-born perversity; it refuses to follow its own valley to the sea, but leaves it, and turning to the east cuts through a mountain range into another valley. Had it continued southward in its own valley it would soon have come to the headwaters of the Croton and gone thence to the Hudson and New York Bay. But the Webutuck is not alone in its waywardness. Its neighbors, all the principal rivers of Connecticut, to whom it would seem to be allied, have the same idiosyncrasy; each in its turn leaving its own valley and turning to the eastward, cuts through a mountain range and follows another valley to the sea.

We were now in a part where neither of us had been before, and as we found our map to be unreliable we had much conjecture as to where our river would lead us. Before us was the mountain. Would the stream go to the right or left of a certain

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peak? "The chances are that it will lead to the left of that peak," said one. What a strange expression to apply to the course of a stream whose channel has been laid for ages! Yet we often use the expression as inappropriately in applying it to the course of life, when in reality the destiny to which it leads is as certainly predetermined as is the locality to which this stream would surely lead us. What is seemingly chance is often but one's ignorance. Life is often compared to a stream. Thoreau characteristically says, "A man's life should be constantly as fresh as this river. It should be the same channel, but a new water every instant." Well, we float for an instant on the immortal stream of humanity, flowing from an unknown source to an unknown destination.

We had some occasional fishing and hunting on the way but had not taken time since leaving home for elaborate cooking, but we decided that on this day we would prepare a more sumptuous meal. Soon after ten o'clock we shoved our boat through the lily pads of a shaded cove and landing in a group of maples built a rousing fire of dead limbs. The leading articles on the bill were partridge with boiled potatoes, fresh fish fried with pork, coffee and biscuit, etc. I hardly need to explain to those who have had similar experiences that the surrounding circumstances combined to give a relish to the fare that Delmonico's best cook has never surpassed.

As we approached the mountain before us it still showed no sign of opening until we were almost to it; then the course changed and presently the setting sun glanced into what seemed to be the opening of a deep notch in the mountain, but night was upon us and we tied up and camped again.

After breakfast in the morning we walked ahead a little and soon ascertained that we had nearly reached the limit of possible navigation. Inquiry brought out the information that the ravine continued for three miles through the mountain to where the Webutuck joined the Housatonic. So we took a

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luncheon, with guns and lines, and continued the voyage on foot, so to speak. We found that the remainder of the way the river ran with a rapid descent over a rocky bed of bowlders, and the sides of the ravine were so steep that we could not keep by the river the whole distance. There was a highway climbing in and out among the trees, clinging to the side of the mountain and giving lovely glimpses of the torrent. So between road and river bank we finally reached the end of the Webutuck, where it mingled with the larger stream, it being about 25 miles from our starting place, but probably more than twice that distance by the way we had come.

From here we followed up the Housatonic a mile or two to the cataract at Bull's Bridge. Here the river is compressed to a quarter of its usual width and plunges down in a succession of leaps over a limestone ledge. The gorge is evidently made by the wearing away of the rock by the water. As the river was low much of the bottom could be seen and it contained some singular looking holes. They were round and from one to four feet deep. Some had a round smooth bowlder of granite in the bottom of each. Upon careful study of the surroundings it was evident that the bowlders had been tumbled along the river's bed by the strong current in some former age and had lodged here and there against the projections of rock. Floating ice and driftwood might occasionally strike and move them a little or turn them around. Being harder than the rock on which they lay they had literally bored their way into it; but as some of the smaller ones were missing it seemed that they had been worn out in the process.

We were loth to leave this place which has so much to interest, but as we had not yet decided how or when we should start for home, nor what to do with the boat, we started in the afternoon upon our return. Reaching the place where we had left the boat we were surprised to find our father, who had estimated with some accuracy the time we should probably occupy

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on the voyage, and had driven down with the large farm wagon. After a good hot supper at the old country tavern we drew the boat out of the water and placing it, with the camping outfit, on the wagon, we got in ourselves and started for home, where we arrived some time before morning.

Upon a recent visit to the valley of the Webutuck I find it practically unchanged from what it was a third of a century ago. Only a small portion of it is visible from the car window and the depths and windings of its tranquil river are still as pure from the chemicals as its air from the smoke of factories. Sometimes its echoes are awakened by the bugler of a tally-ho with its crowd of fashionables on the way to Lenox, but not to such travelers does Dame Nature give her confidences.

Troutbeck Leaflets are devoted to a single spot of American earth and to those who have touched its life. Of this sixth number (which has been reprinted from the Springfield, Massachusetts, "Republican" of June 4, 1896) two hundred copies have been printed for the friends of J. E. and Amy E. Spingarn. ♣ ♣ Charles E. Benton was born at Troutbeck in 1841, and now lives in Rochester, New York. Like his brother, Myron B. Benton, with whom he took this voyage from Troutbeck to the Housatonic in 1860, he has been both farmer and writer, and his books include "As Seen from the Ranks: A Boy in the Civil War" (1902) and "Troutbeck, A Dutchess County Homestead" (1916).