ADIRONDACK ROADSIDE SPRINGS

By Phil Gallos

I am looking for roadside springs. I am pursuing them with digital camera and Slik tripod, with stopwatch equipped GPS receiver and two kinds of mapping software, with tin pail and thermometer and measuring tape, and with paper and with pen. As of this writing, I have been to 72 springs in 39 towns in eight counties. I hope to find every one within the Adirondack Park and every one for a distance of ten miles beyond the Blue Line. How many will that be? I don't know. Maybe 250. Maybe 300. I want to photograph every one. And map every one. And measure each ones flow and temperature, and describe each one's infrastructure, and document each one's history.

They are rather puny, really, our Adirondack roadside springs. Even by Adirondack standards, they are of meager stature. By the standards of the Ozarks, or Florida, or the karst regions of Europe, where rivers gush fully formed from the bosom of the earth, the output of the pipes and spigots and cisterns along our highways and byways is vanishingly small. Yet, for all their diminutive flow, they are no less fascinating, magical, sacred, and essential – even if most of the people who pass by them fail to recognize their intrinsic value or even regard them as anachronistic, unnecessary liabilities.

Almost every Adirondack town has one of these, a place where the people have come for generations to carry away the precious liquid in bottles and jugs and buckets. When their well water is full of iron and they can't afford a filtration system, when flooding fills their shallow wells with silt, when the electricity fails or their pumps break down, when they don't want to drink the stuff the municipality provides – replete with chlorine and fluorine and caustic soda – or simply because this is what their parents and their parents' parents have done, they come to the springs; and, even though most of those springs have not been tested for pathogens or pollutants, even though the pipes may be rusty or algeaceous, even though their sources may be open to the sky and their channels filled with debris, these people will tell you this is the best water they have ever tasted.

IN THE BEGINNING, FIDDLER'S ELBOW

How did it begin, this watery quest of mine? When? And why?

In 1988, Marion Hoelzel moved from relatively cozy digs in a cabin on McCauley Pond to an old, weather-worn farm house known as Fiddler's Elbow. The house stood on the brow of a hill facing north. Its amenities were few, but the rent was right: one dollar per day. Actually, the amenities were near to zero. There was no insulation; those windows which were not broken were ill fitting; there was no central heating. In fact, there was no heat at all until Marion hauled in a home-made woodstove that Addison Bickford had fabricated from a discarded oil drum. (She later acquired a "real" woodstove which someone had advertised in the Free Trader, and that one kept the ground floor reasonably comfortable -- most of the time.) When old Boreas blew against Fiddler's Elbow through the forever-long December nights, slats of loose clapboard would slap the hollow walls, the corrugated roof would rattle, and the whole house would moan sometimes as though wrongly kicked or keen like the mother of a child lost in a blizzard. There was electricity, but there was no telephone for a goodly spell. And there was no plumbing – no toilets to flush, no taps to turn. There was a two-seater outhouse out back in a grove of pines; but, if there had ever been a well – let alone a stalwart old hand pump – there was no sign of one when Marion moved in.

This was not considered a problem. There was a spring less than a mile away (there was another one much nearer, but I'll get to that later). Down the long grade to the North Branch of the Saranac, left on the unpaved Thatcherville Road and along the river and across it on a steel deck bridge, and there it is, good water gushing out of the hillside at the rate of 78 gallons per minute. About a third of it gets diverted through a big gray pipe and pours out in front of a pallet put there to keep containers clean and feet dry. And though it's only a fraction of what comes out of the ground, the force of the flow from that pipe can still knock a container from an unwary hand. Somewhere nearby is the site of Hunter's Home, Paul Smith's first hotel, which he built in 1853 and of which nothing remains. But the spring remains.

Of course, I had been to King Phillip's Spring on Route 9 down by Northway Exit 30 (who hadn't?), but this was a completely different scene. No tourists here! No weekend visitors nor fortnight vacationers filling gallon jugs with the spirit of the mountains to take home to city and suburb, later to savor alone or share with friends and family and remember their Adirondack adventures. For many of those folks, King Phillip's was the only spring they had ever seen, and the water it gave them was a rare and delicious – if sometimes bittersweet – luxury.

What was happening on Thatcherville Road was something else altogether, much of the time driven by raw necessity. This water was being used for drinking, yes, but also for cooking the food and washing the dishes on which the food was served, for laundering of garments and for bathing the body those garments had clothed. There was no wiener wagon parked here; nor was there anyone selling chainsaw sculptures or jig-saw silhouettes. Furthermore, the water tasted better than King Phillip's, and there was a whole lot more of it coming out of the pipe – twenty times more of it – which was a good thing because we were filling five-gallon buckets. People did come here with the ubiquitous gallon jugs, but not those for whom this water had to do everything.

It could be a tedious business, especially in winter, this water fetching; but there was a beauty to it, a purity and simplicity that subsumed any inconvenience. We were engaged in an activity infused by an aesthetic of timelessness, even if we were dragged there and back by the pull of an internal combustion engine. Had we not possessed an engine, we would have hitched up the horse – or the mule or some other beast of burden. Had we not possessed a beast, we would have rolled out the hand cart. Had we not had a cart, we would have shouldered yokes for the walk to Hunter's Home to haul the brimming buckets back up the hill to the wind-riven house.

We were going to the spring impelled by the same imperatives that have ruled humankind for millennia. We were going to the source for the most basic of necessities. If people had access to the source, and the source was stewarded and protected, then it seemed to me that those people enjoyed a level of independence not available to most – just as they would had they access to a swatch of soil for food or a patch of woods for fuel. When the delicate, vulnerable, wholly unsustainable house of cards we've built with our oh-so-sophisticated technology and our sociopathic economy finally collapses – as it inevitably must – it will be the springs and the gardens and the woodlots that will keep people alive.

When I fill my bucket or my jug or my jar at the spring, I feel always a part of something completely natural, with an intrinsic rightness and an incontrovertible logic. There is nothing natural about turning a tap at a kitchen sink as a way to obtain water – unconscious, yes; but do it consciously, with focused, critical thinking and unsuspended disbelief, and the whole business becomes fabulously absurd. We have put away samples of our robust, reliable, time-tested and allegedly obsolete technologies in a museum on The Mall in Washington, DC. Will its doors be open when the plug is pulled on our suicidal civilization?

There are those who say the back-to-basics, back-to-the-land lifestyle is just a romantic, atavistic game played by the children of rich suburbanites; but Marion was not playing, and she was not rich – nor were many of the women and men who, like her, lived in houses without plumbing and grew the meals they ate from the soil outside, were warmed in winter by wood they had split, and were cooled in summer and refreshed in every season by water they had fetched from the spring. Some were too poor to have it any other way. They did not choose this lifestyle. It chose them, and perhaps some resented it and longed for the myriad conveniences that are supposed to be every American's birthright. Some were searching, trying out a way of being to see if it was how they wanted to be. Some of them stayed with it and some moved on. Some were seeking temporary sanctuary from the travails of a complex culture. Some were simply testing themselves. And some people chose this way to live because, as Americans, they wanted to be at least a little less ugly. As citizens of a nation that holds less than 5% of the world's people but consumes 30% of the world's resources and spews back 30% of the world's waste, they aspired not to "livin' large" but to "live lightly on the land." When the water you're using comes by the dipper from a bucket on the floor, you're a lot more frugal with what you use, and you're grateful to have what you have and grateful also that the water in the bucket is clean and that you didn't have to carry it five miles to get it home and that it didn't cost you half a month's earnings.

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A hundred yards down the road from Fiddler's Elbow is another spring with a far more developed infrastructure than the one on Thatcherville Road but nevertheless nearly extinct. There is a ruin that used to be a spring house upon a broken foundation of concrete and stone. The foundation was once the reservoir for the water that came from a series of seeps in the hill behind it; but reservoirs require maintenance, as do the structures that cover them. There has been none of that here for a long time. The family that loved and farmed this land has been gone for nearly half a century. The spring house is collapsing into the hillside, and its door lays discarded on the ground. The reservoir has so filled with silt that it holds a mere film of water barely a quarter inch deep, yet Ralph Etienne has told me that he would come to fill his bottles here twenty-five years ago. This is Daigneau Spring. The Daigneau family grew potatoes in the fields to the south of the road and occupied two houses on this land – the younger generation in a large and comfortable (and now non-existent) domicile near the spring, and their elders in the old, austere house on the hill, which still stands at this writing, though no one has lived in it since Marion left it in 1991.

When Marion moved into The Elbow, the water at Daigneau Spring was still deep enough for dipping, and the spring house door was still attached, but the weather-worn little building was already beginning to lean into the hill. It was a picturesque yet melancholy structure, built at the edge of the original route of the 1814 Port Kent-Hopkinton Turnpike. It had held its position against thunderstorms, blizzards, and the occasional vandal, valiant but doomed, unseen or forgotten by most folks who sped by on the newer highway a few rods north, though still sometimes visited by a few individuals who remembered and honored its purpose – but not enough to try to save it.

I knew of a few other springs in the area: the spring at Hunter's Home and King Phillip's Spring, of course; the beautifully maintained Muzzy Spring in Vermontville; Moffitsville Spring in the Town of Saranac with its long pipe draining down to a claw foot bathtub; the River Road Spring near the Olympic Ski Jumps outside Lake Placid; the beloved Lumber Jack Spring south of Tupper Lake…. How many more might there be? How many were providing a vital resource to people who had no place else to go (or preferred to go no place else) for their drinking water? And how many would end up, like Daigneau Spring, falling into disrepair – or disappearing altogether? Somebody should find out. Somebody should document this.

Somehow, I decided that somebody was me; and I set myself the task of photographing the springs with a battered but indestructible old Speed Graphic press camera mounted on a hefty Bogen tripod. Despite the camera's name, the process turned out to be decidedly less than speedy. So, as much as the project appealed to me, I didn't get very far with it. In fact, I got just about nowhere. I photographed the Daigneau Spring; I processed the 4 X 5 inch negatives; I finished a couple of prints; and that was pretty much it for the next fourteen years.

But the project would not go away. Buried though it was beneath the minutia and the milestones of day-to-day life, it nevertheless bubbled to the surface in small eruptions of guilt that kept me scheming for the future. Along the way, I decided that, when the hardware got good enough (and inexpensive enough), I would buy a digital camera, and with it I would start photographing the springs, again. In June, 2003, I purchased a five megapixil Nikon with an 8X optical zoom lens, two 256 megabyte Lexar memory cards, and an extra battery. Oh, boy. I was on my way!

ON THE DARK SIDE OF LITTER

Litter is a problem nearly everywhere, and the springs do not escape this manifestation of cultural self-loathing. For most of human history, the spring and the well were considered sacred places. For some, this is still true. But in our mechanized, cash-‘n'-carry culture, a sad dichotomy has arisen. We are creatures of the Earth, dependent on Her bounty, our health determined by Hers, our future, be it good or ill, inextricably tied to Hers. Yet, we act as though our lives and our "civilization" (such as it is) are independent and self-empowered. We like to believe, if we believe in anything beyond our own cleverness, in a non-corporeal God and forget that disrespect for God's creation is equal disregard for the Creator that we proclaim central to our lives.

So people go to the spring for water freely given by the Earth, and they leave their garbage. Oh, we've come a long way from sacrificing the virgin and the lamb, haven't we? I don't mean to suggest a return to human sacrifice; but we should take a long look at how and why we once offered up what was most precious to us in gratitude, and now we leave behind what we most revile. This is blasphemy, a crime against the spirit of place – a spirit which is an emanation of the God of all.

The spring is where God's blood flows from inert stone and slumbering soil to sustain all God's creatures. The springs are sacred, as are the stone and the soil from which they rise; and our failure to recognize this does not diminish it, but merely confirms our own fall. When a tree topples in the forest and "no one" is there to hear it, it does nevertheless resound. Humankind is not the center of the universe.

Granted, many springs are protected, watched over, cared for by selfless, often anonymous individuals – spring saints, as it were – who clean away the trash, mow the grass, improve the infrastructure. Still, I can't help but wonder – marvel, really – at the audacity of some people's piggishness. Perhaps this is because of my own attitude toward what I consider the inherent sanctity of these sites. Perhaps if I granted more value to dollars and the things dollars can secure rather than to the gifts of the land, I would be just mildly annoyed rather than totally appalled. Maybe I should stop trying to figure it out and just accept as a fact and a matter of life that some people are no good. But every time I see this desecration, it opens the wound anew, and I reflexively salve it by attempting to understand what motivates these folks.

We have decimated entire forests, buried a nation's worth of wetlands, murdered thousands of lakes (and the fish within them and, ultimately, the people who eat – or would eat – those fish), and have ripped the tops off whole mountain ranges. We have sterilized the life out of the living soil with petrochemical "fertilizers" and pesticides and treat the animals we eat as insentient, spiritless automatons, as mere units of profit and loss. We have plundered the bounty of the oceans nearly to the brink of oblivion while simultaneously pouring upon them our foulest wastes. There are pharmaceutical "byproducts" in the remotest waters of the South Pacific. There are PCBs in the snows of the Poles. There is detectable DDT again in the milk of human mothers. And for what? So we can continually get what we get more cheaply?

Am I dwelling on the dark side? Does that make sense when there is so much beauty about us? Shouldn't I be celebrating what has been saved, what has been left pristine or what has been snatched from destruction? Yes. Certainly. But not to the obscuration of how we have gone so wrong – locally, nationally, globally. The pile of litter by the local spring arises from the same consciousness that plows an entire hillside into an adjacent valley, burns the contents of that hillside and spews the poisonous remains into the air we breathe. It is the consciousness of entitlement, the mind set of "getting what's mine" that drives the rape of our one and only life sustaining planet in the name of cheap energy, cheap raw materials, cheap products, cheap labor. And who is it who profits most from this compulsive quest for "always low prices?" Is it the poor? Is it the indigent? Is it the wage-slave workers? Is it the "middle-class" mothers and fathers? Those people aren't beating each other in the head
trying to be first through the doors of Wal-Mart because they've got truckloads of disposable income. It is the very slimmest fraction of us—the most privileged and powerful few – who grow ever fatter from pillaging the treasure that was put here to support us all. They are brigands, and they are thieves; and yet so many of us want to be just like them.

SIX TALES OF TRASH

Admonitions to keep spring areas clean meet with limited success. At McConley Spring, where two pipes emerge from a wall of massive stone blocks at the foot of a gently sloping lawn across the Tracy Road from a lovely little pond in the Town of Moriah, there is a large sign which reads, in part: "This Property Is Owned By The People Of The Town Of Moriah. It Is For Your Enjoyment. Please Keep It Clean… IF YOU CARRY IT IN, YOU CARRY IT OUT." Most of the time the area around the spring is in good shape, but on October 9, 2004, someone must have forgotten to read the last line … or perhaps they were just tired. I went to McConley Spring that day to measure its discharge rates and temperature and to record the sound of the water, which sometimes emerges from the east pipe accompanied by strange hissings and gurglings. When I got there, I found, by that pipe, less than a foot from the iron grating onto which the water falls, a clear plastic bag full of used kitty litter and, on top of the wall, another bag which contained various aerosol and empty food cans in addition to more used kitty litter. Why, I wondered, if somebody wanted to dump their garbage in the woods to avoid paying a fee or simply to be rebellious, didn't they drive fifty feet farther west where begin woods that extend virtually unbroken for the next twelve miles? Why drop it here at this place that belongs to all the people of the Town and of which they can be justifiably proud. A friend of mine suggested that the perpetrator may have put the bags by the spring precisely because it was so well cared for, so that he or she could count on someone else taking the bags away. It's a strange world.

There is a somewhat more strident sign at Gougeville Spring, a twin-piped installation on the left bank of the Saranac River just beyond the Blue Line in the Town of Plattsburgh. Here is what it says. "ATTENTION. IT IS UNLAWFUL TO DUMP HOUSEHOLD GARBAGE OR TO EMPTY ROADSIDE REFUSE CONTAINERS IN

THIS WATER STATION – PLEASE – USE SANITARY LANDFILL. VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED PURSUANT TO TOWN ORDINANCE AND BE SUBJECT TO A $50.00 FINE. BY ORDER OF TOWN BOARD, TOWN of PLATTSBURGH." While I have never seen kitty litter here, the stern warning about household garbage has gone routinely unheeded. Although modest in quantity, the leavings at Gougeville Spring have not lacked variety. Once they even provided a lesson in ecology. This was in the form of a small pile of cucumber peels languishing on the grass – an eyesore for us, but a happy meal for two harvestmen and a wooly bear caterpillar.

Certainly the most peculiar piece of jetsam I have seen so far was the television set sitting at the side of the road twenty feet north of The Watering Tub (a.k.a. Highland Spring) in the Town of Chesterfield. Except for the old discharge pipe, which had been recently replaced, this was the only refuse evident near the spring.

The piece de resistance has to be the toilet lying forlornly on its side in the drainage a dozen yards uphill from Lumberton Spring in the Town of Long Lake. The woods around it were full of rubbish, including a 33-gallon plastic trash can, covered but also lying on its side, and a couple of bulging black plastic garbage bags. Lumberton Spring is at the extreme eastern edge of the Town, barely across the Newcomb line. So, was this mischief wrought by Long Lakers or Newcombites? The nearest spring within the town of Newcomb is the very busy Ski Slope Spigot on the Goodnow Road, which is kept remarkably clean for the amount of traffic it receives. In two other Towns adjoining the Town of Long Lake – Arietta to the southwest and Tupper Lake (formerly Altamont) to the northwest – The Spring on the North Point Road and Lumberjack Spring just off NYS Route 30 were essentially trash free.

The most ironic spring-trashing and, to me, the most outrageous, was what I encountered at Indian Ridge Spring off the north bound lane of NYS Route 22 just north of the hamlet of Crown Point. The highway was built over the spring – not a very bright move but, hey, engineering can overcome anything, right? Wrong. The water wells up on both sides of the right-of-way while the road itself slowly sinks and requires periodic rebuilding, according to Town of Crown Point Historian Joan Hunsdon. A pipe captures the east side water and delivers it to a concrete-block shelter for the convenience of those who would partake of it (I would not). Painted large on the rear wall of this shelter is the universal "NO" symbol of a circle with a slash through it; and what is being slashed inside that circle are the initials APA.

The Crown Point area has long been known as a hot bed of anti-Adirondack Park Agency activism, so that particular sort of graffiti in that particular location was not a surprise. The APA is still resented in certain quarters because its regulations, meant to protect the integrity of the land, are seen as a taking of the land through the limitations they impose on the ways that land can be used. "No more APA land grab" is a long standing battle cry of the anti-regulationists. So one could surmise, I think not unjustifiably, that such a decoration as the one painted on the Indian Ridge Spring shelter was meant to convey a specific message, that message being: "This is our land, APA. We don't need you stealing it from us. Get the bleep out."

If you accept the premise that the purpose of the Park Agency's onerous regulations is to ensure (some might say "enforce") stewardship of the land – and many who oppose the APA do – you could view those regulations as a personal insult, a slanderous assumption from the power centers to the south that the native Adirondacker is too obtuse to grasp the concept of stewardship, congenitally incapable of caring for his or her own land, and therefore not to be trusted with its future disposition. This perception adds a second layer of resentment and gives rise to the following subtext to the message sprayed on the shelter at Indian Ridge Spring: "This is our land. We don't need you telling us how to take care of it. We can take care of it perfectly well ourselves."

As I said, this came as no surprise. It's all quite reasonable. It's just common sense. What did come as a surprise; what was – and is – quite unreasonable and defies any sense, common or otherwise, was what I saw fifteen feet to the east of the little shelter at Indian Ridge. There, in hideous counterpoint to what might have been, was a dense swath of trash ten feet long and three feet wide consisting primarily of plastic bottles that had once contained such wholesome products as motor oil, antifreeze, fabric softener, and soda pop (used as a pesticide in some third world countries). Immediately behind the shelter, in the small pools formed where the water percolates up from under the highway, were a beer bottle, paper coffee cups, an empty cigarette pack and God knows what else hidden by the tall grass. I looked at the graffiti in the spring shelter, and I looked at the swath of trash. I looked at the graffiti again, and I looked again at the trash. And yet again and again, in bewilderment, back and forth, until I perceived a final message in all of it. "This is our land. We don't need you telling us how to take care of it. We are perfectly capable of desecrating it ourselves."

For me, the saddest case is the Teboville Spring, just outside the Adirondack Park boundary in the Town of Malone. Here the water flows quietly out of a wound in the hillside and into a small, shallow, timber-sided but roofless reservoir. In other springs of this type, like The Watering Tub in the Town of Chesterfield or the Macmahon Road Spring in the Town of Westport, the water is then drained out via one or more pipes inserted through the downstream "wall" of the reservoir, continuing the natural direction of the flow. Here, uniquely, the water swirls down a pipe which opens from the bottom of the reservoir like a bathtub drain. Somewhere underground there is an elbow, and the pipe emerges from the slope some four feet below and six feet south of where it began, the water discharging over an ancient platform of wood and stone and concrete. Somebody clearly put a good deal of thought and care into this, not to mention labor.

On a late summer afternoon in 2004, I was photographing here when a silver-blue sedan pulled into the parking area. A man in his mid-thirties got out of the driver's seat, and from the passenger's side came a boy who appeared to be 12 or 13 years old. Father and son, they started walking toward the spring with their containers when the father stopped them short and asked me if they'd be interfering with my work. I said it wouldn't be a problem; would he mind if I photographed while they were collecting their water? He hesitated.

"Where're the pictures gonna be published?" he asked. "I'm not planning on publishing them," I assured him – which was true at the time, and may be still. "Okay," he said.

So they went about their business, and I went about mine; but, curious as to how someone with New Jersey license plates knew about a spring so far off the main highway, I asked the man if he owned a camp in the area. He said he did. He was loading his haul into his automobile when he paused, looked over at me, and said, "You know, until I came here, I never knew there was a place where you could drive up and get water from a pipe coming out of a mountainside." The tone of his voice indicated that he was still surprised by this fact and even a little awed by it. In response, I launched into a riff about the politics of water as a resource and how fortunate we were to have places like this one. "It's a wonderful thing, I concluded, finally. "Yes, it is," he concurred, probably not knowing what else to say; but I believe he meant it. Did he realize there were apparently plenty of people neither as surprised nor as awed as he? The evidence was all around us.

Each of the three times that I have come to Teboville Spring, the place has been more trashed than the time before – not so much right at the spring itself but along the woods' edge east and west of it, and even in the little creek that chatters down the drainage ditch across the road, where I once found practically an entire set of broken dinner dishes. Most of the junk consists of the ubiquitous beverage containers with a generous admixture of motor oil bottles. The parking lot is a spacious one, and it is well removed from human habitations – just right for a teenagers' party patch. But I can't blame the mess here just on youthful revelers. They don't usually bring detergent jugs and disposable diapers with them, and they don't normally drink very much Mobilelube.

On my last visit to Teboville Spring, there were large, blue plastic sealing strips scattered about. An inch wide and seven inches long with a fat tab at the end, they were the kind that hold the caps on five-gallon carboys – the big bottles that feed water coolers. Two of the strips were floating in the reservoir near the delivery pipe's intake. The reservoir is behind a tall, barbed wire fence which affords it some protection but is ineffective against wind and idiots. After all the open source springs I've inspected, never before had I seen human refuse in the source water – nor have I since. I reached through the fence and retrieved one of the strips, but the other was too far away. I left saddened and angry. Who the hell are the people who do this? It is the same question that has dogged me at McConley Spring and at The Watering Tub, at Lumberton and Gougeville and at Indian Ridge. When I see the messes that have been made at these places, I think of the man with the New Jersey plates who spoke with respect and wonderment of the privilege of getting his water from the Teboville Spring. Perhaps more of us need to live for a while in New Jersey – not the Pine Barrens or the hills and lakes of the northwest but in Patterson or Paramus, or in Camden, or along Chemical Alley. Maybe then we'd have a little more reverence for water coming out of a pipe from the side of a mountain.

WHY THE LONG FACE ?

We as a nation have been pursuing a lifestyle that is not only unsustainable; it is destroying the very resources and systems that would sustain us; and we are proselytizing for this lifestyle on a global scale, sermonizing it with the single-minded fervor of a tent-revival preacher on fire with visions of glory and a fat profit, so that the process of resource degradation and the pace at which we approach economic/environmental/social collapse is accelerating.

When I was younger and poorer, I supplemented my regular diet with fish I caught in nearby lakes and rivers. I wasn't worried about poisoning myself. After all, I was in the Adirondack Park, the largest park outside of Alaska, containing the largest tracts of roadless, undeveloped land east of the Rocky Mountains and north of the Everglades. The Adirondack Forest Preserve has now been in existence for 120 years, and it grows wilder by the day, a wilderness reclaiming itself.

But what of the fish? There are three thousand lakes and ponds in the Adirondacks. When I was catching those fish a quarter century ago, the seriousness of the acid precipitation problem was just beginning to impress itself upon us. Now, hundreds of our lakes are completely devoid of fish – dead lakes, they are called – murdered by trillions of raindrops, each carrying its load of nitric and sulfuric oxides courtesy of our exhaust pipes and power plants.

And where there are still fish to be found? We are being told not to eat them. Several species of fish in several Adirondack lakes were recently found to contain dangerous levels of mercury – this in water bodies that have never had a human habitation near them, much less an industrial site; but they are at the receiving end of towering smoke stacks far away that spew clouds of heavy metals into the sky – clouds which drift hundreds of miles eastward to turn the life-giving rain into an agent of death. Some health officials have warned that no fish should be eaten from any lake in New York State.

One of the fatal flaws in the evolution of our culture is the obsession with maximum return from minimum investment. We think we can get away with this or postpone the inevitable forever, but that's simply self-deception. Since we are unwilling to pay up front with cleaner automobiles and power plants, we pay later with dead lakes and toxic fish, crippled forests and asthmatic children and a future with fewer dividends and more liabilities than our grandparents would ever have imagined.

Our lifestyle, with its so-called comforts and conveniences, comes at a cost; and, in the real world – not the fantasy proffered to us by advertising agencies and media conglomerates, by neo-con ideologues and true-believing supply-side economists – the cost must be paid. How it is paid is up to us. We can calculate the cost honestly and pay it forthrightly, or we can habitually underpay or try to evade payment entirely – until the Planet to which we owe everything collects in Her own way. On that day, the immutable limits of natural law will make a case that all our smart and shifty government and corporate attorneys cannot win. Sadly, frighteningly, we are careening toward default of a magnitude that will require the repossession of much more than a few cars and condos. It is frightening because it will be terrible: implacably brutal, irrevocable, non-negotiable. It is sad because it could have been so easily avoided.

We have removed ourselves so far from natural systems, have allowed ourselves to become so dependent upon, so enthralled by our inventions and our networks and our "markets" that most of us give little if any thought to how we might survive without them.

In an angry lament called "Gavin's Woodpile," Canadian musician/poet Bruce Cockburn (pronounced CO-burn) sings about a group of native people, people wedded to the land, who are dying from mercury poisoning because the captains of industry and government are married only to the maximization of profit.

> "I remember crackling embers
> colored windows shining through the rain
> like the colored slicks on the English River
> death in the marrow and death in the liver
> and some government gambler with his mouth full of steak
> saying, 'If you can't eat the fish, fish in some other lake. To
> watch a people die – it is no new thing'."

This was written in 1976, and, though that kind of callous arrogance is a little less evident now -- thanks to spin meisters and P.R. firms -- the ignorance of and hostility toward Earth-centered lifestyles remain a leitmotif of our culture which will eventually turn around and kick us in the teeth; and, while we are shaking our heads at the fate of others, we seem to miss the obvious: that we are next in line.

THE TREASURE OF FRIENDLYVILLE

Late in July of 2004, I accompanied my wife Sharon O'Brien far afield from Saranac Lake and well outside the Blue Line to one of our state's larger cities where she was obliged to attend a work related meeting. I spent part of that time telephoning people who might tell me about springs we could visit on the journey home; but, after several calls, I was pretty much striking out. Finally, I got what seemed like a good tip.

When I found the White Vinyl Church Artesian Overflow, I was looking for something else. I had spoken with the Town Historian about my project, and she told me of three springs in her area. All were on private property, but the one in the hamlet of Friendlyville (not its real name) was accessible to the public.

We had come into Friendlyville from the east. I was supposed to be looking for a "little restaurant" somewhere not far past the post office. The spring was supposed to be right across the road. I never saw the restaurant. Nor did I see the spring. I figured this out when I found myself suddenly on the far edge of town. Just before the boonies began, there was a scurvy looking roadhouse on the right. There was nothing across the road from it except a sandy vacant lot inhabited by some junk. I decide the roadhouse was not the restaurant and the junk was not the spring, and I turned around for another pass.

Friendlyville did not appear particularly friendly to me. It had the look and feel of southern Appalachia. Poverty showed on the faces of more than a few of the houses. Though the hamlet was on a state highway, it was far from the major travel corridors. Most of the incomes here probably came from the lumber woods; a few from subsistence farms; a few from commuting to the nearest sizable village, which was not very near. There was no one here getting fat from the tourist dollar. Friendlyville had an insular and withdrawn air about it – the kind of place tourists would fail to even see as they drove through it.

I had noticed on our first transit of the hamlet that there was a little loop street off the south side of the highway. I had thought the historian had said the spring was right on the main drag; but maybe I'd missed something she had said as I spoke with her on a cell phone from a motel room far away. Maybe what I was looking for was down this detour. So I turned off the highway and drove along the loop. What I was looking for was not there. What I found was much better, but that was not immediately clear to me. To the right of a modest, old church, there was a big, new church. Vinyl skinned and aluminum steepled, it was by far the newest, shiniest building in Friendlyville. To the right of the church, there was a spacious, sloping lawn and, to the right of the lawn, a long scar of raw mud at the foot of which stood a crookt black plastic pipe spewing water down onto a broad, steel grate. This was a brand new installation – clearly not the spring about which the Historian had spoken. I parked and got out to take a closer look, camera dangling from my neck – the incontrovertible mark of he-who-does-not-belong.

To the right of the pipe, there was a smaller slice of lawn. To the right of that stood a house, white painted with a generous front porch. It was an old house, but it was well kept. It was not a shiny structure like the church, but neither was it sad like so many other houses in Friendlyville. It had a quiet dignity about it that captivated me, so that I almost failed to notice the 1970s vintage pick-up truck parked still farther to the right and pointed in my direction, nor the young man, a shadow of stubble covering his once-shaved head, tall, well-muscled, clad in a less-than-white tee shirt and obscurely-blue jeans, leaning petulantly against the driver's side door. I judged him to be about seventeen years of age and not particularly content with life and its unannounced visitations. I flashed him a bright smile as I imagined his head filling with questions like: "Who are you? Wadda you doing here? Wadda you think you're gonna do with that camera?" So I stepped forward and introduced myself and gave him my springs project spiel and told him what the Town Historian had told me and asked him what he could tell me about the crook-necked pipe and the water issuing there from.

He pointed to the house.

"Julia's home," he said. "She knows everything about the water. You go up there and knock on the door. She'll answer your questions."

I thanked him, and I went. I mounted the two front steps, pulled open the screen, strode across the wide porch, and stopped and knocked upon the big front door. And I waited. And I envisioned a grandmotherly lady who had grown up and grown old in this old house and knew all there was to know about Friendlyville and its pipes, crookt and otherwise.

The door opened, and there before me stood a slender, bright-eyed young lady, perhaps fifteen, with multicolored hair and a variety of piercings in a variety of places and saying "hello" to me with an expression of almost blissful inquisitiveness.

"Is Julia here?" I asked. "The young gentleman outside said she could tell me about that pipe out there."

"I'm Julia," she said.

"Oh! Well … I'm Phil Gallos. I'm from Saranac Lake." And I did the springs spiel again. I wrapped it up with: "The Historian -- Mrs. Whatsername -- told me there was a spring in town along the main highway across from a little restaurant, but I didn't see it. Instead, I found this pipe, here. Is this the spring?"

Julia explained that it was not the spring Mrs. Whatsername had described – that it was not, in fact, a spring at all, nor was the other.

"It's an artesian well," she said -- the fact of this seeming to both please her and infuse her with a gentle, innocent pride. "There's four houses connected to it, and the church. The spring you're looking for is an artesian well, too. It's there on the curve on the right. You'll see it as you go out. It's easier to see from this direction; but it doesn't put out as much water as it used to, not since we opened the well up here."

I did not regale her with my erudition about artesian wells. I did not tell her that the term "artesian" derived from "Artesium," the ancient Latin name for the French province of Artois where the first such water source was developed in the early 12th century and flows to this day. I did not pontificate to her that, though a human artifact, artesian wells are still considered springs because the water rises to the surface by natural pressure – so much pressure that the water can shoot up into the air like a fountain and overflow pipes, such as the one outside her house, have to be provided to prevent damage to plumbing systems.

"So this pipe is the overflow from the new artesian well?" I asked redundantly.

"That's right."

"Is that on your property?"

"No," she said. "The pipe belongs to the church. But the water belongs to everyone. You don't have to be a member of the church. Anybody can come here and take what they need."

How to describe the tone with which she said this. It was not preachy, but it was evident she saw me as a culturally deprived outlander unfamiliar with the concept of the commons, yet there was also an edge of amazement in her voice as though what she had just said was still a revelation to her as much as it might be to me.

I asked Julia if it would be alright to take some pictures of the pipe.

She said, "Sure. That's okay."

I thanked her and bid her goodbye and walked out to the White Vinyl Church Artesian Overflow to make my photos. Then I got in the car, and Sharon and I headed out the east end of the loop back onto the main highway. We saw then, as the road curved to the right, the spring I had come here to find in the first place; but I still didn't see any restaurant, and I did not stop. It was late, and there were many miles to home, and I wanted to think and talk about this backwoods no-horse town and its water belonging to everyone.

In the Tri-Lakes area – the most heavily populated part of the Adirondack Park – the Village of Tupper Lake has no spring. There are two popular springs outside of town; but, the better known of these, Lumberjack Spring, is nine and a quarter miles to the south, and the other, Cold Spring, west of the hamlet of Piercefield, is only a tenth of a mile nearer. Lake Placid has a spring, but it's off the River Road out by the Olympic Ski Jumps, not within walking distance for most Placidians – a consideration for a time when gasoline may cost $15.00 per gallon, if it's available at all. The Village of Saranac Lake once had a spring. It was less than a quarter mile from the heart of town, but the pipe was pulled out years ago and the spring's guts dug up and reburied. Now it's just a wet spot on the hillside. We are not proving ourselves to be the crown of creation when we do these things.

Though the well by the white vinyl church was drilled by humans and the pipe installed by humans, the citizens of Friendlyville would likely declare that God gave them this gift of pure water at the center of their community. Clearly humans had nothing to do with the tellurian pressure that pushes the water up through that pipe – a work of some superior power. Now, may their God protect these people from health department bureaucrats, insurance company actuaries, and litigious lawyers, agents of a system structured to enforce upon us all the same level of dependence. The people of this place may not have much; but, when the electricity goes away – and, one day, it may go away for keeps – they'll have the forest from which to take wood to heat their homes, and they'll have the soil for gardens to feed their families, and -- thanks to foresight and selflessness – they'll have a source of fresh, clean water within a short walk of most of their houses, a fount from which "anybody can take what they need." When there is no money, or the money there is has no meaning, this will be the real treasure.