

# A River Comes Clean, 1,000 Volunteers Later

by William Bole

(ANS) GREAT BARRINGTON, Mass. -- **When** Rachel Fletcher and a few friends started hauling trash out of the river here, people thought she was nuts.

The waterway hadn't been used for much other than dumping ever since the Mahican Indians (not to be confused with the Mohicans) blazed a path for Wisconsin in 1724.

"Over there," said Fletcher, pointing across the Housatonic River to the back of an apartment house, "some guys were sitting on lawn chairs, laughing and tossing beer bottles at us."

Now, eight years later, they aren't laughing anymore.

**Using their bare** hands, shovels and wheelbarrows, the people of this small town in western Massachusetts have cleared over 200 tons of rubble from their stretch of the Housatonic, a notoriously polluted river. They have built a scenic "river walk" trail right behind the town's main street.

And in what national observers say is practically unheard of anywhere else, they did it by the sweat of their own brows -- an all-volunteer feat. Even the beer guzzlers who heckled Fletcher cleaned up their patch of the riverbank.

"We want everyone picking up trash in the river, so the river will never be trashed again," said Fletcher, 48, who launched the citizen campaign dubbed River Walk.

The do-it-yourself thrust may be unique, but all over the country, communities are reconnecting with the rivers that run through them -- though normally with the aid of paid professional cleanup crews.

One sign of this rediscovery is the explosion of walking trails that link river and town. Ed McMahon of the Conservation Fund in Arlington, Va., said his organization alone has tracked several thousand of these "greenway" projects nationwide, and there are many more.

"A lot of people are starting to realize that this is both good for business and good for the environment," he said, referring to the role of greenways in revitalizing cities and towns.

This is typically a job for professionals: planners, excavators, landscapers and others.

In old mill towns like this, "You always knew what color dye they were using (for the textiles), because that was the color of the river."

"It's pretty unique" for regular citizens to do it all as volunteers, said McMahon.

But they did it here, against long odds.

Like many other New England towns, Great Barrington was built with its back to the river. Legend has it that anyone who fell into the filthy Housatonic was shunned for a week.

In old mill towns like this, "You always knew what color dye they were using (for the textiles), because that was the color of the river," said Victor McMahan of American Rivers, Inc., an environmental group in Washington.

"People knew it as a place to throw their junk," said Comstock Small, 76, who was contrary and would row his boat down the river, "for exercise." Small is now a river volunteer with 800 hours of service under his belt.

Things began to change when Fletcher was volunteering for the Community Land Trust, a nonprofit group that owns a historic house on the river. The trust acquires private land for public use, and yet its own land on the riverbank was full of junk.

Struck by the irony, Fletcher and others rolled up their sleeves. "We were just cleaning up our own backyard," she explained.

After that, teachers at Searles Middle School asked Fletcher to come down stream and clean their bank. "I said, 'No, but we'll train your students to do it,'" Fletcher recalled.

Frankly, she noted, "It would have been a whole lot easier for us to do the job ourselves." Their true goal was to teach a lesson about civic spirit and environmental stewardship to the 70 eighth graders.

"Those kids just worked like crazy, hauling out vines and enormous amounts of trash. When they were finished, there was this beautiful nature walk," said Fletcher, a professional designer of outdoor spaces who devotes 20 hours of each week to River Walk, for no pay.

**That is how** the river trail, 825 feet and extending, has been made: step by step, stone by stone. No feasibility studies, no grand schemes, no big contractors. A pittance of public funds has helped with the purchase of wood and other materials; private contributions have handled the rest.

Over one thousand volunteers, half of them school-age children, have put in time on the trail. A few local experts, including a landscaper and nature trail designer, have given guidance free of charge.

In deep rubbish, they have pulled out votive candles and flowers from St. Peter's Catholic Church; and cigar boxes and perfume bottles from the old Melvin's Drugs, which burned down in 1978 -- dropping 78 tons of debris in the river.

The attraction of a scenic trail, with benches and canoe docks, has been great for business

One volunteer discovered a Native American hunting spear while excavating soil used in laying the trail.

For the first time since the Mahicans, people are feeling drawn to the river.

"I like to come down here and eat snacks, before choir practice (at St. Peter's)," said 12-year-old Jesse Drew, a Searles student who on a recent Saturday morning was not snacking, but lugging stones for a fence along a new spread of trail. Later on she planted ferns and asters with other volunteers.

And the attraction of a scenic trail, with benches and canoe docks, has been great for business, said Erik Bruun of the Main Street Action Association, which is now planning a separate hiking and biking trail in another part of town.

For all this, Fletcher credits the strong work ethic of this primarily working class town of 7,500. Others hand the credit back to Fletcher and her ability to inspire: "You don't want to let Rachel Fletcher down," said local environmentalist George Wislocki.

At a town gathering in September, a young woman walked up to Fletcher to say thanks for having led her on the civic and environmental path. Fletcher didn't recognize Keira Ritter -- seven years older than when her eighth grade class created the nature walk behind Searles Middle School.

Now an architecture student, Ritter is helping to draft a new town policy on the use of "open spaces," such as parks and farmland.

"We had imagined they (the eighth graders) would be our future leaders, doing the environmental work -- and there she was," Fletcher said of Ritter. "When that happened, I said to myself, 'Yeah, it's been worth it.'"

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