

HOUSATONIC RIVER WALK

THE HOUSATONIC RIVER

Speech of W. E. DuBois '84 at the Annual Meeting of
the Alumni of Searles High School, July 21, 1930.

On hearing the subject of my speech, some of you may have thought of it as a joke: and others may have expected an historical disquisition on the history of this valley; but my speech is neither of these. On the contrary it is a bit of philosophy, a little inquiry into the meaning of life in this valley, brought to my mind because of the condition of the Housatonic river. I am not going to try to answer all the questions which I raise, but I do want to bring them to your minds.

In the earlier days, even before this anniversary we are celebrating in Massachusetts now, this valley must have been a magnificent sight. The beautiful mountains on either side, thickly covered with massive trees, and in the midst of it all, the Housatonic river rolling in great flood, winding here and there, stretching now and then into lakes which are our present meadows and so hurrying always on toward the sea. And I think everyone would realize then and now that the river was the center of the picture. In a sense the mountains exist for the river; and no matter how much one might climb their sides, they look back upon the river as the central beauty of the panorama.

What has happened? The thing that has happened in this valley has happened in hundreds of others. The town, the whole valley, has turned its back upon the river. They have sought to get away from it. They have neglected it. They have used it as a sewer, a drain, a place for throwing their waste and their offal. Mills, homes, and farms have poured their dirt and refuse into it; outhouses and dung heaps have lined its banks. Almost as if by miracle some beauty still remains in places where the river for a moment free of its enemies and tormentors, dark and exhausted under its tall trees, has sunk back to vestiges of its former charm, in great, slow, breathless curves and still murmurs. But for the most part the Housatonic has been transformed into an ugly disgraceful thing. We have crossed it with bridges of unbelievable ugliness, we have choked the flow of its waters, and we have done this not only by filling up the river with refuse, but by denuding the guardian hillsides of their trees and shutting off the brooks.

I remember one brook in particular, for indeed, the whole Housatonic was close to my boyhood days. With every real Great Barrington boy I was initiated into the mystery of water by swimming across the Big Bend. Always when I come back here I go down to look at the river in spite of the indignation and almost physical nausea which most of it invariably causes me today and then I remember that brook.

It came down from the slow sloping of the western hills; it wandered miles up Castle Hill way, through grove and meadow, and finally *mirabile dictu* it went right through my front yard. That brook had everything to delight a boy's soul, rushing falls, gurgling murmurs, placid bits of lakes on gravelly beds, trees, bushes and little waterfalls. It was a complete and long and magnificent brook, and it brought its waters down the hills and through the yards and across town and emptied them at last in triumph into the Housatonic.

And then the world, this valley world of ours, began to thwart and check the brook. I remember the angry despair of its murmurs when in that front yard they put up ugly walls to confine and half bury it. They sent it under Main Street in dark lonely culverts, they worried it and narrowed it and suppressed it and filled it up, until at last it died. Like a crippled, pale and living thing, it disappeared and is not.

Now what is the meaning of this? Of course as I said before, the thing has disappeared in a hundred places. I remember being away in Jefferson City, Missouri years ago. The magnificent wall of river, longest in the world, which is the Missouri-Mississippi came down past the city, and the city rejected it; it turned its back upon it. It faced the dull dust of the prairie and it used to Missouri for sewage and freight trains. But there came at last a man with a vision, and when the new state house was built, he set its plaza right out on the bluff facing the magnificence of the river, facing the whole golden west. Since that, diffidently but evidently, the city has been trying to turn around.

I have just been to Harvard, celebrating a class anniversary, and when in Boston I got lost. This is of course, a common occupation in Boston, but I was particularly out of patience that I should become lost on the way to Cambridge, because Cambridge I know much better. But Cambridge deceived me on account of the Charles River. In my student days the Charles river was nothing; it was a little lazy, neglected ditch, but only for the mockers of Cambridgeport. No real gentleman from Harvard ever paid any attention to it.

Thus, very easily I was deceived and misled because the Charles river had become a park, flanked by beautiful driveways, crossed by the arching of graceful bridges. In other words, it had taken its place as forming a natural center for the beauty of Cambridge and Boston. Of course in those college days there were a few people on the Boston bank of the Charles who received the sunset on the waters into their back yards with a certain hospitality; but they were quite exceptional and queer, while now the whole river has come into its own.

One might multiply these instances. Washington has only quite recently discovered the Potomac. Pittsburg still regards the Ohio as a canal. The Hudson is still a sewer but the boulevards east and west are beginning to broider it. Philadelphia has found the Schuylkill and may yet discover the Delaware.

Abroad, the rivers have so long been worshipped that we forget the day when the Seine was anything but the great central highway of Paris, and the Rhine unthought of as a story of German civilization and progress. Even where rivers have been made to slave for men and carry their burdens, cities have learned that these hives of industry can be made also things of beauty. St. Louis, Memphis, and New Orleans are discovering this with the Mississippi, and I have stood on the park above Nijni-Novgorod and seen the panorama of the Volga. The city was torn and maimed by war and famine and civil strife, but the park and river were still beautiful.

What now is the meaning of all this for Great Barrington? I conceive it a much more important matter than it may seem at first. I left New York this morning and rode up into this valley with the same feeling that I always bring—that here is a more ordered and satisfying solution to the problem of living than in the hot and crowded and dirty city. Cities are artificial; they are nerve-racking with noise, they manufacture by their very organization more social problems than their ingenuity is able to settle. Here is a great country; over nine-tenths of its area is empty and the rest dotted by these notoriously congested centers called cities that civilization has conceived and carried on.

But is this necessary? Why can we not in valleys like this, have as efficient a life and surely one more gracious and satisfying? Evidently we cannot because no sooner does one stop here any time than one begins to feel the bonds, the frustration of effort, the impossibility of effectively carrying out of ideas and wishes and dreams. Why is this?

It is impossible for us to answer this offhand. Many of the reasons are bound up with our imperfect technique of industry and communication; with matters of education and of human contact; and so we go on leaving the country and rushing to the city, raising our sons and even our daughters with no idea of keeping them home—it seems so perfectly rational to send them away to the hives of human culture.

But I wonder if one phase of our difficulty is not illustrated by our treatment of the Housatonic. We turn our backs upon the natural center of the river and try to make the center Main street. Mr. Sinclair Lewis has proven to us that Main street can not be the center of real civilization. And for this valley the river must be the center. Certainly it is the physical center; perhaps, in a sense, the spiritual center. You know we are judged by what we neglect. The new gown may be quite perfect but the other matters of dress betray the untrained and uncouth. Perhaps the very freeing of spirit which will come from giving up our attempt to do the impossible, from our ignoring of our greatest source of beauty and completeness, and degrading it with filth and refuse, perhaps from that very freeing of spirit will come other freedoms and inspirations and aspirations which may be steps toward the whole vast problem of country life and the diffusion and diversification and enriching of culture throughout this land. Even if this vision sounds fantastic to the severely practical, certainly the cleansing of the Housatonic will mean better health, less typhoid, safer recreation and lovelier vistas of beauty.

Indeed, I have already noticed two matters which may indicate change. I am not quite sure why the Searles High school was built upon the banks of the Housatonic. Perhaps of course it was simply another way of carrying out the idea that school houses are to be hidden. In the West one often sees an imposing high school building in the main thoroughfare of the city, but not so here. We made our school houses in apologetic places and perhaps that is why this school was built on the banks of the Housatonic instead of on Main street. On the other hand, it may be that some thoughtful person saw far beyond the present and grasped the idea that they were putting the institution on what was the natural great highway of the valley. They may have looked forward to the time when parks and boulevards would line the redeemed river; when the best people would not attempt to climb the hills to get away from the valley, but turn about and descend to its gracious invitation; when public buildings and canoes and pleasure boats and swimming children would make the whole valley glad and the river would come into its own again.

And there is a second bit that is helpful. On the steep slope of the river in the upper part of the town there is a house where I lived for awhile, with blood dripping from its windows, blood or red paint and down back of that old house was a magnificent view, vast, dark trees and pools and rocks. A few years ago coming into town I found that just about this mystery nook of my youth, somebody had placed a little playground, the merest shadow of a thing, so tiny that I fear children are a bit in awe of it; at any rate it is usually empty; yet that tiny bit foreshadows a whole park system. It is strategically placed, challenging the dirt of the factory above, and greeting the high shore opposite. Below is my pool. With this beginning we may in time clear the river, give the Searles High school its perfect setting. We may even induce the mills (if we can find out who owns them) to stop pouring their refuse into the river, which is merely a habit and not a necessity.

And so I have ventured to call the attention of the graduates of the Searles High school this bit of philosophy of living in this valley, urging that we should rescue the Housatonic and clean it as we have never in all the years thought before of cleaning it, and seek to restore its ancient beauty; making it the center of a town, of a valley, and perhaps—who knows? of a new measure of civilized life.

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