

JANUARY 29, 1955



THOREAU ON MADISON AVENUE

By JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH

Not long ago it was considered beneath a man to labor in the fields, subject to the cold and the sun; witty and ambitious boys flocked to the cities from their fathers' lands. Today neither his own psychiatrist nor modern playwrights, sociologists, or poets seem to be enthusiastic about the life of a city-dweller—the "luncher at 21" whose \$30,000 a year presumably shackles him to an intolerable life. The team of Krutch-Thoreau is particularly sour on the subject of the Madison Avenue ethos. The Krutch side of this equation is, of course, Joseph Wood Krutch, critic, essayist, and dweller-in-the-desert, whose last book was "The Best of Two Worlds."

NOT long ago the shade of Henry David Thoreau visited me at midnight, as it occasionally does. As usual I broke the silence, but our conversation seems to me worth reporting.

ME: Well, Henry, this is an important day for you.

HENRY: I never knew a day that wasn't.

ME: The same old Henry, I see. I really should have anticipated that one. But I had something less transcendental in mind. I mean that it was just one hundred years ago that "Walden" was published.

HENRY: It was also just a hundred years ago today that I met in a bean field the plumpest woodchuck I ever saw. I didn't eat him, but I thought to myself that if I did eat meat I would want it to be some such savage meat as that.

ME (dryly): I have read your "Journal." But you were a writer after all. You did hope for some readers—for rather more than it seemed likely you would ever get. How do you like being the author of an accepted classic?

HENRY: A classic is a work which everyone acknowledges the obligation

to read and nobody thinks it necessary to take seriously. The New Testament is generally regarded as the most indispensable of classics. It is read every Sunday in churches and, occasionally, even in private. But if it were once actually heard by any congregation not a stone would be left standing of that church—or of any other.

ME: Oh! Come, come. It is generally admitted that your influence has been tremendous. Your writings are said to have been accepted as Bibles by many modern reformers, including the founders of the British Labor Party.

HENRY: And I have just reminded you how much influence Bibles really have.

ME: At least it must be a satisfaction to remember that your defense of John Brown carried some weight. And the slave was freed.

HENRY: From one of his masters, but not from himself. It is hard to have a Southern overseer; it is worse to have a Northern one; but worst of all when you are the slavedriver yourself. Abolition may possibly have



"You know, Eldridge, since you elected yourself a champion of the cause of peaceful co-existence you've been impossible to live with!"

saved the souls of the masters in the other world; but I cannot see that it contributed much to saving the souls of the slaves in your world or the other. Nowadays they hope they will someday be regarded as "just as good as anybody else." I never heard of a less exalted ambition.

ME: Well, there's still the Labor Party, anyway. You were a kind of socialist. And all Labor Parties applaud when you say, "I cannot believe that our factory system is the best mode by which man can get clothing . . . since, as far as I have heard or observed, the principal object is, not that mankind may be well or honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that corporations may be enriched."

HENRY: Yes, indeed. And when I lived in Concord many of the neighbors who existed there with me picked and chose among the Gospel sayings. But they never took enough to change essentially their way of life. I never heard it maintained by any sensible man that anywhere in the United States life was lived as Jesus intended it should be. And I doubt that life in any socialist country would please me better. Where today are men any less exclusively concerned with getting and spending? What else does what they call "a higher standard of living" amount to? What necessities of the soul that money can't buy are they trying to attain? Where have they learned that what mankind needs to know is not how to be rich, but how to live well in poverty?

ME: Perhaps all that will come in time. One must begin somewhere.

HENRY: What I do know is that one must not begin at the wrong end. One should put first things first.

ME: What is the right end? Where should they begin?

HENRY: Simplify. Simplify. Wise individuals have done that from time to time. But what society has ever voluntarily taken one step in that direction? More things for more people is the noblest ideal any modern reformer has ever been able to think of. He supposes the curse will no longer be a curse if only everybody is cursed with it. But that is not what is implied in "Walden"—or in a much older book. Who can truly say that he was ever "influenced" by either my life or my writings if he still believes that the need of mankind is for still more things? In my day the mass of men led lives of quiet desperation. The lives of such men are less quiet in 1954, but they are no less desperate. And this is what you call Progress. The mud-turtles in Massachusetts have not changed. But they are no worse than they were when I admired them for their persistence in the ways that mud-turtles had found best for their kind. Would I could say the same for those men who are now said to live in New England.

ME: But, Henry, our society could not possibly simplify—even if it wanted to, which it certainly doesn't. That

agricultural economy which was one of the few things in Concord village you approved of could not serve the needs of one-third the population of the United States—to say nothing of those in distant parts who now depend upon us for so many things. Not all the machines yet invented are more than barely sufficient to keep abreast of the needs of a constantly growing population.

HENRY: And neither will all those you may manage to invent in the future do more. It is for want of a Man that there are so many men.

ME: You can hardly be serious. You are extravagant.

HENRY: It is because I am serious that I always try, in vain, to be extravagant. No extravagance can be adequate to the plight of man. His potentialities are so great that no one can imagine them; his actuality something that makes angels weep and sent even me to mud-turtles and woodchucks for fellowship. How can such facts be moderately stated?

ME: It is not your judgment upon us that I question so much as the practicality of your proposals for improving our condition. Do you think that letting most men die of want would produce a Man? Do you hold even ordinary lives that cheap?

HENRY: Not so cheap as your world holds them. Does not that world show plainly enough that it regards them as freely expendable? Has it not improved the methods of mass destruction even more spectacularly than it has improved the methods of agriculture? Does it not act as though it had come finally to the conclusion that it is simpler to slaughter populations than it is to feed them?

ME: Perhaps, perhaps. At least it is a platitude to say so.

HENRY: That honesty is the best policy is a platitude also. And none the worse for that.

ME: I suppose so. But I still don't see how we could possibly simplify. It has become too difficult. We have gone too far.

HENRY: It will not get any easier. Is having gone too far a good reason for going further? Or is that an act of desperation? It is not the part of wisdom to do desperate things.

ME: Not all men today feel desperate or even pessimistic. The future looks very bright to some. Only the other day some representative of a highly optimistic group sent me through the mail a whole sheaf of optimistic pro-

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Recollections of a River

"The Susquehanna," by Carl Carmer (Rinehart, 493 pp. \$5), latest in the Rivers of America Series, retells the lore and legend of a great river that runs from New York State through Pennsylvania and into Maryland. John Bakeless, who reviews it below, is the author of "Daniel Boone. Master of the Wilderness" and other books on the American past.

By John Bakeless

ASPIRITED and interesting book, with a fine feeling for the human and historical values in purely local lore, Carl Carmer's "Susquehanna" is a worthy addition to the forty-seven volumes in Rinehart's ever-lengthening Rivers of America Series, and his second contribution to it, his first being its best seller, "The Hudson." The present book tells the whole story of the river, from the day when Captain John Smith, adventuring into its mouth, chatted with raiding Indian war parties in their canoes, down to the day before yesterday. Here are the best treatments to date of several small but interesting bits of American history. One of these that chimes a

startling contemporary echo is the story of the defeat of the miner-terrorists, the Molly Maguires, through the spying of a young Pinkerton detective who, like Herbert Philbrick among the Communists, worked for years in their innermost councils and then testified against them in court. Making war against owners in the name of labor, the Mollies had quickly become a kind of Irish Mafia, assassinating foremen, policemen, owners, and other miners who disagreed with them, spreading an atmosphere of lawlessness that Conan Doyle used in his Sherlock Holmes story "The Valley of Fear."

Another, gentler episode in forgotten local history is the rise of the community of Azilum, founded by aristocratic fugitives from the French Revolution. Here in a pleasant group of farms and log cabins the emigrés worked, played Mozart and Scarlatti, cultivated the simple virtues that Rousseau taught them to seek in this wild paradise, and raised a huge log palace intended to be a refuge for Marie Antoinette. But the hard facts of economics ruined their dream, and Napoleon's amnesty for emigrées gave it the *coup-de-grace*. Its founder perished in command of a French ship under Nelson's guns off Egypt, and the settlement sank back into the wilderness.

Mr. Carmer gives us serio-comic vignettes, too. There were wars between Pennsylvanians and Connecticut invaders who crossed the Hudson and beat their way over mountains and through swamps to stake out rich farms in the Wyoming Valley. Back and forth the Connecticut settlers trekked as they won and lost skirmishes with the "Pennymites" before and during the Revolution, stolidly rearing new cabins on the ashes of the old, planting new crops, and raising new forts. With total disregard for Pennsylvanian rights, the Yankees set up a miniature New England, with town meetings and selectmen, and even claimed that they were part of Litchfield County.

Although Connecticut extraterritoriality was eventually submerged in Pennsylvania history, civil war once again erupted within her borders when Copperheads and other Confederate sympathizers were rumored to have established a bastion of secessionism in the mountains near Bloomsburg



THE AUTHOR: Ever since the mid-Twenties Carl Carmer and Americana have been a thing. It was back in those Coolidge days that Carmer, a Hamilton College alumnus then teaching English at the University of Alabama, shed his professorial gown to go to work mining three million square miles of folkloric deposits, an adventure he related the other day in prose and song. "The things that happened around Tuscaloosa were obviously folk material out of which poetry could be made," he reminisced. Gregarious, observant, and earminded, he promptly made "One Night in Calera" out of Tuscaloosa's colorful and rhythmic carryings-on. "Calera," a narrative about razorback hogs that represented Carmer's switching from "pretty" to "Americana" poetry, was dispatched posthaste to *Poetry* but Harriet Monroe just as posthaste rejected it. Who, as the saying goes, should turn up but Carl Sandburg—ambling about the Alabama campus. Sandburg, learning about the poem, pocketed it when he left, and days later Carmer received a blue postcard from Miss Monroe. "'All right, I'll let your dirty pigs run through my clean pages,' it said," Carmer recalled happily. "God, suddenly I thought I was a writer, I thought I was a poet, Harriet even encouraged me to write more!" Over the years Carmer, who in the period following his valedictory to classrooms worked on the *New Orleans Item-Tribune*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Theatre Arts Monthly*, has written a dozen books or so based on a recipe of folklore and history compassionately stirred. "Deep South," in 1930, and "Stars Fell on Alabama," in 1934, cut Carmer's niche in literature. With Stephen Vincent Benét, he helped edit the *Rivers in America Series* after the project was launched, taking over as editor when Benét died in 1943. Carmer, when he isn't editing or writing, is fond of giving informal tours of his "Octagon House" in Irvington-on-Hudson, N.Y., a lovely eight-sided specimen of architectural Americana dating back to 1860. Line forms to the right.

—BERNARD KALB.



—By Stow Wengenroth, for "The Susquehanna."

"... up the river and down the centuries."