

States of the Union

DELIBERATE PLEASURES

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



HENRY DAVID THOREAU

THIS is what Diane and I did on our summer vacation. First we attended a wedding in the Maine woods, the guests wore Dacron slacks, the bride wore white satin. Then we drove “athwart the fields” (Thoreau) to Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom, stopping for a night at Lake Seymour Lodge, an inn of six bed-

rooms and one bath. After that we made rendezvous in the New Hampshire mountains with the bride’s parents, the four of us lolligagging on a wraparound porch with a view of cows in the foreground and of eternity beyond. Finally, we headed south for Cape Cod, there to spend a few days in a cottage overlooking miles of mudflats.

My notebook is barely legible, full of Thoreau and gritty with the sands of Wellfleet.

The Wedding In a clearing in the woods at Flying Moose Lodge we sit on folding chairs and watch as Janet MacColl and Harrie Price IV exchange vows. Janet is a knockout, a slim parabola of white amid the pines. She reminded some of us of Rema in Hudson’s *Green Mansions*—nature’s child and every old-fashioned man’s daydream. Harrie is trim, balding and very happy.

We sense that the ceremony is a hybrid, part Presbyterian and part Quaker, but it is not always easy for a Jewish secularist to separate the strands. The audience’s failure to stand as the bride glides by on Stewart’s arm seems a bow to Quakerism, if one can bow while

seated. Likewise the opportunity each of us has been given to stand and speak. (Someone, a friend of the bride’s family, rises to assure Jane that “the Price is right.”)

For the Presbyterians there is Stewart, who doubles as minister and father of the bride. And for the rest of us—transcendentalists, ecologists, civil libertarians—there is Thoreau’s stern wisdom, read to us by Janet’s kid sister, Linda.

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived”—as had poor Firs, for instance, the old servant in Chekhov’s masterpiece. Even though Firs lived next to a cherry orchard, he never ventured into the woods. “Life has slipped by as if I hadn’t lived,” he mutters at the conclusion of the play. “I’ll lie down a bit.”

I wonder what Thoreau’s last words were. *Open the window. I think I hear a different drummer.*

After the ceremony some of us go for a swim in the gleaming “pond” below. (In Minnesota we’d call it a lake.) I am an earthbound bather who can swim no further than the exact length of the indoor pool in which I took lessons as a child. From the shallows I watch my friends challenge the deep. “While men believe in the infinite, some ponds will be thought to be bottomless.”

The Northeast Kingdom Lake Seymour is a genuine lake, replete with beckoning islands and arcane coves, and surrounded by densely green hills. In the fall, we are told by our Innkeeper, the hills turn all the colors of the rainbow. “It’s incredible,” he says. “It makes you want to cry.”

Diane and I borrow the Innkeeper’s aluminum canoe and paddle around the lake. For a while we sit on a large rock, a hunk of sun-bleached schist, sipping vodka and lemonade out of a leaky paper cup. All is remarkably quiet, except for the sound of a small airplane, a skywriter exploring the deep sky. We watch as the pilot scrawls a

single long streak, white and puffy across the blue

"There's a writer with nothing to say," Diane remarks

"He's not the first," I murmur

Back on the lodge porch we enjoy the sunset with the Innkeeper's Wife and her mother, both former public school teachers from Dayton, Ohio "George and I managed a canoe rental business every summer," the wife explains, "but we didn't own it, somebody else did, and after eight years we had nothing to show for it, even though we'd tripled their profits

"We thought maybe we could do something on our own Besides, teaching in Dayton was getting harder and harder The kids were really rough We didn't have any cause to stay in Dayton, and we didn't want to move to the Sun Belt—*everybody* was doing that So here we are in the Northeast Kingdom "

They went to Vermont to live deliberately

Whitefield, New Hampshire Another state, another porch From here we can see much of the Presidential Range, which Henry Thoreau visited twice—in 1839 with his brother John, and again in 1858, after the area had become a popular vacation spot "The scenery in Conway and onward to North Conway is surprisingly grand," he wrote "You are steadily advancing into an amphitheatre of mountains "

On the summit of Mt Washington Thoreau noted that "a cloud invested us all," but found to his delight that by looking downward he could see the sky "There was a ring of light encircling the summit, thus close to the rocks under the thick cloud, and the evidences of a blue sky in that direction were just as strong as ordinarily when you look upward "

The scene today is less pleasant, as William Howarth has pointed out in his book, *Thoreau in the Mountains* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), "for high-density development has come to Mt Washington Parking lots, offices for the carriage road and railway, a museum, a weather observatory, a TV and radio installation, and a new summit

building—all cluster together on this valuable piece of altitude " Howarth neglected to mention the thick black smoke that now envelops everything and everyone, a product of the narrow-gauge tourist railroad and its coal-fired locomotive

On the trail that leads downward, writes Howarth, "hikers have left a hand-lettered sign of protest 'Coming Soon McDonald's '"

One sunny day Stewart and I drive to Bethlehem Junction for nine holes of golf, while Diane and Jane go off somewhere to pick blueberries Downtown Bethlehem is a place of contrasts Girls in pink shorts share the sidewalk with bearded Chasidim in black kaftans (there's a Chasidic summer retreat nearby), classy art galleries thrive cheek by jowl with X-rated movie houses Like its 3,000-year-old namesake, the town seems a pressure cooker for competing *isms*, with hedonism on top at the moment

Stewart and I are in the mainstream, today preferring par to philosophy The golf course is one I have played before, but neither wisely nor well

"Keep your head down," Stewart admonishes me after I have taken two futile swings at the ball "Don't look up "

"But then I won't see the mountains," I point out Stewart smiles and shrugs, a gesture indicating the hopelessness of my outlook If you want to be Jack Nicklaus, you better ignore the scenery

The next morning we have blueberry pancakes for breakfast

Wellfleet At dusk I don sandals and trek with Diane to the mudflats, where thousands of oysters are rumored to be ready for kidnapping and eating Within seconds we have sunk shin deep into the ooze, my sandals leaving my feet with a melancholy sucking sound

"Are you sure this is the way the oyster-terms of old did it?" I ask Diane

"Don't be smart," she says, flailing at the mosquitoes

In time we discover an oyster bonanza, scores of grayish-white shells poking out of the sludge We fill our pot with two dozen of the largest, aware that the

town has imposed a three-inch diameter minimum on oyster diggers

As we march back to the cottage with our catch, Diane raises the question of whether oysters can move on their own power The answer, I learn later, is Yes and No It seems Thoreau posed the same question to an octogenarian oystererman in Wellfleet in June 1857

"Can oysters move?" he asked

"Just as much as my shoe," was the answer

Not one to let sleeping oysters lie, Thoreau quoted a naturalist named Buckland, who in "Curiosities of Natural History" observed that "An oyster, who has once taken up his position and fixed himself when quite young, can never make a change Oysters, nevertheless, that have not fixed themselves, have the power of locomotion, they open their shells to the fullest extent, and then suddenly contracting them, the expulsion of the water forwards gives them a motion backwards ' In other words, jet propulsion in reverse

An old Wellfleet oystererman and his wife lived less than a mile from our present cottage, on the shore of a freshwater pond where residents and tourists still swim The couple gave Thoreau and his companion beds for a night and in the morning served them a breakfast of eels, buttermilk cake, cold bread, green beans, doughnuts, and tea

The host turned out to be a Bible reader and quoter, although like many of the guests at the wedding we attended, he had chosen no nameable doctrine He told Thoreau that "he had been to hear thirteen kinds of preaching in one month, when he was young, but he did not join any of them—he stuck to his Bible "

Later the man asked Thoreau's companion to what sect he belonged "Oh, I belong to the Universal Brotherhood," the companion answered

"What's that? Sons o' Temperance?"

Diane and I clean and shuck our oysters and eat them more or less deliberately, washing them down with a bottle of ale apiece The Sons o' Temperance are not our oyster, but for a few moments, at least, the oyster is our world