

## **Walden Pond (Psst--Its Not What You Think It Is)**

*Wetland Journal* , Winter, 1999, Vol. 11, No. 1.

by Patrick C. Garner

I had never visited the great pond before. On a spectacular Saturday morning in 1996, I drove to Concord, Massachusetts, to visit Walden Pond. The spring sky was just turning blue as the sun rose. I was tempted by the mild weather, and driven, I now know, by misplaced romanticism. The outing was in a true sense a pilgrimage. My anticipation grew. I turned off Route 2 at the park signs, vaguely worried by the heavy traffic at that early hour. I waited in a long line of cars to turn into the parking lots. As a park ranger waved me forward, I glanced at my watch: 7:25 am.

Since I was a child, Walden had loomed for me as the penultimate ecological icon. Walden! The name evokes images of the Shangri-La of the American continent. Walden is the veritable birthplace of environmental consciousness, an extraordinary locus where the sublime Thoreau suggested that Nature was not our foe, but an ally, not a dark force to be beaten back, but a marvelous force to be admired.

I had first been enthralled reading Thoreau as a child in New York. Later as a young teenager in Kansas, I wandered the Missouri River collecting arrowheads, imagining myself as Henry David. I walked the sandy banks, thousands of miles from Massachusetts, adding to my collection of points as he had done from the plowed fields of Concord in the 1840's. Later in my teens when I lived in Georgia, I hungered for the New England hardwoods I hardly knew.

Without doubt this Sunday visit was decades in coming. Yet no one had told me that Walden was no longer Thoreau's magic sanctuary.

In fact Walden Pond is a major urban park with a dual purpose and a schizophrenic soul. The park keepers, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management (DEM), perpetuate the myth that Walden remains Thoreau's meditative center. A replica of Thoreau's cabin sits beside the parking lot. The store near the parking lot sells books by and about Thoreau.

Rock celebrities who periodically stage concert benefits to "Save Walden Pond" buoy the myth. Yet far from being a place of contemplation, the pond is visited by more than 600,000 people a year. The vast majority of these visitors appear solely in the summer months. In spring and summer, hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people spin cast for stocked fish in the pond, lining the banks shoulder to shoulder. They compete with hundreds of families who come to swim at the artificial beach near the road along the eastern edge of the park. In good weather, Walden Pond is a mass of humanity, a stew of frantic motion, boom boxes and squealing children.

In fact, what Massachusetts fondly calls "the birthplace" of environmental consciousness is a giant swimming pool, an over-fished fishing hole, a park masquerading as a

contemplative shrine. If you are seeking solace and peaceful communion, never make the mistake I did of visiting Walden on a beautiful spring weekend.

That morning I crossed the busy road from the parking areas to the pond. A paved walkway led to the pond's edge, and then turned into a gravel foot trail, which wound around the length of the pond. As far as I could see, the pond was lined with people fishing. Men, women, children were throwing weighted lines into the water. Bait cartons were carelessly bobbing in the water. Ignoring no-access signs along steep embankments, men grabbed shrubbery and lowered themselves down to the edge. A typical idealist, I was overwhelmed with sadness.

Since that time I have visited Walden Pond a dozen times, driven to understand my own feelings and to understand the policies, which govern the use of the park. Once I took my mother, who was visiting from out-of-state. She had had a similarly naive vision of the pond, however well prepared by conversation before we arrived. A world-traveler, she was remarkably disappointed.

On cold or rainy days the pond is often empty. I will sometimes take the 35-minute walk around the pond then. The area is relatively quiet, and with the exception of an occasional jogger, the trails are usually clear. Inevitably I think of Thoreau, imagining him kneeling at the water's edge, poking a branch into the glassy surface, perhaps looking up at passing geese. Or I imagine him coming toward me through the fog on the trail, wearing a woolen coat and cap, nodding as we pass. But the images are forced, and I am always reminded of a personal conviction I now have that Walden, the one we imagine, existed only for the two years he spent there. Even more, I wonder if Walden, the one of myth and of our idealism, isn't simply an invention, a spirit given substance through Thoreau's insights and analysis.

The pond has recently experienced a major renovation. The work will be completed sometime this year. Plagued by years of erosion and neglect, the pond had become a notable eyesore. Vegetation was beaten back by fishermen, large areas of the shoreline were barren, random trails had been cut like cobwebs through the adjoining woods. DEM has endeavored to change that, carefully applying contemporary restoration techniques and using outside expertise to restore the most sensitive wetland edges. Bioengineering techniques are being tested, and the overall trail system simplified. Indigenous vegetation, particularly the numerous species cited by Thoreau in his writings, are being heavily planted. Although it is too early to judge the long-term success of these efforts, the restoration effort itself is encouraging.

Did the Walden we imagine ever exist? Or is our cherished pond simply the masterwork of a genius that wove words wonderfully? Perhaps Walden is a necessary social invention, and like Shangri-La, is a mythos that continues to tap deep human emotions.

In fact, Thoreau uncovered natural analogues, inventing an environmental ethos that had not previously existed. That ethos is a reflection, a revelation of a curious and powerful aspect of the human spirit. Thoreau's perspectives and insights are those of science

coupled with compassion, and of genuine love fused with admiration for the endless diversity of Nature. We know now that Thoreau was one of the first ecologists. His feelings are those that many of us still feel when we hike through any conservation area. Yet those revelations so patiently scribed long ago could have been etched from observations of the barren pinelands of New Jersey, of the badlands in Nebraska or the granite ravines of Vermont. The small, controversial park that remains in Concord is incidental to the revelations that flowed from it.

Our idealizations are a key element of our personal ethics. The best become a touchstone. Without them we are less.

I was wrong to equate the ethos with the place. Obviously, things change. Yet an iconic spirit such as Thoreau's far surpasses the confines of any geographic point.