

This river is tough to love - at first

Sunday, September 19, 2004

By **BOB IVRY**
STAFF WRITER

Let's be honest. If you're even thinking of paddling the entire 70-plus miles of the Passaic River, you must be nuts.

"Most of my friends were flabbergasted," says Steve Garufi, who kayaked from the Great Swamp to Newark Bay in 2000. "They thought it was a stupid thing to do."

Garufi's friends were right - to a point. Like New Jersey, the Passaic River can be tough to love. But after experiencing it so intimately, it turns out to be charming.

"Nobody seems to care about the Passaic," he laments. "There really is a lot of beauty there."

Only a few people have done the whole river, which is part of the cachet. It's not a health hazard, really, unless you go goofy and start drinking out of it. And the river's very Jersey juxtaposition of breathtaking nature and revolting industrial yuck will appeal to any contrarian willing to defy the seemingly inbred dismissiveness most of New Jersey has for the "P'sake."

While the river never really challenges an experienced boater, it does provide its thrills. The stretch of the river that winds through the Great Swamp is serene and flat. From there, it offers rapids (in Millington Gorge), rocky shallows (south of Chatham), a dozen points where trees block the river, necessitating carries through calf-deep mud, a slalom of two dozen submerged supermarket carts (Paterson), a game of dodge-the-tugboat (Newark), and countless mysterious floaties (everywhere).

"I had Huck Finn dreams," says Garufi, a Fairfield native who now lives in Colorado. "As a boy, I was always going over the river on bridges. It hit me that paddling it was one of my life's dreams. That was my boyhood river."

Joe Filippone, the son of Ella Filippone, director of the environmental Passaic River Coalition, canoed the Passaic in 1980 with the late Frank Sudol to study its defilement.

"Frank and I took 300 photos and printed a document of what we saw," says Filippone, who was 16 at the time. "Frank submitted it to an official who issued tickets to people who dumped pollutants into the river."

Ten years later, Filippone and Sudol did the trip again.

"There was a lot of improvement in the river's condition," Filippone says.

If you go, be prepared to recognize very few landmarks, even

THE PASSAIC RIVER

Once the force that powered America's industrial independence from the Old World, the Passaic is now New Jersey's forgotten river. Bob Ivry paddled its length, from the Great Swamp to Newark Bay, and found serene beauty, optimistic plans for the river's future, homeless men camped on riverbanks, foul-smelling sewage - and bureaucratic inertia on what to do to stem chronic flooding and clean up pollution.

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those you know well as a landlubber. Be prepared for the roar of highways as you float beneath them. Be prepared to be virtually invisible to people on shore. Be prepared for a symphony of strange smells: butterscotch, ammonia, grape jelly, hamsters, overripe cantaloupe, prunes, and the froggy, moldy scent of treated sewage. And be prepared for the creepy sensation of floating on other people's urine.

Be prepared, too, for irony - among the main perpetrators of pollution are bobbing water bottles, ubiquitous because tap water from the river tastes so dodgy.

On the river, Filippone divined the scope of humankind's journey from ancient simplicity to contemporary complexity.

"As you progress downstream, you see the evolution of man," he says. "You go from the peaceful serenity of the Great Swamp to modern homes and then to industry. It gives you an interesting perspective on things."

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An old, ruined waterway

Sunday, September 19, 2004

By **BOB IVRY**
STAFF WRITER

First of four parts

Help me understand something. Please. Let's say you had a blowout and you bought a new tire. Now you have an old tire you don't need. What do you do with it?

You walk down to the Passaic River and you pitch it down the bank?

This, apparently, is a widespread method of tire disposal in North Jersey and has been for decades. Just a couple of years ago, 4,000 tires were hauled out of an 800-foot stretch of river between Paterson and Fair Lawn.

That's no typo. Four thousand.

What the heck is going on?

We say we love our environment. We say we favor having a clean Passaic River. But the physical evidence says otherwise.

We hate the Passaic River.

We toss our trash there. We dump our sewage. We dam it. We divert it. We curse it. We ignore it as we crisscross over it on our tangled mane of roads and highways.

But here's the thing. The Passaic River is a ribbon of serenity flowing through the bubbling hubbub of North Jersey. In the Great Swamp, near its source, it's lush and bursting with life. It supplies 800,000 people with drinking water. And even along its stinkiest stretches, it supports a surprising variety of wildlife and aquatic flora.

It's a repository of memories, a place where grown-ups have taught kids to fish for generations.

It's living history - the Passaic's rushing waters powered America's first industries and made possible this country's economic independence from the Old World.

It's an opportunity - river towns like Clifton, Passaic, Paterson, and Newark have awakened to the potential of their riversides to reinvigorate commerce and polish their images.

Before that happens, though, the river needs an extreme makeover.

Antiquated sewage treatment systems that spew raw waste into the Passaic on rainy days have to be retooled. Flood plains paved over with parking lots and factories and houses - robbing wetlands

THE PASSAIC RIVER

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of their ability to absorb and purify excess rainfall - need to be returned to nature.

The toxic crap - and "crap" is hardly strong enough language to describe it - needs to go. The nastiest pollutant is dioxin, formally known as 2,3,7,8 tetrachlorodibenzodioxin, an Agent Orange byproduct that was released into the river by Diamond Alkali at its old factory in Newark.

This potent carcinogen has been floating in the 17-mile tidal stretch of the Passaic, from the Dundee Dam in Garfield to Newark Bay, and settling in its bottom mud for a generation. And where are we now? In the midst of another study, undertaken this time by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, to identify the river's myriad problems and get back to us with a new set of proposals to mull - in 2008.

We already know what we need to do. The question is: Does the Passaic River mean enough to us to spend millions, perhaps billions, to do it?

To find an answer, I set out to paddle the river's 77 miles.

River of no respect

The Passaic River has never gotten much respect. The first clumsy maps of the region, drawn in 1611, showed the Hackensack River but not the Passaic. When George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette stopped by the Great Falls in 1778, a Lafayette aide described it as "the meek falls of the Passaic."

The Dundee Dam was built in 1859 in Garfield, and neighbors used the resulting lake for swimming and ice skating. But by 1920, it was deserted, considered "a cesspool, unfit for human visitors," according to Norman F. Brydon, author of "The Passaic River: Past, Present, Future."

Disrespect has also delayed the EPA's current study of pollutants. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers pledged \$4.5 million to the project but has actually contributed less than \$500,000 over the last two years.

Even folks who live by the river give it scant respect.

"You talk to mayors and council members in these river communities and they know every street in town. It's almost a prerequisite for their jobs," says David Epstein of the Morris Land Conservancy, an environmental group. "But very, very few know the river. It's a forgotten river."

As I kayaked the Passaic with various companions, we often felt invisible to land dwellers. Many times we waved at people on shore, but they never saw us. They seemed conditioned never to look at the river.

Environmental groups notice the disconnect, too. The Passaic River Coalition recently launched a "Face the River, Fix the River" campaign. It includes an initiative to turn riverside park benches around so they face the water.

"That would allow the public to reconnect with this tremendous resource as if it were our front yard, rather than a backyard dump," says Greg Remaud of the NY/NJ Baykeeper, a watchdog group with an office in Keyport.

A modest goal, to be sure. But that's where we stand today. Three hundred and thirty-eight years

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after Robert Treat led a boatful of British settlers from Connecticut to establish a village in what is now Newark, we're still introducing ourselves to the Passaic River.

North Jersey's great outdoors

Most people don't believe the Passaic River can be a place to play. The truth is, anyone with a boat can legally paddle the length of the river.

The fishing can be gratifying - as long you check state advisories before eating anything you catch. Carp, pickerel, smallmouth bass, and northern pike thrive. One fisherman, Michael DiNonno, 28, of Moonachie, reports hooking brown trout in Little Falls.

"Most people don't fish the river because they think it's poison, but it's surprising the wide diversity of species you find," DiNonno says.

Perhaps it's inevitable in an era of increased concern about pollution that young people lack the feeling for the river that past generations felt.

"When I was a kid, the river was my life," says Jack Parzek, a 56-year-old computer programmer who grew up in Wayne. "I fished and boated on it all the time. We went camping in the Great Piece Meadows, before Route 80 came in. We felt like we were in the deep woods when we went up there. It was a great place to go for a kid."

Bill Anderson, a 56-year-old banker raised in West Caldwell, remembers getting up at 3 or 4 in the morning to check his muskrat traps before high school. He'd get up to 98 cents a pelt, depending on the color.

"Muskrats were everywhere," Anderson says. "Back then, the river was used primarily for recreation."

Like Parzek, Anderson blames Route 80 for splitting the meadows and ruining his fun.

"Route 80 forever changed the water flows to and from the Great Piece Meadows," Anderson says. "Before that, it was magnificent grassland used by Dutch farmers for sheep grazing."

Before the Dutch farmers were the Lenape Indians, whose presence has pretty much been erased. One exception is a V-shaped configuration of rocks in the Passaic River visible from the Fair Lawn Avenue bridge. Called the Fair Lawn-Paterson Fish Weir, it was once used by the natives to catch fish.

There's no telling exactly how old it is, but Anthony DeCondo, a retired teacher from Elmwood Park who has studied the weir, estimates that it was built at least 300 years ago and may be as old as 3,000 years.

"Out of 10 or 11 rock weirs in the Passaic, this is the only one that hasn't been destroyed," DeCondo says. "During the early 20th century, when they were developing the area, they'd drive heavy equipment over the weirs. They didn't know what they were damaging. Even walking on them is a no-no."

Just upstream from the weir, in the Great Falls section of Paterson, fabric and grist mills were built starting in 1791 along a series of raceways - brick-lined culverts that diverted rushing water around the falls to turn the wheels of industry.

Today, the footprint of Alexander Hamilton's dream survives in Paterson's Raceway Park. The culverts have been preserved, and visitors can stroll the area and read interpretive signs that explain the development of America's first planned industrial city.

But nowadays, weeds grow in the culverts and mosquitoes breed in the stagnant water. And hardly anyone visits.

High water everywhere

Tires, sewage, dioxin, neglect. What's next?

How about floods?

Most of the Passaic has, at one time or another, overflowed its banks and wrecked farmland, factories, homes, and roads. But the most inundated stretch has to be the Two Bridges area, where the influx of the Pompton River swells the Passaic even in normal times.

Since the mid-1930s, the Army engineers have been tinkering with the Passaic and its tributaries - the Whippany, Rockaway, Pompton, and Saddle rivers, among others - trying to come up with a magical solution.

The biggest obstacle is development. Roughly half the 40,000 acres in the flood plain is covered with houses, supermarkets, offices, and malls. So, instead of natural wetlands that soak up excess water - and filter the impurities - rain runs off roofs and asphalt and drains directly into the river.

"You're never going to stop flooding," says Paul Tumminello, the Engineer Corps' Passaic River project manager. "Our goal is to reduce it and do so without having an adverse impact on the environment."

The corps' grand scheme to stem floods was a \$2 billion, 21-mile tunnel, from Wayne to Newark Bay, to divert water when the river got too high.

Gov. Christie Todd Whitman quashed the idea in 1996 as too expensive and too, well, weird. So the corps turned to Plan B: Buy up property in the flood plain. If it's vacant, keep it that way. If it has buildings, tear them down.

So far this year, \$1 million has been appropriated.

Even if that were anywhere near enough cash to buy much of value in the land-mad economy of North Jersey, where even flood plain property can be pricey, there's another hitch: The corps has only one guy doing the real estate deals.

He works part time.

And he's based in Baltimore.

TOMORROW: Idyllic Upper Passaic marred by floods and wastewater.

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A world of beauty, sewage, and floods

Monday, September 20, 2004

By **BOB IVRY**
STAFF WRITER

Second of four parts

Every spring, the Passaic River comes lap-lap-lapping at Jesse's door.

Once in a while, the water overwhelms the door and heads for the kitchen and living room. In '84, it climbed the stairs and made itself at home on the second floor.

But Jesse has no worries. It's not as if he's going anywhere. Not like two of his neighbors on Camp Lane in Fairfield. They took advantage of the state's Blue Acres program, sold their houses, and left. The state tore the houses down, part of a plan to reduce flooding. The homesites are now a grassy lot - a perfect place for Jesse and his friends to launch their fishing boats.

As for the house, Jesse says he's waiting for his father to die so he can fix it up the way he likes.

"I'll put it on stilts and fish off the deck," says Jesse, who agreed to talk with us but asked that his last name not be printed in the newspaper.

Why does he stay?

"Are you kidding?" he responds. "Look at all this natural beauty all around me. I'm living the life."

High water aside, Jesse has a point. The upper Passaic River - from its origin in Morris County to its confluence with the Pompton River at Two Bridges, just downstream from Jesse - has a lazy charm and relatively clean water. Compared to the lower Passaic, whose banks are crowded with crumbling cinder blocks, leaky junkyards, and abandoned warehouses, the upper Passaic is idyllic.

Yet it has persistent and growing problems. Floods have engulfed riverside communities for centuries. Five major sewage plants spew wastewater into the murky flow, and recent tests on downstream water revealed the presence of harmful phosphates. And efforts to make the river cleaner and less prone to overflow are both underfunded and underwhelming.

The first two days of our four-day, 77-mile trip are spent paddling the upper Passaic. The river begins as a trickle near the Mendham High School athletic fields and becomes deep enough for kayaks at Lord Stirling Park in Basking Ridge.

The Passaic's genesis is Edenic. Floating the flat water where it snakes along the western edge of the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, we kept pinching ourselves. Can this really be

THE UPPER PASSAIC RIVER

From its hidden headwaters in Mendham to its confluence with the Pompton River at Two Bridges in Fairfield, the Passaic River offers many natural delights for the intrepid recreational boater. But that's not to say the region is problem-free. Floods loom during every big storm, and five major sewage plants spew treated waste into the muddy flow.

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New Jersey?

Two great blue herons let us chase them upriver. Willow trees lean into the narrow channel, brushing us with feathery leaves. Lavender marshmallow flowers, which would look good tucked behind a jazz singer's ear, wave in the breeze.

Ebony jewelwings - damselflies with iridescent green bodies and velvety black wings - play zigzag tag. Crickets whine. Spider webs with strands as thick as ropes span the limbs of a fallen birch.

From the swamp, the river winds through the back yards of hoity-toity towns like Chatham, Florham Park, and Livingston. Along the way, it serves as the border between Morris County and a trio of its neighbors - Somerset, Union, and Essex counties. Past Horseneck Road, which spans Montville and Fairfield, it enters the Great Piece Meadows, where the Fairfield Sportsmen and Conservation Club leases land for hunting and Wildlife Preserves Inc. keeps thousands of acres out of the hands of developers.

A generation ago, the Great Piece Meadows were seemingly endless, undulating fields of tall, blond grass. The description no longer fits. The construction of Route 80 split the meadows and disturbed their drainage. Today, they are a boggy forest, with poison ivy climbing the trunks of towering red maples. Kingfishers dive-bomb the water for their meals, and frogs plop into the river ahead of our boats.

We paddle past a sewage treatment plant in Long Hill Township that pumps 800,000 gallons of wastewater into the Passaic River each day. About 1.8 million gallons a day pours out of another, in Berkeley Heights. At both places, we are struck by the strong aroma. The smell is unmistakably what it is: human waste.

As stinky as these treatment plants are, they've been updated by their well-to-do communities. Some downstream cities like Paterson and Newark still use antiquated sewer systems, which can result in combined sewer overflows, or CSOs. Sewage and street runoff travel the same pipes, and during heavy rain, treatment plants are swamped. They shut down to prevent sewage from backing up into homes, so the raw sewage has nowhere to go but straight into the river. Treatment systems in the upper Passaic can handle sudden flow increases and thus avoid dumping untreated waste into the river.

Even so, alarmingly high levels of phosphates, from human waste and fertilizer, have been detected in the upper Passaic, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is spending \$900,000 to determine how to remove phosphates.

Phosphates are harmful because they promote excessive growth of weeds, algae, and bacteria, which deplete the oxygen that fish and other aquatic animals need.

While inadequate sewage treatment may be to blame for a percentage of the phosphates, runoff from suburban lawns is culpable for the rest.

"Even if you live 20 miles from the Passaic River, the fertilizer you put on your lawn will affect the water," says Joan Ehrenfeld, a professor of wetlands ecology at Rutgers. "What you put on your lawn, how you dispose of oil from your car, how well you clean up after your dog - it all has a major effect on the regional watershed."

Raising the stakes: 800,000 people in 23 towns use 83 million gallons of river water each day.

To recap: we pour sewage into the river, then we cook, bathe, and drink from it.

That may sound strange, but Joe Bella, executive director of the Passaic Valley Water

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Commission, says the situation is not unusual.

"In the eastern United States, it's hard to find a water system that doesn't have sewer outflows upriver," Bella says.

The water commission is unveiling a \$72 million treatment plant in Totowa, just below the Little Falls dam. It will use ozone for disinfection - an update on 100-year-old chlorine technology.

"There's no question about it, water taste and odor need improvement," Bella acknowledges. "The new facility will accomplish that."

Environmentalists counter that a better way to ensure palatable drinking water is to clean up the river rather than treat what's taken from it.

They urge preservation and restoration of swamps, marshes, and bogs. Wetlands filter and purify water. They also act as sponges, storing excess water during floods.

By contrast, developed areas retain little water. Rain drains off roofs and pavement, adding to flooding.

That's why government agencies are buying up the flood plain. Before it ran out of money, the state's Blue Acres program bought 100 homes and tore them down. Now the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has stepped in, identifying some 300 properties along the upper Passaic for possible purchase.

One problem is that Gerry Bresee, the corps official in charge of the program, has only \$1 million a year to spend. Plus, he works in Baltimore and, by his own estimate, is in New Jersey "about two or three days every other month - or whenever it's necessary."

Not only that, he's targeting properties that are already owned by municipalities - "the easier deals," he calls them.

This strategy baffles critics, who say they're impatient with the corps' progress.

"Why is the Army corps trying to buy land from local governments?" says an environmentalist who asked not to be identified. "It's land that's not going to be developed anyway. What about all the private land? We want the corps to buy land that's in danger of being developed. Otherwise, the money - and the land - will go away."

Bresee says the corps wanted to get those "easier" deals "out of the way" before concentrating on buying private parcels. But, he acknowledged, this year's \$1 million hasn't been spent, which means a similar allocation may not be forthcoming in next year's budget.

"It's use it or lose it," Bresee says.

Bresee's colleague, Paul Tumminello, the Passaic River project manager for the corps, says the floods will never be completely tamed. He warns that the corps isn't likely to get a handle on the problem "for a couple of decades."

"It's time to plan," Tumminello says, "and coordinate with local communities."

All that planning - or planning to plan - means more flooding for Jesse and his neighbors on Camp Lane. More moving their possessions to higher ground at the first sign of a gathering storm. More sloppy cleanup. More hassles.

And more fishing.

"The floods are part of life," Jesse says. "They don't bother me. As long as the fishing is good."

The unwanted find haven beside the abandoned

Tuesday, September 21, 2004

By **BOB IVRY**
STAFF WRITER

Third of four parts

Martin DeRosa was a welder. After a car accident four months ago, he couldn't work. He lost his job. Then he lost his apartment.

Since June, he has lived with 10 other men and a dog named Terry on the banks of the Passaic River in Paterson.

"It's not so bad," DeRosa says with a shrug.

DeRosa is a small man. Soft-spoken. On the third day of our four-day paddle from the headwaters of the Passaic River to Newark Bay, he offers to help launch my kayak into a shallow but hard-rushing stretch of the river alongside the encampment. He's bare-chested. He has sores on his body - festering bug bites that he picks at. He wears a baseball cap and walks pigeon-toed through the camp. His home.

The men - all of whom speak only Spanish, except for DeRosa, who was born in Brooklyn - live on a patch of hard-packed earth surrounded by tall weeds beside a rocky embankment that descends sharply to the river. They sleep under a sheet tied to four sticks. When it rains they still get wet.

The day I visit, two men wearing only briefs are bathing in the river. They laugh as they soap up. Two others sit under the sheet on kitchen chairs without backs. Another picks through overripe fruit in a cardboard box balanced on a milk crate. Clothes and blankets hang on sawn-off tree branches lashed together horizontally to make a rustic fence along the river.

Trash is strewn on the bare ground, under bushes, on the rocky river edge. Yellow plastic grocery bags. Paper napkins. Foam takeout containers. Brown beer bottles.

Toilet paper.

Human waste.

DeRosa gestures downstream. We're in the heart of Paterson, not far below the Great Falls, on the southern bank of the river. "We don't go over there," he says. "The black guys live there."

DeRosa explains that one of the black guys was drunk one night and hit one of his Latino friends in the eye with a bottle.

"Most of those guys are all right," DeRosa says, indicating his downstream neighbors. "But that one guy was drunk. So we don't



JAMES W. ANNESS / THE RECORD

▲ Wally, who has lived on the banks of the Passaic River for nearly three years, playing solitaire under Route 21 in Wallington recently.

OUT OF SIGHT

The Passaic River flows mostly hidden from the view of North Jersey residents, who are usually conscious of it only when they're crossing the water on roads and highways. Also hidden are dozens of homeless people, whose encampments dot the lower part of the Passaic.

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go over there."

Once a day, DeRosa and his companions cross the river on the Main Street Bridge for the meal they get from the Northside Chapel. Most mornings, they line up on a nearby corner, waiting for contractors and landscapers to drive up and hire them.

The men risk being arrested for loitering. DeRosa says that's a day in jail and a fine none of them can afford. But he also knows he can make \$80 cash for a day on a construction site.

"We do the jobs nobody else wants to do," he says. "You should see what they have me weld."

Most days nobody drives by, and they get no work.

DeRosa's encampment is just one of many places along the lower part of the Passaic that attract men who have nowhere else to go. Forgotten men on the forgotten river. We paddle past five or six camps, but that's just what we can see. Just as foliage and steep riverbanks often obscure the river from people walking or driving past, there are also places where people can hide from boaters.

Scouting a route to carry our kayaks around Little Falls, we stumble upon a young man sleeping under the Union Boulevard bridge. He has luggage and bedding. He's had an argument with his girlfriend, he tells us, and has nowhere else to go.

The location of the old Allied Textile plant, within spitting distance of the Great Falls, is notorious as a hangout for sometimes violent vagrants.

In Garfield, just downstream from the Dundee Dam, a riverside clearing has been outfitted with a dome tent and a clothesline. Two men wave as we paddle past.

In the small slice of Wallington on the west side of the river, a man has set up a shelter under Route 21. He shares the space with geese and ducks, which waddle up the concrete bank to beg for food scraps.

Man and bird inhabit a loud, filthy cavern formed by an overhanging section of Route 21. It stinks of car exhaust. At the bottom of the concrete bank a canal flows. Its water is flat, lifeless. Amber-colored clots float on the surface - raw sewage.

The water out in the river's mainstream is muddy, but in the canal, with unnavigable origins somewhere in the concrete jumble of sewer culvert and highway overpass, it is as clear as ... water. It's only a foot or two deep, and all the trash lying on the bottom is visible in the sunlight - half-buried tires, scraps of burlap, corroded machine parts, a mangled baby stroller.

Paddling down the narrow canal, with a rocky shore leading to an abandoned factory on one side and Route 21 high above my head on the other, I can't help but wonder what tragic story might explain the sunken baby stroller.

Back in Paterson, Martin DeRosa complains that the police come by and harass the men. They don't arrest them, or ask them to leave. They pick on them.

The policy of the city of Paterson, according to Mayor José "Joey" Torres, is not to harass the homeless, but to move them out. Get them help. Offer them social services.

"We go out, we see them, we take down their camps, and they come back," Torres says. "They're violating the law and endangering themselves and the public."

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Torres acknowledges there isn't enough space in the city's shelters to provide a roof for everyone who needs one.

"It's a problem," Torres says. "A social problem."

■

A week after meeting Martin DeRosa, I head back to his camp on the riverside. I want to ask him more about his life.

What are his plans for when the weather turns nippy?

Has he been able to find permanent work?

He's gone.

In a vacant lot next to where the Latino men had carved out their makeshift home, workers are setting up carnival rides for the weekend's Puerto Rican pride celebration.

The tall weeds that hid the encampment from the street have been ripped out and plowed over. Tracks from heavy machinery chew the hard-packed earth where the men had slept.

The only sign that anyone had lived there are the brown beer bottles, still littering the riverbank, and the sheet that had provided protection from sun. Most of it is buried in the dirt. The corner still exposed is tied neatly around a stick.

Tomorrow: Signs of resiliency amid the chemicals.

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Floating in a Superfund soup

Wednesday, September 22, 2004

By **BOB IVRY**
STAFF WRITER

Last of four parts

Every 30 seconds, a plane roars overhead.

The site of the old Diamond Alkali chemical plant lies beneath an approach to Newark Airport on the southern bank of the Passaic River.

On these eight acres, wedged between a freight container graveyard and a Benjamin Moore paint factory, Diamond Alkali made Agent Orange, the defoliant used to lay bare the Vietnamese countryside. A toxic byproduct of the manufacturing process made its way into the river.

Most of the poison settled into the mud. A lot of it flowed upriver with the tide. Some went downstream and contaminated Newark Bay. Some even backed up into the Hudson River.

Today, the factory is gone. It's a Superfund site now. A high concrete wall stands where land meets water, topped by a chain-link fence.

On the other side of the fence is more concrete, bright white in the sun. On the concrete sit a dozen round concrete planters, each with a small evergreen tree growing out of it.

It looks like a mausoleum. A tomb for the poison. With Christmas trees on top.

After paddling most of the 77 miles of the Passaic River - starting in a serene wonderscape, three days previous - to come upon Diamond Alkali so close to the end of the trip feels like a punch to the head. Even the stinkiest stretches of the river suggested the vibrancy the Passaic once had, and the beauty that might one day return.

But at Diamond Alkali, the suggestion is only of death.

One river-day previous, paddling through a horrific part of Paterson, with shopping carts and car tires littering our path and rank industrial stench making us woozy, Debbie Mans of NY/NJ Baykeeper told me, "The river is resilient. It's coming back to life whether we want it to or not." And I believed her, even in the midst of all that garbage.

But at Diamond Alkali, I see that people can kill a river.

Despite the best efforts of a lot of well-intentioned people who have dedicated years of their lives to the resuscitation of New Jersey's most historic waterway, the Diamond Alkali site has remained one of the most notorious hot spots in the country for a generation.

THE LOWER PASSAIC RIVER

The tidal portion downstream from the Dundee Dam in Garfield is dominated by controversy over who's going to clean up the dioxin left in river sediment by Diamond Alkali's Agent Orange plant in Newark. But there's more to the region, including surprising signs of life in a part of the river that was more or less given up for dead.

PART ONE

- ▶ [An old, ruined waterway](#)
- ▶ [This river is tough to love - at first](#)

PART TWO

- ▶ [A world of beauty, sewage, and floods](#)

The culprit: 2,3,7,8 tetrachlorodibenzodioxin. Better known as dioxin.

Dozens of nasty compounds swirl and settle in the Passaic River. We may never be able to name them all, figure their exact concentrations, or even identify all those responsible. So far, 31 companies have been fingered as polluters and are on the hook for part of the cleanup cost. But the real show-stopper is the dioxin from the old Diamond Alkali factory.

Dioxin causes cancer. There's no safe level of exposure. It's tough to get rid of. It gets into fish, and if we eat the fish, we eat the dioxin. And if flooding or dredging were to roil the mud, the nasty stuff would be kicked up.

And we are kayaking right through it.

Dioxin got into the groundwater here, too. After capping the dioxin under concrete on the old factory site, workers have sucked 3 million gallons of tainted water out of 10 wells over the last three years. They clean the water, then spew it into the river from a 2-inch-wide white plastic pipe at the downstream end of the property.

On the afternoon we paddle by, an employee leans against the chain-link fence, some 10 feet above the river, smoking a cigarette.

At low tide, he says, you can see the mud. It's deep and sludgy.

"You fall in there," he adds with a chuckle, "they'll never find you."

Over the years, Diamond Alkali has changed names as often as a criminal on the lam. Diamond Shamrock. Occidental Chemical. Maxxus. Chemical Landholdings. Now Tierra Solutions.

The company has spent about \$50 million studying contamination in the lower Passaic, according to spokesman Michael Turner.

In June, the 31 companies responsible for polluting the river, including Tierra, contributed \$10 million toward a study by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency of contamination in the 17-mile tidal stretch of the Passaic, which starts at the Dundee Dam in Garfield and ends in Newark Bay. The EPA hopes to make the findings public, but not before 2008.

"We want to come up with a cleanup and restoration plan that's well-coordinated," says David Kluesner, an EPA spokesman. "We don't want to rush into something and have to redo it because the area gets recontaminated."

Nobody has ever accused anyone of rushing into cleaning up the Passaic River. For a long time the Passaic has been a forgotten river, the subject of more talk than action. Environmentalists like Ella Filippone of the Passaic River Coalition would prefer that the cash be spent on doing something rather than on studying doing something.

"Start dredging," Filippone says. "Now. Not 10 years from now. Start below the Dundee Dam. That can be dredged while they deliberate about trouble spots farther downriver."

But a recent Tierra study found that trace amounts of dioxin were still getting into the river from a point upstream of the Tierra site.

"If there's ongoing contamination, what good will it do to take stuff out? It would be pointless,"

PART THREE

▶ [The unwanted find haven beside the abandoned](#)

▶ [A hydro plant by the Devil's Path](#)

PART FOUR

▶ [Floating in a Superfund soup](#)

says Turner, the Tierra spokesman. "We're up to paying our fair share, and we will, but there's a lot of responsibility for polluting the river."

Despite its long history of abuse and neglect, the river is showing signs of resiliency.

Optimistic proposals dot the lower Passaic. Paterson plans to refurbish the Great Falls area. Garfield wants to build a park near the Dundee Dam. Clifton may set aside 3½ acres on Dundee Island for a wildlife refuge. Passaic is putting in soccer fields. The MetroStars soccer team is building a waterfront stadium in Harrison, and improvements in riverfront parks are on drawing boards in Lyndhurst, Kearny, and Newark.

A trash removal program, run by Bob DeVita of the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission, employs two skimmer boats - one docked at the Newark plant, one at the Nereid Boat Club in Rutherford - that pick up about 150 tons of floating garbage each year. DeVita estimates that volunteers and staff collect another 300 tons.

"Little by little the skimmer program is working," DeVita says. "Trash is the No. 1 impediment to recreational use of the river."

Passaic River enthusiasts have a simple plan. Modest, even. Put in park benches that face the water. They want people to stop turning their backs on the river. The hope is that the more people get to know the river, the more people will love the river. And the more people who love the river, the better its chances for survival.

Such efforts are meaningless, however, unless the river can be cleansed of the garbage no one can see or smell. Like 2,3,7,8 tetrachlorodibenzodioxin.

At the end of our fourth day of paddling, the Pulaski Skyway rises from the muddy water like a 1939 World's Fair vision of the science-fiction future - the Swamp Thing fitted out in Erector-set iron. Paddling under it is breathtaking. With its height, its breadth, its sky-filling majesty, it is awesome and ugly, dreamlike and nightmarish.

Paddling beyond it feels bittersweet. We are on our final push to the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission plant on the banks of Newark Bay, where we'll pull the kayaks out of the water one last time.

A headwind kicks up, pushing 2- and 3-foot waves toward us. One after the other after the other after the other they roll at us, nudging the bows of our kayaks upward and slapping them back down.

The water smells a bit like treated sewage, that froggy, moldy scent so familiar from earlier points in the river, starting with the Long Hill Township treatment plant three river-days before. But now there is also more than a briny hint of the open sea, too. We're almost there.

Far off to our left, the broccoli-green trees of Kearny Point mark the Passaic River's confluence with the Hackensack River and the beginning of Newark Bay. To our right is Newark - the scary, industrial, forgotten neck of town. A gas refinery hisses. A dog barks ceaselessly, small in the distance. He strains against his rope tether, dancing madly at the crazy sight of us floating on the water. Beyond him lies a junkyard. Flattened cars are stacked two stories high, like Pringles, and on another pile a yellow school bus slouches. Its engine compartment is crushed and a hole is punched in its roof, as if a giant fist had thrust through from the inside.

A plane roars overhead. The sun burns a hole in the clouds. Its rays spread like a flower and the light dusts the wave tops with silver.

It's beautiful. Disgusting, too. But beautiful.

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Save the Passaic - now

Monday, September 27, 2004

AFTER centuries of neglect, abuse, and flagrant pollution, the Passaic River has been trying to make a comeback.

The Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission and volunteers have been collecting an estimated 450 tons of debris - 450 tons! - from the lower part of the 70-mile-long river. Several towns want to build riverfront parks and ball fields. Slowly but surely, municipalities are upgrading antiquated sewage treatment plants that dump raw sewage into the river every time there's a heavy rain. And there's even an effort to turn around the park benches along the river so that they face the water instead of looking away.

But as Staff Writer Bob Ivry reported in his four-part series last week, the river is battling inertia and indifference. Too many people, too many government agencies, too many polluting companies, have turned their backs on the Passaic River for far too long. The biggest offender was no doubt Diamond Alkali, now owned by Tierra Solutions, which released massive amounts of dioxin into the river several decades ago. This cancer-causing chemical is so toxic that there's no safe level of exposure.

There have been plenty of studies on the dioxin pollution, and very little action. State DEP Commissioner Bradley Campbell has a plan on the table that would go a long way toward cleaning up the worst section of the river - the 17-mile stretch from the old Dundee Dam in Garfield to Newark Bay. He wants to dig a pit at the bottom of Newark Bay, dredge the dioxin-tainted parts of the river and put them in the pit, and then cap it.

The federal EPA has a different idea. It wants to study the pollution some more, out of concern that recurring contamination would undermine the clean-up effort. In June, Tierra Solutions and 30 other companies responsible for polluting the river contributed \$10 million to fund an additional study of the 17-mile portion of the river. The federal EPA hopes to make the findings of the study public, but not for another four years.

A spokesman for Tierra Solutions, Mike Turner, says that his company has already spent \$50 million in environmental studies and site clean-ups and is willing to pay its fair share to clean the river, but that the additional study is needed because trace amounts of heavy metals are still being released at other sites on the river.

"If there's ongoing contamination, what good will it do to take stuff out?" he told The Record. "It would be pointless."

But the substance that would be taken out of the river is highly toxic dioxin, and Mr. Campbell makes a persuasive case when he says that enough studies have been done already to know how significant a health problem the dioxin is - and how to reduce the risk.

"Each day this deadly substance is spread further upriver and into Newark Bay. We have a public obligation to clean up this river," he says. "It's not going to happen overnight, but it has to start today."

Mr. Campbell is right. The time to turn the tide on the Passaic River's pollution is not in four years or more. The time is now.