

# THE ODYSSEY OF A CANOE



The First Carry to the Canal on the bank of the Passaic River



The Morris Canal below Mountain View

PHOTOS BY MASON A. STONE, JR.



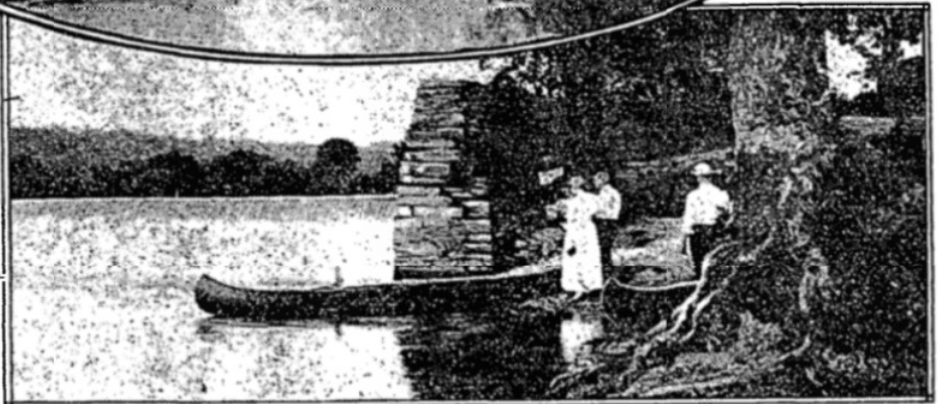
Looking Down the Passaic River - Second Watchung Mountain in the Distance

## A Day's Journey Into the Wilderness of New Jersey But a Few Short Miles from the Metropolis.

By Albert Handy.

THE day was Sunday, the hour was 9 in the morning the place was Singac, a small hamlet on the Passaic River to the southwest of Paterson. The canoe had been christened "Some Little Girl," and the canoe occupies the most important place—almost—in this narrative; incidentally, there was a live flesh-and-blood girl, too.

The Last Carry - Falls on the Pompton River Two Miles Below the Lake



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We had risen with the milkman and the early worm that we might take an 8 o'clock train—8 o'clock from Jersey City, be it understood, the passenger agent of the Erie having seen fit in his wisdom to omit Singac as a point of call for the 9:15. It was one of those occasional days, however, which May bequeaths to midsummer, when the world is very fair and optimism pervades the earth. So, being in an optimistic frame of mind, we found good even in this early departure, as we arrived before the Sunday excursionists from Paterson.

The little girl—not the canoe, of course—is staying in town this Summer. One evening I found her poring over a magazine, but it wasn't a story she was reading. It was an advertisement, it was a call to the Maine woods inserted by some enterprising railway man.

"Wilderness canoe trips," I read looking over her shoulder, "the finest vacations for city-tired people." That advertising man was a genius; I know, for I saw the wistful look in her eyes. He had made us both hear the echoes of the call of the wild.

For a moment I was thoughtful, then I said: "Come, we will go on a wilderness canoe trip."

"Shall we start now?" she queried mockingly.

"I mean it!" I replied. Perhaps my tone of voice carried conviction.

"Don't be foolish," she said. "Of course, I couldn't go without a chaperon; and, anyway, you can't get away from business."

"We shall go on Sunday, and be back on Sunday evening," I replied.

"You can't do it," she replied, in a tone of finality; "there is no wilderness near New York; there's nothing but rows and rows of stone and brick houses, and miles and miles of stone and asphalt paving, and the parks full of horrid people, and Long Beach full of horrid people, too."

"Wait," I said, "and see."

Now you have the genesis of this Odyssey.

below was a factory at Little Falls, also the dam and the waterfall which gives the town its name. I brought the canoe sharply around and ran ashore on the north bank.

"This is the first carry," I remarked in explanation. "We cross over here into the Morris Canal."

I wanted to distract her attention from the factory on the south shore. She didn't say anything, but at the sound of the word "canal" there was a tossing of the head—skepticism had been registered. Another canoeist, the only man in sight, helped to carry our canoe over the 150 feet of rough woodland in return for a like courtesy on my part. Sometimes it is helpful to meet people even when one goes in quest of the wilderness.

I didn't blame the girl for being skeptical. Somehow, a canal does not seem a promising byway over which to travel to the wilderness. But many decades have passed since the fleets of commerce floated upon the surface of this particular canal, and for years it has borne no more valuable cargo than the equipment of canoeists voyaging, like ourselves, to the wilderness, while the towpath has been long since overgrown with grass.

Once within the last couple of years the oldest inhabitant was awakened from his almost perpetual nap by the sound of a great noise. He hobbled out on his porch and saw canal boats drawn up and down the stream by horses on the towpath, and signs of activity such as had not existed since the Morris & Essex Railroad sent all its freight into New York from Phillipsburg through this waterway. He rubbed his eyes; the surprise of Rip Van Winkle was as nothing compared with his surprise. One might sleep fifty years, but how could one go back fifty years? Then the camera of the moving picture man began to click, and another romance of the eighteenth century was transferred to the film. And the next day the horses had gone, and the canal boats had gone, and

## Odyssey.

Singac does not possess a railway station. You alight from the train—when you are fortunate enough to find a train that stops—on the main street; just beyond the street is the river, and across the river is the boat-house. We did not select the canoe because we liked her name, but because we liked her lines. She seemed only recently to have fallen from a higher estate. She had once, we imagined, been the treasured possession of some proud owner, and we wondered vaguely why he had allowed her to descend to the level of a livery canoe. She was light and graceful, an aristocrat among canoes, and she was ours for the present—ours to bear us away from the land of every day to the hoped-for wilderness.

We launched. The little girl allowed her eyes to wander from the steel bridge over which we had just crossed the river to the steel railway bridge below, and then to the row of shanties on the opposite bank, boathouses boasting no aristocratic canoes, bathing houses, and places where one might purchase soft drinks and gasoline. She looked at me reproachfully. "But where's the wilderness?" she inquired.

"Wait!" I said, as we dropped down stream.

Soon the bridges and the shanties passed from view; in midstream was a wooded island, which concealed the bank where "civilization" obtruded itself unpleasantly; through the north channel we drifted. On either side were the overhanging trees, and overhead was the blue sky and to the southeast was the morning sun. We had entered the gateway to the wilderness. I heard a little sigh of satisfaction. It meant, "This is better." But there was no word spoken.

Three-quarters of a mile beyond Singac the island came to an end; just

and the canal boats had gone, and the actors had gone, and the director had gone, and the camera man had gone, and there remained only the quiet canal and the old man babbling tales of the old time to the great-grandchildren gathered around his knees.

"It's early," I remarked. "We'll have time to look at the falls."

We headed south, and paddled out on the viaduct on which the canal crosses the valley of the Passaic. Midway we stopped to watch the sheets of water coming over the dam and dashing themselves into the pool below. For a few moments our paddles remained motionless; then we turned and proceeded up the canal. At first we encountered an occasional house; then we passed a grove of trees, then an iron bridge, then some more trees and some ploughed fields, from which a scarecrow looked solemnly down upon us.

A little turn to the west, and suddenly the girl exclaimed. I followed her gaze. Before us was a narrow waterway overhung on each side with leafy trees, with a narrowed strip of blue sky between, and far beyond rose the mountains. She turned to speak, and behind us she perceived another mountain.

"Oh," she whispered softly, "I begin to see."

"They are not mountains, they are only hills," I remarked. "Not one of them is a thousand feet above sea level. But the people call them mountains, and they are not tagged with their height as they are on the Geological Survey maps, and they serve pretty well for mountains in the nearer wilderness. Those behind us are called the Watchung Mountains and over to the right is the Packanack range, and those are as good Indian names as Ne-ha-sa-ne and Katahdin."

"Yes," she said, "and don't you re-

member that Fiona Macleod wrote somewhere that it is what we bring to the enchantment that matters more than what the enchantment may disclose."

You see the spell of the wilderness was upon her, too.

Three and a half miles paddling brought us to Mountain View, another small village. Here the canal widens out into a sort of bay in front of a country hotel, doubtless to afford a harbor for those canoeists who have a tender regard for their appetites.

Here, too, we reached a parting of the ways. From the north comes the feeder, leading down from Pompton Lake, at the edge of the Ramapos; to the west the canal winds on through the hills until it arrives at the Delaware River. The feeder runs by a wood-yard and other evidences of commercialism, but the little girl had ceased to doubt. "Let's go up the feeder," she said.

We carried again, over the tracks of the Lackawanna, and hastened our paddling for the next mile or two, beside a dusty road largely given over to motorists, past uninteresting fields and under prosaic bridges; until the village of Wayne had been left behind.

Then we plunged into the forest once more. There were a few camps on the east bank, and now and then another canoe floated past us, but these were unobtrusive and harmonized with the landscape.

Then a long stretch where we saw neither canoe nor camp; nothing but the water and the trees and little flecks of blue sky and sunlight. From the bushes to our left came a winged flash of red. We tried to follow it with our eyes, but it was gone. It may have been a scarlet tanager. When the girl asked questions I said that I thought that it was.

The sun was high in the heavens, which indicated that it was lunch time.

"Up at Pompton Lake," I remarked casually, "is an oasis in a desert of blue laws, a road house owned by a

into the Pompton River on the last stage of our journey to the lake. The canal and the feeder had been left behind, the river was wider and swifter, with a current increasing in force with every quarter of a mile until on the last lap we were carried back one foot for every three which we advanced. We didn't pay much attention to the scenery; we were too busy paddling. At last we reached the end of our course, pulled the canoe ashore, and left it to its fate, while we clambered up the bank, crossed the road and went up the hill to the lake.

Answering the girl's unspoken question I said: "It's three miles to the head of the lake where the Ramapo River comes down from the hills to the north and empties, but I promised to take you home tonight and we can't make it."

"It looks wonderful up beyond the hills," she said, "but I suppose we haven't time."

"Beyond the Alps lies Italy."

"No, the Never-Never Land," she corrected.

We returned to the canoe and began our homeward voyage. The canoe Mardi hailed us. "How far," queried the Captain in the stern, "is Pompton Lake?" "That depends; going up stream it's all of two miles from here, but coming down it's less than half a mile."

He looked puzzled; then the crew in the bow said something, and a great light dawned upon him; they thanked us and proceeded. We did that two miles from the head of the river to the lock in about a quarter of the time it had taken us to go in the opposite direction. At the lock we again carried, for the last time, but instead of going back by the feeder we turned into the river called variously Pompton and Pequannock, running swiftly between shelving banks on either side. It was after 6. The canoe glided rapidly down the river; the thicket of trees on the east formed a great dark curtain, beyond which might be anything or nothing; through the thicket of trees on the other bank we had constantly recurring glimpses, as we shot by, of a magnificent curtain of red splashed with gold hanging low in the Western sky. A sand piper flew down and lighting on a log just ahead

man who is a Christian. He keeps his side door open on the Sabbath Day, and feeds the hungry, which is legal according to the statute, and giveth drink to them that are athirst—all for a consideration, of course. Shall we cook our lunch here or wait until we get to the lake?"

"When we are camping in the Adirondacks we don't go to a hotel when we are hungry," the girl retorted scornfully. "We'll land right here and start our fire."

Our camping place was well chosen. North and east and west were the purple mountains, and between lay the woods and at our feet was the stream, and there were no man-made noises and no signs of man-made handiwork except such as we were guilty of having brought with us.

Camping, in our case, consisted of building a fireplace, lighting a fire, and making two seats of boughs upon which to recline. Of course, it rarely happens in the nearer wilderness that you can have your fish fresh from the water, wrapped in leaves and baked in clay, the way the guides do it, but at least lunch was not the ordinary picnic repast of cakes, olives and sandwiches. And even without the fish it was a fairly satisfactory camp meal.

When lunch was over we burned the debris, and lounged around watching the lengthening shadows.

Finally I glanced at the sun. "It's time to go, it's almost four," I muttered apologetically.

"I hate to leave, it's lovely here," the girl responded.

Nevertheless we went. Another quarter of a mile brought us to a dam and lock. The pool just below the dam we found to be a popular bathing resort, but popular bathing resorts did not interest us, and we carried over

regarded us curiously. Now we would come to a place where the bed of the stream fell away, forming miniature rapids; then we would float off into placid water again.

At Mountain View it was almost dark; torrents of water were pouring down from the canal which crossed the river on a viaduct. After we discovered that we could go under the viaduct without being drenched we enjoyed the spectacle. We had counted on a full moon, but there were neither moon nor stars.

And here began the real adventure. For the next two or three miles the river winds tortuously; in our course were sandbars and jagged rocks and snags.

Then we made a discovery. We were not in New Jersey; not in America even. We were in the Never-Never Land. Ahead and to each side of us the water was falling away in torrential rapids. The fall was only a few feet off, but we never reached it. The trees and the skies were reflected in the river. There were islands ahead of us which no mortal eye had ever seen, and lagoons and channels through which man-built boats might never pass; when we reached the place where we had seen them they were not there.

It was weird, strange, uncanny—but it was wonderful. We felt our way carefully. From behind came another canoe fitted with a searchlight. We followed it.

Presently lights, the lights of camps and bungalows, began to appear on the banks; across the water came the sound of a phonograph.

Another two miles and lights innumerable, began to flicker on the west bank of the river—which, incidentally, became the Passaic just below Mountain View—these were lights from the shanties which had offended our gaze in the morning, but which now appeared picturesque additions to the scene; up and down the widening stream also bobbed the lights of motor boats and canoes. In another five minutes we had docked and drawn our canoe up on the float.

And thus the Odyssey came to an end. But as we crossed the bridge on the way to the railway station I heard the girl humming. The tune was "The End of a Perfect Day."