In Friendly Candor

by

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What Happens to Walden

WHAT happens to Walden Pond happens to us all. This small, green oasis, sacred to the memory of Henry Thoreau, is a symbol of the privacy which we are in the act of surrendering straight across the country. Water and privacy are today the two natural resources in short supply throughout the United States. Have any people on earth ever changed the face of their country as fast as we Americans? The Egyptians who made up in slave labor what we possess in bulldozers and power saws had nothing like our speed, and it took them more than a millennium to arrive at the desert which is theirs today. The English and Canadians seem to lack our rapacity for tearing down, for "modernizing" what is old.

We do our engulfing in the name of progress; nothing must impede "the wheels of progress," and nothing does. Today those wheels which have the light touch of a tank are being accelerated by the pressure of numbers, by our current mania for bigger and faster roads, and by the incredible growth of a hard-top, ranch-house suburbia. Like lava from Etna, this pressure of numbers overflows the countryside, filling in meadows and marshes, felling the woodlands, forcing the brooks underground. Nothing is impregnable. If old avenues of oaks or maples stand in the way of a new road, down they come; if the new Colby College campus is an obstruction to the plans

of a throughway, surely the campus can give; if larger bathing facilities are needed in Middlesex County, why not Walden Pond?

Next to Boston, the village of Concord is the most visited, most revered shrine in New England. Concord is a self-respecting community, conscious that it has a dual responsibility in tending to the past and planning for the future. It is proud of its schools; it takes care of its trees (grieving as we all do about the ravage of the elms); and through private guardianship and public interest, it has preserved as much as it could of its famous heritage — such landmarks as Wright's Tavern, the Old Manse, the Emerson, Alcott, and Hawthorne houses, and "the battlefield." But a pond is harder to preserve.

Walden Pond is a little cup of blue water set in the woods within easy walking distance of Concord center; it is spring-fed and has no outlet, so that the level of the lake rises unpredictably. It is not large, half a mile long by three eighths of a mile wide; and it is very deep, 107 feet by Thoreau's measurement in certain places. The Emersons owned a large part of the shore, and Ralph Waldo in 1845 gave Thoreau permission to build a hut of the native white pine and to cultivate a two-acre bean plot. Henry Thoreau was then twenty-eight, rebellious, a nonconformist, with no job; the job he set himself was to live for two years beside this "forest mirror" until he knew its every mood. The record of Walden and himself which he left in his great book has made the spot a shrine for all Americans and has brought back to it year after year pilgrims who take the shore path thinking to see what Thoreau saw a hundred and ten years ago.

Thoreau was never to know what his sense of privacy had done to this sylvan spot. Walden has its vulnerable points, being