

Smelly History of the Androscoggin River

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The Dammedest River: In 1883 Professor Appleton of Brown University analyzed the water for a manufacturing interest and found it to be 'a superior water for manufacturing purposes and of a high grade of purity, containing but small absolute dissolved and suspended matters.' However Walter Lawrance wrote that "under such variable conditions it is doubtful if the Androscoggin River water was ever pristine pure; it must have been heavily silted during high water and contaminated with organic debris from the extensive forest areas during the hot, dry summers when flow was very low." The Androscoggin's numerous falls were eventually harnessed for water power with 21 dams on the river by the 1930s earning it the title of the 'dammedest river' in America.



THE WATERSHED: The Androscoggin River is one of the longest rivers in the State of Maine flowing from Lake Umbagog in Errol, New Hampshire and then Maine until it enters Merrymeeting Bay.



The Mills: Since their creation in the 1880s, the pulp and paper mills along the Androscoggin River have been the largest polluters of the river. The three largest mills were located in Rumford, Jay, and Berlin. In 1930 the mills funded a report on the water quality, which said that "while it has long been accepted – and still is today– that our streams and rivers must serve as natural channels for the carrying off and removal of liquid waste materials, it came to be recognized that there was a limit to the amount which the individual stream or river could carry without deleterious effect upon the natural fish life in the stream itself, or possibly upon the health of the communities through which it passed." Despite this report the Maine Attorney General's 1942 report noted that 92% of the total pollution load in the river came from the paper mills.



The Odor: In 1941 the odor coming from the Androscoggin in the Lewiston-Auburn area was so bad that children sold clothespins on either sides of the bridge and people threw up as they crossed the river. The odor was a constant reminder that if the Androscoggin River was treated like a sewer then it could act like one. In his role as River Master, Walter Lawrance took 'daily scientific odor observations,' where he went to several points along the river and smelled the air. Some of the smells he recorded include pig-pen, sour, sulphite, moldy, musty, grassy, fishy, earthy, and woody. Lawrance's odor observations raise interesting questions about how science and policy is objectified. While Lawrance said that he was "immune to the odor" his wife was so nauseated by the smell that she was unable to eat at times.



The River Master: Walter Lawrance was a Bates Chemistry Professor, in 1947 he was appointed by the Maine Supreme Court to act as the River Master of the Androscoggin River. As River Master, Lawrance had the right to set limits on the amount of waste that the paper mills could discharge into the river and take any action necessary to prevent nuisance conditions. From 1948 to 1960 Lawrance and his army of assistants dumped hundreds of tons of sodium nitrate into the river in order to prevent the anaerobic conditions that created the strongest odors. The program was largely viewed as successful in reducing the odor, though it had some unintended downstream effects. Professor John Lichter thinks it is likely that the nitrate fertilized the beds of wild rice in Merrymeeting Bay increasing the food supply for migrating ducks.



Cleaner Water?: The author of the Clean Water Act, Senator Edmund Muskie, grew up along the Androscoggin River in Rumford, Maine and attended Bates College while Walter Lawrance taught chemistry there. The Clean Water Act provided massive amounts of federal funding for treatment plants for industry and municipalities. By 1977, the last year Lawrance served as River Master, oxygen levels had risen considerably along the entire course of the river. Yet to this day, certain parts of the river above the Gulf Island Dam remain have not reached the minimum 'C' classification required by the Clean Water Act.