

The Cuyahoga 2013

I walked the banks of the Cuyahoga River from the Summit County line to Lake Erie. There were a few spots I could not access, but not many. Through most of the southern end central parts of the county, the river is followed by the ingenious Tow Path, and winds through fecund woods and flood plains. The mist coming off the river, how it courses beneath the trees, and the background hills that guide the Cuyahoga make for such a bucolic scene. At the edge of parking lot at Chippewa Creek it is easy to imagine a settler, centuries ago, looking over acres of flat river plain, listening to the rapids and deciding to make a home here.

Some days I would walk along the river near the Brecksville Reservation in the morning, and then go downtown in the afternoon to feel that great contrast that makes Cuyahoga county so interesting. The traffic of birds, deer, and strollers gives way to the rush cars, bridges craning, and hulk-like barges making their improbable way through the river's curves. The few miles of river that flow from the county line to Lake Erie encapsulate more than a century of time. In that stretch, forests turn into farms, and farms turn into factories, and factories build the City.

Ironically, the section of the river that felt most wild was a tiny patch of forgotten woods in the Industrial Valley. I felt like a pioneer there. From the Harvard Avenue Bridge, I hacked through brush and made a trail along the western bank. I scrambled down a steep drop-off under the Denison Bridge and through a dense thicket. Two deer startled from under a ginko tree and ran along an old fence-line. I flushed a flock of mallards from their perch on an ancient upturned boat – an iron island. A run of shad glinted along the banks by the thousands. A garter snake poured like liquid from a privet branch. The Alcoa plant provided an imposing and unlikely backdrop for what I witnessed. As I clamored along the banks, I got the feeling that my steps were the first to be laid on this particular stretch of the riverbank for a long, long time. Perhaps a desperate fisherman or a truant teen crouched here, but I saw no sign of the recent presence of a person. However, the footprint of mankind loomed everywhere. I was under a major highway bridge, and the mill with its cliff-like banks of steel rumbled directly across the river. Plastic bags were strewn among the tree branches from a recent flood.

This section of the river is not scenic, but it is beautiful. It is a beauty wrought with tension, a perplexing beauty that had something to teach me about nature, the human endeavor, and time. I could look up stream, and down stream, on the west bank and toward the east and see all of the ages of the river: A primordial past when birds flocked, deer grazed and the trees leaned out over the water to trap the sun and shade the banks; a near past where iron-hulled boats carved a treacherous passage among the curves and rocks to the factories that relied on water to cool their vitals; a recent past, where the polluted river could not support life, but instead supported American industry and infrastructure. Now. Cleveland has allowed the river that runs through its heart to once again carry a nascent ecology. It flows with signs of hope. And sometime in the very distant future the Cuyahoga and the species that rely on it will run unfettered by our endeavors.

JW