

A Pilgrimage To Walden's Pond

(Thursday, November 28, 1994)

by J W Henson

We arose to a clear, crisp New England morning, and began our trek to Concord, just outside Boston. We drove past the Ralph Waldo Emerson house and on out to Walden Pond. In the mid-1800s Mr. Emerson had just purchased a portion of the land adjoining the Pond. It was here that Henry David Thoreau built his cabin, and wrote the noted 'Walden'. Thoreau was more a creature of nature than a solid citizen. He had a good education, spoke and read several languages, but could never become a cog in the community. He lived with the freedom of the birds, for he did not own the property upon which he built his nest, but lived there by the kind permission of Mr. Emerson. He was an individual of frail constitution, but wiry build, encouraged by the exercise of constructing a cabin and raising a variety of vegetables in his bean patch. It is unfair to say that Thoreau was lazy for he provided his needs in the bean patch while at Walden. He certainly did not conform to the routine of the community.

A biting, cold wind gripped us as we moved from behind the shoulder of earth that surrounds the southeast side of the Pond. Drawing our coats tightly about us we stepped upon the sandy beach that lies nearest the road. There were no long haired girls sitting cross legged along the shore reading from 'Walden', as I have seen before. That will come with the moderating of the weather.

I picked up a fist sized stone from the beach and carried it along the pondside trail back to the site of the cabin. There is a stone cairn raised in loving memory near the old cabin location. It was here that I discarded my stone as I have done others in the past. I once brought two stones from near the foundation of my Mother's house. The stones had crinoid fossils embedded within them. They lie there among the many thousands of other stones slowly raising a monument in honor of a misfit in society. Where but in America could one be honored for such ideals as Thoreau exhibited. I looked, in vain, for the stones from Mom's old house. It is not as if there were only a few rock upon the cairn. It stands about five feet tall and has a diameter of about 20 feet.

The cabin has been gone for many years, with only the stone from the hearth remaining. Park officials have raised stone columns at each corner of the site, with holes through them to accommodate a chain laced around the perimeter of the old cabin itself. Visitors talk little, and in more somber tones as they stand looking at the Pond which is some 200 feet from the door of the cabin. I heard one pilgrim say that Thoreau measured the depth of the entire lake. He did not elaborate, just made the comment. It is apparent that all minds need active material upon which to feed. Preparing a map plan of the bottom of the Pond was the activity of a mind in search for food upon which to masticate. Pilgrims to the holy place do not stay long, especially at this temperature.

Most people come for the same reason that visitors came on lovely fall afternoons when Thoreau sat upon his door step, they come from curiosity, and with little more knowledge today of the man's mission on Earth than did the bonnet bedecked, buggy riding people of 150 years ago. He was as strange to the people of Concord as they were to him. Do we not all question the lifestyle of others from time to time? I wonder what would be Thoreau's thoughts and feeling of today's society; the age of super technology. He would have to recognize the great accomplishments of science, but would be more adamant than ever about the materialism of men today. He would be more concerned about the impact we are having on the ecology of this planet than he was in his day.

The thrill whistle of a train told us that the tracks that Thoreau spoke of so many years ago still run near the old cabin site today. It is a double railroad with a well maintained road bed. I have stood to the side and watched swift trains that are so modern as to have caused Thoreau to really ponder the future.

The Pond is in the shape of a frozen amoeba. Along the western shore of the water is a walled section of bank. I have read it debated by Thoreau that the name Walden could have come from 'Walled In', having a wall of stone around the shoreline. A man in wadders had walked out knee deep into the frigid waters, under the protection from the wind by a corner of the shore. I asked how the fishing was going. He replied that nothing was happening at present, yet he had not given up. I am sure that he was reminiscing inwardly about the man Thoreau, and the doctrine that he espoused to the world 15 decades ago.

On our return to the car we stopped by the replica of the cabin that someone build upon the visitor's welcome area. I stood in the cold air and drew a sketch of the meager little cabin that held a book that found such great empathy in the 1970s by the young people of this country.

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