

# HOT AIR

## Big River

By Barbara Currier Bell

May is National Rivers Month: time to give the Housatonic a bow. Why the Housatonic? In recent years it's gotten a bad name. Barges have stalled on its mucky bottom; construction cranes have been lost in it; tract developments have sullied its sides. Just this year, the Housatonic was listed as one of the 10 most endangered rivers in America. Plenty of reason to turn thumbs down.

Instead, let's take a refresher course in respect. The Housatonic was historically an economic mainstay for Milford; it still is, in certain ways; and, as a major natural resource, it continues to hold huge potential value for the future.

Along its 149 miles, running from northwestern MA down to Long Island Sound, the Housatonic passes through different terrains and takes different forms—so different that the Indians had two names for the river: they called the upper part Pootatuck, “river of the great falls”, and the lower part Ousatonic, “place beyond the mountains.” Indeed, the very lowest part of the Housatonic, dividing Milford from Stratford, is tidal all the way to Derby, and for eight of those miles, up to Shelton, it isn't even a river: technically speaking, it's an estuary. Estuaries are where fresh and saltwater mingle. They are some of the most productive areas on the planet, generating four times more organic matter than a fertilized cornfield. Not only did Milford farmers grow food on the river's rich bottomlands, fisherman pulled alewives, eels, shad, salmon and even sturgeon from the water, while on the marsh flats they harvested abundant oysters, crabs, and clams.

Though the Housatonic's fisheries largely declined during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, due to both dams and pollution, its seed oyster beds have been rebuilt, and now 40% of CT's stock come from this river. Eight hundred and fifty acres at the mouth of the Housatonic behind Milford Point have been designated the Stewart B. McKinney Wildlife Refuge: it hosts 45 types of fish and amphibians, not to mention numerous kinds of birds and waterfowl, even rare species, such as bald eagles. All of these, in turn, comprise the raw material for more modern products—environmental education, recreation, tourism.

The Housatonic provided essential transportation for Milford early on, and perhaps the railroad may offer that again; at any rate, the river corridor, which once carried workers and goods, now carries the energy to make and consume goods, while today's workers, with 90-degree different commutes, hope for a Housatonic greenway as an amenity.

The Housatonic is considered endangered because of the toxic PCBs dumped into the river from a GE transformer factory in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. GE is cleaning up that stretch of the river, and studying what needs to be done downstream. Milford has a big stake in assuring that GE doesn't walk away from the job. The Wepawaug is Milford's "signature" river, but the Housatonic is just as promising for the city's productiveness and quality of life, long-term.