

Passaic River Journal

November 22nd, bitter cold, strong winds

At a municipal park on the Passaic River in Fairlawn, I find the boat launch and see Thomas's jeep with his 17-foot aluminum canoe tied to the roof. He had volunteered to take me out in his canoe after I got his phone number and called him to make a date. I help him get it down. I am bundled up wearing winter gloves, a hooded sweat-shirt and I have trouble getting the life jacket on. It is the coldest day of the year and this is only my second time in a canoe. My first was 40 years ago as a scout in summer camp. Thomas tells me that he has never canoed the Passaic River and never canoed this late in the year.

I lower myself into the bow and he pushes off and hops into the stern. I paddle desperately, trying not to spill over. The wind is blowing and icicles are forming from the water dripping off my paddle. Halfway across the river, my arms are aching from fighting a headwind and a strong current. I tell Thomas that this is madness, but neither of us wants to admit defeat—me a middle-aged college professor and him a recent college graduate. I could see the headlines: "Professor's frozen body found in river."

Since I started writing this article, four bodies have been pulled from the river, and it had me wondering why this river attracts so much of this type of tragedy? It is the only press this river ever gets, either human tragedy or environmental.

I tell Thomas that I am writing about the Passaic River and that I am using William Carlos Williams as a literary reference. Thomas offered to take me in his canoe when I called him after getting his number from Tony DeCondo, who works part time at the Paterson Museum and whose name was recently in the *New York Times* for the work he does finding Indian artifacts on the Passaic River. I spoke to Tony on the phone and he told me about the Indian weirs and that there are two between Paterson and Fairlawn and that you can see the V formation of rocks when the river is low. It is how the Indians fished these waters before the Dutch and English arrived. He has found several arrow heads. He gave me Thomas's number, who is a friend of his son's.

Ever since I had moved to Paterson in 1984, in the newly opened "Artist Housing" in the renovated silk mills by the falls, I have been drawn to this river because it is New Jersey's river, and because I consider it part of the "Weird" New Jersey phenomenon with its spooky-looking abandoned buildings, and because of strange things, aside from dead bodies, that turn up in its waters. Before moving to Paterson, I had already developed a strong connection to Williams. My first poetry job was poetry coordinator for the newly opened Williams Center in Rutherford. This was 1982. My fascination with the poet/doctor from my home state developed into a lifelong study. One of the books that came into my possession back then was Williams's *Life along the Passaic River*, an out-of-print 1938 New Directions first edition of 19 stories that Williams wrote during the Great Depression.

The more I read, the more I admired the way Williams was able to recreate what life was like for a small town doctor going out on house calls. What I admired most was how he seemed to describe

everything with a heightened sense of awareness. Williams in these stories writes the way Walker Evans composed his photographs.

June 17th, 80 degrees, overcast

I wanted to find the street Williams mentions in one of his stories and the bridge he mentions in another, so I called my friend, Mark Tambone, a new instructor at the college where we teach, and who was teaching a class in the city of Passaic that he had just let out. We get in his car and take off in pursuit of Summer Street where Williams confronts the girl from the story "The Girl with the Pimple Face." We drive past the Gregory Avenue Bridge where teddy bears and flowers keep piling up in an ever-growing memorial for the little girl who was drowned by her uncle a few weeks earlier and who was all over the news. The newspapers reported that man's body had just been pulled out of the river.

Summer Street is not far from the river. The homes are old, two-family houses, near the industrial section of town. The street signs are old; the trees are tall and shady. The red brick factories, a couple of blocks away, look like they haven't been open in years. There are guys sitting in front of doorways. I feel like I am driving through one of Williams's stories, as if nothing's changed in seventy years except the cars.

I tell my friend to stop the car so that I can take a photograph of the street sign. I love the way Williams has his doctor/narrator in a kind of stand off with the girl in this story. It is a scenario that is repeated in his other stories in a battle of wills. The doctor is in love with the girls, their tough, street-wise savvy and determination. It is as if he registers that their reproductive force almost guarantees that the species will survive through the sexual power of these feisty immigrant offspring. The doctor senses this animal power much like D. H. Lawrence does with his female characters in his stories.

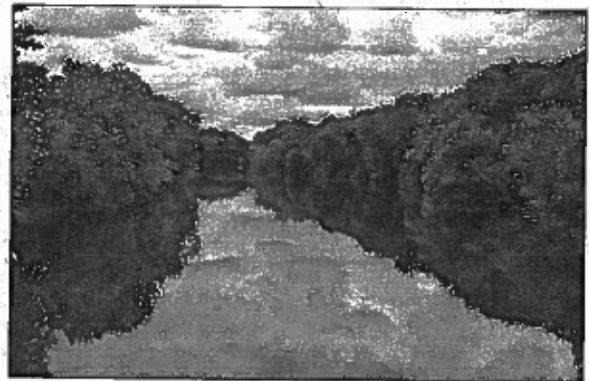
Back in November, out in the middle of the river, I tried to aim the canoe for the center of the Maple Avenue Bridge in Paterson. The wind and current blew the canoe sideways and we spun around. I was trying to remember everything I had learned in scouts: how to sit, how to hold the paddle and use it as a rudder. The muscles in my arms were burning. I never thought that we would make it under that bridge.

We hugged the Paterson side in the lee as the river curved upstream away from the headwinds. Thomas pointed out the long, black seed pods hanging down from a catalpa tree. "Kids smoke these," he said. He pointed out two types of willow growing on the banks, black and white. The banks were overgrown with bushes and vines; some bushes called pokeweed grew dark indigo berries that were poisonous. People use the banks of the Lower Passaic River, especially on the Paterson side, to dump refrigerators and car tires. I saw many shopping carts, car bumpers, hub caps,

front ends, engine blocks, some of it covered over in vines. There were also red-tailed hawks, mallards, Canada geese, crows and muskrats that I saw as I paddled.

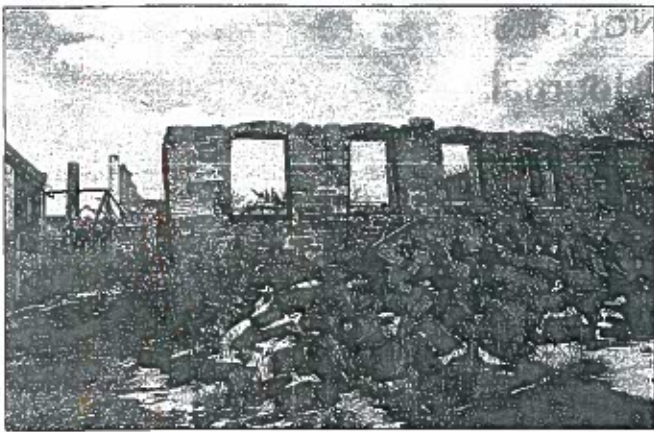
On the map, the river looks like a noose slung around the neck of the City of Paterson. Some think of it as a moat to keep the inner city walled off. No one looking at the Passaic as it plunges 80 feet in a torrent over the Great Falls can imagine this river at its source some sixty miles away, as just a stream only three-feet wide, flowing out of the Great Swamp in Mendham, that was once a glacial lake ten miles across at the end of the last ice age. Locals call this the Upper Passaic, a spate river that always floods its banks during heavy rains. The Lower Passaic (the river Williams was familiar with), is tidal, all 17 miles of it, until it reaches the Dundee Weir in Garfield.

A couple of months after I moved into my artist loft by the falls, it rained nonstop for eight days. Downtown Paterson flooded out. All the homes in the flood plain along the upper river had to be evacuated. Several people drowned. The West Broadway Bridge in Paterson was under water. Kansas Fried Chicken was under water. Cars floated away. I saw the contents of flooded-out houses upriver plunge over the falls: television sets bobbed like corks, sofas twirled in maelstroms. I never saw so much water. There were white caps. They say that the flood of 1984 was a 100-year flood, but floods nearly as bad have happened a couple of times since.



The Passaic River

My loft in Paterson was in the back, away from the street, and faced the "Valley of the Rocks," or the cliffs that make up the Great Falls. Behind my building was a ten-acre site of ruined mills on the river that the city had fenced off because the homeless would set them on fire to keep warm. One of the foundations and walls still standing was the original 1836 Colt Mill where Samuel Colt produced his first revolver—The Paterson Colt. I kept a camera mounted on a tripod and I would often take photographs of these ruins at different times and in different weather. The homeless made their camp sites along the river, and at night I could see their camp fires burning in the pitch darkness. It was like a scene out of some nuclear holocaust movie. A French friend of mine, when he first visited and stepped into my loft, said, "C'est la vue d'enfer mais à pas s'y être"—like seeing hell without being there.



The Colt Mill



The rowing club

June 29th, humid, 80 degrees, overcast

I am waiting to meet Jeff Lahm, founder of the Passaic River Rowing Association, and so I am sitting in the Arlington Diner in North Arlington having coffee and listening to Frank Sinatra sing "Strangers in the Night." The coffee is surprisingly good and I am studying the menu deciding on whether to order their "World Famous Cheesecake" that is advertised on the sign above the diner. The diner sits right on the Passaic River across the bridge from Belleville where I can see an old Dutch church dating from four centuries ago. The church is obscured by Route 21, which passes in front of it. The bridges this far downriver were designed to be raised, or they could be swung sideways to let boats go by, but that was a long time ago. There are no more commercial boats on the Passaic.

I am between counties, Essex County on the other side of the bridge and Hudson County just south of here. North Arlington is the last town in Bergen County. It started to drizzle before I got inside the diner, so I took my rain cover out of my camera bag and fit it over my Nikon so that I could take a photograph of the diner in the rain. I review my images while I wait for the bill and put the camera back in the bag while removing the rain cover.

I check my cell phone and see that it is time to go, so I leave money on the counter, get back in my car and drive a mile north along River Road to Lyndhurst. It is one of the strange things about the Passaic River that I can drive along much of its length and never see a soul on the water, but sometimes I would look out the window and see rowers, teams of young men or women. The rowing club is in the county park in a cement storage facility that looks like an army Quonset hut and which was once used to store a kid's train ride from back in the 50s or so I would find out. I see dozens of needle-like boats on racks and go in and introduce myself to Jeff, a man with a grey beard who looks remarkably trim and fit for his age.

Jeff shows me the different boats—boats for two rowers, for four, six and eight—and I keep asking him questions. He said that he formed his club twelve years ago. He used to belong to the Nereid Boat Club in Rutherford, the oldest boating club on the river, dating from 1870, but that membership got too expensive and it was too private. He wanted to involve the local high schools and get the kids interested in rowing with free lessons for anyone who wanted to learn. The county leased him the storage facility, and he raised funds and collected membership fees to build a dock and purchase boats.

I couldn't believe how light they were as he let me lift a sixty-foot, 8-crew member boat that weighed only slightly more than 100 pounds. "That one cost thirty thousand," he said, "carbon fiber," and then showed me the oars and how they fit into the outriggers. "You don't sit in the boats," he said, "you ride on top and you work the oars on the outriggers to balance yourself." The hull was less than an inch thick and it was no wider than a foot and a half. I saw some girls getting lessons from a young woman down at the dock and I watched them practice.

Williams writes a vivid description of the river in his opening paragraph in his opening title story and writes about how the kids made use of the river:

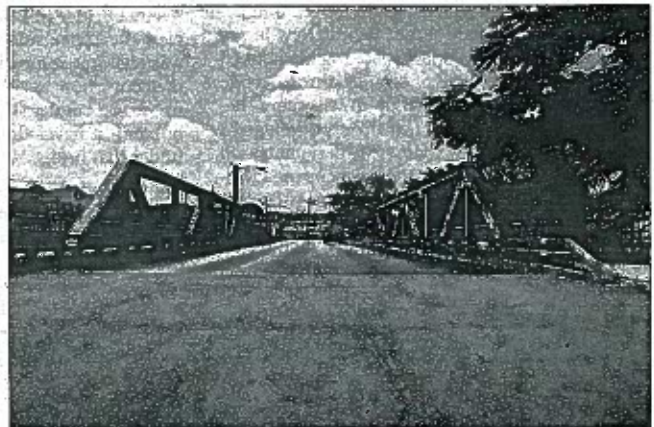
About noon of a muggy July day, a spot of a canoe filled by the small boy who no doubt made it, lies west of the new 3rd Street Bridge between Passaic and Wallington, midstream opposite the Manhattan Rubber Co.'s red brick and concrete power plant. There's the sound of work going on there, and a jet of water spouts from a pipe at the foundation level below the factory onto the river's narrow mud bank which it has channeled making a way for itself into the brown water of the two-hundred foot wide stream. The boy is drifting with the current but paddling a little also toward a couple of kids in bathing suits and a young man in his shirt sleeves, lying on what looks like grass but is probably weeds across the river at the edge of an empty lot where they dumped ashes some years ago, watching him. These youngsters who make boats out of barrel hoops and a piece of old duck, wherever they find it, live by the river these hot summer days. It's a godsend to them.

And it's a godsend to the kids who join Jeff's rowing club because they compete in races and regattas against seven high school rowing teams in the area and many of them get rowing scholarships to good schools. I ask him why the Passaic; he tells me that it is relatively straight and about thirty feet deep in this stretch of water, there is no commercial boat traffic, and the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission skimmer boats do a good job of cleaning the litter off the surface. When I

ask him how far he can row, he says about four miles up to what he calls the "Garfield Bend," where the river loops around Passaic, Wallington and Garfield. He tells me that he can row seven miles south to Newark and Kearny. "It's a good workout," he said. "I do it almost every morning. I used to run to stay in shape, but now I row," he smiled.

Back when my friend Mark drove me around the factories in Passaic, after we left Summer Street, I asked him to drive to the different bridges that connect Passaic to the towns of Wallington and Garfield across the river. I saw a white memorial cross and flowers tied to a fence on one of these bridges for another river drowning victim. The "New 3rd Street Bridge" that Williams mentions was torn down and replaced with a "newer" concrete bridge a few years ago. They kept the original bronze plaque dated 1930 from the old New 3rd Street Bridge which is now the Market Street Bridge. Using a fast shutter and focus tracking on my Nikon, I was able to grab shots from the car as we rode past places Williams would have ridden past on his trips into these neighborhoods. There were a couple of Eastern Orthodox churches and a large Russian Orthodox Cathedral with spiraling onion domes. A few people were speaking Russian or Ukrainian. These would have been the immigrants that Williams knew.

Paul Mariani, in his biography on Williams, mentions that Williams had just begun a long prose poem that he had titled "Life along the Passaic River." Mariani makes the case that this was Williams's genesis for his nascent yet unborn book-length poem, *Paterson*, which had been brewing in the doctor's psyche during the summer of 1933.



The Third Street Bridge



The Russian Orthodox Cathedral

Mariani writes: "... though it looked like prose—he considered it a poem 'in five line sentences (more or less) about the low-life of these parts.' In mid-July he'd driven over to the new Third Street Bridge between Passaic and Wallington to meditate on the Passaic—his river."

Williams once told an interviewer in speaking on the subject of how these stories came to be written, "I was still obsessed by the plight of the poor... the best stories were written at white heat. I would come home from my practice and sit down and write until the story was finished, ten to twelve pages. I seldom revised at all. Williams went on to say that he wrote these stories at the request of the editor of a new magazine and that he promised to write something for him every week (Heal 63).

In many ways, Williams was always struggling to craft a "beautiful thing" out of his patients' working-class world. The words themselves would later become a key phrase that he would use as a refrain in sections of *Paterson*. The stories are a reflection of not only the time he lived, and the revulsion he sometimes felt for the brute existence of immigrants who often had no money to pay him for his medical service, but for his hope for the children that he was treating. He saw beauty in them, in their struggle to live and beat the odds. It is what Robert Coles would call in one of his books, "the knack of survival in America." Coles, as a young medical student, writes about going out on a house call with Williams, that Williams would instruct him before entering a patient's house, "Look around, let your eye take in the neighborhood—the homes, the stores, the people and places, there waiting to tell you, show you something" (House Calls 8).

I was trying to take in everything I could see as we piloted downriver on the Hackensack and upriver on the Passaic on Captain Bill Sheehan's pontoon boat. After my friend took me to the bridges in Passaic, we drove over to Secaucus to the marina behind the Red Roof Inn on the Hackensack River to wait for the captain. We jumped on board as he pulled up to the dock; then he hit the throttle of his 115-horse Evinrude and we took off. He idled the boat under all the train trestles and steel bridges, some so low we had to duck our heads. A piece of the Pulaski Skyway fell on my friend's head, a small rusted piece of steel, and I could see the repaired cracks in the concrete piers that hold up the ancient structure. It felt like we were in the movie "Apocalypse Now" and like Captain Willard, we had one mission, to get as far up that river as we could.

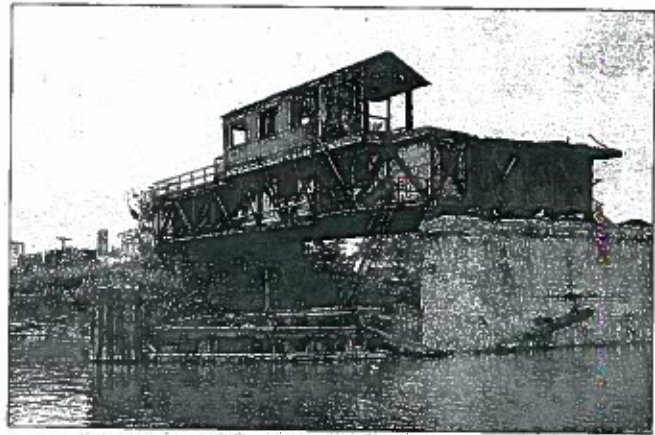
I showed Captain Bill where I wanted to go on my map and he jokingly said, "We were thinking of calling that our 'Heart of Darkness Tour.'" Captain Bill runs "eco-tours of the Meadowlands for groups and individuals and he is the founder and executive director of the Hackensack Riverkeeper, a non-profit environmental watchdog group that reports polluters, organizes cleanups, and raises money to purchase wetlands. There are two other environmental groups in the region, the Newark Baykeeper and the Passaic River Coalition. In addition, "The Passaic River Institute" was formed a couple of years ago as a think tank and conference center for environmental groups at Montclair State University.

The map had a blank area on it, a rare thing anywhere in North Jersey, but there was a single trucking road that dead-ended, and after that there was nothing. It was the place where the Hackensack and the Passaic merge, a spot that always fascinated me, a foreboding industrial no-man's-land of dead end factory roads and rail lines under the shadows of the New Jersey Turnpike and the Pulaski Skyway. I could see several acres of untouched woodland; this was my blank area at the end of Kearny Peninsula, or "Kearny Point" as the captain called it. He said it was as close as you can get to what it may have looked like before Europeans arrived. His idea is to turn it into a park.

We had to stay well out from shore because of the mud flats of tidal Newark Bay, so we stayed outside the buoys as the boat made a wide turn west, northwest and then north up the Passaic River. No one ever gets to see this part of the river, an area that drivers can only glimpse at 75 mph from the New Jersey Turnpike. It is an impenetrable maze of power line transmission towers, refineries, liquid gas storage tanks, waste incinerators, cargo container yards, and deserted factories, warehouses and auto junkyards where a definite toxic presence lurks.

I was thinking back to my first time on the river last November and about being blown sideways in a canoe. Now here I was on the river again, but this time on an ocean-going pontoon boat heading up the Passaic River's mouth.

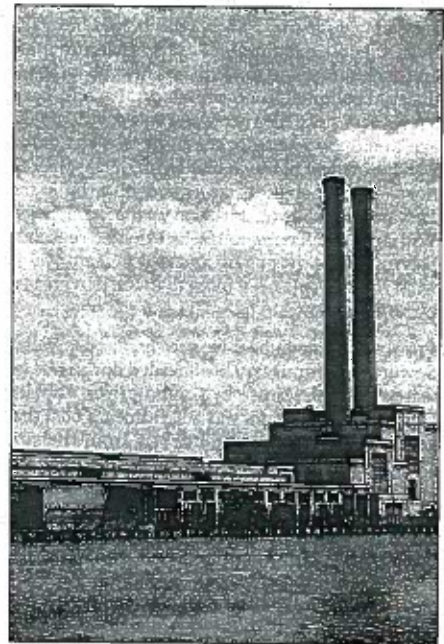
A huge plume of black smoke rose to the height of a twenty-story building just north of us and Captain Bill got an immediate cell phone call from one of his watchdogs. It was an auto-truck accident on the Eastern Spur of the turnpike. Just as we rounded Kearny Point, I saw a huge complex of abandoned factory buildings and smokestacks and what looked like office buildings all connected to each other. "That's the old Western



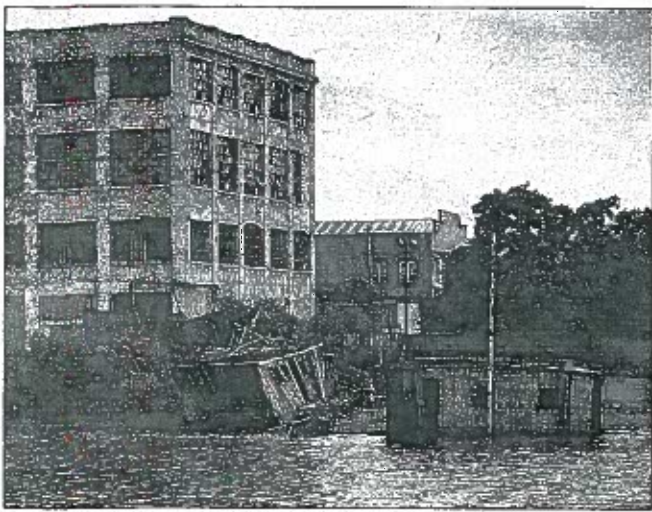
Railroad trestle at the Western Electric plant

Electric plant," Captain Bill said, looking over the beige brick compound. A strange feeling passed over me when I realized that that was where my father used to work when he first got out of the army after World War II—the Kearny WE plant. "It is where they made the old telephones," Captain Bill said, "back when you used to lease your phone from the phone company." We motored by a pair of collapsed railroad bridges that had carried freight trains right up to the back of the plant. The company had its own rail line. It all looked so bombed out.

We navigated past a waste incinerator plant for the City of Newark rising behind some old, abandoned brick warehouse buildings that were built earlier in the last century. There was graffiti scrawled over the sides. A little ways further upriver I could smell the sewage treatment plant, and after that foul odor there was a sickening sweet smell coming from a plant that makes artificial sweetener, and those two odors combined to make me feel slightly nauseated. This is the part of the Passaic that has earned the distinction of being one of the worst polluted rivers in the country. It is a titled well earned, since it was one of the nation's first industrial rivers with a history of pollution dating back to the founding of the So-



The abandoned Western Electric plant at Kearny



The Newark waterfront

ciety for Useful Manufacturers in 1792—a society dreamt up by Alexander Hamilton after seeing the Great Falls and envisioning Paterson as the manufacturing center for a new nation.

Mariani captures how Williams felt about the nation's first Secretary of the Treasury, whose financial system Williams saw as part of the country's eventual economic downfall—"Hamilton: Williams' enemy and dark doppelganger, whose statue a nd presence stood overlooking the polluted falls of his Passaic at Paterson" (382). I had been to the falls recently and stood below on the grass by the power generator at the base of the falls looking up the statue of Hamilton that Mariani mentions. Nowhere in Paterson is there a statue of Williams. There's a statue of Paterson native and comedian Lou Costello holding a baseball bat, but not one for the city's most famous poet.

Hamilton set up the S.U.M. as a corporation that would have jurisdiction over all the Passaic River's watershed, a resource back then equal in value to oil today for its industrial power. It wasn't until the 1930s that the monopoly was broken up under anti-trust laws; in its place the Passaic Valley Water and Sewage Commission was formed. When I started to write this article, I discovered, near the falls, the last remaining "S.U.M." cast-iron grate and took a photograph. Williams describes the industrial pollution in his title story: "It's only been a few years since the river water was so full of sewage and dye-waste from the mills that you didn't want to go near it, much less swim in it as they do now—or boat on it. It was a good job to build the Passaic Valley Sewer and clean up that stink hole." Williams is referring to the fact that he sees kids playing in the river again and that a clean river is what these people need more than the jobs created by river polluters.

From the pontoon boat we see the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission boat headed downriver towards us as we cruise by going upriver. Captain Bill pointed out that it was a skimmer, a boat that collects floating litter and debris from the surface of the Passaic. We waved to them and the two crew members waved back. Straight ahead I could see the downtown skyline of Newark looming up over a bend in the river. People in Newark don't even realize that they are living in a maritime city because they are cut off from the water by the freight yards and chemical plants.

As we pull up close to this cement bulkhead, I hear the captain's voice getting louder and angry

as a few "F" words slip out of his mouth. He is in full diatribe now about the Diamond Alkali Chemical Plant. He throttles the pontoon boat down to idle and we drift a little in the current near what looks like a cement parking lot with potted trees laid out every so many feet. "This is the single greatest point source for pollution for the entire area," Captain Bill fumes. "It is a toxic scar, an environmental disaster caused by corporate negligence and government inaction," he adds. "The chemical plant made 'Agent Orange' on this site for the Vietnam War, and the river mud and former grounds are saturated with

dioxin, one of the most toxic substances known to man," he continues. "The tides carry this dioxin 17 miles up the Passaic, and crabs have been caught in Jamaica Bay Queens over twenty miles away with this same dioxin in them." I look again and it seems almost like a mausoleum; there's an eerie feeling to the place that nothing is able to live here. It is near the "Iron Bound" section of Newark, which reaps the benefits of all this contamination. The captain tells us that this mausoleum, or slurry wall, was installed in 2001. It was capped with tons of cement, but some progress is being made with a recent legal victory against the subsidiary holding company with the sick name of "Tierra Solutions." Cleanup is scheduled to begin in 2010, but the method used to remediate the site is being debated, as is the 80 million dollars in cleanup costs.

I ask Captain Bill what he thinks of the Passaic, and he says, "It is a sorrowful river." He mentions that he organizes 14 to 15 cleanups a year and that 150 volunteers show up. I ask him what he hauls out of the water and he reads off a litany of discarded trash—"Tires, lawn furniture, auto parts, plastic bottles, traffic safety cones, shopping carts." The tides he tells me are strong enough to drag a shopping cart from Passaic to Newark over time. He tells me that as a kid growing up in Secaucus he used to play in the Meadowlands where the Hartz Mountain Corporation built hundreds of condominiums and that he used to lash logs to 50-gallon drums to make a raft. He started his organization in 1995 as a river cruise project to educate people in the ecology of the area because, as he says, "No one understood the issues at the time."

July 14th, skies threatening, dark clouds unseasonably mild

It is no surprise to see that the front page of the Passaic River Coalition's newsletter features the "Diamond Alkali Chemical" waste site in Newark. I hold a copy in my hands as I sit in Ella Filippone's office, the executive director of the coalition, in her temporary lodgings in Warren, New Jersey. "This is stupid," she says. "They want to remove the contaminated soil by pressing the water out and hauling the dried soil away for burial." Her tone, like the captain's, changes when Tierra Solutions and dioxin is brought up. She sat at her desk piled high with several three-foot stacks of papers. Her computer lies buried under a moun-

tain of file folders filled with documents. She reaches to a crowded shelf above her head and pulls down a slim, dark-green volume of poetry titled "Song of the Passaic" by J. A. MacNab, published in 1890. She reads a few stanzas of rhyming couplets in the style of Longfellow—then she beams a big smile. "I love it," she says. "I know Williams wrote about the Passaic, but he was a modernist. I prefer this."

So the river had its 19th century bard in the age of Whitman and Longfellow who has fallen into obscurity. I tell her that I am glad to learn about this book and that I will try to locate a copy. I tell her that she should mention the book and its author in her next newsletter, and she agrees. I ask her how she became the executive director. She tells me that when she retired from her PR firm in 1969 she needed something to keep her engaged, and a friend suggested she join a local environmental group. Her skills running a PR agency and her doctorate in business administration led the other members to nominate her to the position she's held ever since.

"And what do you think is going to happen when they press the soil to dry it?" she asks. I give her the correct answer, that the dioxin-contaminated water will drain back into the river.

She tells me that Congressman Bill Pascrell, Jr., has been a friend and active supporter of what her organization is doing, as well as Governor Jon Corzine, and Mayor Jose "Joey" Torres of Paterson, and that they all want to bring life back to the Passaic. Pascrell supports creating a 32-mile kayak and canoe trail on the Lower Passaic. Torres wants to create river walks where the abandoned mills now stand, and he wants to hold boat races on the river the way they did back at the turn of the last century. Dr. Filippone wants to get the raceways near the Great Falls back in shape as part of her organization's effort to clean up the river around the Great Falls.

The raceway system was created to power the mills. It took water from the river above the falls and sent it to sluices that powered waterwheels. "I want to spruce it up by removing litter and pulling out weeds and replanting the area with colorful ground roses and flowering bushes so that it will look inviting," she said. I asked her about the water; she lamented that the sewage treatment plant doesn't do enough to remove the phosphates because it is expensive to do and that those chemicals are compromising the health of the river.

As I get up to leave and thank her for her time, she mentions that one of her biggest concerns is for the Passaic River watershed. "The ground water levels are going down in the Highlands," she says. "People who live in the area have to drill deeper to find water. In another few years, there won't be any drinking water." I look up and see how serious her expression is. It is something I haven't thought about, but I have read newspaper articles about feeder streams for the Passaic River drying up in the summer and this scares me.

July 17th, clearing, fair weather, clouds by afternoon

I go to meet Joshua Castano, Historic Preservation Specialist, who works for the City of Paterson's Historic Preservation Commission. The office sits in what looks like a one-room brick schoolhouse that overlooks the Great Falls. The Great Falls was in the news; it had just been designated this year as a national park. I park by the statue of Alexander Hamilton in the shade of a tree and go to



Great Falls



Dundee Weir

the door, where Joshua lets me in. I can see photography equipment lying about, tripods, camera cases, as well as stacks of documents and maps. There's a lot of interest in shaping up this former city park now that it will be turned over to the feds. I chat with him for a while about photography, and somehow we get on the subject of poetry and then Williams, and he tells me that his mother knows a poet friend of mine who taught her when she was a student at Bloomfield College. I ask him for a copy of the "Master Plan" for the Great Falls; he tells me that he can give me a CD instead and I thank him.

The plan calls for an amphitheater to be constructed for outdoor concerts at the base of the falls facing the power generator and the river, and I wonder how anyone will be able to hear anything with the noise in the background. There's also a plan for a cliff trail adjacent to the falls with places for rock climbing and even a replica Indian village on the riverbank, as well as a paved historic walkway through the ruined mills along the river. My wish is that it be cleaned up and left in its natural state so that visitors can appreciate the river and the falls as nature intended, not as an industrial silk mill theme park. The plan is over two hundred pages long. What would Williams have thought?

I walk down the side access path to the grass field in front of the power generator plant at the base of the falls and notice that the stairs that lead up to the statue of Hamilton are closed. There are weeds everywhere, along with graffiti and broken bottles. I take some photographs using an infrared filter. Then I pack away my equipment and walk up the path and out to the street, up to the intersection with McBride Avenue so I can continue to the pedestrian walkway that crosses the rock chasm directly over the falls. Then I cross over the Passaic on the Wayne Avenue Bridge to the other side of the river by the old football stadium. Closed for over twenty years, the stadium looks like a deserted and ruined Roman coliseum covered over in graffiti and weeds. There's a path that leads to the river behind the stadium. It is shady and cool and overgrown with trees along the steep cliff side. I spot about a dozen homeless men sitting on rocks or on logs under the trees by the water to keep cool.

I am a little nervous down here at the river's edge up against the rock cliff at the base of the falls. I see a kid fishing and I watch a group of kids climb up on a huge chunk of basalt that fell off the face of the cliff and into the water years ago. The kids climb up easily using handholds and footholds to get purchase on the cracks in the basalt and make

it over so that they can sit on another boulder under the spray of the waterfalls. I turn back after one unsuccessful try.

It's a clear summer day and I want to take advantage of the weather, so I walk back to my car and drive Route 80 east to the first exit after crossing the Passaic, Exit 61. I take the old county road, Route 507, that Williams would have driven north to get to Paterson from Rutherford in the 1930s. I drive south towards Garfield. I think I see an access road to the river but end up in the trucking yard for the Sealed Air Corporation and have to turn around. I get back on the county road and pull into Eric's Auto World used car lot, which is right on the river. The sun is still strong at 6 pm and the riverbank is thickly wooded. I spot the weir and the little park by the weir with a bench and a flagpole. There's a man standing in the river, fishing. He is casting his line into the foam at the base of the falling water. The weir is ten feet high and three hundred feet across and holds back what they call "Lake Dundee." I ask the fisherman if he has caught anything. He holds up his hands, because I can't hear him under the roar of water, and indicates that they were too small.

In his title story, Williams writes: "All the streets of the Dundee section of Passaic have men idling in them this summer. Polacks mostly, walking around—collars open, skinny, pot bellied—or sitting on the steps of the old-time wooden houses, looking out of place, fathers of families with their women folk around them."

I cross the county road from the weir to a small convenience strip mall opposite the used car lot, and look in all the shop windows. All the stores are Polish, the signs are in Polish. There's a Polish deli, a Polish meat store, a Polish travel agency. There are Polish kids with skate boards, and mothers shopping for dinner on their way home. I see a couple of long-haired young men smoking, leaning up against a wall, and an old man buying a newspaper. The air glistens with water vapor in the sunlight from the spray of the Dundee Weir. A few days earlier, a woman's body was found floating in the river here, and there were police divers and helicopters scanning the river. The woman's body was discovered by two homeless fishermen who were questioned and let go. Life goes on along the Passaic River.

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photographs by the author

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