

Jacob's Pillow and the Housatonic Cultural celebration of a river

By John Townes

What do Pittsfield and other communities in the hilly, landlocked Berkshires have in common with Stratford and Bridgeport on the low-lying Connecticut shoreline at Long Island Sound?

The Housatonic River.

To link the diverse regions along the 132-mile river, Jacob's Pillow and a coalition of artists, individuals and community groups are planning a yearlong celebration of the Housatonic. Called *From Source to Sound: The Housatonic River Project*, it will include a wide range of performances and other events at various points along the river, beginning this autumn and continuing through next summer.

Sam Miller, executive director of Jacob's Pillow, initiated the project in 1990. "I'm interested in the connection between artists and the community," says Miller. "I thought it would be interesting to combine that with the idea of the Housatonic River as a neighborhood we all share."

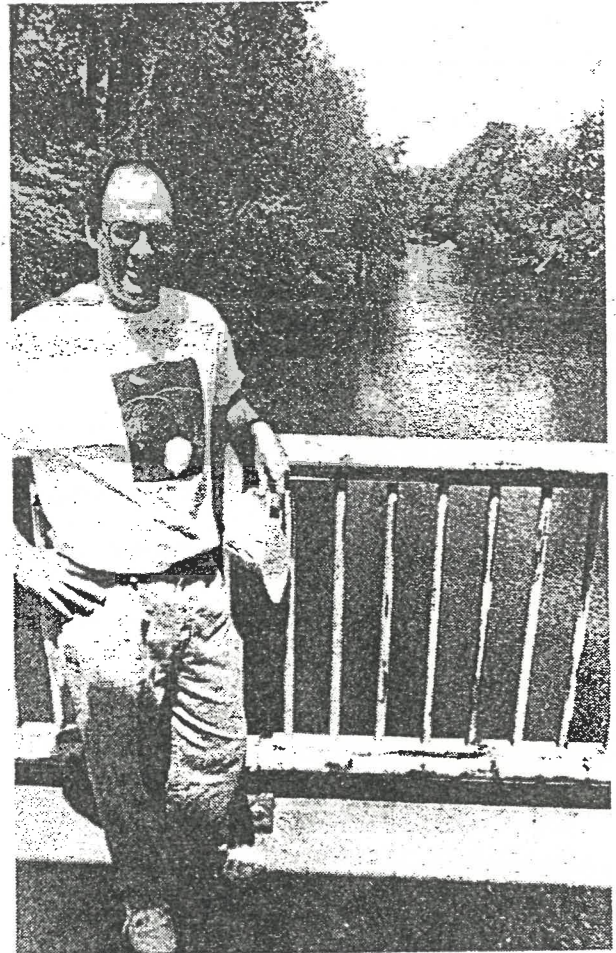
Miller and other organizers hope the festival will stimulate public awareness of the Housatonic's regional importance and diversity and to foster partnerships among those who are working to preserve and improve different sections of the river and the valley around it.

"As someone who has lived by the Housatonic in two states, I'm very conscious of how it crosses borders," he says. "I would like this project to result in a greater recognition of our interdependence, that we're all neighbors along the river."

During the festival, dancers and other artists will interpret various aspects of the Housatonic and the very different regions the river passes through from its sources around Pittsfield to its mouth on Long Island Sound. Other activities related to the river are also planned.

"The Housatonic is a microcosm of society and raises many issues: environmental, political, social and artistic,"

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Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival director Sam Miller stands by the Housatonic River near his home in Great Barrington.

Jacob's Pillow on the Housatonic River

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says Susan Sgorbati, artistic director of the project.

"It has so many different identities and roles," she adds. "Along some sections of the river, people have treated it like a private dumping ground. But in other spots, you'll find million-dollar homes along its banks and people wouldn't even dream of dropping a cigarette butt into it."

The process of organizing the festival is as important as the results, according to Miller and Sgorbati. One goal is to establish common ground between such seemingly diver-

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gent interests as environmental organizations and industries that have polluted the river.

"We've fragmented our culture," says Sgorbati. "A project like this offers a new way to tie together many different groups of people along the river: artists, businesses, politicians and community groups."

Multifaceted

The festival is expected to be as multifaceted as the river itself.

To support the project financially, Jacob's Pillow has been raising funds from such contributors as General Electric and the Massachusetts Commission for the Humanities.

In addition to people from the Housatonic region, Jacob's Pillow plans to commission dancers and other artists from different parts of the country to participate.

For example, one artist who has an interest in the effects of light has been invited to create a work based on the qualities of light along the Housatonic. In another project, a group of scientists are taking water samples along the river and working with composers to create music and video works directly related to the data.

Sgorbati is also developing a work to be performed in the festival. It will compare how the natural characteristics of the river at various points relate to the history and character of those areas. "For example, the land and river current made certain places good sites for paper mills, which led to the development of certain types of communities there," she explains.

In addition, other organizations along the river have been invited to participate and to sponsor their own related events, either in conjunction with the commissioned artists or on their own.

In Bridgeport, Conn., for example, one community group plans to organize a Hispanic festival related to the river. In Connecticut, project organizers have also been working with the Housatonic Valley Association, a group that has been advocating for coordinated land-use and water-quality policies all along the river valley.

Organizers have also contacted many individuals and groups in Berkshire County, including Pittsfield's planning department, the Berkshire Natural Resources Council, Great Barrington river advocate Rachel Fletcher, and an organization of trout fishermen, among others.

"This event can make people more aware that the river is not only an important natural resource, but an important cultural resource," says Tad Ames, a staff member of the Berkshire Natural Resources Council in Pittsfield.

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Scope expanded

The project grew from an idea Miller had in late 1990 to commission Sgorbati to perform a work about the river.

Sgorbati, who is also an administrator at Bennington College, has previously organized numerous performances based on such sites as quarries, factories and farms.

To help her prepare for the Housatonic work, she recruited writer Julius Rosenwald and photographer Sue Rees. They spent several days following the river along adjacent roads and talking to people with interests in the Housatonic along the way.

"It was an incredible experience," she recalls of the trip, which they took during the Persian Gulf War last year. "We met a lot of amazing people, such as a man who has spent several years making paintings of every bridge along the Housatonic. I realized the project could have a much wider scope than just my performance."

She and Miller then decided to expand it to include other artists and events all along the river.

Earlier this year, three public meetings with river advocates were held in different regions. Several weeks ago, a core of about 20 or 25 people held a retreat at Jacob's Pillow to begin working out details of the project.

The organizers plan eventually to publish a calendar of the events, which will take place all along the river at different times and dates throughout the year.

Miller hopes the effect of the project will extend beyond the end of the year. "I'd like to see this be the catalyst for projects that won't even start until after the year is over," he says. "Hopefully it will generate greater support for efforts to improve the Housatonic from top to bottom. It should be just a beginning."