

Stone Valley: A Cooperative Recreational Area

By Lewis E. Weeks, Jr.

All photos by author

The Raquette River, New York's second longest river and by some called the most damned river in the country, is legendary for its beautiful falls, some still running free: the fabled Buttermilk Falls, below Forked Lake; the wild, isolated and forested Raquette Falls, at the foot of Long Lake; and, still in the Adirondack Park, Moody and Jamestown Falls, downriver from Sevey's corners. Ghosts of their former selves are the many other falls from Piercefield to the St. Lawrence that have been damned in the past to run mills and later to produce hydro power.

Just outside the northern boundary of the Adirondack Park between Colton and Brown's Bridge, a distance of about two miles as the crow flies, the Raquette plunges in its most spectacular descent, about 300 feet. Of all the falls on the river, none are more picturesque, varied and breathtaking than are those between Colton and Brown's Bridge.

This section of the river is now accessible to the public through a series of hiking and cross-country ski trails made possible by the cooperative efforts of the Niagara Mohawk Power Corporation (NIMO), the town of Colton, St. Lawrence County, the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and the Laurentian Chapter of the Adirondack Mountain Club.

The story of how this area was developed and opened to the public should be of special interest to readers of *Adirondack*. We hope that it may serve as a model for other Chapters that might have inaccessible attractions in their own neighborhoods.

Initiative

It all began with the enthusiasm of a few who knew some of the more spectacular

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An example of what can happen when business, government and an ADK Chapter work together.



One of the falls of the Raquette in Stone Valley.

sections of Stone Valley and felt they should be better known and available to the public without trespass. A look at town tax maps led, mistakenly as it turned out, to the belief that the acquisition of two pieces of private property, along with the crucial cooperation of NIMO, which owned the rest of the land on both sides of the river, could make the dream a reality.

Consequently, with encouragement from local DEC head Roger Hutchinson, a proposal to purchase or acquire easements across the private land, to build hiking and ski trails, and to prepare educational materials was drawn up. Niagara Mohawk officials in Potsdam were informally approached about the concept. They were not only receptive but eagerly ready to cooperate.

The proposal to the DEC began to wind its way through channels, as did our overtures to Niagara Mohawk. In addition, as the town of Colton and St. Lawrence County

both owned land adjacent to the project, we approached their officials and again received an enthusiastic and warm welcome. Serendipitously, Colton folk were already hoping to enlist the power corporation's support for uncovering Colton's industrial history through identifying and making open bankside ruins and sites on Niagara Mohawk lands. Moreover, the county forests adjacent and nearby were already laced with a series of woods roads, hiking paths and ski trails, constructed under the direction of Joe Kutsko, the county forester. These could be readily connected to those in our proposal.

Most encouraging and helpful of all was Laurentian Chapter's president, Dick Mooers. When he was approached for his reaction to asking Chapter members to help with trail-building if the proposal were approved, he suggested that the Chapter might sponsor the entire project, making available its manpower, its prestige and the cooperation of headquarters in Lake George. And so it transpired! Far more important than that, however, was the fact that Dick works for the St. Lawrence County Planning Board.

Immediately, he put his enthusiasm and professional competence to work and discovered that the power corporation owned all the shoreline on both sides of the river, making our DEC appeal unnecessary. We withdrew that proposal and, again drawing on Dick's experience, submitted a formal and highly professional proposal to Niagara Mohawk, one that was accepted virtually without alterations.

Jewel of an area

We were soon ready to begin work; and what we had to work on was indeed very, very special, a jewel of an area, as the words of our "experts" reveal. It is impossible, in trying to describe the area, to curb one's enthusiasm or refrain from superlatives; for, indeed, this is a jewel-like place

with many facets, chief of which is the river and its falls, especially those at Colton, Stone Valley, The Tub, Lucy's Hole and O'Malley Brook. There are magnificent stands of pine and hemlock in Stone Valley and especially at O'Malley Brook, which tumbles picturesquely over a series of rock shelves into the Raquette.

Most conservationists decry the building of dams, which drown and impede the natural flow of a river. However, in Stone Valley there is an advantage to the impoundment at Colton: When the river is reduced to a slight flow during the summer because the water is almost entirely diverted into the penstock to generate power at Brown's Bridge Station, the ancient bed of the Raquette, with its potholes, pools, uptilted strata and spectacular rock formations, is fully revealed.

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Winter, with its ice falls and snow capped rocks, and autumn, with its brilliant colors in the predominant hardwoods of the west bank and sections of the east, provide varied prospects and different kinds of beauty in the same scenes.

Dr. Bradford Van Diver, geology professor at SUNY Potsdam, points out that the geology of Stone Valley is unique in its clear exposure of a profound geological boundary called the "Carthage-Colton Line," separating the Highland and Lowland Adirondacks. Although both are Precambrian in age, the Highland rock is generally metamorphosed igneous plutonic rock, formed at great depth; the Lowland rock is predominantly sedimentary and volcanic rock, formed at a somewhat shallower depth.

"Stone Valley may hold the key to the problem of the direct contact here of these two different groups of rock formed at widely different depths," he says. "This connection, through tectonic action along a fault, occurred at great depth rather than near the surface. Erosion by the Raquette along the shears created the steeply inclined steps that are the most striking aspect of the valley. Not only shearing but also complex small-scale folding has resulted in intimate mixing of the various types of rocks from both sides of the line."

Van Diver considers Stone Valley an "outstanding laboratory of Adirondack geology that may provide answers to some of the region's most puzzling geologic problems and that should be preserved for the public at all costs."

Flora and fauna

Dr. Paul Hafer, professor emeritus of biology at Potsdam College, and Nancy Eldblom, local wild plant expert, are familiar with the area and report as follows: "The Stone Valley environs include a variety of flora and animal habitats. One of the most striking of these is the refreshingly cool grove of pine and hemlock trees at the confluence of O'Malley Brook and the Raquette River. A high canopy of these stately conifers provides a protective ceiling for a number of shade-loving ferns and clubmosses. The forest floor is relatively clear and carpeted by a duff of needles. Clintonia lily, jack-in-the-pulpit and Indian cucumber dot the brown carpet, along with an occasional patch of goldthread and foamflower. Of the ferns, oak fern long beech fern, silvery spleenwort, lady fern, cinnamon fern, ostrich fern, royal fern, New York fern and interrupted fern are among those found under the soaring arches.

"Along the Raquette, the red of cardinal *lobelia* provides a striking contrast to the various greens, including witch hazel, and striped and mountain maples. Back a bit from the river is at least one site containing maidenhair and rattlesnake ferns, hepatica, red and white trillium, and more. Bulblet bladder and fragile ferns can also be found.

"Along the trail, the observer is likely to startle a few small azure butterflies, a mourning cloak or two, and a number of meadow fritillaries, tiger swallowtails and white admirals.

"Tracks, trails, and droppings reveal a number of mammal inhabitants: white-tail (Virginia) deer, snowshoe rabbit (varying hare), cottontail, raccoon, porcupine, red fox, red and grey squirrel, deer mouse, woodchuck and Eastern skunk. Beaver, marten, New York weasel, otter, moles shrews and a number of other mammals are likely to visit the area, including an occa-

sional black bear."

A single survey of the bird population of the area, made in the third week of July, 1989, by Robert Cerwonka, who teaches ornithology at Potsdam College, and his wife, Sheila, an avid and expert bird watcher, revealed the following: great blue heron, pintail, yellow shafted flicker, Wilson's snipe, yellow bellied sapsucker, wood pewee, blue jay, black-capped chickadee, robin, wood thrush, veery, red-eyed vireo, black-throated warbler, American redstart, white-throated sparrow, and oven bird. As this count was made late in the summer, bird activity was not at its height. At other times of the year, especially in the spring, additional species native to a forest and riverine environment would surely be seen.

Back to work

During the winter of 1988-89, most of the preliminary planning and arrangements as to the role of the town, county, DEC, Niagara Mohawk and ADK were completed. Obviously, the most important participant was the corporation. Dave Youlen superintendent of regional stations, and Joe Zagrobelny, assistant superintendent, were our local contacts. They were unfailingly supportive and helpful.

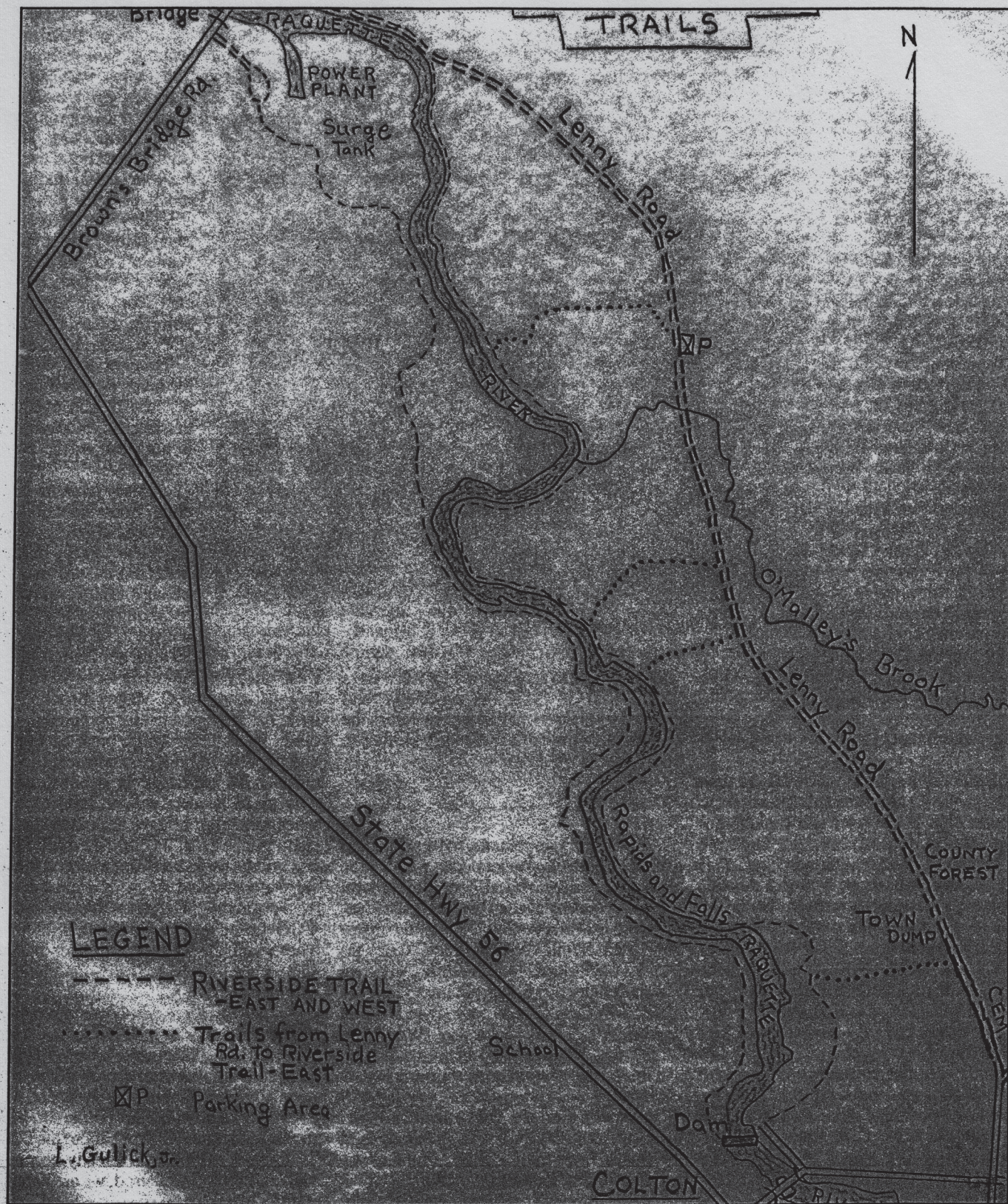
Our only difficulty arose over providing insurance to protect volunteers working on the trails, a not unusual concern of landowners who permit their lands to be enjoyed by the public. This concern is a legitimate and real one in view of the litigious nature of our society and in spite of

We have been delighted at how little litter there has been. We like to think this is because so many have been involved and have taken a proprietary interest.

Public Law 9-103, which is specifically designed to protect such landowners. Our ADK headquarters was able to help by providing coverage as on any official Chapter activity. On the other hand, this solution did keep us from drawing on the many other sources of volunteers that were available, such as service organizations, scouts, college outing clubs, and so on.

Headquarters also provided us with the services of Willie Janeway, ADK trails coordinator. He walked some of the area with a few of us, giving a crash course in trail location and construction.

By mid-April of '89, when winter's back was pretty well broken, various phases of the project had been tentatively scheduled, some trail layout and flagging had been completed, work days had been officially



announced, and the actual trail building by the Laurentians begun. In the summer, a crew of the Youth Conservation Corps, sponsored by the DEC and the county youth department, administered by Maryann Ashley and under the direction of Joe Kutsko, the county forester, connected the county trails on the east side of the Lenney Road (see map) to the county lands on the west side of the road, where they built and marked a trail down to the Riverside Trail. In addition, the crew built a picturesque and sturdy log bridge over O'Malley Brook; about two and a half miles of trail, including 32 log steps on one particularly steep pitch; and about a quarter-mile section of difficult cut-and-fill trail.

Niagara Mohawk, at the same time, provided a crew that worked on the west side of the river, opening up about three miles of new trail beginning at Colton and connecting with a logging road to the north, thus finishing the west side trail from Colton to Brown's Bridge.

Loops and branches

With only a few days of working time left, the NIMO crew shifted operations to the east side of the river and rapidly finished about two miles of riverside trail from O'Malley Brook to Brown's Bridge. This effort was gratifying as it meant that the ambitious hiker could start at any one of the trailheads and make a complete loop of from eight to ten miles along both sides of the river in Stone Valley. As the map indicates, there are several marked entrances from the Lenney Road to the riverside, making possible almost any length of hike desired.

In the fall, Niagara Mohawk provided two real bonuses for our project. First, we discovered two huge stone mill wheels in the woods near the Colton east side trailhead. A NIMO crew drew them out of the woods and positioned them so that they make an appropriate and attractive entrance for that trail.

There is much more historical and legendary material associated with the Colton area that Cynthia Hennessy, town historian, is researching for us. We hope to have much of that material available along the trails where appropriate.

We needed a bridge over the huge penstock barring easy access to the Colton west side trailhead. Our plans did not call for this to be completed until the summer of 1990 at the earliest. However, the power corpora-



The Raquette, full of misty spring runoff, in Stone Valley.

tion was able to spare a crew for a few days in the fall of 1989. A substantial and attractive bridge was completed across the penstock, eliminating the last barrier to easy access for all trails.

Thanks

A word or two remains to be said about others who have cooperated in making the project so successful. Roger Hutchinson, district forester of the DEC office in Canton, made available to us the familiar brown and gold "Trail," "Parking" and "Carry in-Carry out" signs. Incidentally, we have been delighted at how little litter there has been—in fact, almost none, over the late summer, fall, and winter use. We like to think this is because so many have been involved and have taken a proprietary interest.

We followed the state brown and gold colors in the four main trailhead signs at Brown's Bridge and Colton. Phil Collins, of the Golden Rule Building Supply Co. in Colton, provided us with heavy exterior plywood and paint for these signs. Jerry Wilson, manual arts teacher at Colton-Pierrepont School, put his shop class to work to create the signs and hangers and to paint the signs. We were almost in despair at the tremendous cost of the lettering wherever we turned, until Tim Hennessy, head of the

Colton Town Board, suggested we check the county highway sign-shop. There Dick Demo, head of the highway department, sent us to Jim Manning, sign technician, who did a beautiful job of lettering our

signs, which now hang four square on standards made in the NIMO shop. There is ample parking at each of the four main trailheads and a parking lot near O'Malley Brook on county land off the Lenney Road. White's Tru-Value Hardware of Potsdam contributed paint for signs and bulletin boards, which other volunteers made.

Everywhere we turned for help, we were treated generously and even enthusiastically. Community is not dead in the North Country!

What remains to be done? Some ski trails have been laid out (except where access or terrain make it inadvisable, we use the hiking trails for cross country skiing); other ski trails are yet to be laid out, and all must be cleared. On the

west side, two fair-sized loops have been flagged; one, the O'Malley Brook Overlook, has been practically completed. The other, Rock Dam Loop, must be cleared and a couple of bridges constructed. More cut-and-fill trailwork is needed, and a number of rivulets will be safer to cross when small log bridges are made. A few steep pitches will be climbed more easily and will be subject to less erosion when log steps are installed.

Fortunately, Niagara Mohawk and the YCC promised crews for this summer. These and the Laurentian eager beavers should see the project fully completed by summer's end.

Of course, there will be annual maintenance and repair as well as cleanups from time to time. Whether we have made an adequate appeal and involved enough people in the project to eliminate most littering will soon become apparent, as the months to come will bring about the heaviest use yet. The area is already becoming well known and well used, we are happy to note.

Do pay us a visit and share the treasures of this wonderful playground. Trail maps are posted at all trailheads and are available at the Colton town offices, directly across from the parking area at the Southwest trailhead, in the center of Colton, on the riverside.

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