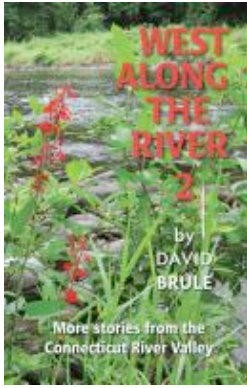


**WEST
ALONG
THE
RIVER**

2

by
**DAVID
BRULE**

**More stories from the
Connecticut River Valley**



The is the second book in a series about nature, village life, sense of place in the Connecticut River Valley, and beyond. Seasons in western New England, family, Red Sox lore and local heroes in Fenway Park, encounters with bears and other memorable wild creatures, Native American presence, and adventures in Ireland, Brittany and France complete this collection. Lyrical nature writing and tender remembrance connect the past and present, helping record oral history of a corner of New England rural culture.

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West Along the River 2

Stories from
The Connecticut River Valley
And Elsewhere

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High Water Chronicles (April 2010)

If you're from these parts, or if you've lived here attuned to the river moods long enough, you know this season is called "high water", not the poetic "spring freshet" nor the cubic feet per second of the hydrologists. All it takes is just a sparse two-word phrase referring to the essential element here, and its current state.

* * * *

Every spring season of high water has its yearly difference. They still talk about the 500-year flood one fateful March in 1936 that brought torrential rains and disastrous flooding, with ice jams blocking the Connecticut, putting deadly pressure on bridges, dams and creating havoc when they finally gave way. Such high water was never seen before and was not to be seen for another 500 years. Or so they thought. But in fact it only took two short years later for another 500-year flood to occur at the time of the 1938 hurricane. Maybe we're good for a thousand years this time around!

This year the water came up early, under warm heavy rains in March, melting snow and quickly raising the level of the river that swirls around the rocky cliff face in our bend of the river.

Someone once said of the river: "Well... it runs by here every day".

That is its job after all, it carries water away, down river to the sea and most times keeps it away from our door.

* * * *

Some folks down east along the coast didn't have an easy time of it this year what with the unusual storm surges. But here, in our old house that sits on the edge of an ancient flood plain,

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the river, just one terrace below us, predictably reclaims its prehistoric right to spread swirls and new streams of rushing water through the trees and creek paths. In high water season, we hear the roiling rush night and day, through every open window of the house, the constant river sound comes in through the kitchen door and into the upstairs bedrooms at night. The white water flashes through the bare trees beyond the garden. In the evening, the river gleams as silver ribbons running through the woods.

In contrast to the rushing noisiness on the other side of the trees, the frog pond is quite still, though brimming full, and on its stillness, trees are perfectly mirrored like an Escher print. One could get lost, staring into the labyrinth of the real trees and the merely reflected trees upside down on the surface. By day, dozens of frogs, the green ones and the bullfrogs, croak and paddle happily in their brief mating and spawning. An elegant wood duck pair dally in pre-nuptial bliss on the edge of the pond, and a visiting muskrat spends time plunging to the bottom to locate succulents, stems and tubers.

The house and the yard, high and dry like Noah's Ark on the flood, edge into spring with the noisy river as a back drop.

In these warm days of early April, the morning sun creeps over this corner of the river, over the rushing water sounds. Early reddish buds on the maple give a scarlet haze to the morning air. The birds are resuming their spring calling, overwintering juncos linger and trill from every limb. Their numbers now down however from the 50 or 60 here in full winter. White-throats have begun their sweet whistle of "Old Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody". Sometimes just shortened to "Old Sam" with no Peabody at all, as one of our Amherst poets once remarked.

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Our phoebe constantly wheezes out his squeeze-toy call while seriously considering the eaves of our summer gazebo in the woods.

The morning session we could call “Squirrels Gone Wild” begins. Two exuberant bushy-tails as zany and deranged as any kittens high on catnip, careen from tree base to tree base, flipping on their backs to tussle or fight with a broken branch on the ground. The two of them do back-flips and somersaults, race furiously to the lilacs to instantly stop and hold position in freeze-tag style before resuming a mad streaking and caroming like a pinball game out of control. I’d better check on what it is that they’re getting into back there, maybe some strange grass or weed. Or is it just spring fever?

* * * *

So we have made it through one more winter, and a thankfully mild one at that, compared to past years, and to the rest of the country. Warms days have coaxed out early tender green, and the shadbush billows whitely in the wind, early this year.

In the evening, the river pathways through the woods turn to silver again as the sun goes down. More voices rise up in the dusk, an early woodcock has begun its calling and courting in the gleaming birch and stark alders. Hundreds of spring peepers with voices like silver bells rise up in song. Our Tribal friends have recently told us that in their culture, the peepers sing for the elders who have passed away this winter. It is a good way to be reminded of them.

And just then, amid these thoughts, into the fading light, wings and lurches our favorite brown bat! She’s back, somehow, miraculously. She has not died with the tens of thousands in the winter caves. All alone, for the time being, our bat wings erratically over her familiar territory in the yard, between the

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peak of the old house and the towering maples. Exactly like last year.

The joy of return is mutual, and seems to pass between us like a current. We are thrilled and relieved to see our old friend on leather wings, swooping low over our heads near the campfire before going out over the rushing river that is pushing this year's high water down to the sea.

The Zen of Porch Repair (August 2011)

One day last week, this being the month of August, it was high time to repair the back porch.

This porch is an open affair, there being no roof on this sort of a deck, and some of the floor boards were getting punky, pushing up mushrooms, getting along into rotting and such. And although the resident chipmunks, Hoover and No-Tail Ryan, used that state of affairs to their advantage, peering through the worn boards up-periscope, and diving under at the slightest alarm, nails had worked their way through the punky parts and some of the 12-footers really needed replacing.

Now, as with many aspects of this old house, I approach any tampering with the homestead spirits with great caution, reverence and even reluctance. So it takes me a long time to get around to doing things here.

* * * *

The current edition of the back porch, which some would call a deck, although our version doesn't quite aspire to that designation, was the work and creation of my father, his pal Babe Fritz, and me, back in the 80s.

I've told you before about our man Babe and his enigmatic carpentry ways. He was a man of few words, dry wisecracks, and intensity. You never wanted to tell Babe about your projects too far in advance for he was an early riser, and he'd be at the front door by 5:30- 6 o'clock AM ready to get started if you didn't watch out! So tampering with his work done years ago, even *repairing* his handiwork, had to be approached with respect.

* * * *

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Truth to tell, this house does have another porch out front, built by great-grandfather Judah before the turn of the last century. That porch though, is on the north side, always out of the sun, which suited folks of the Victorian age in the 1880s, who wanted to sit in the shade, rock back and forth, drink lemonade and watch the neighbors across the street. Back then, they called it the “*piazza*”. As in, for example “Grandfather Abe’s out front on the *piazza*.”

Sure enough most times when we grandchildren showed up down here on the Flat, Abe *would* be out on the piazza in his homemade Adirondack chair, smoking his pipe, drinking lukewarm Narragansett beer, and occasionally spitting over the railing. Many the pleasant hour Cousin Tom and I had spent there while Abe told stories, tall tales and lies mostly, squinting at us sideways to see if we were paying attention. Our first taste of beer came in those days, but between the flat ‘Gansett and the wicked home brew he concocted down cellar, we were cured from wanting the beer for a few more years until our taste buds began yearning for it. That piazza is still here, held together with 19th century workmanship and countless coats of paint.

But on the south side of the house, just outside the kitchen door, there was nothing but some steps and a small spread of cinders for a path on the edge of the grass.

First thing we did in moving in after Abe passed on, was to build a back porch.

So the first edition of the porch came about in 1974, when we needed a dry place to sit outdoors, a place for dog and boy to play in the sunshine, a surface above the dew-damp grass, where we could live just outside the kitchen whenever we wanted.

After all, after spending years in Paris back then, once we settled here, we needed our outdoor café terrace, a promenade deck, an observation post from which to watch birds, daydream, play, and lie on our backs to look at the sky.

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That first edition of the porch came mostly from materials salvaged from the Millers Falls Tool Co. where Abe worked. He was an expert at hoarding things, and had filled the cellar with box boards he had salvaged from the shop, along with paint brushes, screwdrivers, wood chisels and all. Enough to last two lifetimes or more.

Don't know what he actually had had in mind, but those boards were perfect for a back porch. Fourteen and sixteen-foot boards came up and out to the light of day. Abe had saved all the nails from those boxes too, so we had buckets of them to use without going to the hardware store. Walter Carlisle, my parents' neighbor, provided some discarded telephone poles for the posts and underpinnings. Soon we secured a good number of 2x4s from Rugg Lumber, put Abe's boards and nails to good use, and we had ourselves a deck.

* * * *

Of course, after a number of years, that makeshift deck was showing age and wear, and that's when my father, Babe, and I put in the second edition of the porch. And now *that* edition is showing its age too, but replacing a board here and there won't be too hard. I do have to rummage around for the tools however, since tools like to get up and change places on you when you're not looking.

I've only got hand tools to use, that's all I want really. They are all hand-me-downs and require no electricity, leave no carbon footprint, need no nuclear fuel-generated energy.

Having no need to rush, neither to work fast nor move on to another building project, I can appreciate and enjoy direct contact with the wood, the direct contact with my work. I hear no shrill whine of an electric skillsaw, no mechanical repetitive firing of a compressor-driven hammer.

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I locate the hand saw, salvaged from the Old Camp on the Connecticut, before we closed it up. It was grandfather Joe's saw, probably acquired sometime in the 50s, but it still holds a true cut in a 2x4 and needs no sharpening in spite of its 60-odd years. The back and forth, scree and scraw is music and rhythm, it produces fragrant perfume out of sawdust, and I can pause to hear the catbird in the lilacs, watch the yellowthroat in the flowers without my ears ringing with the scream of steel in wood.

The hammer, the nails, the saw, the pause between efforts. Nothing comes between you and your work but cadenced muscle power, silence between strokes.

So this day, the tools are gathered and laid out on the workbench on the back porch. That homemade table serves as workplace, writing surface, choice spot for summer and late fall dining under the bats and the stars, bird feeder in the winter.

The hammer that pounded generations of nails for generations of house dwellers here, the afore-mentioned saw, a Millers Falls Tool Co. level and tape measure, a square and a number 2 pencil, they all came with the house. That's how it is when you live in the family homestead. One time I needed an adjustable wrench, and something led me to a toolbox lurking in a corner of the dirt floor cellar. Inside was the wrench I needed, left there 50 Christmases ago by an uncle who abruptly left us on a winter's night in darkest December, never to come back, except for his wake, in the parlor, just over there.

The wrench did its job, and back to its spot it went, waiting for the next call to use.

* * * *

The catbird twitches while she watches me set up for my simple task. The hummingbirds hum, and the tinhorn nuthatch calls as I move around the job, contemplating the angles,

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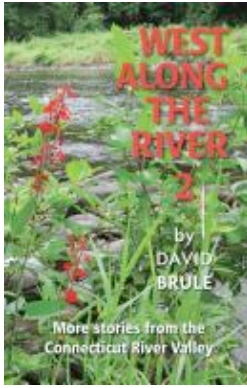
savoring the thrust of the saw, feeling accomplishment at the driving of a beautiful nail into a new pressure-treated 2x6.

When we built this edition of the porch, there were the three of us, back in the 80s. But Babe and my father are gone, more than ten years ago. I finish up, alone now.

But this repair job brings us back full circle: to me, replacing boards, getting in touch with the old guys and their workingman's wisecracks, bringing them forth in the silence between the blows of the hammer on nail, in the pause between the scree and scraw of the ancient handsaw.

*"It's good to reach the end of a journey,
But it's the journey that matters, in the end."*

--Ursula Le Guin



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