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Getting in Deep

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GETTING IN DEEP

Johnson Pond has had a problem for years, and Colby was determined to get to the bottom of it.

November 3, 1997. Maine's fall election campaign was in its last gasp and a surfeit of warm air blew over the entire state. At 8 o'clock that morning, Gus Libby, in his shirtsleeves, turned a long-handled wrench to open the drain valve and begin the much-anticipated restoration of Colby's Johnson Pond.

Supervisor of mechanical services and wise in the ways of rusted gears, Gus was ready. For days he had been dosing the apparatus with Kroil ("The Oil That Creeps"). That, plus some heat from an oxy-acetylene torch and a few good whacks with a brass hammer, got the water flowing through a 20-inch underground pipe to the far side of the soccer field where it surfaced in an old gully and gushed on to the Messalonskee Stream.

Back at the outlet, a single ring-billed gull back-pedaled in the current, watching Gus with a wary eye. It was easy to tell she was disgusted.

Truth be told, Johnson Pond badly needed fixing. For years, pond watchers have fretted over the blooming thing, helpless as this most pleasing foreground of a kazillion photographs slowly turned green.

As long ago as 1969, when most on the campus were stomping around about more global matters, there were some who vented over the sad shape of the pond. A report to the faculty that year from the Campus Natural Environ-

ment Committee blamed the decline of the watery icon entirely on the ducks, accusing them of rooting out plants, the nesting place of bugs intended as the diet of small fish that, in turn, were meant to feed the big fish whose job it was to keep the pond churned up and healthy. The cussed ducks also were peaking the Ph with their poop.

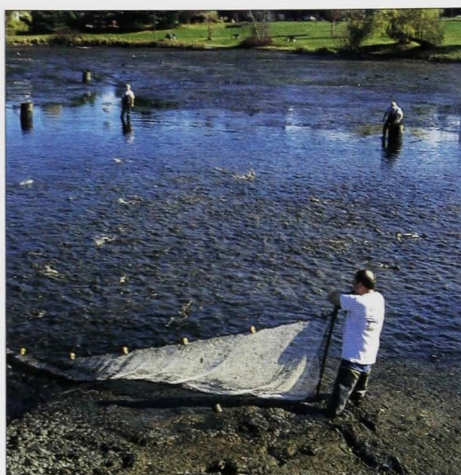
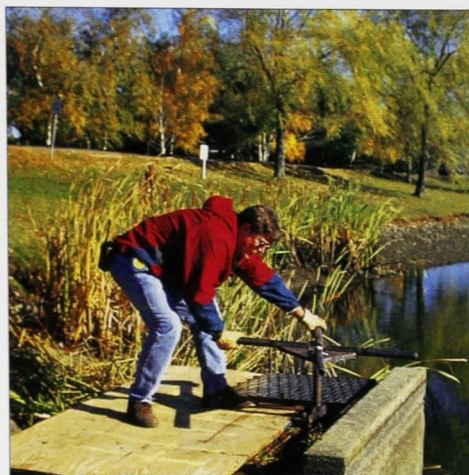
A sternly worded committee recommendation that the duck population "be maintained at a maximum of two individuals" went unheeded, not only by beleaguered College authorities but also by the ducks, who multiplied from the loaves of day-old bread and small fishes. Worse, the ducks soon were joined by legions of gulls, forced by the closing of Maine's open dumps to move to the campus and live off the lush offal of students.

And so it went.

Last spring the ice sank on April 17. Two days later the shallow west end of the pond was in full bloom with pickerel weed. It was time for action, and the College responded predictably—it formed a committee. From that point on it was hard to keep a straight face.

Plant and marine biologists, environmental analysts, hydraulic engineers, landscape architects and assorted other specialists worked hard on a restoration plan. For the only time through the entire adventure, experts outnumbered kibitzers.

Text and Photos by Earl Smith



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Steve Mohr, Portland landscape wizard and a man who knows an adventure when he smells one, signed on to help. In early September, armed with drawings and charts, he met with President Bill Cotter and others to firm up a plan. Mohr explained that the gradual accumulation of some two feet of silt, brought on by erosion, had lowered the water volume and increased nutrient levels with unwanted loading of phosphorus, thus accelerating eutrophication and macrophyte growth.

Alan Lewis, head of the Physical Plant Department and a practical Maine man to the core, offered a satisfying summary: "After fifty years," he said, "her bottom's gone soft."

Mohr proposed draining the pond, scraping out the gunk, and filling it up again. Cotter, who has a thing about campus tidiness, was feeling the full burden of his office. He wanted assurances of success and clear water by Commencement. Here folks normally given to precision became vague and tentative. Estimates on the time required to refill the pond after a proper cleaning varied from 72 hours to four months. Nobody was making guarantees. In the end, Cotter agreed to launch Colby's second great Venture of Faith (the original one produced the Mayflower Hill campus and created the man-made pond in the first place).

Once word was out, local, state and federal regulatory agencies—undaunted by uncertainty of their jurisdictions—tripped over one another in an unseemly eagerness to participate.

First in line was the local planning board, citing a statute requiring permission to make unsightly disturbances to any large piece of ground—never mind that the plot in question is normally under water or that the proposed work was aimed at improving the view. After a solemn hearing, a permit was granted.

The Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (IFW) temporarily fretted over the fish until agents learned that the smallmouth bass that inhabit the place had tapeworm. The department promptly proposed that the whole lot of them be killed with rotenone and buried in the back forty. Alert to the political fallout of killing so many fish in plain view of local residents who had for years been denied the opportunity to catch them, the IFW offered a second option—use nets to move them to the Messalonskee Stream, where, it turns out, the resident bass population is already wormy.

The College chose option two, whereupon the fisheries folks issued a pair of permits, one for relocating the fish and a second for the eventual re-stocking of wormless cousins. These fish agents also said they would be on hand when the plug was pulled, to be on the lookout for any rare, threatened or endangered species. (The best they could find was a strange turtle, a cross between a Red Slider and a Florida Cooter, evidence that not all the fooling around in that area has taken place in parked cars.)

Next of the permitters was the Maine Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), a most thorough and serious bunch who ultimately issued 10 pages of permissions including a nice placard to be posted on location, a "modification application" to record any changes in plans and a "transfer form" to be used in the event the College got discouraged and decided to sell the pond to a new owner.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was more tentative. Although there was some opinion that the College needed a "Non Point Discharge Permit" to flush the water out the underground pipe—where the overflow has been sent since 1930—the EPA folks let the draining go forward with a wink and a nod, explaining that "technical-



whole affair with a startling geographic observation from Pond "is not considered a water of the United States."

ties" prevented them from putting it all in writing.

The Army Corps of Engineers politely wiped its hands of the whole affair with a startling geographic observation from the chief of the regulatory branch, who wrote that Johnson Pond "is not considered a water of the United States." As much as the Army would have liked to be involved, it simply wasn't possible.

The Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA), asked to have a look for any hazards in the project, came to the altogether sensible conclusion that the pond was, in fact, going to be a whole lot safer without the water. Otherwise, they said, they worried that the muck might be so deep as to present an "engulfment hazard" to curious students. (It wasn't *that* deep.)

Armed with o.k.'s from the Planning Board, IFW, DEP, EPA, ACE and OSHA, the project was a go, Gus Libby opened the drain, and four days later the water was nearly gone. The rich bottom muck, exposed to the sunlight, promptly turned the pond into a giant petri dish.

For several days, curious onlookers prowled the banks. Hopes that the pond would surrender misplaced refrigerators and Volkswagens soon were dashed. Instead, all that could be seen were a few beer kegs and enough cement blocks to make a barn, dragged onto the ice to mark boundaries of long-ago hockey games.

The discovery near the north bank of a pair of booted legs, feet pointed skyward, sent security guard Jimmy Dickinson tip-toeing to the edge. It was not Jimmy Hoffa. "It's either a mannequin or a dead man with two wooden legs," Dickinson proclaimed.

Word of the pond cleaning soon spread on the World Wide Web. Melvin Lyon '52 e-mailed from Little Rock, Ark., asking the crew to keep an eye out for his wallet, lost

during an unauthorized swim in 1951. A woman from Oregon wrote hoping for word of the discovery of a diamond ring, flung into the deep in an engagement-busting pique in the early 1970s. She never married the man, she said, but always rued the loss of a fine piece of jewelry.

The origin of the mysterious mannequin surfaced as well. Ari Druker '93 e-mailed a confession from Japan. Seems that, in September 1992, he and a few co-conspirators (Southall, Gillis, West & Morgan) found the thing during a pond treasure hunt. It was taken to the Heights, showered and properly clothed in Colby boxers, where it stood sentinel outside the lair known as Heights 301 (Southall, Druker, Yormak & Hostler) for the entire year. Late at night, after Commencement 1993, it was, with tearful farewells, returned to the pond. (They asked to have it back for their fifth reunion this spring, but the dummy was reclaimed by the rightful owner—a local merchant who rented it to student party-makers in 1972 and never got it back.)

Once the pond was empty and somewhat dry, Don Gurney, who has dug more Mayflower Hill holes (and uprooted more underground cables) than any man in history, got the bid to remove the muck. Stalled only briefly by The Great Ice Storm of '98, he and his men worked through the winter, scraping up and carting off some 14,000 cubic feet of the stuff (which Colby will keep to mix with sand and make powerful loam for campus lawns and gardens).

On February 23, 1998, the job was declared finished. In a month, the pond was near full. The new water has an odd coffee color. Grounds supervisor Keith Stockford offers an ominous explanation. "It's only silt," he says. "Sooner or later it will all sink to the bottom." ♦