


## *The River Road*

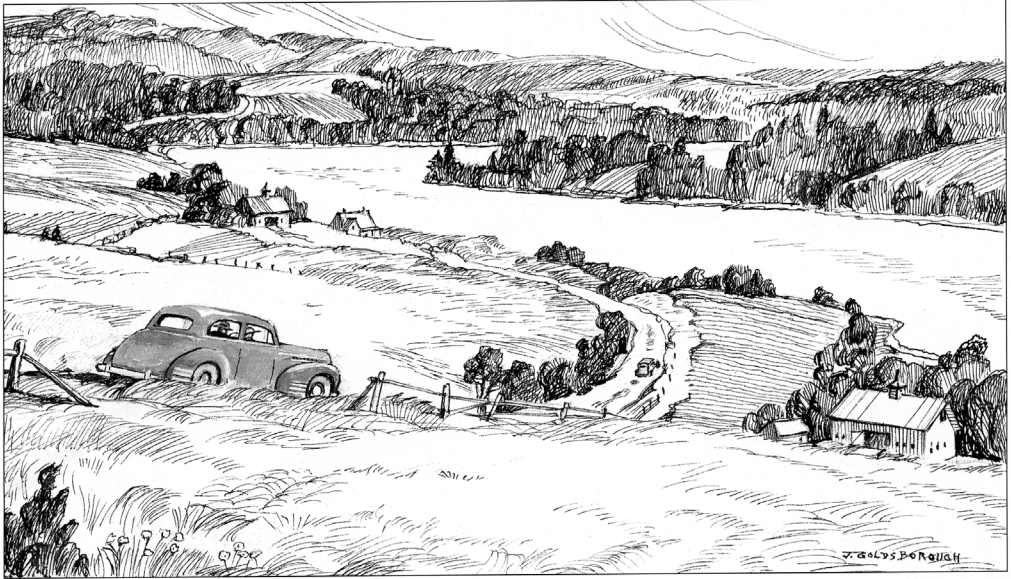
omeday in the early summer, I'm going to dress in a Panama hat, white ducks, and saddle shoes, borrow my brother's 1947 Chevrolet, and drive to Vermont with my wife. She'll wear a cotton shirtwaist dress, white sneakers, and a brimmed straw hat with a blue ribbon. We'll start early, drive on back roads to Brattleboro, then turn north on Route 5 and watch the Connecticut River landscape roll by.

For the next two days, driving slowly, we'll keep the river on our right, and, whenever we come to a likely field at midday, we'll take our straw picnic basket and go down by the shore, eat cold chicken, and lean on our elbows in the afternoon, watching the old river run by and the play of the wind in the trees on the right bank.

Nowadays, the drive from southern Connecticut to the northeast kingdom of Vermont can be accomplished in three to four hours, if you push the speed limit and the traffic is light. But in my time, when my family and I would undertake this same journey, it took three days. Five of us. My father in his white ducks and saddle shoes, my mother in a shirtwaist dress and a straw hat, and the three of us in back, counting cupolas and the round barns of Vermont, waving our arms out the windows in the wind, and asking if we were there yet when we still had two days worth of driving to do.

My father worked as the "doctor" in a boys' camp just north of East Charleston, Vermont (he wasn't a real doctor, so I don't know how or why he got the job). Each summer in June, we would roll up the rugs, cover the furniture with sheets, catch the dog, and drive along the river to Vermont.

We would come up the Merritt Parkway (counting bridges all the way; there were fifty-six as I recall), and as soon as we could, we'd cut over to the Connecticut River and drive up the left bank, staying in big white hotels and listening to the whistle of the night trains switching at White River Junction. The journey marks the best times in my memory—the end of school, the beginning of a long summer, the smell of fresh-cut hay, the smell of the first spruces of the



north, the smell of river water, and the view of that rolling Connecticut River landscape, where the sky drops down to the hay field, and the fields drop down to the river, and the river runs down to the sea.

A few years ago, starting this time at Brattleboro, I began annually recreating this sentimental journey. The thing that first struck me is that it can still be done. You can still spot the vernacular landscape of the river road of the 1940s and early 1950s—the rusting Jenny gas signs, the old decaying round barns with hay spilling out of their lofts, the cow yards, the cupolas, the pastures and fields. And always, sometimes out of sight, sometimes dominating the view, the Connecticut, the Great River, as it used to be called by the Indians, the winding river, the silver light river, the gray light river, blue light river, snaking through the hay fields, curving east, curving west, now wide and slow, now running hard through highlands, collecting tributaries all along the way, and never ceasing in its downslope southbound quest for the mother sea.

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