

# Vermonters Play It Cool With Water Recreation

LEMUEL J. PEET



HALFWAY up the tall dimension of Vermont live 20,000 people who demonstrate a refreshing zeal for fishing, camping, hiking, skiing, for wildflower preservation, and for kindred pursuits. Others may take to outdoor enjoyment lightly or as the stuff of wistful dreams. But not the residents of the White River Valley's rolling hills and winding stream-banks—they are fashioning their own special way of life.

For example, they think an abundance of cool, sweet water habitable for trout is almost as important as a plenitude of handsome, stanch homes for humans. Their maturing plan weighs the value of a heart-lifting view of a mountain on a scale just about equal to that applied to the productive enterprises now developing for family breadwinners.

And the many private investments in the newly launched recreation areas bear witness to the firm purpose of the valley dwellers.

Putnam Blodgett, Jr., put \$37,000 into building a 15-acre lake on Roaring Brook atop the timbered slope in back of his dairy farmstead at Bradford. He added guest facilities to the farmhouse, a cluster of rustic cabins in the lakeside woods; also trails, toilets, cooksheds, stables, and a craft shop. Before he hired counselors and cooks, this dairyman had invested \$50,000 in his recreation enterprise.

Such a venture might once have stirred local prophets of doom. Now, in the late 1960's, Blodgett's lively young campers in summer, succeeded by hunters in the

fall, skiers in winter, and fishermen in the spring—document a vital theme in the story of the White River Resource Conservation and Development project.

Originally, Blodgett's was one of 35 recreation- and wildlife-oriented facilities to be installed in this 635,000-acre project embracing parts of 4 counties. Landowners soon proved they had many more ideas. Today, outdoor fun prospects run the gamut, from hunting wild boar to quietly gathering butternuts—from "schussing" down a ski slope to smelting one's own copper on an old mine site.

## Specialists Help Out

Leading the agricultural interests in providing bases for such activities is dairyman Edson E. Gifford, Sr., chairman of the White River Soil and Water Conservation District. Head of the R.C. & D. Project Coordinating Committee is Sheldon M. Dimick, local banker. Lending their know-how to the effort are virtually all resource specialists operating in the 992 square mile area. They work at the elbows of 100 representatives from the valley's towns and villages, citizens from all the walks of life.

In 23 rural towns, the needed emphasis on recreation potentials literally stared planners in the face. From 3,200-foot



Lemuel J. Peet has been *State Conservationist* for the Soil Conservation Service in his native Vermont since 1943.

Mount Monastery in the west, to Blodgett's high pasture on the extreme east, every promontory looks out upon classic scenery. Yet, within a 500-mile radius live 50 million people. And the market for marginal farmland among vacation and retirement homeseekers was already fast livening.

Streams lace the countryside—including 400 choice miles of channel haunted by trout, bass, pickerel, and other gamesters. Retreating glaciers had left precious few acreages of impounded water.

Preferred frontage on the two outstanding lakes, Morey and Fairlee, had long since been snapped up.

Searching for recreation water, project planners inventoried 50 sites capable of impounding at least 20 acres apiece. Their potential totals over 1,000 added water-acres. A tempting 275-acre lake site was noted near Randolph.

The shaping of a water-abundant future quickly followed the start of project planning back in 1964.

As part of his 1,000-acre conservation plan, Webb Keefe, retired educator, installed a 4-acre pond for sportsmen at his newly built hunting and fishing lodge near Ely. It enhances a wilderness preserve which features imported Russian boar, as well as native deer and bear and other shooting quarry, too.

### 'Lake Champagne'

Elsewhere, dairyman Maurice LaFrance constructed a 2-acre pond on a clay site in his pasture. Improvements included a trucked-in sandy beach, a playfield, bathhouse, snackbar, benches, and a picnic pavilion. The handsome area quickly became a community-wide attraction for the village of Randolph Center. LaFrance's user fees amplify his 175-acre dairy income. Tourists often stopped to inquire if they could camp beside his "Lake Champagne." The farmer was thus encouraged to prepare 30 tent and trailer sites. He has plenty of elbowroom left in which to expand upon his \$15,000 investment.

A contractor, Robert Levasseur, too, joined the project's search for water development. He checked the R.C. & D.

inventory for suitable sites. A prime spot showed on an abandoned 80-acre farm owned by Phillip Kratky, of Royalton. The businessman readily warmed to Levasseur's proposals. Armed with a project-originated design, the contractor set his crew to work on the Fay Brook location in the town of Strafford. The completed dam holds 6 acres of water. It furnishes a scenic view for two new year-round residences plus several vacation homesites Kratky expects to develop.

### Pond Building

Farm pond building operations begun 25 years ago by cooperators of the White River Soil and Water Conservation District picked up momentum—and in a new direction. Most of the 98 little bodies of water visible at the turn of the decade were designed for livestock or firefighting. Vacation land buyers brought along their own concepts of pond values: A liquid jewel to admire outside the picture window; a cool place to entertain weekend guests; a nesting, resting, or watering retreat for wild creatures.

Thus, the rate of pond construction jumped from 7 to 21 annually—in this era of resource project stimulation.

Locating more land suitable for sport, relaxation, new homes, and awakening industries also perplexed the White River leaders. In response, Project Coordinator Eugene C. Hanchett of the Soil Conservation Service is directing a high-speed survey of area soils. It defines each acre's capability for housing, factories, commercial, and recreation sites—or the entire spectrum of community wants.

Newer accommodations often blend in with the work-and-play atmosphere.

Swiss chalet-style, all-weather dwellings have begun to emerge from lofty footings amid trees on the skier-inviting face of Hawk Mountain at Pittsfield.

Twenty new year-round homes with spacious lots are taking shape on a plateau near Blodgett's camps and within sight of the majestic Connecticut River.

At Sharon, farmer George Ainsworth has set up a travel-trailer park on 5 of his 105 acres of dairyland. Steadily moving toward him and an eventual nearby

interchange are construction crews showing Interstate Highway 89 across the hills. To Ainsworth's and other project area enterprises, the Boston to Canada thoroughfare will mean potential customers at a rate three times the present daily traffic volume. A similar harvest is expected from Interstate Highway 91 being forged along the eastern edges of the project, bordering New Hampshire.

### New Plants Open

Advantages of enticing employees to an area where it's possible to catch a fat, brown trout for dinner after work hours or to practice a few Christiana turns on skis during the noon break haven't been lost upon commercial and industrial leaders. In this setting, newer enterprises including a plastic parts firm, a wooden toy factory, a cable distributing terminal, and a parquet floor processing plant have added scores of jobs to the local economy.

"It's gotten so that I can't find any extra help to hire," says building contractor Kenneth E. Manning. Demand thrives for all-weather vacation homes at prices up to \$25,000 a unit. This has boosted Manning's need to 25 workmen at season's peak. "Five or six men used to be plenty for me," Manning adds. "Our business is up 25 percent over the past 5 years. The trend is to spanking-new, winter-and-summer dwellings. We are running out of farmhouses to remodel."

Real estate agents such as Orville A. Curtis reflect a similar outlook. Curtis testifies, "In the past few years, just about 90 percent of my buyers have come from out of State—from New York, New Jersey, and central New England. Not long ago, I'd have 30 to 35 ready-built properties to show. These days, I've got to scratch for a handful!"

Project Leader Hanchett sampled the tax rolls of 11 selected towns. He found the nonresident versus resident property ownership ratio edging ever closer to the 50-50 mark. This changing state of affairs is measurable in a steadily broadening tax base. It has helped to pay for improved school buildings, new sewage treatment plants, and other services.

Local folks, themselves, are alert to

their "backyard" resources. A good example is Pinnacle Ski-Ways. The 100-acre family-fun facility serves the White River Valley area. In a single year, local people chipped in \$50,000, built four trails, two lifts, and a base lodge. Soil Conservation Service technicians helped them plan measures to correct poor drainage, erosion, and excessive icing on slopes. At the first snowfall, both young and old queued up for ski instruction.

People now outnumber the cows in this area once dominated by dairy farms. But the remaining cows and farms continually break and make milk production records. No one is writing off agriculture. "The intermixed landscape of farms, fields, forests, and villages is a kind of 'visual' resource the new people come here for," affirms Edson Gifford, Sr. He and other boosters among White River Soil and Water Conservation District co-operators say this fact dictates speedier planning. They're shooting for land conservation treatment at three times what the rate was in preproject days.

Many of the 1,200 landowners involved in district work have also become active project promoters. Their influence on a program aimed at balancing needs of land and people, within the decade, is expected to enhance 60,000 acres of crop and pasture fields and 33,000 acres of forest. It will spice a melting pot of aims containing town resource planning, farm management counseling, flood prevention, municipal water supplies, woodland product usage, and still more facilities for sportsmen, holiday residents, and retirees.

Local folks already note a heightened vitality which abundant outdoor recreation has brought to their economy. The future promises a heady array of benefits led by employment at the rate of 1,450 man-years on resources-related construction. This is the initial 5-year phase. In the same period, the project plan points to a \$1.5 million increase in real estate value.

Meanwhile, Putnam Blodgett finds his time increasingly splintered between the needs of 80 milk cows and needs of campers and other recreation-bent guests. Economists analyzing his pay-for-fun enterprise say he has added a \$24,000 net average increase to the local economy.