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Nowheres

The sheer physiographic intensity of New Jersey

John McPhee



With the permission of the author, who shares a hometown with the editor, this essay is reprinted here. McPhee originally wrote it in 1981. It appears in his new book, Silk Parachute (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2010).

THAT AUGUST I RETURNED TO THE TOWN IN NEW JERSEY WHERE I had been born fifty years before. It looked much the same. Any town would, after five weeks.

There was a great deal of waiting mail—08540, 08540, 08540. Not for nothing does that begin and end with a zero, I reflected. Good to be home. Nice to lift up the edges and crawl in under the only zip code I've ever known. A Zip that doesn't flap. A Zip that can be tied down. A Zip with grommets at either end.

I opened a letter from a staff writer at a national travel magazine compiled and edited in Tennessee.

He said, "I would appreciate it very much if you could answer some questions I have about New Jersey. . . . I would like to know why a writer, who could live almost anywhere he wanted to, chooses to live in New Jersey."

Is he kidding? I have just come home from Alaska, from a long drift on the Yukon River, where, virtually under doctor's orders, I must go from time to time to recover from the sheer physiographic intensity of living in New Jersey—must go, to be reminded that there is at least one other state that is physically as varied but is sensibly spread out. New Jersey was bisected in 1664, when a boundary line was drawn from Little Egg Harbor to the Delaware River near the Water Gap so that this earth of majesty, this fortress built by Nature for herself, could be deeded by the Duke of York to Lord Berkeley and George Carteret. If you travel that line—the surveyors' pylons still stand—you traverse the physiographic provinces of New Jersey. You cross the Coastal Plain. You cross the Triassic Lowlands, a successor basin. You cross the Blue Ridge, crystalline hills. Now before you is the centerpiece of a limestone valley that runs south from New Jersey to Alabama and north from New Jersey into Canada—one valley, known to science as the Great Valley of the Appalachians and to local people here and there as Champlain,

Carnegie Lake, dug out from a stream base for crew racing, watches over the eastern side of the land of Zip code 08540. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Shenandoah, Clinch River Valley, but in New Jersey by no well-known name, for in terrain so cornucopian one does not tend to notice a Shenandoah. A limestone valley is a white silo, a white barn, a sweep of ground so beautiful it should never end. You cross the broad valley. You rise now into the folded and faulted mountains, the eastern sinuous welt, the Deformed Appalachians themselves. You are still in New Jersey.

Are they aware of this in Tennessee? When you cross New Jersey, you cover four events: the violent upheaval of two sets of mountains several hundred million years apart; and, long after all that, the creation of the Atlantic Ocean; and, more recently, the laying on of the Coastal Plain by the trowel of the Mason. Do they know that in Tennessee? Tennessee is a one-event country: All you see there, east to west, are the Appalachians slowly going away.

New Jersey has had the genius to build across its narrow center the most concentrated transportation slot in the world—with three or four railroads, seaports, highways, and an international airport all compacted in effect into a tube, a conduit, which has acquired through time an ugliness sufficient to stop a Gorgon in her tracks. Through this supersluice continuously pass hundreds of thousands of people from Nebraska, Kansas, Illinois, Iowa, Texas, Tennessee, holding their breath. They are shot like peas to New York. If New Jersey has a secret, that's it.

I remember Fred Brown, who lived in the Pine Barrens of the New Jersey Coastal Plain, remarking years ago outside his shanty, "I never been nowheres where I liked it better than I do here. I like to walk where you can walk on level ground. Outside here, if I stand still, fifteen or twenty quail, a couple of coveys, will come out and go around. The gray fox don't come in no nearer than the swamp there, but I've had the coons come in here, the deer will come up. Muskrats breed right here, and otters sometimes. I was to Tennessee once. They're greedy, hungry, there, to Tennessee. They'll pretty near take the back off your hand when you lay down money. I never been nowheres I liked better than here."

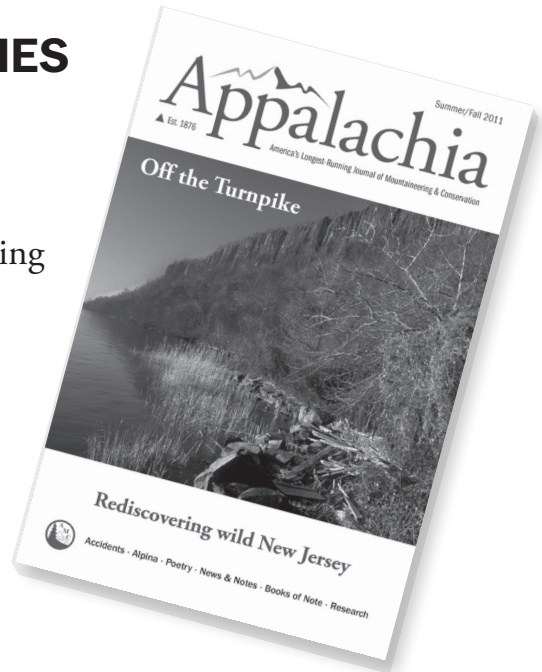
JOHN MCPHEE is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. He is the author of 28 books. He lives in Princeton, New Jersey.

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