



Solomon Valley History

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Part 1 - Nepaholla Dreams: Water on a Hill

by Ron Parks

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Ron Parks, Manhattan KS, is retired from the Kansas State Historical Society. He served in various capacities with the KSHS, including site administrator at Fort Hays State Historic Park at Hays and Kaw Mission State Historic Park at Council Grove. He has written extensively about the Kanza or Kaw Indians, the tribe for whom the state and river are named. Nepaholla was the Kanza name for the Solomon River. Parks has kindly granted permission for the Solomon Valley Anthology to reprint this four-part series, "Nepaholla Dreams," which reaches beyond the Solomon Valley but includes many experiences and thoughts that will touch the hearts and minds of all who live in and love this wonderful valley. Special thanks is extended to Parks for sharing these stories.

Let us take a day trip to an ancient Kansas holy site. We'll head west, commencing at Manhattan on Highway 24, driving on over to Tuttle Creek Boulevard, moving up the west side of the Big Blue River Valley. Just past the dam of Tuttle Creek Reservoir, we ascend into uplands. On the right are the Blue Hills, trapezoidal mounds deeply etched by tree-lined creeks and ravines tilted east toward the lake. We turn west toward the town of Riley, passing through gentle folds of tilled land interspersed with pastures. Just west of Clay Center we cross the Republican, known as the "River of Geese" by the Kanza Indians. Here we enter the sandstone hills forming the eastern edge of the Smoky Hills. Whereas the Blue Hills project geometric lines, this terrain, though mostly gradual inclines and gently arced mounds, surprises with pockets of buttes, saddles, high ridges, and cliffs stippled with outcroppings of rugged, ferruginous rocks.

This is cattle and mixed-grass country, though cedars have invaded some of the pastures and trees line the streams and farmsteads. Just past Miltonvale on the right a ridge parallel to the highway moves into view, this the divide separating the Nepaholla (Solomon) River watershed to the south from the "River of Geese" to the north. For the next 16 miles the travelers' gaze is riveted by scores of towering wind generators spiked erratically along the ridge. Near Glasco we descend into a broad, flat valley, on the left the tree-marked Nepaholla contorts its way southeast through fields of corn, beans, wheat, milo, and alfalfa. We pass a large cattle feeder operation, then the highway trims the north edge of the largest town in the valley, Beloit. Fifteen miles west of Beloit just south of the highway, Lake Waconda squats low, windswept, and huge. A few miles further a roadside Kansas Historical Marker beckons, its heading: "Waconda (Great Spirit) Spring."

We have traveled exactly 110 miles from Manhattan. The spring can be seen no longer, it being inundated by the lake. The marker tells this story:

"Many moons ago, so runs an Indian legend, Waconda, a beautiful Princess, fell in love with a brave of another tribe. Prevented from marriage by a blood feud, this warrior embroiled the tribes in battle. During the fight an arrow struck him as he stood on the brink of a spring and he fell mortally wounded into the waters. Waconda, grief-stricken, plunged after him. Believing her soul still lived in the depths, the tribes for countless ages carried their sick to drink the healing waters. Here they celebrated their victories and mourned their losses, never neglecting to throw into the spring some token for the Great Spirit." [Editor's note: The marker quoted above has been replaced recently with the marker that appears above.]

The story is a romance, a Romeo and Juliet in buckskins in the vein of Longfellow and Cooper and many other writers of their ilk. Not a shred of evidence exists that this legend of Waconda, beautiful Indian princess, stems from the oral traditions of the tribes of the central plains. Rather,

the story is a construction of white people, steeped in the conventions of 19th-Century romanticism, one of the most popular being the appropriating of Indians as objects to be woven into romantic myths and legends, usually tragic in nature.

Much more interesting and potent is the truth of Waconda Springs, or at least the closest we can approximate to the truth.

The Kanza Indians named the Solomon River for this spring, calling it Nepaholla, meaning "Water-on-a-Hill," an apt description of Waconda Springs and the name I prefer for the river. The Nepaholla's streambed of 150 years ago is about two hundred yards south of the spring, which is located three-fourths mile south of the highway marker. The size and shape of the "hill" never failed to impress early observers. It was a fairly symmetrical cone 300 feet across at its base, 150 feet wide at the top, this elevated 40 feet above the valley floor. Nestled in the center of the summit was a 55-foot-wide circular spring basin. The pool's surface reached a few inches below the rim so that a strong wind from any direction splashed water over the rim on the opposite side. The water seeped through the porous encasement of travertine, a kind of limestone. The spring was deep, according to one measurement 35 meters deep. The water was heavily mineralized, especially high in salt and sodium sulphate, its source the underlying Dakota aquifer. According to one theory, the formative process began about eight thousand years ago when the water, elevated by artesian pressure, gradually deposited minerals, mostly calcium carbonate, that concreted into the mound. If this is true it means, geologically speaking, Waconda Spring is barely an infant.

One May evening a couple of years ago, a friend and I sat on a bench elevated twenty feet or so above the floor of the Nepaholla valley, drinking beer and observing the evening's advance. We were, in fact, sitting atop a one-half-scale reconstruction of the Waconda Springs. Behind us, a wrought iron fence encircled a concrete pool approximately one-half the diameter of the original spring basin. The replica, completed just a few years before, is made up of 17,000 cubic yards of compacted dirt. Its summit offers a good view of the lake and the Nepaholla valley. We watched a red-tailed hawk circle about us several times, maintaining a consistent radius as it went to and from its nest in a pine tree a hundred yards south. Frequently, I found myself gazing to the west-southwest across the lake's wrinkled platinum skin.

We discussed the day's canoe trip on the Nepaholla, then turned to the pros and cons of the replication.

"Best not to," I said. "A replica can never capture the essence of the original. It's a 21st century construct using 21st century technologies for 21st century purposes. It's just one more dislocation, a further diminishment. Best to put up a wayside exhibit, provoke their interest with text, photos, and drawings, just leave it to their imaginations."

"Got to hand to the people who did this," he responded. "They cared enough about the springs to put this here. And it does give me an understanding of something that's really kinda' hard to picture otherwise. My hat's off to them."

What I considered a kind of idolatry he considered necessary explication in three dimensions. Further discussion was pointless. Besides, I'm not really sure who was right.

What I do know is that in pre-settlement times it must have been extraordinary to come up on the real spring, a stony mini-volcano-like mass rising up over the flat, grassy river bottom. It was a singular feature of the central plains, its size, symmetry, and mysterious pool of water a surefire way to evoke wonderment.

The Kanza's veneration for the spring is reflected in the tribe's name for it: Ne Wohkondaga, or "Spirit Water." According to Isaac McCoy, who visited Waconda Spring in 1830, "the singularity of this fountain" induced the Delawares and other eastern tribes relocated to Kansas to call it "Spirit Water" as well. The Pawnees' name was kicawi caku, or "Spring Mound." This tribe considered the spring a "location of an important animal lodge where mysterious powers were reputedly bestowed on individuals." McCoy wrote that the Kanza, Pawnee, and Potawatomie "in passing by this spring, usually throw into it, as a kind of conjuring charm, some small article of value." The spring, wrote geographer Walter H. Schoewe, "was held in great reverence and esteem by the various Indian tribes." Many relics, including beads, medals, rifles, arrowheads, and bows and arrows, were, in fact, fished out by white people.

With Euro-American occupation, entrepreneurship came to Waconda Springs, starting in the 1870s with the bottling and national marketing of the spring's mineral waters under the moniker "Waconda Water." In 1884 a health spa was established there, and over the years a complex of buildings was developed at the site, including a 48-room, four-story stone sanitarium. In the late 1800s adjacent to the sanitarium were dog and horse race tracks, a saloon, and a gambling house.

By the first decade of the 20th century the gambling and liquor dispensing had dissipated, but the health spa revitalized to flourish throughout the first half of the century. In 1965 the spa closed, its fate sealed by the impending construction of the Glen Elder dam that three years later impounded the Nepaholla waters. Prior to inundation, the sanitarium was bulldozed, its debris dumped into the spring, completing its transmutation from holy site to trash pit. If the lake were to be drained, the entire mound would still be intact. So today, while recreationists and their boats periodically thrash across the lake's surface, the Spirit Water spring, submerged in the still murk of its watery grave—with no beautiful Indian princess poised tragically on its slimy rim—endures.

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Part 2 - Nepaholla Dreams: Water on a Hill

by Ron Parks

So we're back in Manhattan ready for another road trip. This time we head east on Highway 24. After we cross the Big Blue River, its Kanza name Man yinka tu hu u dje', a sales barn comes into view on the right. Here we salute the site of the Kanza village of Igaman-sabe', Euro Americans called it the "Blue Earth Village," occupied by the entire tribe from about 1800 to 1830. After leaving the Blue Earth village, the tribe split into at least three bands, remaining fractured until forced to leave Kansas in 1873. A few miles east of Wamego we come to Vermillion Creek on which Hard Chief's village was located from 1834 to 1845, the Kanza name for both the creek and this village is Tce xu'li'n. Pushing further east Soldier Creek, known by the Kanza as Saba' sa'be, appears on our left, then we arrive in Topeka, where we go through the site of Fool Chief's village, occupied from 1831 to 1847. On the east edge of Topeka, we turn south on the Highway 4 cutoff, cross the Kansas River, known by the tribe as To-pike' Gaqa', turn left onto Highway 40, then another quick left brings us to Tecumseh. The confluence of the Kansas River and Shunganunga Creek is nearby. Although a Kanza word, Shunganunga is not the Kanza name for this creek. They had two names for it, Man'ha zi'tan man and Cun mikase ulinbe, the latter meaning "Where Wolf Dwelt." Now we're close to the original site of the Big Red Rock, one of two (the other is Wakanda Spring) documented Kanza sacred sites. However, the object of veneration is no longer here.

The rock is pink, roughly cube-shaped, and about twice as tall as wide. It stands eleven feet high, has a circumference of about twenty feet and a diameter of seven, and weighs twenty-five tons. It's known as a glacial erratic, the name implying its itinerant origins, having traveled here from the eastern South Dakota area about a million years ago, pushed along by ice during a glacial period known as the Kansan, a time when ice penetrated as far south as the Wakarusa valley. After the ice receded north, hundreds of thousands of these rocks, also known as pink or red quartzite, were left strewn over the northeast Kansas landscape. The rock is metamorphic and very hard, quartzite generally cannot be scratched by a knife or other sharp objects, a quality of some importance, as we shall see, to the Kanza.

During the two or three centuries the Kanza inhabited the river valley bearing their name, the rock was located on the south Kansas River bank just east of the mouth of Shunganunga Creek. How it became sacred to the tribe is not known, but the fact is the rock was an object of worship where the Kanza, according to historian George Morehouse, "regularly offered sacrificial prayers and offerings." Kanza chief Pahanle-gaqli drew a "prayer chart" for ethnologist James Owen Dorsey depicting 27 venerated entities to whom the Kanza offered prayer songs. Varying numbers of lines were drawn beneath each image as mnemonic devices identifying the number of songs to be addressed to each object. Among these "minor deities" were four winds, the planet Venus, wolf, moon, buffalo bull, corn, and so forth. Number 11 on the chart, with five prayer marks beneath it,

was the "The Big Red Rock Near Topeka," referred to by Morehouse as the "Prayer Rock." Morehouse, basing his words on the Dorsey material, offered the following prayer chant verse:

O Wakanda! O Wakanda!
We see the big, red rock;
It has a hard body,
Like that of Wakanda!
May we continue like it-
Like this big, red rock!

Pahanle-gaqli warned Dorsey that these songs are very sacred, never to be sung on ordinary occasions, or in a profane manner, lest the offender should be killed by the thunder-god. Wakanda, the entity to whom this prayer-petition is addressed, is difficult for my monotheistic-conditioned mind to grasp. Ordinarily at this point we reach into our academic terminology bag and toss out the term pantheism, or perhaps animism, and assume we have the subject covered. On one hand, according to Dorsey, Wakanda denotes superhuman beings or powers, and in that sense these 27 minor deities addressed in the prayer chart are all Wakandas. But on the other hand, Wakanda is the pervasive, all-encompassing power investing the universe, impossible to diminish into any visual representation. According to Thomas Say, who visited the Kanza at their Blue Earth Village in 1819, the Kanza "say that they have never seen Wakanda, so they cannot pretend to personify Him; but they have often heard Him speak in the thunder."

So what became of the Big Red Rock? In an article published in the Topeka State Journal, September 7, 1929, Topeka attorney A. A. Graham called attention to the rock, proposing that it be removed to the statehouse grounds because "Topeka is holy ground of the glacial drift," the rock being a striking representation of that geological phenomenon. Meanwhile, twenty-five miles downriver, the city of Lawrence was preparing to celebrate its 75th year of existence. Like the quicker of two boys contesting a fumbled football, Lawrence swooped in and with the help of a powerful hoist courtesy of the Santa Fe Railway Company, scooped its heavy prize out of the river bank and hustled it back home. Here it was placed on edge atop a pedestal of rocks and cement in Robinson Park, located on the north end of Massachusetts Street, just south of the Highway 59 Kansas River Bridge. Set into the rock are bronze plates memorializing the men who in 1854 founded the city. Today the tiny park is wedged between two highway lanes, so if you wish to ruminate on our hardy pioneer forbearers, be prepared to ingest the fruits of our triumphant civilization—incessant noise, fumes, and traffic of one of the busiest street intersections in Lawrence.

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See Part 3 on following page...

Part 3- Nepaholla Dreams: Signposts to Reclaiming the Sacred in the Kansas Landscape

by Ron Parks

So we have completed two regional visits, dabbling a bit in the mysteries of story and geography. What are we to make of this? What, indeed, is the point?

A full explication will not be forthcoming here. I will only position a few signposts, five to be exact, that help me, and perhaps you, engage the challenge posed by the somewhat immodest title of this article: "Reclaiming the Sacred in the Kansas Landscape." Each of these warrants a full essay in itself, a task deferred for now.

The signposts:

1. Acknowledge the losses.
2. The sacred is located in relationship.
3. Language matters.
4. Place matters.
5. It's not over, it's just beginning.

1. Acknowledge the losses.

Picture that first bulldozer grinding its way noisily up the mound of Wakanda Springs with a load of rubble, its elevated rusty yellow bucket full of limestone, glass, steel, chunks of concrete, exhaust pipe coughing black smoke, rumbling up to the pool's edge, engine vibrations shaking flesh, earth, and water, a hand grasps a lever, bucket's sudden swivel cracks like a gunshot, a flash of suspended debris, glass glints in sunlight, the plunge. . . .

After all, it was perfectly logical what was done. We're talking efficiency in trash disposal. It was only a curious water hole soon to disappear below the lake that would bestow its blessings of flood control, recreation, irrigation, wildlife habitat, a water supply for cities. Perfectly consistent with the larger aims of our civilization: productive land use, effective application of technology, the protection of American lives and property from nature's caprices, economic development. In a word, progress.

The Kanza Indians removed from the state in 1873. The last wolf recorded in 1905. Otters no longer swim in our streams. Relative to their original numbers and distribution, elk, pronghorn, and bison are greatly diminished. Hundreds of thousands of native grass acres turned under, meaning complicated and beautiful prairie ecosystems displaced by agricultural commodities. In recent years an estimated 10,000 acres of Flint Hills prairie succumb annually to encroachments of woody vegetation and multiple forms of human development. Small towns and small farms wither away. Soil erodes. Streams treated like sewers. Mass consumer culture drives out place-based alternatives. Go on, create your own catalog of loss.

I am not interested in white man's guilt trips. I don't think we need to dwell incessantly on Indians as victims. I weary of elegies for nature and indigenous peoples. I am aware that historically Indians have sometimes acted in ecologically damaging ways. And I know American Indians are not relics of the past. But to integrate the land and its stories into a more vital, place-centered consciousness, it seems to me necessary first to learn the story of our native peoples and the land before Euro-American settlement. Then contemplate the devastating impact of our industrial civilization. As Carl Jung and many others have pointed out, the dark places in our consciousness, if left unexamined, contain the seeds for their re-visitation as powerful pathologies.

2. The sacred is found in relationship.

Embedded in Nepaholla and Big Red Rock stories is the practice of gift-giving. At Wakanda Springs the Kanza and other tribes threw into its waters various articles of value; at the Big Red Rock the Kanza regularly offered sacrificial prayers and offerings. These gift offerings, tokens of honor and respect for the great powers or Wakandas implicit in these holy sites, were the transferences of matter and energy for purposes of creating and sustaining communal relations between themselves and the places of veneration, mutually enhancing exchanges between the manifested and the powerful unseen dimensions. In other words, they sought to make relatives of the Wakandas.

This sensibility of “archaic” people is articulated by anthropologist Mircea Eliade in this way: “They . . . were concerned only with the circulation of sacred energy in the cosmos (from the divinity to man and nature, then from man–through sacrifice–back to the divinity, and so on).” A modern equivalent is, perhaps, expressed by Eckhart Tolle: “You need nature as your teacher to help you reconnect with Being. But not only do you need nature, it also needs you.” Wakanda Spring and the Big Red Rock afforded the Kanza portals for the exchange and amplification of this “sacred energy,” a transference that profoundly revitalized the earth, Wakanda, and the Kanza.

3. Language matters.

I’m thinking principally of two closely related areas: names and stories. Take the Kanza Indian name for our river which does not show up on our modern maps–Nepaholla. As stated before, the Kanza Indians named the Solomon River for this spring, calling it Nepaholla, meaning “Water-on-a-Hill,” an apt description of Wakanda Springs. I prefer Nepaholla over Solomon for these reasons: The source of the name “Solomon” is obscure, the best explanation being that the river was named for a French official headquartered in New Orleans whose name, though not actually spelled Solomon, bore it a phonetic resemblance. This vague and uninspiring word pedigree contrasts with Nepaholla, which conveys a precise image of a unique and renowned natural feature of this river valley, a word uttered for generations by the original Kansans in their native tongue, a term, as we have seen, evoking an earth-and-water icon of profound significance in the tribe’s sacred traditions. And keep in mind that until the mid-1850s, Nepaholla was often used by Euro-American map makers as the river’s primary name. Explorer Captain John W. Gunnison, who led his expedition through the upper Kansas River valley in early July 1853, reported he “crossed the Nepeholla and Saline rivers by ferrying on rafts of logs.” But ultimately, the native term was displaced by the colonizers, severing yet another vital connection between language and landscape and our imaginations.

William Least Heat-Moon, in his book about Chase County, PrairyErth, laments that “When the Kansa Indians were pushed out of the state, they carried with them the last perception of wind as anything other than a faceless force, usually for destruction . . . it has no identity but a direction.” A local preacher told Heat-Moon: “Giving names to nature is unchristian.” The author responded by saying “it might help people connect with things, and who knows where that might lead.” The preacher replied: “To idolatry.”

And now, briefly, about that complex, magical and transformative artifact of language–story. David Abram in his masterful and inspiring book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, wrote that events depicted in story belong “to the place, and to tell the story of those events is to let the place itself speak through the telling.” That land exercises the agency of expression in story is considered radical in our culture. It is time to take this notion seriously. “It is the animate earth that speaks,” wrote Abram, “human speech is but a part of that vaster discourse.”

This form of story-telling is not anti-intellectual. It does not negate knowing the place’s geology, biology, and history. Our treatment of both Wakanda Spring and the Big Rock should make that clear. But story that embraces the sentience and expressiveness of place, in Abram’s words: “makes sense,” that is it “stirs the senses,” releases “the body from the constraints imposed by outworn ways of speaking, and hence to renew and rejuvenate one’s felt awareness of the world.”

4. Place matters.

In 1997 I attended a conference in Topeka about the Kansas River. We broke into groups of a dozen or so to discuss particular topics. Somehow in my group the idea of the Kansas identity related to the Kansas River came up. We reflected on our memories of the river; we deplored the fact Kansans overwhelmingly ignored their greatest river; we speculated on how by means of education and non-school programming we could construct a cultural shift whereby Kansans would embrace the river, help to protect the river, enhancing their Kansas identity in the process. Amidst all the dazzling verbal exercises, three American Indians, a professor from Haskell Indian Nations University and his students, sat in silence. Someone asked their thoughts. The professor, without the least rhetorical flourish, calmly said: “In regards to the Kansas identity and the river, our traditions are different. We are the river and the river is us.” If my memory serves me correctly, the American Indians had little to say after that and the rest of the group went on strategizing our revolution in the Kansas consciousness vis-à-vis the river. But over the years that moment has stuck with me for many reasons. And in the context of “Place matters,” “We are the river and the river is us” means place really, really, really, really matters.

This past Halloween day [2010] an article appeared in the New York Times about a meditative garden that will contain 1,000 Buddha statues being created by Tibetan Buddhists on the Salish and Kootenai reservation in Montana. Its objective is to promote world peace. The Dalai Lama has agreed to come there in 2012 to consecrate the Garden. In the process of planning and executing this garden, there have been tensions to be resolved between the Buddhists and the American Indians. The Buddhists have acted to resolve these tensions in various ways, one being bringing traditional gifts of tobacco and prayer scarves to the tribal councils. But according to one Salish Kootenai leader, "there was also an uncanny relationship between the tribal and Buddhist cultures...a shared vision of cultures being under pressure and surviving." The Buddhists and Indians discovered they both used juniper and sage as purifying incense for ceremonies, similar prayer cloths, similar ritual drumming. They also found common ground "based on understandings of sacred landscapes." One Tibetan lama said: "There is something pure and powerful about this landscape." He went on to say, "good Karma, or spiritual energy, is ebbing from the earth, and the garden will help enhance it." I bring this up in anticipation that the idea of sacred landscape may be dismissed as just another fuzzy, self-indulgent New-Agey trip. This it is not. It is, in fact, an intercontinental feature of the most venerable and rigorous spiritual traditions, as solid as the ground under your and my feet.

5. It's not over. It's just beginning.

I am not interested in a cultural conversion program whereby we do a wholesale adoption of American Indian religious forms to address our pressing environmental and spiritual crises. However, I have deep respect for American Indian wisdom, especially its understanding that, in the words of the Sioux author and educator Charles Eastman, "spirit pervades all creation and every creature possesses a soul." This important insight is not the end of our journey; rather, it provides a base from which to begin a serious inquiry. Embracing both the wisdom of native traditions and science, and, in the words of Wendell Berry, "staying away from anything that obscures the place it is in," it's time to move forward into a re-exploration of this landscape. "Now that new lands are completely gone and wilderness is nearly gone," writes Don Gayton in *Landscapes of the Interior*, "we must turn the telescope of exploration around, to find mystery and complexity in the fine details of what is left."

"Ours is a baby culture," said poet Gary Snyder, during a walk with a friend near Sourdough Mountain. "We'll need a hundred poets on Sourdough and a thousand other peaks to create a rooted culture here."

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Part 4- Nepaholla Dreams: Nepaholla Dreaming

by Ron Parks

I think a term useful for this experiment in rediscovery is liminality. The liminal is related to a sensory threshold that, like all boundaries, both separates and joins worlds. Liminal places in the Kansas landscape are present, interstices amidst the monoculture fields and development grids. These places can still be found because the land and water, up to a point, are resilient, as are our minds and bodies. From way back all of us, humans and more-than-humans, are wired up for liminal experiences.

Now I'm going to go a bit autobiographical on you. In 2009 I floated the Nepaholla River in a canoe from the Waconda Lake Dam to the Nepaholla's mouth at the Smoky Hill River near Solomon, a small town located between Salina and Abilene. The trip, actually a series of trips, starting in May and concluding in mid-November, covered 172.4 river miles. Here's what I want to share with you:

During the hundred hours or so I was on the water I saw a total of six people: four solitary fisher- men, one woodcutter, and one farmer checking his irrigation equipment. In June, sections of the Nepaholla smelled like the shelves of herbicide products in Wal-Mart.

There are seven log jams—I think I am the only person in the world who knows this—between Waconda Lake and the Smoky Hill River, including three encountered on the last day. Getting the canoe and myself over and around these blockades required physical strength, dexterity, and stamina, qualities with which this writer is not abundantly endowed. I'm reasonably certain that no surveillance devices recorded my contortions in overcoming these obstacles or the frequent vile oaths issuing forth from these tense lips. For that I am grateful. And I would like it officially recognized that I never tipped over into the Nepaholla.

On some of those days I was joined by a companion, Tom, a friend since childhood. He sat in the rear of the canoe and I sat in front. Tom is a storyteller, regaling me hour after hour. He also is hard of hearing. I am rigid of spine and cannot swivel. So it was that this pair of canoeing codgers, garrulous to the extreme, his chattered narratives punctuated by my bellowed acknowledgments, left in our wake a shattered Nepaholla tranquillity.

A river-wise friend said this about the Nepaholla: "There's a uniqueness there, it's just a mind-flip. You don't know it until you've experienced it."

And that's it, finally. The Nepaholla, hyper-engineered by government technocrats, a sewer for agribusiness, and all but ignored by its human neighbors, is a wonderful, transformative, liminal place. It renews and rejuvenates, in Steven Abram's words, "one's felt awareness of the world."

Let me end this by sprinkling a little Nepaholla holy water on you:

Tree-cordoned and serpentine in a rectilinear landscape, twisting low and subversive, a world unto itself, Nepaholla dreaming.

Male wood ducks, beyond Disney gaudiness, the females skillful injury fakers, the skittish bank-hugging chicks, hours of entertainment.

Cottonwoods towering high above the outer bends, below amidst the roots a network of holes, beaver dens.

Banks covered by thousands of mock cucumber domes, vibrant and massive, vines taper down to the river's edge, herds of mammoths come to drink.

The chocolate milk water full of churning sediment, bugs scrawl the surface, turtles bask on rocks, a sudden canoe-shuddering scrape, didn't see it coming.

Severed duck's head on a rock, black head, blue bill, yellow eyes, bloodstained feathers, a Nepaholla murder mystery.

"Always check the catfish's stomach," says Tom. "Purple stomachs mean ripe mulberries, your bait of the day."

A sharp bend, massive sandstone cliff on right bank, hemispheres pock its smooth, high, stolid walls. Below in the streambed, one after another, they fall out of the sky, hit with a thud and writhe, a bison jump.

Sun glints off of water-skimmed paddle, somewhere in the timber an owl: "whhooaaah!!!," millions of poison hemlock blooms infiltrate the air acrid. Wakanda Springs upstream, Big Red Rock downstream; right here-and now, canoe prow creases the water, Nepaholla dreaming.

Journey complete, he's muddy, tired, and hungry. Lady at Solomon bar says only place to eat is Bushes, today they're serving sausage submarine sandwiches with sauerkraut, advises going light on the sauerkraut.