

In Upper Jay, Nancy Haley, water up to her waist, clung to the branch of an apple tree until her husband, Bob, could help her to higher ground. Just downstream, Dave Terwilliger watched helplessly as Pickles, an elderly pony who'd been around since the days of the Land of Makebelieve theme park, fought the river, eyes bulging and wild before he disappeared. The Ausable River took out houses, it heaved pavement, crashed through the Wells Memorial Library and knocked the Upper Jay firehouse off its foundation. In Jay, water splashed through the windows of the covered bridge and ate away at riverbanks, leaving a garage teetering on the brink. It soaked Sue Benway's Elmbrook Veterinary Clinic, terrifying convalescing cats and ruining meds and equipment. Along Route 9N, the water picked up a little gift shop, then flooded an elk farm, scattering the creatures. In Au Sable Forks it bent the walls of the century-old Carnes Granite Company barn, overtook entire neighborhoods, rushed down Main Street and spilled into the Grand Union grocery store. A couple who tried to escape the torrent in a motorboat couldn't compete with the river and was pulled to safety at the hamlet's Jersey neighborhood bridge.

From my driveway in Jay I watched helplessly—and guiltily. My house at the time was on a hill, overlooking the river. The rain came in sheets, the river ran chocolate and smelled like death, and I worried that some of my neighbors might not make it out of this alive. I'd spent years living beside the Ausable and thought I knew its every mood. But it turns out that you never really know a river beyond its bed, where you expect it to sleep.

DAYS AFTER IRENE, everyone still in shock, I joined my neighbors in Au Sable's community-center auditorium. Representatives from FEMA sat at long tables with stacks of paperwork for those whose houses were unsalvageable or for those who'd had it with riverside dwelling. Someone stood and explained a complicated process of which forms needed to be filed and by when. Next, Dr. Tim Mihuc, director of the Lake Champlain Research Institute, gave a presentation about the flood, why the river behaved the way it did, and what we, as a community, might face in the future. Irene, he said, was a 500-year flood. That didn't mean it would happen every five centuries, but that there's a .2-percent chance of a similar event occurring in any given year. He said that another Irene could, hypothetically, happen tomorrow. North Country weather records indicated that storms were bringing more precipitation, were more frequent and more destructive.

"But is it going to happen again?" someone asked from the cramped rows of wooden seats.

"When is it going to happen again?" asked someone else. Rivers, said Mihuc, "are dynamic," they change all the time.

In the end, FEMA bought out 19 houses in the town of Jay, population 2,500, though the flood affected far more homes. People stayed, as they had in previous floods, as recently as four months earlier. They dried their tears, shoveled out the thick, mucky sludge that coated every surface and squished into keyholes and microwaves. They untangled fencing and swimming-pool liners from trees and utility poles, and dragged soggy, already mildewing Sheetrock, carpet and other pieces of their lives into heaps on their front lawns.

TROPICAL STORM IRENE was an extraordinary meteorological event. The hurricane spun up along the East Coast and skipped like a stone from Long Island to the Adirondacks. For hours, Irene hung above our mountains, unleashing cataclysmic rain, saturating our highest peaks until the soil slid off, making fresh slides. Water and whatever it picked up along the way careened downstream into our communities.

Early settlers straddled their lives around Adirondack waterways. The Ausable River, flowing down Mount Marcy and splitting into an East and West Branch, must have been a sight to behold. In 1796, some 40,000 years after indigenous people first walked this landscape, Nathaniel Mallory saw the East Branch's rapids and knew this was a place for prosperity, where he could harness the water's power to fuel his forge. His base was known as "Mallory's Bush," later renamed Jay, after Founding

Route 9N photograph by Ben Stechshulte. Nancy Haley and water level photographs by Jamie West McGiver



A flood-level reminder along Route 9N. Nancy Haley and the Macintosh tree that saved her life during Tropical Storm Irene. FACNG PAGE: Irene's destruction in Upper Jay. PAGE 59: Ausable River rapids in Jay.



Father John Jay. In Mallory's settlement the river was a liquid highway, where logs could be floated to Lake Champlain. The river offered fresh water and fish. It accepted waste and sewage and carried it elsewhere. Its surrounding hills gave rich, fertile soil. And all along the river, paths that connected other growing communities hugged its curves. Those roads were eventually planked, paved and lined with houses and businesses.

Today these same critical passageways are a detriment. Road salt, dumped onto icy pavement to protect winter drivers, seeps into our watershed, affecting drinking water and aquatic life. After a good rain, submerged asphalt or sedan-sized chunks of river ice transform hamlets into islands. Route 9N acts as a barrier, blocking the Ausable from its floodplain, the natural spillway for high water.

Through time the Ausable River has been abused—dammed for power, widened for logging, shoveled for gravel and restrained by development. What's remarkable, though, is its ability to heal. Kelley Tucker, executive director of the Ausable River Association (AsRA), describes the river as being "alive—a living ecosystem." But a river's ability to fix itself "takes geologic time and miles of space in a system like ours," she says. In places like Jay, where people live with the river, "we have to step in and try to help the river heal faster and jump forward a hundred years." AsRA does this by replacing old, undersized culverts with state-of-the-art climate-ready ones to mitigate the flow of streams and brooks, protecting roads and aquatic species. It plants trees, native shrubs and grasses and rebuilds and restores stretches of water near development to reduce riverbank erosion and protect homeowners. It studies the health of the river and how the Ausable responds to infrastructure and other forces, offering solutions when problems arise.

Tucker's job, like others in the Adirondack Park that involve the intersection of the human and natural worlds, comes with controversy—some people are grateful for her work; others think she cares more for fish

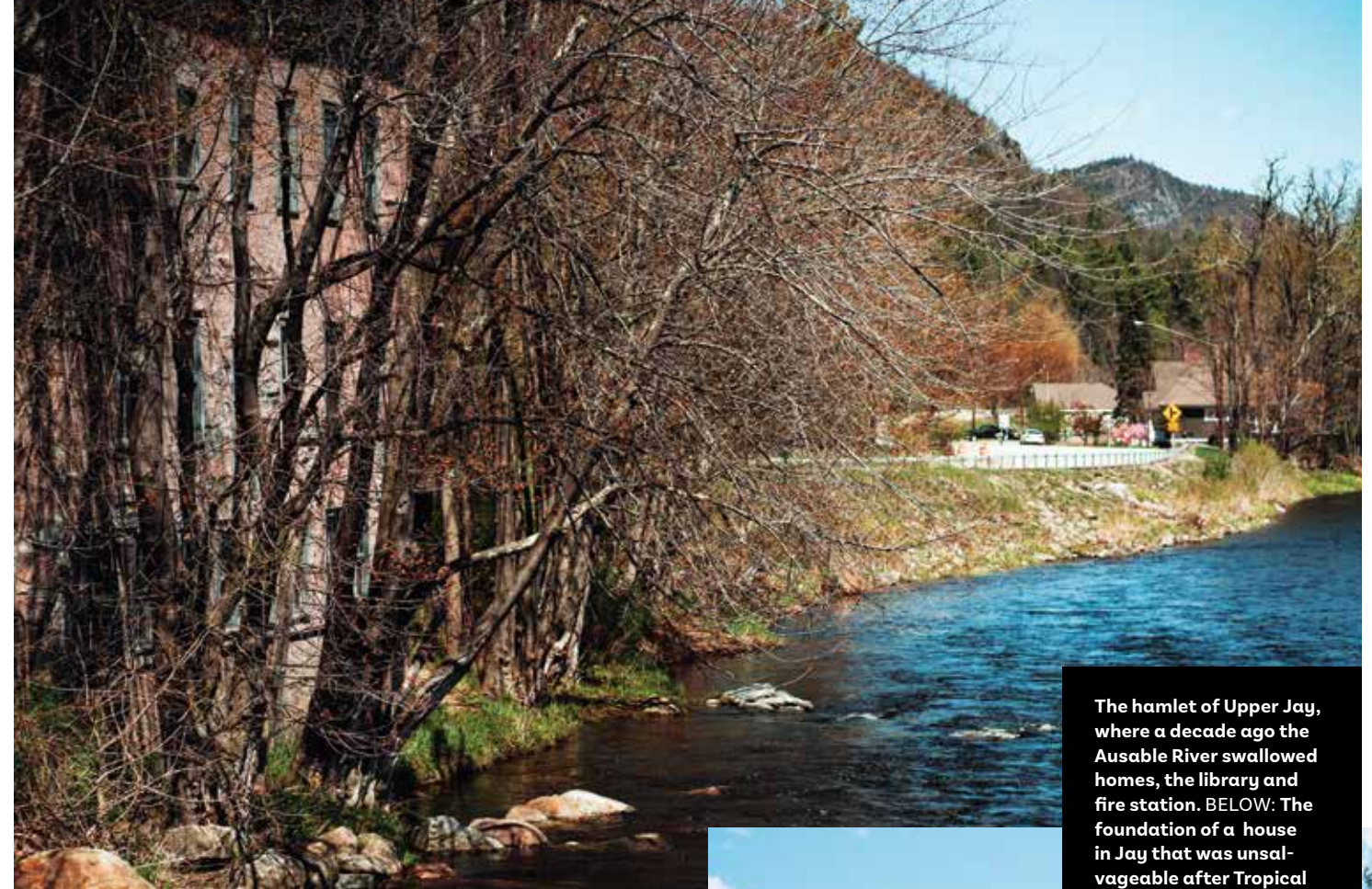


Kelley Tucker, Ausable River Association's executive director, on a stretch of the Ausable's East Branch. RIGHT: Most of the remaining houses in Au Sable Forks' lower Jersey neighborhood have flooded repeatedly.



than people. Tucker got hate mail during the removal of the old Rome Dam on the lower West Branch in Au Sable Forks. There was concern that losing the dam would threaten people living downstream, but taking it out let the river flow freely, released built-up sediment and saved residents from an impending disaster. AsRA, a nonprofit organization with seven full-time staff, partners with private landowners, engineering firms and environmental groups as well as with federal, state and local government, as it did on the Rome Dam project. While most of the work happens behind the scenes, Tucker (the “Jane Goodall of Rivers,” according to one scientist) is tasked with translating AsRA’s research and showing us—at town meetings, clean-up events and other forums—why we should care about the Ausable. “Rivers,” she says, “are essential to all life. They’re an ecological network that supports brook trout and dragonflies and foxes and birds but that also nurtures and sustains us.” Some people in our watershed still draw their water directly from the river.

Tropical Storm Irene affected enough Ausable River Valley residents, says Tucker, “that I do think it succeeded in waking us up to a climatic pattern that has been evident in the hydrographs and gauge readings since the late 1990s.” (During Irene, Au Sable Forks’s river gauge measured the Ausable’s crest at 18.43 feet, more than 11 feet above flood stage, though scientists think it was even higher.) “Everything is a little more vulnerable—us included.” The



The hamlet of Upper Jay, where a decade ago the Ausable River swallowed homes, the library and fire station. BELOW: The foundation of a house in Jay that was unsalvageable after Tropical Storm Irene.

reality is that “the river will flood, because rivers have to—they move sediment and nutrients, that’s their job. If a river can’t transport sediment, you get buildup and that’s what leads to disastrous flooding. The river gets wider and wider and flatter and flatter, chewing away riverbanks.”

She adds, “Are the things we can do perfect? No. Will they prevent flooding? No, but they’ll make living here more manageable.”

Tucker says that people who continue to build in the floodplain “aren’t making good economic decisions” and “they’re compromising public safety.” But for those who already live by the river, perhaps in a home inhabited by the same family for generations, she dreams that she could tell them, “Your family has been here for so long, we respect the depth of your history and your love and knowledge of this place. If you would like to consider moving, we as a community would like to help you. Here’s 125 percent the value of your home that we would be happy to give to you. We would like to help you build a home elsewhere in this community.”

But that would take the resources and collaboration of many.

EARLY MORNING ON September 30, 1856, after a dam broke at Lower Ausable Lake, a “Great Freshet” woke people “from their slumbers,” according to the Essex





County Republican. The river had “reached a greater height than ever before known.” From Keene to Jay to Au Sable Forks to Clintonville and Keeseville, bridges, factories, mills, ironworks, forges, slaughterhouses and barns were destroyed. Horses and livestock were “swept off.” A “Mr. Wolf’s” boardinghouse in Au Sable, below a bridge over the East Branch, was inundated by water—“Three of Mr. Wolf’s children were carried off with the building and lost. The widow Kennedy and daughter are drowned; also one of the foremen in the rolling mill, a Frenchman. Eight dwelling houses are also destroyed. ... Several small houses on the flats”—near where the Ausable’s East and West Branches meet—“were swept off before their occupants could escape, and a number of their [inhabitants] perished.”

A man in New Sweden, near Clintonville, saw a woman “screaming for help carried over the dam there ... and she was dashed to pieces.” Two men from Jay “had a most miraculous escape. They had climbed to the roof the house, which was floating down the river, and as it neared the bridge at New Sweden both sprang for their lives ... escaping to the shore. In a moment more of the house and bridge were dashed to pieces by the fury of the flood.” New bridges and plank roads were destroyed. In Au Sable Forks “the banks of the river have been lined all day with crowds of citizens, women and children, looking with terror on the scene of destruction, but entirely unable to render the least assistance.”

“Well, this was our home. What they said hurt—years and years of the jokes about the house floating away, the comments.”

The Grove in Au Sable Forks, where homes and people have drowned. RIGHT: The hamlet of Jay and its covered bridge, built in 1857 after the original span was destroyed in the Great Freshet of 1856.



After that, Ausable River floods continued to leave their mark.

Beginning in 1974, Sharron and Geoff Hewston lived in their home on Grove Road, near where Mr. Wolf’s boardinghouse once stood. There, the Hewstons say they weathered 26 floods. Finally, during the November 9, 1996, flood, they lost their battle with the river. Their mobile home survived as long as it did, says Sharron, because Geoff had chained it down with logging skidders. He had also anchored their planters, deck and kids’ bunkhouse with cement.

Geoff grew up in the Grove. At the time of the ’96 flood the neighborhood was still mostly family. Sharron, the town of Jay’s historian—appointed for her meticulous research skills and passion for the past—is a sixth-generation Au Sable native. In 1998, everyone in the Grove accepted a FEMA buyout. The Hewstons built a house on a nearby hill.

But Geoff and Sharron worry about people in town who live along the river, and remember what it was like after each flood, when they’d work to put their house back together. “We called them ‘gawkers,’” says Geoff. “They’d come to look down at us and whisper

how stupid we were. Well, this was our home. What they said hurt—years and years of the jokes about the house floating away, the comments.”

Sharron keeps several photo albums bulging with pages into which she’s sealed snapshots and newspaper articles about town of Jay floods beginning with the Great Freshet. During a driving tour of the Forks, Sharron slows the car in front of where her house once sat, a plot that’s since eroded more than 30 feet into the river. She points out where her dog, Sir Kubford, and cat, Oscar Meyer, are buried, and where the maple Geoff planted with their kids in 1985 barely clings to the shoreline. The river “could be a beauty or a beast,” says Sharron. “Three hundred and sixty-four days a year it could be heavenly here”—in fall you can see Whiteface Mountain. This is where her kids played with friends and rode their bikes. They swam in and skated on the river. This, she says, pointing at the Ausable, was the view from her window, where she learned to gauge the temperament of the river—“If the mist came up, over that rise” at the confluence of the river’s East and West Branches, “we had about 10 minutes to get out before the water took

the bank.” This is also where, Sharron says, she, her husband and kids developed PTSD. Rain still sends them into a panic. Sharron believes it almost gave her a heart attack, leading to open-heart surgery. There’s an opaque scar just visible above the V of her flannel shirt, beneath the cross around her neck.

TODAY, NANCY AND BOB HALEY still live in their modest one-story, built in 1982. That was the same year they planted the Macintosh tree that Nancy clung to during Irene, on her grandparents’ property near what was the Land of Makebelieve. Nancy remembers when she and her siblings would come here from Long Island to ride her grandparents’ horses. That original parcel was divided between Nancy and her siblings. Three of them built homes; Nancy’s the only one who stayed.

Three hundred to 500 years ago this part of the Ausable’s floodplain was the river’s channel, the reason water seeps up from below. During past floods the river has come close to the Haleys’ property, but never inside, which is why when Irene hit, the Haleys didn’t evacuate until it was almost too late. If anything like that happens again, says Bob, “I’m going to high ground.” They have no plans to move. Bob is one of the busiest plumbers in town. In this house they raised their boys, it’s where their memories are. The Haleys tragically lost their son Chris in 2015. High water? says Nancy. “That is nothing like losing Chris.”

Tamber and Josh McCabe still live in Au Sable Forks’ lower Jersey

Grove Road photograph by Jamie West McGiver. Hamlet of Jay photograph by Johnathan Esper



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ON THE EDGE

neighborhood, where every house was swallowed during Irene. Their belongings were sucked out a window, including a refrigerator. The McCabes gutted their home and rebuilt it. A decade later Tamber says she backs her car into the driveway in case her family needs to make a quick getaway. If there's heavy rain they move their stuff upstairs. Tamber takes her purse to bed at night, "so I can grab my stuff and I know where my keys are," she says. After Irene her kids were afraid of the rain and wanted to check the river each night before bed. Tamber admits that the worry has lessened, "but it's still there."

"I like the area we live in—the kids play in the street and it's nice to hear the basketball" bouncing on the pavement. Regardless, she says, how long her family will be there depends on the river.

Others who lived through Irene and rebuilt say they don't want to talk about it, especially on record. There's trauma from the flood and from outsiders who don't understand why they stay.

STAYING IS A form of calculated risk. In the US, 85 percent of people live in climate-vulnerable places, anticipating wildfires, tornadoes, coastal and river flooding, hurricanes or droughts. In Jay, most people will tell you they already know the science and can't stomach more data. The grassy tombs where homes in our community once stood are daily reminders of what happened and what could come again. We can see climate change in real time, including more Lyme disease-infected deer ticks that thrive in warmer temperatures, as well as wetter, more destructive storms. We've also been told that living in a river valley sandwiched between mountains affects what happens on the ground. Paul Smith's College natural sciences professor Curt Stager says that our peaks "act like funnels when a storm lingers," as Irene did. "That means that any settlement on the floodplain is inherently vulnerable anytime a rainstorm, even a moderate one, slows down over the area and dumps the water it's carrying in one place rather than smearing it across a wider landscape."

ON THE EDGE

The town of Jay is not Miami Beach or New Orleans or other low-lying coastal cities repeatedly thrashed by hurricanes and compromised by rising seas. The Ausable isn't the Mississippi, a mighty 2,300-mile force that routinely displaces millions of Midwesterners when levees break. But we do know that our river will flood again. So at what point will Jay reach crisis level, and what will that mean for a financially-strapped community like ours that's already struggling to keep the roads plowed? It's a burden that people who live beside the river can't take on alone.

At the time of Irene, the town of Jay's median household income was \$49,740. People here often work multiple jobs. Building with state-of-the-art, climate-safe materials or moving elsewhere isn't necessarily an option. "Where am I supposed to go?" asked a man whose home has flooded repeatedly. "Keeseville?"

Place-based identity figures big.

I landed in the Adirondacks in 2000 when I took a part-time job at *Adirondack Life* magazine. I never meant to stay, but I came to love Jay—our mountain range, our river that runs through it all—and I made friends who are now family. My ancestors aren't in this soil, but now I get why this is so complicated.

Dennis Perpetua, one of the many first responders who risked their lives during Irene, says that every time he drives by the farmhouse near Au Sable where he helped rescue the man and his dog, he sees the black, baseball-sized mark by the second-floor window where the boat's bumper hit. It's a reminder of that treacherous storm and how dramatically the river can change. But he also notes the garage in Jay that Irene's floodwaters almost shoved over the riverbank. A decade later it's rebuilt and sits on a new foundation, showing the resilience of this place and its people. "Shovel by shovel, nail by nail that garage was put back together again," says Perpetua. "In the Adirondacks we just do our best to carve out our lives." ▲

Annie Stoltie is the executive editor and a co-publisher of *Adirondack Life*.



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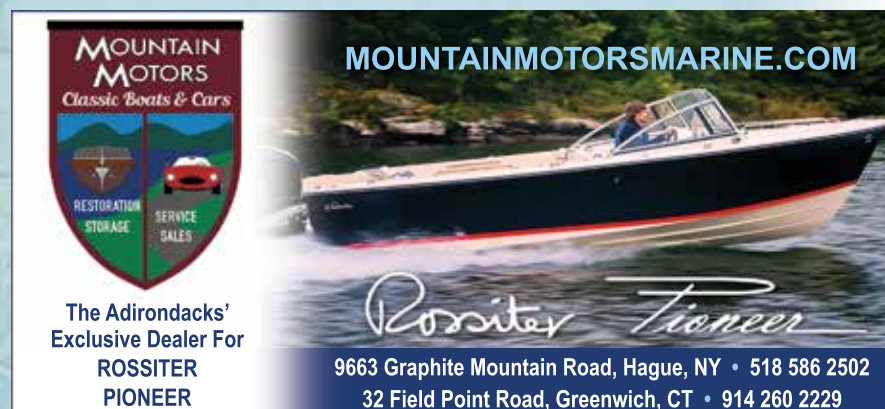
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