Chapter One

# *The High Ridge*

"*It seems* that most people who came up here were trying to get away from something," Prothero said. "They were renegades or dropouts—people trying to escape. Or maybe they were the hunters, the ones who were looking for something, and they thought this would be a good place to find it." I had figured Jim Prothero came to the Youghiogheny River of southwestern Pennsylvania to guide raft trips, since that's what he did for five years after he arrived, but he corrected me. He came here after he broke up with a girl friend. He needed to get away, and there is nothing like a daily soaking in whitewater for a change of pace. River guides at Ohiopyle are responsible for eighty people on a busy day, and there is no time for a past or a future. It is day-to-day, exactly what this man needed.

That was a long time ago. Since then, Prothero has seen some of the Youghiogheny. He has guided two hundred commercial raft trips and spent five years renting canoes on the reach from Confluence to Ohiopyle. For sport he has kayaked the dangerous upper Youghiogheny. But in all this time, he had never been to the headwaters. This river that had brought escape, pleasure, and livelihood—he had never seen where it starts. Few people have. Maybe he was just avoiding the work at his riverside house in Confluence, but when I said I was going to search out the beginning of the river, in May of 1981, Jim Prothero said he would come along.

From maps, I couldn't tell if our final destination was in Maryland or West Virginia. But somewhere up there, close to the border



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on Backbone Mountain, the Youghiogheny River begins and our search would end.

From its first spring at an elevation of about 2,700 feet above sea level, the Youghiogheny flows 132 miles to the north and west, draining 1,764 square miles (an area about the size of Delaware) and joining the Monongahela River at McKeesport, elevation 719 feet, 15.6 miles south of Pittsburgh. In this book, we will explore the entire river and meet the people who live along its shores.

To find the source, I drive my van to Silver Lake, West Virginia, a half-mile-long reservoir built in 1928 by damming the Youghiogheny (sometimes called the "Yock"). Below the dam, the river can be stepped across. Floyd and Edith Cowger from Fairmont, West Virginia, recently bought the lake with its seven cottages and twenty-five campsites. They installed a wood stove in a sagging but comfortable cabin and moved onto their new land.

"This used to be a popular recreation site, even into the fifties," Cowger says. While he, Prothero, and I talk, he hones an axe with a file, then thumbs the blade to test its sharpness. "We like it here," he says, "and we think other people will, too." Though the lake has been sold and resold by owners unable to earn a profit, the Cowgers are hopeful. They know what they want: a small family business on a good piece of ground. Meanwhile, Floyd finds jobs in construction and spends weekends refurbishing cabins. He plans to stock the lake with warm-water fish such as bass, and to have a small fleet of boats for tourists to row, paddle, or sail. Almost at the Youghiogheny's source, the Cowgers are the first of many who hope to gain a livelihood from this river.

Topographic maps show only an "intermittent" stream at the Silver Lake inlet. Prothero and I want to find the absolute beginning of this river, so with Cowger's permission we walk across his land and aim upstream. The inlet is choked with mud; one-third of the original reservoir is now a swampy delta from soil washed off the mountain.

Beavers inhabit the place. We cross one of their trails, worn smooth by the hauling of bigtooth aspen and black willow. Like cowboys who erase their footprints in old-time movies, the beavers obliterate their tracks with the branches they drag. Prothero watches everything and spots wild turkey scratchings where the gobblers have scattered leaves during their search for bugs to eat.

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Shortly we find a dirt road and follow it for half a mile, but it is too far from the river. We walk closer to the water so that we can always spot the largest fork and follow it to the true source, but a rhododendron jungle encloses the Youghiogheny and I almost have to be in it to see it. With my hands, I part the branches as if they were curtains, but they are supple; without warning they swat me in the face. Rhododendron is the state shrub in West Virginia and the unofficial but inescapable shrub of our small Youghiogheny.

The river splits in two. Most records say that the Youghiogheny's source lies in Preston County, West Virginia. Since the river comes from the south, I can see the reason to call the southernmost branch the source, but when I was there, the Maryland branch, coming from the east, was nominally larger—maybe forty inches wide versus thirty-six. We follow the Maryland branch through a maze of fallen timber. Crisscrossed and at every angle, logs bridge the river, two or three feet above it. I step from one trunk to another, never touching ground except when a log breaks and I drop straight down into the Youghiogheny, all of three inches deep. "You know how to swim?" Prothero asks.

We are heading toward the top of the Appalachians. Backbone Mountain, on which we walk, is the divide between the Potomac, which flows into the Atlantic Ocean, and the Youghiogheny, whose waters are bound for the Gulf of Mexico. It is the continental divide of the East, and one of many northeast-southwest trending ridges that make up what geologists call the Allegheny Mountain Section of the Appalachian Plateaus Province. All of this is a part of the Appalachian Mountain chain, 300 million years old, running 1,600 miles from Alabama to Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula, spanning one-sixth the distance from the equator to the North Pole. We are 600 miles up from the Alabama end. The summit above us is Hoyes Crest, 3,360 feet high. It is the highest point in Maryland, a claim that borders on the sneaky, since you can almost spit into West Virginia.

As I fall in the water for the third time I am speared again by a dead branch, and I wonder why it is so important to see the source. Prothero doesn't wonder. He enjoys the challenge of this search. He likes to be tested, to see what he can do, to be savvy and to prove to himself that he can go anywhere. Maybe it is part of his escaping. Over the years this drive has led him to whitewater. First he guided on the lower Youghiogheny in a raft, then a kayak. He tells me

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about paddling a waterfall of forty-five degrees, more or less, in Banff Park, Canada. He almost died. I say he was crazy and he agrees. Prothero now paddles open canoes which are much more difficult in rapids than kayaks.

What difference does this spring make? The Youghiogheny sips from thousands of springs. Seventy percent of the river's flow emanates from groundwater that seeps down from springs. Why is the Source so important? I think it has to do with beginnings. To me they are important times, important places. Finding the beginning of the river has something to do with grasping the whole thing, with understanding this part of the earth. After seeing the source, I will know the river better when I launch my canoe or my raft seventy miles downstream at Ohiopyle, or when I stand on a sandbar in the shadow of the U.S. Steel tube mill where the Youghiogheny dumps without grace into the Monongahela at McKeesport. Maybe it is like holding a baby. Even though there may be little similarity between infant and adult, somehow the person is known better, or known more completely, if you know him when he is young and then see him grow. A river shows all of its ages at once. Right now we see its birth. Farther downstream we can see it as a child, then as an adult, and finally in old age. A river offers a chance to see the natural process, to see the workings of life. It involves changes, growth, cycles, setbacks, and healing, and eventually includes us whether we want to be included or not.

Something here also involves gradient and elevation. There was an ancient belief that rivers flow from the center of the earth. That idea may entice those interested in myths, but to me, the reality that rivers come from the highest places on earth is more powerful. To go to the top of the river is somehow alluring. If this river began at the end of a flat plain I would not be so drawn to its source. The fact that I must climb to reach the beginning of the Youghiogheny is an extra attraction.

To some people, gradient has an appeal wherever it is found: mountains, cliffs, sand dunes, waves, skyscrapers, balcony seats, waterfalls, whitewater rapids. Some mountain people become edgy in the flatlands. They would rather look up to peaks and down to valleys, nap in the shade of a cliff, be confined between the walls of a canyon, or free as the wind in the limitless space on top. Gradient is what makes mountain people what they are. These old hills—the Appalachians—were our nation's original symbol of gradient, and

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it is an essential element in the story of this river. Prothero and I climb higher.

Discovery may also be what I am after; finding something new. Maybe I am driven by what drove the old explorers, maybe by modern restlessness, or maybe they are the same. I want to go somewhere I have never been. The 1700s are considered the age of exploration for the Appalachians, but these mountains are as new to me, today, as they were to Christopher Gist and George Washington in the 1750s. Those explorers hit only the highlights. Since I plan to see every mile of the river, I may as well start at the top.

Beginnings, gradient, discovery: all could be reasons for this climb. Prothero is content to say, "I just want to see it."

We come to the mossy remains of two concrete dams. One is eight feet high, another is four feet high, but neither hold water any more. I automatically see dams as problems. They block the flow, bury the riffles, stop the migration of fish, warm the water by ponding it, collect mud and silt. They are piles of cement dumped into my river. My bias is clear. I would hope that to dam a river, there would be some very good reasons. Prothero, on the other hand, does not judge, does not get angry. He only wonders why, and how. He has a fascination for man-made stuff. He has the eye of a tinkerer. He *is* a tinkerer. While I wonder how to blow these dams up, Prothero looks at them closely and notices their shape—narrow at the top and wide at the base. He wonders how far into the hill they extend. He decides that this one is not rooted deep, because all the water seeps through underneath. He wonders how the builders carried the cement up here, and of course, he wonders what the dam was for. Later I learn that it was built in the 1920s for a trout-rearing pond.

As we gain elevation, the stream remains a junkyard of fallen logs, but thick shrubbery is left behind and I enjoy seeing the sky. We can walk up the mossy, loggy bed in a ravine about six feet deep and twelve feet wide, or we can walk above the ravine where the greenbrier—viney with sharp spines—is healthy. It's a good substitute for barbed wire. We take the ravine.

Before I started this trip, I had a vision of the Youghiogheny headwaters. They would be clean enough to drink, tucked away in a wild corner of the Appalachians, a sweet untouched spring. What I found were hundreds of acres that had been clear-cut twenty years ago. Every 200 feet an old logging road, now paved with grass and

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weeds, fords the river, each time making a muddy goo even after all those years. This is where the silt that chokes Floyd Cowger's lake comes from. The river starts in a clear-cut; it ends at a steel mill. The miracle is that in between, it is one of the finest wild and scenic rivers in the eastern United States. In four different sections, the Youghiogheny offers some of the best water for expert kayakers, intermediate canoeists, commercial rafters, and gentle-water paddlers. It is one of the country's outstanding examples of reclaimed water quality and a return of trout. But not to get ahead of the story.

Where is the highest spring, that elusive Youghiogheny source? Prothero says that this hike reminds him of a training trip for Canoe Trails. Back in Beaver, Pennsylvania, in tenth grade, he signed up for a scouting program. Each year, a group went to Canada for ten days, but not before intensive preparation, including cross-country orienteering. The Canoe Trails program went co-ed while Prothero was there, and that is where he met his heart-break girl friend—the one who led to his Ohiopyle escape. Eventually, Prothero was kicked out of Canoe Trails for "insubordination." He says, "There were a lot of good things there, but also a lot of stuff that you grow out of, and the program doesn't grow with you." When Prothero started his own programs on the Youghiogheny, the emphasis was on growth.

Soon the river is but a trickle. In places it goes underground like a phantom, then pops up again. Any moment I expect the flow to give out altogether, and it does. Within a grove of tall tulip poplar skipped by the loggers and surrounded by third-growth striped maple, speckled alder, yellow birch, and red maple, a hemlock tree stands with a spring at its base. Hay-scented ferns are green and thick. At the rate of perhaps one cup a minute, the Youghiogheny flows toward the Gulf of Mexico. This seems an appropriate source, but above, the ravine continues, and where there is a hollow, there is water, at least when it rains. We keep walking.

The Youghiogheny at this altitude is a damp spot in the bottom of a Maryland ravine. As we press upward, sink-sized pools of water appear now and then with drops of current running through. Then, up ahead, I finally see the highest limit of the ravine. I see where it begins in a cavity like a tiny cirque, fifteen feet across. Above it, the mountain simply rises to its summit, uncut and uneroded by the flow of water. Below it, there is a channel for the Youghiogheny, continu-

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ous for 2,082 miles. And right at the back of the cirque, tight against the mountain, is a spring measuring one foot across, two inches deep, and edged with the yellow pollen of May.

Hoyes Crest, above the Youghiogheny source, is not a peak at all. It is only a little higher than other places on Backbone Mountain, which runs fifty miles from Parsons, West Virginia, northward to Westernport, Maryland. From the crest you see only trees, with barely a glimpse of the upper Youghiogheny Valley and the North Branch Potomac Valley.

For a better view—to see the lay of the land—I travel a few days later to a different apex of the Backbone: Eagle Rocks. They rise east of Loch Lynn and Oakland, and are accessible by dirt road off Maryland Route 560. On the topographic map it is a dramatic site. First of all, the name. Maybe an aerie was here. Maybe eagles soar past in the spring or fall. The map's contour lines are congested, crowded together, indicating the concave rise of a rocky summit. On the map it says "quarry."

It is evening when I turn off the highway and test my van's springs on the washboard road to the rocks. To what is left of them. It seems the quarry has eaten the best of the eagle habitat. The remaining rocks are hard sandstone surrounded by a coarse, white, remarkable sand. An acre of the summit has been excavated and removed for use at lower elevations. On my heels, in fact, is a pickup with two men who will shovel half a cubic yard of Eagle Rock super-sand and drive away with the treasure. The mountaintop will be reincarnated as a slab on which a suburban doghouse will sit. Even so, a few rocks remain. I scramble up the slopes of the quarry and reach a path that lures me to where a ten-foot-square stone catches a gale of wind and the last glint of springtime sun. To soak up both, I climb on top.

Pittsburgh and Baltimore may as well be on another planet. To the east the mountains are graceful; they are the smooth-topped mountains of Maryland. Wide valleys with seas of grass lie between. Even during the Indians' time there were grasslands down there with buffalo grazing in them. The scene reminds me of central Pennsylvania, or of a diminished version of Virginia's Blue Ridge. In all, about ten high ridges run in a northeast-southwest slant between here and the Atlantic Ocean, the easternmost mountain rising near Frederick.

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Below me is the tip of western Maryland, a part that is geographically, economically, and culturally a part of West Virginia or southern Pennsylvania. More coal mines than horse farms, more food stamps than dividend checks, more chewing tobacco than Virginia Slims. Deer rifles; not duck hunters' shotguns. This is remote Garrett County, Maryland's equivalent to Alaska. To the southwest I see the massive rounded peaks of West Virginia where there are national forests and rugged river canyons. To the north and west it looks equally wild, a jumble of topography incised by gorges—a wildness that runs into Pennsylvania, where the Youghiogheny and I will be going on a journey to last a year.

Journeys are dated things. It seems that few people take journeys anymore; instead, people simply go places. A person could travel the length of the Youghiogheny in one hour by airplane, in three hours by car. Some people could even walk from one end to another in a week, and what is seen between origin and destination may be unimportant. Not for me. For me, the going is the thing. Look around. Talk to people. Go slowly. Enjoy it. The place will never be the same, and will probably never again be this good.

With thoughts spurred by past journeys and by the pickup truck full of sand heading down the mountain, I feel an impermanence here, even on the mountain. Especially on the mountain. Everything that is up here will end up down there at the river. Water, soil, nutrients, rocks, trash: all of it will erode and roll from the top to the bottom. Instability is resolved by moving downhill. That truckload of sand was only getting a premature ride. So will we end at the bottom, giving in to gravity, yielding to its greater strength.

Water descends the east side of the Backbone, runs into the Potomac and past the nation's capital to Chesapeake Bay. Mountains to the south feed the Cheat River, which with the West Fork, forms the Monongahela at Point Marion, Pennsylvania. The north side of the mountain sheds water to the Youghiogheny. Nearby are more excellent whitewater rivers than perhaps in any other place in the country: the Savage from the eastern slope of this mountain, the North Branch of the Potomac, the Big Sandy and Blackwater which join the Cheat, the Cheat itself, and the Youghiogheny.

Down there along the Youghiogheny are people fiercely protective of their land, and others who would sell it in a minute. There are old-timers like Gwen Waters and Shelby Mitchell who have seen the changes. There are newcomers like Jim Prothero who will keep

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coming back. The whitewater down there is the most popular in the United States, and for recreation it is the most efficiently managed, whatever that is worth. There are gorges and towns and cities; ospreys, rare plants, and rare people. Parts of it stubbornly show our country's past; parts may show its future.

Down there it looks rugged and green, but this is not an empty region. Far from it. In the Youghiogheny basin there is one place—only one—where you can be more than a mile from a road. All of the land, save a few acres in two state parks, has been logged. Counting small "ground hog" mines in the sides of hills, thousands of coal mines have been dug and their spoil piles remain.

From Eagle Rocks I see the tall stacks of the Mount Storm power plant to the east, burning coal and belching smoke for the megalopolis. The plant sits in a valley but its stacks rise over the mountaintop. To the northeast is the paper mill at Luke, Maryland. You have to be within a mile to spot it by sight, but on some days it can be smelled the whole way to Ohiopyle, a straight-line distance of forty miles. To the north, hidden by mountains, is Deep Creek Dam on a Youghiogheny tributary, where the Pennsylvania Electric Company generates hydroelectricity for peaking power—mainly for air conditioners. Beyond, in all directions but barely visible from here, are strip mines where coal is dug. Much of it is then exported to Japan and Europe.

Up here, it is easy to see that the Youghiogheny story is one of use and exploitation. The region was a resource colony of Pittsburgh, a city made possible through the use of water and coal from these mountains. The Youghiogheny basin was, and still is, controlled in many ways by Pittsburghers. Its history includes boom and bust, the despair of Appalachia, people fighting to take from the land, fighting for a living, fighting outsiders, and fighting among themselves. It is a place where expectations soared and fell, where desires were imported with settlers and then grew in a singular, regional way, sometimes realized, often blunted. Hopes were raised, then abandoned as old people clung fast and young people left. Chances to use the land in a sustained and durable way were not realized and were passed by.

Today, there are new chances to use the land in lasting ways, because this has been a place of recovery and healing, of forests and waters partly reclaimed from two centuries of abuse. It is a place full of contradictions, beginning with the ancient rocks and the

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recent quarry as neighbors here on top. Threads of wilderness run through it all, from the highest spring to the willow-thicket shorelines where the Youghiogheny nears Pittsburgh.

So the place has been sapped of its wealth, but in other ways it has been saved. Compared with the rest of the East, parts of the basin are a storybook wilderness. Within fifty miles of the middle river are almost three million people; this wild river is so close to urban centers as to be a curiosity, a magnet, a refuge.

The Youghiogheny has been the target of more escapees than Jim Prothero. Others were Delaware Indians after being driven from eastern Pennsylvania, the man who claimed to have shot General Braddock in the French and Indian War, a Pittsburgher whose doctor told him to flee the city and seek clean air, a schoolteacher who could stand working in the Hill District of Pittsburgh no longer, an office equipment salesman who would rather run the river and drink wine, and a machinist-inventor who wanted no more of the nine-to-five routine, and a river guide who would probably have destroyed himself in any other environment.

Down below me there are homes, and hopes, and joys shared, and dreams, though the dreams are often buried among hard realities.

The horizon at Eagle Rocks is golden, then red, then navy blue as the light fades and Venus shines in the west and stars decorate the sky. In early May it is cold and windy. A deer mouse flashes past so fast I can hardly see it but I feel it touch my foot. Each ridge of the Appalachians recedes in its own shade of blue. Then they all turn to black. It is nighttime and dark, but our journey down the Youghiogheny has just begun.

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