

“Who Killed the French Broad?”

Wilma spent much of her life fighting to preserve and protect the French Broad River. Her first book *The French Broad* contained a chapter which addressed river pollution. In response to the reluctance of the publishers to include such a controversial subject she titled it “Who Killed the French Broad?” to make it sound like a murder mystery! Wilma was seven years ahead of Rachel Carson who wrote “Silent Spring” in 1962. That book was credited with helping to launch the environmental movement in America.



Wilma Dykeman (1920-2006) in 1955 when she wrote *The French Broad*



Wilma’s Green and Fragile Planet

Wilma Dykeman saw the world holistically. In her book *Explorations* she wrote: “All knowledge is related. When we know more about the corner of the world where we live, we know more about the green and fragile planet which is home to all humans. Our own little spark of curiosity is part of the immense mystery which surrounds all life. I learned that no corner of the world was without wonder, that every living creature or plant or drop of water holds miracles if we would look, listen, think, relate.” (*Explorations*)

Wilma once said that we have a very little time on this earth and how we leave it is going to make a big difference.

Polluting for Shareholders’ Profit



Reuben Robertson, President of Champion Paper Company, was interviewed by Wilma in the 1950s. She asked him point blank why his company would not clean up the river. His reply was “We can’t justify spending a great deal of money to our stockholders... {We} will clean it up when we have to.”

In a Sept. 18, 1992 photograph, attorney Louis Woolf representing Champion Paper Company refuses a drink of Pigeon River water from Newport, Tennessee eighth-grader Jason Martin during a lunch break in the class-action lawsuit trial in Greenville, Tennessee. The suit

was filed by property owners along the Pigeon River, the French Broad and Douglas Lake in Cocke, Sevier and Jefferson counties in Tennessee. The premise was that by polluting the Pigeon River residents’ property values were decreased, their lives were disrupted and their health threatened. Woolf had said earlier in the trial when asked by Wilma Dykeman if he would “dare” to drink water from the river that he would. (*Paul Efirid/Knoxville News Sentinel*)



Champion Paper Company, Canton, North Carolina

Sense of Place LOSING/FINDING OUR DIRECTION

“Our wanderings both far and near, define us.” Wilma wrote. In an article published in the 1999 *Cosmos Journal* (she was a member of the Cosmos Club, a private social club founded in Washington, D.C. in 1878) entitled *Recovering a Sense of Place*, Wilma lamented that development is making every community look the same.

... I feel the chill of being an expatriate... in my own country where a frenetic mobility and growing cultural conformity erode that time and energy necessary to understanding the uniqueness at the heart of a sense of place.

Of course, air travel removes us even more decisively from the places we pass through or over, landing us in ports where all is already familiar. At what cost does the convenient travel we demand come if we consistently overlook the places along our way? We travel fast and hard, especially ‘to save time.’ But a sense of place is inextricably interwoven with a sense of time, and how we ‘spend’ the one determines the quality we find in the other.

The gulf between what we once called ‘our homeplace’ and today’s new landscape is wide and grows wider with each fluctuation of distant marketplaces. Meaning traditionally associated with the word ‘home’ disappears behind the gated gatherings of multimillion-dollar mansions and the stark bleakness of acres of ‘mobile homes’ parked cheek by jowl, identified only by numbers. ... Between these raw extremes, there is a vision of ‘home’ struggling to survive in the global economy.”



Junkyards along the French Broad River. “Water is a living thing; it is life itself. In it life began. And everything that lives in water requires oxygen. It is also a moving thing. A burden bearer, water can carry off great loads of humanity’s leavings – but here the struggle between life and death begins. For it can only carry so much, and as the oxygen in water is used up by waste, organic or inorganic, the living creatures in water begin to die... Not only the life in the river suffers, there is all the life along it, including man himself.”



Tunnel Road, Asheville, North Carolina. “Serving the Kingdom of the automobile... highways lace our land from coast to coast, seeking speed and creating along their routes a standardized service and entertainment complex so that we can eat, sleep, laugh and shop in the same way all of the time. But somewhere, and sometimes hidden in little valleys or among hills and deserts, are those distinctive communities where we once discovered our past, our prolific variety, even our conversation.”

Wilma Dykeman RiverWay—The 17-mile Wilma Dykeman RiverWay is a tribute to Wilma Dykeman, a native daughter of the French Broad River watershed. “... she understood the delicate balance between economic development and environmental protection and the importance of traditions and authenticity,” according to Karen Cragolin, Executive Director of Riverlink.



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