

Fishermen on a boulder tend their lines above the clear waters of the gorge, below, and at right, a family hikes along a shaded trail.



# The Niagara's Other Wonder

After the Falls there is still more grandeur, as generations of hikers and exploring kids have learned in the Niagara Gorge.

By JIM WAKE

**A**S KIDS, WE USED to hop the low wall at the foot of Vanderbilt and scurry across the parkway — and there we were. It was at farthest 500 yards from any of our homes, but it was as if we entered another world. On the other side of that double band of concrete was the Niagara Gorge, a 300-foot-deep crevice whose steep sides concealed a network of trails and secret hideaways — and even a few shallow caves. For adventurous 12-year-olds, it was a wilderness playground.

In those days the gorge was not as accessible as it is now — a sheer, 20-foot drop at the very top of the cliff had to be negotiated by sliding down a heavy steel cable. This filtered out all but a few dedicated fishermen, rambunctious preteens like ourselves, and young lovers looking for romance and privacy.

After that first bit of mountaineering, though, the climb got easier. The main trail wound back and forth between precariously perched giant boulders that appeared ready to tumble down the sides of the gorge at any moment. Here among the boulders, in an environment that seemed to be apart from civilization — except when an occasional tourist helicopter fluttered above our heads — we played hide and

seek, scurried over the rocks, explored the caves, built raging bonfires (even brought hot dogs for lunch on occasion) and happily insulted each other as boys so often do.

Although we all considered ourselves fearless, we never quite matched an unassuming companion we called "Secret Sam" (his name was actually Mike) who once scaled a needle-shaped rock rising about 70 or 80 feet above the water's edge. Then there was Paul, who was the clumsiest and goofiest one of the bunch. He would think

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nothing of dangling his toes over the edge of an overhang, with nothing but air between him and a landing spot 100 feet below.

At the bottom of the gorge, the wildly rushing waters were both soothing and hypnotic. There are few torrents of water in the world as

rapid and powerful as that stretch of the Niagara River that begins downstream from the Whirlpool Bridge and continues on for a mile or two to the Robert Moses power plant. In some places the water rushes by at 40 miles an hour, and when it curls over itself and crashes against submerged rocks, sending up a frothy white spray, the effect is every bit as awe-inspiring as the Falls a few miles upstream.

A favorite pastime for us — and one it's probably fortunate our parents weren't there to see — was to hop from rock to rock until we were practically in midstream, with the water rushing by on both sides. There was one rock that was a challenge to reach, and long ago "Molly and John" defiantly proclaimed their everlasting affection for one another — and their daring — on this highly visible rock.

Others flirted with a greater danger by diving off certain rocks into currents that were more or less dependable. They could be reasonably certain — but not positive — that the water would return them to calm and shallow depths at the river's edge. Over the years, the newspapers gave reports of several who didn't make it back.

Of course, the Niagara River continues to roar by, even though the group of friends who passed Saturdays and summer afternoons togeth-

*Continued on Page 7*



# The Niagara's Other Wonder

*continued from Page 5*

er in the gorge dispersed long ago. The gorge has become less a secret place. The cable has been replaced by sturdy concrete steps; the trails have been cleaned up and lined with stone retaining walls, and there are Sunday afternoons when they carry as much traffic as they once did during an entire month.

But it is still not as appreciated as it might be. (I wonder if I am violating some sacred trust in espousing its values here?) For those who would like a breathtaking and still somewhat secluded view of one of nature's greatest wonders, here is an itinerary:

Take the Robert Moses Parkway to Whirlpool State Park in Niagara Falls. Park your car and follow the trail at the gorge's edge about a quarter-mile downstream into a slight depression. At the bottom of this depression you will find two broken concrete-and-wood benches opposite a small opening in the railing facing the gorge. (A vanished or vandalized sign for the "Ongiara Trail" may or may not have been replaced by the time you get there.) The opening leads to the steps and a well-defined trail that terminates at the water's edge.

On the way down, be sure to glance over your shoulder from time to time. While the Niagara Gorge is no Grand Canyon, it does manage to swallow up all who enter it; the view upward is as impressive as the view downward. About two-thirds of the way down the side of the cliff, take a moment to look over a couple of house-sized boulders that long ago tumbled down the side of the gorge from high above. The higher one seems to be balanced on little more than a knife's edge.

Just below this level there are some broken but usable picnic tables, and fireplaces from which the grills were removed long ago. More ambitious picnickers might want to carry along hot dogs and charcoal for use here, and liquid refreshment also might be welcome at this point. The climb back up is bound to leave even a seasoned hiker a bit breathless, so it's a good idea to save something to drink for the bitter end. Also,

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thoughtful hikers will take their garbage back to the top. So it's a good idea not to carry too much.

Running along the bottom of the gorge, about 50 feet above the water's edge, is the abandoned bed of a railroad that once ran from Niagara Falls to Lewiston. President William McKinley rode on it the day before he was assassinated.

This railroad bed conveniently provides access to points upstream and downstream from the Ongiara Trail. Half a mile upstream, the trail passes by the Niagara River Whirlpool and overlooks the river's narrowest point, where the rushing water is squeezed into a passageway a few hundred yards wide. It is here that the river reaches its greatest fury — and where an ill-fated river raft flipped over a few years ago at the cost of four lives. To reach this point the hiker must





The Devil's Hole, a cave where a band of Indians hid before attacking, is still visible in the gorge, though reduced in size by blasting.

follow the path as it bypasses an old rockfall. This involves some climbing up and over moderate-sized boulders. The easiest route through the rubble has been blazed in bright paint by an altruistic nature lover. Further upstream the trail deteriorates, but a seasoned rock climber can make it to the abutments of the Whirlpool-Rapids Bridge without too much difficulty.

An easier hike from the bottom of the Ongiara Trail follows the old railroad bed downstream about a mile to a point below Devil's Hole State Park, within site of the Robert Moses Power Plant. Some of the best rainbow trout in the area have been pulled in from the rocks upstream from the power plant; and salmon, carp, and giant sturgeon also are said to inhabit the area. Along this route, spectacular rocks and boulders jut out at crazy angles from the gorge walls and the water's edge.

When the hiker reaches the base of Devil's Hole, he has a choice. He can either return to Whirlpool Park the way he came, or he can look for the rock signed by "Terri Villarini" in two-foot letters. This rock stands at the entrance to a path that leads to the right and climbs the side of the gorge to Devil's Hole Park. The trail has a gentler grade than the one near Whirlpool, and it passes through more shaded areas (watered by the remains of the infamous Bloody Run of both historic and contemporary note.)

Near the top of this path are remnants of a cave that reputedly was the hiding place for the band of Seneca Indians who ambushed an English supply convoy on its way to Fort Niagara in 1763. (The English had reneged on promises they had made to the Senecas.) Supposedly, the blood of the victims of this "Devil's Hole Massacre" colored the waters of the nearby stream red — hence its name, Bloody Run.

The Indians, it seems, have been getting their punishment ever since, and most of the cave was blasted away twenty years ago for some obscure reason having to do with the Niagara Power Project. The creek isn't doing so well either. In recent years it has gained notoriety for contamination from a chemical dump.

At any rate, the cave is just a few steep steps below the lip of the gorge. Once on top the hiker

will probably want to finish off the remaining refreshment in his sack and then contemplate the scenic walk along the brink of the gorge from Devil's Hole to Whirlpool Park. This is a relatively easy walk of about a mile.

One need not be a mountaineer to attempt Niagara Gorge; it can be tackled by almost anyone. Still, Niagara Frontier State Parks Commissioner Mario Pirastru warns against reckless adventurism for the uninitiated gorge hiker. "Don't get me wrong," he says. "The gorge is a tremendous attraction. But every year we have to pick people off the side of the gorge who think they are mountain climbers.

"If you don't know what you're doing, it can be dangerous. These trails aren't perfect, so you've got to use a little common sense when you go down.

"The gorge is not for the very young or the very aged. We recommend that newcomers take the guided tour available through the Schoellkopf Geological Museum. The tours are getting more and more popular."

Another good idea, of course, is to wear a pair of sturdy shoes with non-slip soles.

Jack Krajewski invites interested hikers to join one of the museum's free tours. There are four different routes covering the Artpark area, Devil's Hole, the whirlpool and the upper gorge. Each tour is limited to about 20 people by reservation, and each takes about two and a half hours to complete. Reservations can be made by calling 278-1780. Krajewski says the museum hopes to work on the trails to make them more accessible to the public.

A climb into the gorge offers just enough of a challenge to quicken the pulse and enough of an adventure to serve as a surrogate wilderness hike for city dwellers with tight budgets or tight schedules. It is a day trip that is highly recommended. But please don't disturb any young lovers or rambunctious preteen-agers. This place was their playground long before my childhood, and it ought to remain that way for years to come. ●

**JIM WAKE** is a freelance journalist who grew up in Niagara Falls and still appreciates a little adventure and a gorgeous view.

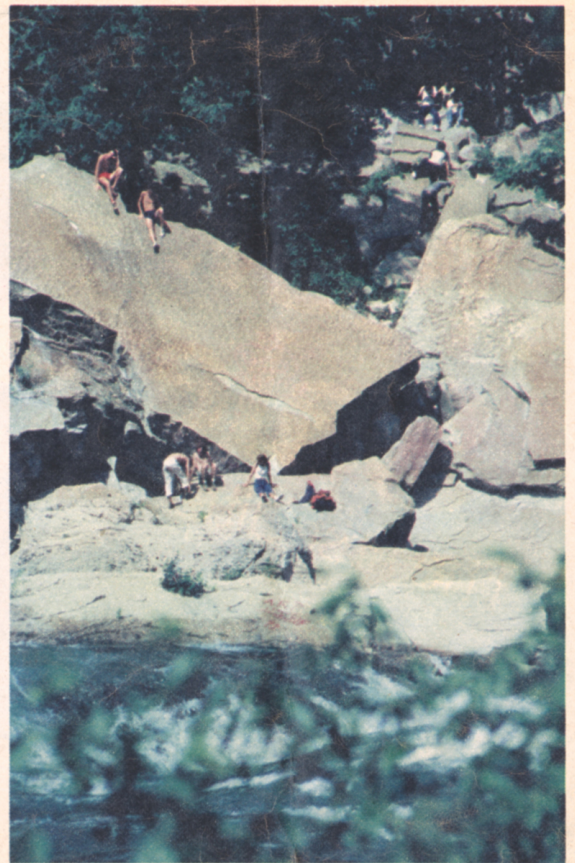




A hiker enjoys splendid solitude, above, and a rock juts from the rapid waters.



Photos by  
**KEVIN COLOSI**  
and **JIM WAKE**



Young and not-so-young gorge connoisseurs bask in the sun and scramble over rocks.



The steep gorge wall drops sharply beneath an overlook on the Canadian shore; above, a cable car glides along its route far above the Whirlpool.