axwell is a small coal-mining village along the eastern bank of the Monongahela River, not far from Brownsville in southwestern Pennsylvania. It lies midway between the river’s source — where the West Fork and Tygart Rivers meet near Fairmont, West Virginia — and Pittsburgh, where the Mon joins the Allegheny to form the Ohio. It is one of the few rivers in the world flowing south to north. Going downriver, it drops 147 feet, each of the nine dams and locks dropping to a lower level, establishing “pools” between them to maintain its navigational depth for river traffic. Maxwell is at the northern end of the Maxwell pool, which extends 20.8 miles on the Upper Mon to Grays Landing.

When the locks and dams were completed for total navigation in 1904, the Mon River became the most commercially traveled waterway in the world, supplying coal, iron ore, and coke to the steel industry in the middle and lower parts of the river. In The Monongahela: River of Dreams, Arthur Parker notes that at the zenith of the steel industry, “during and following World War II, the Mon...
River served the greatest industrial complex in the world."

In the midst of this activity, between Brownsville and Fredericktown, a distance of 10 miles, Maxwell was at the center of some 12 large and small coal mines along the river. Coal was shipped day and night by both rail and water to the steel complex downriver. Eleven hundred miners worked in the Maxwell mine alone. Though the sulfur from the mines drained into the river, the water remained mostly clear, its shoreline sprinkled with white sand. The small mining patch curved along the river a half mile or so, nestled in the lush countryside with neat white picket fences and lined with tall poplar trees, its two dirt roads patched with "red dog" from the mines, a dirt alley running between the two rows of houses. In the dark of night the sounds of the moving trains and steamboats permeating the air, both near and far, haunted me. They haunt me still. I was born there in 1936, the year of the great floods in the Mon Valley, Johnstown, and Pittsburgh.

A half-century later, at the time of the 1985 flood in Maxwell, I was teaching at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, approximately 70
miles away. My mother remained in Maxwell not more than 20 yards from the bank of the rising river near the Maxwell Locks and Dam. She was nearly 79 years old. My father, who had worked in the Maxwell coal mine, had passed away; heavy coughing spells brought on by black lung disease led to a crippling auto accident in 1960, and he was never the same. He was just one of many throughout the region afflicted by the same malady acquired from years of mining. Though he could walk with a cane and speak relatively clearly while the tracheal tube implanted for breathing in his throat was covered, he never fully regained his strength and was plagued by chronic infirmities. They had lived beside the river since 1928, much to my mother's regret because of her chronic arthritis and, in part, because of Maxwell's relative remoteness. She had worked for six years as a waitress at the St. Charles and White Swann hotels in Uniontown before she got married. She kept my father alive until 1982, then continued in relatively good health herself until she died at the age of 94 in 2001.

As the water rose in November 1985, I received a phone call; she calmly described the torrential, swirling river surging past her house, the coal barges broken away from their mooring places atop the oncoming crest of water, smashing into the dam a thousand yards downriver. These barges blocked the flow of water, causing the river to overspill its banks. The water was four feet from her back door. I shouted for her to get her heart medicine and leave immediately, which she did. She backed the car out of the garage and drove to a friend's house on a hill above the flood plain. The houses were engulfed within minutes.

I was born in that house the day before Halloween, perhaps already enraptured by the charm of the river. According to mother, Doc Robinson was too sick to attend to my birth, so he advised her to call Mrs. Fantini, a local midwife, as capable as he would be. She did and with the assistance of my Aunt Irene, my mother's 17-year-old sister who would later become an LPN at West Penn Hospital, I was born. My aunt often laughed that my mother had instructed them to throw the baby into the Mon River if it were not a girl. To this day I wonder why I didn't start talking until I was three years old.

Part of the magic of the river is found in its innate danger, its poetic siren song calling to test its currents and depths, but I had no fear of the 300-yard-wide, 30-foot-deep river, though my life was literally and repeatedly threatened by it. The paradoxical nature of the river — both life-sustaining and life-threatening — provided a means whereby I could measure my boyhood trepidation against what was expected of me, or what I thought I should be. I confronted the image of myself in its waters; formative and enlightening, it helped spawn a sense of self. It is what drives me to look back.

I can’t remember the first time that I swam across the Mon River but I do remember my mother calling from the back porch of the house to "get back over here," as though returning were not as dangerous as going across. One of the dangers was the river traffic because of an obscuring bend downriver. As in this instance, I was caught more than once in the middle of the river having to outrace an approaching craft with its barges coupled four abreast," its swath a hundred feet wide, sounding its warning signals. My punishment was no swimming for the next week, but that never deterred me. Little did I realize at the time its significance. Years later, after I retired from teaching, I wrote in a memoir that "notwithstanding the company of Faulkner and Solzhenitsyn in the library, I cherish more the memory of swimming alone across the Mon River in Maxwell."
began my “Big Two-Hearted River” where I could test the nature of self in solitude against the underlying threat of nature’s beauty.

Falling asleep at night, I remember the foghorns of the paddlewheel steamboats towing the coal barges up and down the river and the whistles of the freight train locomotives hauling cars loaded with coal from other mines on the tracks parallel to the river. The two were tied together not only in my dreams but also in my compulsion for adventure. My father always warned me of the danger of the trains. I remember once seeing a drunk lying beside the tracks covered with blood-soaked blankets after having his leg severed from attempting to beat the train. But like swimming across the river with a daring bravado, by age 11 or 12, I would hop the slow-moving freight cars loaded with coal and ride the half mile or so up the tracks until the train picked up speed and I would hop off, running to keep my balance when I landed. On the switching sidetracks, I used to run through the empty boxcars, slanting down then up on the sloping center mold inside, once breaking my nose on a crossbar I didn’t see. With my shirt splashed with blood, I told my dad I tripped over a log on the path leading to the tracks.

Between the tracks and the river, Maxwell’s row of houses lay between the grade school at one end and the coal mine at the other. To my astonishment, my father talked about coal mines running under the river. How could that be, I wondered — the river seemed bottomless. We’d drop chunks of black coal and dive deep to snag them, sometimes resurfacing with a handful of the bottom to prove our depth, but otherwise, the river seemed forever flowing and infinitely deep, like the Alph in “Kubla Khan,” as though it came out of a dream. Then in 1985, I saw the Maxwell pool drained after the flood so the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers could repair the dam and remove the twisted barges embedded between its concrete piers and beneath four of the five gates that control the water level of the pool. The drained channel was roughly 35 to 40 feet deep with a trickling, primordial stream flowing in its center. People came from miles around to see the coffin-like folds of the empty riverbed and stood quietly in awe or spoke softly as though attending a funeral, feeling the chill of death.

From its inception, when the area was known as “The Bend of the River” by its early settlers, Maxwell has drawn its vitality and identity from the water. Its transcending aesthetic quality and dynamic nature made the small coal mining patch unique in the otherwise depressing setting of the H.C. Frick mining towns in Fayette County. Life in the landlocked, colorless patches seemed to smolder in the stagnancy of the barren, ash- and slate-covered landscape, whereas Maxwell seemed an extension of the river’s innate symbol of freedom, uncontaminated by the drudgery and remnants of the mine. More importantly, as a lifeline, the Mon River, “nature’s equivalent of an assembly line,” literally connected Maxwell to the world as an integral component in Andrew Carnegie and H.C. Frick’s “vertical integration” in processing steel. With the installation of the mine’s loading plant in 1919, some 5,000 tons of raw coal were sent daily downriver by barge to the Clairton Coke Works.

After my parents were married in Uniontown in 1926, they moved to Maxwell, where my father got a job in the mine, operating a coal-cutting machine, the resultant coal dust contributing to his black lung disease. The Great Depression led to the mine closing from 1937 to 1942, sending him to work on road construction for the WPA at $8 or $9 a week. I was born in the teeth of that depression. When the mine reopened with the war, I went to first grade and learned to swim in the river. The valley prospered as I grew up in the 1940s and early 50s, and though my father was proud of his work, he kept me away from

The author’s “backyard” taken from the front porch of his childhood home. Robert Noye.
The very thought of ever entering the mines, thus immunizing me against a history of pain and sacrifice. Thomas Bell dramatized the agony in his analogous *Out of This Furnace*,° or as another wrote, it was “a history … written in blood as well as ink,”° but it was just such suffering that brought great prosperity. Like the paradoxical nature of the river, the mines too were both life-threatening and life-sustaining. UMW President Cecil E. Roberts notes that an estimated 100,000 mining fatalities occurred over the past century, with another 100,000 miners succumbing to black lung disease.²

After four years in the Air Force, spanning the North Pacific from Hawaii to the Marshall Islands (near the track of the *Pequod* and *Moby Dick*),° I returned to the Mon at age 21 and matriculated at California College. Four area mines, the Maxwell Mine among them, were closed permanently by U.S. Steel on May 6, 1960, sending their miners looking for employment elsewhere.³° My dad went to work at the Maple Creek Mine in Washington County. I was attending college at the time, married, and living with my parents in Maxwell. This “Black Friday” occurred in the middle of a year’s time when my three sons (one set of twins) were born, also beside the river. But my memory of that time pales in comparison with the vivid brightness of the river dominating all things associated with my youth.

My mother woke me early one morning when I was about 10 and told me to hurry up and get dressed and go up the block to see what was attracting a crowd that she could see from the porch. In the early mist on the bank of the river I saw a man hanging from a large tree, dangling from the rope with a noose around his neck. His face, hands, and bare feet were purple, his head crooked in the noose. I wasn’t bothered much except for the color of his feet. The crowd was curiously silent, all staring at the swaying corpse. I remember that I felt cold, having run out of the house without socks, my brogans half laced. I was the paperboy at the time and knew most of the mining families in the small hamlet, and I can remember his stale-smelling and barren house.

He lived alone on the hillside, beside the best diver my older brother Dick said that he had ever seen. The diver also lived alone, worked in the mine, and walked frequently along the “narrow,” a winding road cut through the rich foliage along the cliff overhanging the river. This young miner was always in good humor but ominously murmuring to himself. He would swim out to passing steamboats, which were towing coal barges that sat three to four feet above water when filled. He would swim alongside and surge from the water whale-like and hoist himself to a sitting position on a barge and ride downriver to the bend before diving off. He was a marvelous swimmer. Years after the hanging, he also killed himself, shot in the head.

Though the Mon flows south to north, Maxwell’s row of houses extends east-west between two twisting bends in the river. The grade school (destroyed by fire in 1962) was on the eastern end, the coal mine on the western. The only entrance and exit to the village is on the eastern side, the single dirt road (now paved) crossing the tracks and sloping down to the houses along the river. Across the river is a steep hillside and cliff with railroad tracks near its bottom, the tracks a hundred feet above the river’s shoreline. For those within these confines, destinations seem only a dream, hauntingly sounded in the early morning foghorns of the steamboats and the midnight train whistles. Maybe these men felt smothered, entrapped in their work beneath the river, but to me, like coming out of the Depression without sensing our meager existence, I felt richly endowed by the magic and wonder that the river offered.

We lived next to the school, but my education and memory seem more informed by the poetry of the river. I remember my mother and myself in the early ’40s at the bank
watching its frightening face nearing flood-stage, forcing us to take refuge at a friend’s house on a nearby hill in the dark of night. I remember carrying our blankets up the hill. And I can still hear the crowd of people imploring a distressed woman intent on suicide to return to shore, her housedress rising to the surface of the water as she walked far out. The image of the ice- and snow-encrusted waters personifies my memory of the “Great Appalachian Storm” of 1950 and the frigid whiteness of its long winter aftermath. After baseball games in the hot sun of late spring, we found welcome relief in the cool water at what we called “bare-naked beach,” some distance down from the school, a baptismal rite of spring on the Mon. We were not permitted in the river before Memorial Day, so I was always sure to dry my hair before going home.

But it was the white, sandy beach directly below the school that I most remember. My earliest memories derive from learning to swim, mud-crawling along the edge of the shore, and dog-paddling against and with the current. The fear of my father playfully dunking me underwater and the image of him swimming on his side using only one arm as was his custom. And the long, resilient diving board that the young miners built that sprang us upward to gain heights for a double or two-a-half somersault.

When one of the large steamboats passed — The Champion, The Monongahela,2 and The Sailor26 among them — we would swim out to ride the “wheelers,” the waves churned up by the stern paddlewheel. We would try to catch the closest wave behind the churning wheel — the first was almost impossible, the second more probable depending on our strength and energy — riding out the waves until they leveled off. We then had to swim the 150 yards to shore, sometimes floating on our backs a lot, some using inner tubes.

At the opposite end of the village, past the company store and the coal mine, the safety of the beach was removed, and it was there at the “buttmans” that we tested our courage. The buttmans, about 45 feet from shore, were two flat-top, pyramid-like structures constructed to cut the ice flow, protecting the coal barges moored downriver. The pair were about 15 feet apart with the deep current running between. At a younger age, with the river moving swiftly following heavy rains, I attempted to swim to the nearest buttman only to be swept toward the barges below. I surely would have drowned beneath them had not my brother’s friend dove into the water and pulled me to shore. I received a friendly kick and was told to go home.

From the top of the 30-foot buttman, the drop to the water was daunting indeed. But swimming at the buttmans meant diving, and as I grew older, jumping from the top became humiliating. I knew my time to dive had come, whatever the consequences. I was terrified looking over the edge, the water so far below, the drop so steep. I tried to remember how I looked diving from our diving board at the beach, wondering if I could retain my posture in the air. Encouraged by older boys,
I took five or ten running steps and dove. To this day I remember soaring through the air, free from weight, and amazingly delighted. I bent my waist at the crest of my dive, righted my body downward and cut the water without remembering any splash. Wow! I couldn’t wait until I scaled the buttman to dive again. My brother Dick, in the Navy aboard the aircraft carrier USS Coral Sea serving in the Mediterranean, would have approved. On my way home, I celebrated my achievement by charging a pint of chocolate milk to my father’s account at the company store and drinking it on the store’s concrete steps, basking in my glory. I haven’t done anything in my life to equal that feeling.

Removed some 30 years from my boyhood passion associated with the mystique of the river, there was an instance when I had the chance to appreciate the nature of its magic aboard a yacht. It was an epiphany of sorts emanating from “emotions recollected in tranquility.” From midstream that day, the panorama seemed a Cezanne canvas of watercolors (the white clouds patched against the azure sky, the blend of the harsh and soft textures of the river’s green, the earth colors, some reflecting in the shoreline’s smooth water) that transformed the landscape and its geometric images into mood and sensation, casting one emotionally adrift, transcending time.

It was September 1983, and my brother-in-law had invited the cast of the movie, Maria’s Lovers, starring Robert Mitchum, Nastassja Kinski, and John Savage, on a cruise of the river aboard his 50-foot yacht, The Sabrina, to survey the setting where the production took place in Brownsville and the surrounding area. The day was bright, the river calm, the champagne flowing. Mitchum, with his own bottle of tequila, fit the landscape and the southwestern Pennsylvania persona perfectly: hard-drinking, gruff in appearance with beard, but warm and polite to his host and guests. He reminded me of my father. The cast was spread about the yacht, lounging on its decks under the warm sun. From the dock at Ten Mile Creek, some five miles upriver from Maxwell, we passed Millsboro, where my wife’s mother and family were raised, and the Fredericktown ferry on which a scene from the movie was shot. Joe Fantini, grandson of the midwife who delivered me at birth, ran the ferry.

Approaching Maxwell downriver, I knew that my mother, then 76 years old, would be on the bank to wave as we passed, and I was bold enough to ask Mr. Mitchum if he would come on deck to wave to my mother, a great fan of his. He obliged without hesitation. We had a few minutes wait to pass through the locks below her house, so my brother-in-law
cut the engines and we drifted slowly downstream where she would be standing with my sister Shirley and neighbors, waving. Mitchum asked what my mother’s name was, then he waved and shouted, to my surprise, in his deep-throated voice, “Ann, come aboard.” Or did he call her “Annie”? Once again, my mother and the river were enjoined.

We went through the locks, dropping 19 feet, and cruised placidly downriver to Charleroi before returning to the marina, about 25 miles each way. The banks were haunting and illusory, returning me in time. It had the magic of Hollywood. From midstream looking to shore, the river seemed to enjoin primevaly whatever it touched, animate and inanimate, past and present, and I imagined myself as a kid running its shores, diving from the buttman, and testing its current far out. It brought back the mournful sound of foghorns on late summer nights and the splashing of the waves against the shore as the boats passed beneath the window where I slept. And a salute and Godspeed from The Clairton to Maxwell as it passed downriver, the last steamboat on the Mon, delivering “its last load of empty coal barges ... May 13, 1960,”29 a week after the mine closed. I could almost see my mother working the garden along the bank in her bare feet, a large, red miner’s kerchief covering her forehead, my father with his silver lunch bucket, the old “Crowthers” mine…. How strange the beauty.

In late afternoon, we shared a catered dinner with the movie cast at the marina along Ten Mile Creek. Mitchum recalled the beauty and danger of the river while shooting scenes for River of No Return in the Canadian Rockies. It sounded not too different from the beauty and danger experienced — some literal, some poetical — from growing up along the Mon. It comes from confronting the image of self in and along its waters, and spiritually and historically, becoming a link to whatever it has touched in the past. We don’t need Hollywood to experience its magic, though I’m reminded of it by a photo of Mitchum and myself on the wharf along Ten Mile Creek. He still reminds me of my father, who also sometimes called my mother “Annie.”

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After his adventures growing up in Maxwell, Robert Yarup graduated from Brownsville High School, served in the United States Air Force, taught English at Gateway High School in Monroeville (1961-1969), and taught in the English Department at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (1969-1997). He counts his marriage to Josephine and their sons Bob, Steve, and Sean as his greatest achievements.
The little town of Maxwell, nestled along the expansive Monongahela...