

} NINE MILE RUN by Mark Kramer }

OH, IF WE WERE ALL GIVEN \$7.7 MILLION and an army of engineers to mend the terrible mess we make of things.

That's what repaired Nine Mile Run, a 6.5 square-mile watershed located in and around Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and centred upon a rambling, mostly covered and culverted stream that eventually leads to the Monongahela River, which flows into the Ohio, which flows into the Mississippi. Years ago, the watershed contained farms, a few natural gas wells, even a golf course. Then the steel boom and a growing population washed tons of garbage and sewage down Nine Mile Run and they hemmed the creek in with cement and dense construction. But in 2006, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completed a three-year, \$7.7 million restoration and cleared up much of the mess that Pittsburghers had made of the watershed.

To the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, "rain is a festival," a grace to be celebrated in its "gratuity and meaningfulness." But rain roils. Over the last couple of centuries, fully one-third of the watershed became covered by impervious surfaces that don't absorb Merton's wet festival. Instead, the urban surfaces cast much of that water into storm drains, taking with it detritus, road salt, and lawn chemicals. And when heavy rains surge, Pittsburgh's aging sewage system flushes excrement into this waterway. Meanwhile, over a 40-year period steel producers piled slag, that stony matter left over after ore-purification, into a 20-story mound at the creek's end, described by some as "gruesome moonscape."

Then, in 1910, Frederick Law Olmstead, Jr., son of the famous architect of New York City's Central Park, submitted a watershed report, noting that, "[Nine Mile Run's] stream, when it is freed from sewage, will be an attractive and interesting element in the landscape; the wooded slopes on either side give ample opportunity for enjoyment of the forest, for shaded walks, and cool resting places."

So, finally, after generations of neglect, they reconfigured the stream and streambed, established wetlands, and replanted native bushes, wildflowers, and trees.

In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard writes, "It has always been a happy thought to me that the creek runs on all night, new every minute, whether I wish it or know it or care, as a closed book on a shelf continues to whisper to itself its own inexhaustible tale."

For centuries, Nine Mile has run every day and every night, yet new every minute. Now, each passing minute fosters healing and growth and life.

Green sunfish and creek chub and midges have returned. Watershed residents have planted hundreds of additional trees and installed rain barrels and rain gardens that mitigate much of the rainwater runoff. Wetlands proliferate.

On that moonscape, they built a slag-garden (dousing the artificial mountain with well-seeded soil and mulch until up springs nature), and then luxury homes. Just yesterday in Duck Hollow, where Nine Mile Run converges with the Mon River, a birder recorded a common goldeneye and hooded merganser ducks.

Some tout Nine Mile Run as the most successful urban stream restoration ever achieved in the United States. Turns out, though, that even before the engineers and all that cash, an ecosystem of people – artists, developers, city officials, botanists, architects, neighborhood groups – came together to plan, design, and inspire others. It took many years and a community – an ecosystem – of believers with a vision for reclamation to bring about new life.

Oh, if we all had such an ecosystem and vision for redeeming the mess we make of things.

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