

Paul J. DeLoca  
Greensboro, North Carolina

*Thoreau's Escape From the Village and  
Father Bill Curtis' Escape From the City:  
River Skating Journeys of Contemplation  
and Action, 1843-1900*

This paper argues that the skating journeys of Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) demonstrate contrasting moods of playfulness, action and activity during a recreational era marked as contemplative. Most scholarly interpretations identify Thoreau as primarily seeking solitude and simplicity; however, Thoreau's desire for physical activity and action was driven by a normal tendency for play and bodily stimulation demonstrated by his attention to seeking rare skating opportunities during optimal weather conditions. He was clearly disappointed when the weather did not cooperate with his desire for a fine river skate, and when the river was not thick enough with ice, he would seek out other ponds, including Walden, that were familiar to him. An early skating journey with Emerson and Hawthorne demonstrated Thoreau's playfulness and daring physicality. At first tentative on the ice, later in the 1840s his ice journeys took him on thirty mile trips peppered with dangerous threats. Thoreau was capable of joining the contemplative skating experience with the contrasting expressions of play, activity and action. This paper discusses the physicality that allowed Thoreau to make contemplations about nature and society during an emerging age of machine, speed and more forceful action.

Bill Curtis, (1837-1900), renowned as the “father” of amateur athletics in America and sports editor of the *Spirit of the Times*, lived during a recreational age identified with activity and action more so than contemplation. However, his interest in nature and the nature of “athletics” also reflects a contemplative sporting life. His founding of the Fresh Air Club in 1878 began a twenty-year journey into ‘wilderness’ activity (including mountain river skating tours) that ran alongside his work in amateur athletics.

Curtis’ travel writings and descriptions in the *Spirit* on Fresh Air Club outings mimic the descriptive paintings of the Hudson River School, just as Thoreau’s language parallels that of “luminism” in painting. Curtis’ reporting on the weekly activity of the Fresh Air Club did echo the active recreational philosophy of the time which considered the “view” from mountains and within mountain gorges to be one way a person might witness manifestation of the Divine. This tendency ignored the more intimate contemplative aspects of Thoreau’s method by focusing on the “grand view.” While Thoreau spoke of the voice of God coming from the nature experience, Curtis, a great athlete, also sought a higher level of human experience through ‘pure’ amateur athletics and wholesome activity. His death in a July 1900 blizzard on Mt. Washington, NH proved to Curtis’ friends that “Nature was his Master,” but they believed that he would have preferred no other way to die. The image of Fresh Air and ‘pure’ athleticism of which Curtis so often spoke during his river skating reflected an intuitive higher order and purpose to nature that Thoreau also experienced on the frozen rivers. Although small traces of contemplative recreation still remain in modern society, an emphasis on activity and action tends to mask the contemplative aspects and higher purposes of modern sport which emerged during Curtis’ life.

This history can help us understand the cultural gaps that cause regional tensions between the rights of the individual and the larger public purpose. It argues that activity and action need not be incompatible with the nature of the contemplative life, so long as that activity and action serve a higher order which finds the human species using microscopic methods to “take wider views of the universe” (Thoreau, *Journal*, April 2, 1852).