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## ITHACA JOURNAL

**Sweet Fishing and a Gorgeous Gorge,  
if You Don't Mind All That Old Lead**

By KIRK JOHNSON

**I**THACA, N.Y., Oct. 12 — Longfellow pictured an arrow shot into the air as the perfect metaphor for life's mysteries and the unknowable implications of our actions. But here, he might have pictured lead — millions upon millions of tiny lead shotgun pellets, each about one-sixteenth of an inch in diameter, all fired into the air over the course of 100 years of manufacturing and testing firearms at a place called the Ithaca Gun Company.

The factory is gone now, boarded up since the mid-1980's. But the lead birdshot that its employees blasted out into the world over the decades is still, in a strange way, in motion. Much of the shot ended up — perhaps through gravity, erosion or deliberate dumping — in a beautiful city- owned gorge adjacent to the factory, where tourists and residents come to admire the 150-foot waterfall at Fall Creek and to fish and



Trevor Kapralos for The New York Times  
Walter L. T. Hang called federal attention to the contamination of Fall Creek Gorge, leading to tests by the Environmental Protection Agency.



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picnic, and where generations of students from nearby Ithaca High School have climbed in search of escape from their teachers and responsibilities.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency, which tested the soil last month, is considering adding Fall

Creek Gorge to the national Superfund Priority List, which could lead to emergency removal of the topsoil. The city, which acquired the land earlier this year from Cornell University for \$1, has come under fire from some residents who say the property was inadequately investigated. The State Department of Health posted signs several weeks ago warning visitors to wipe their feet and wash their hands after leaving the gorge because of the health hazards of lead exposure, and to be particularly cautious about bringing children into an area that until very recently was considered one of the city's jewels.

The result is a jarring juxtaposition of history, nature and a very odd kind of industrial waste. Fall Creek Gorge, a deep pocket of sheer rock and water where herons pause on the rocks to fish, may be one of the most severely lead-contaminated public spaces in the region, E.P.A. officials say. In some places, tests have found lead concentrations of 215,000 parts per million, more than 500 times above the the level at which state and federal agencies would normally take remedial action.

"It's a paradox — we normally associate pollution with industrial settings," said Walter L. T. Hang, a local resident whose investigation of the site and letters to federal officials prompted the recent testing. "This is the most beautiful area I've ever seen with huge pollution problems."

Ithaca Gun, founded in the 1880's and now based in King Ferry, N.Y., was an icon in the hunting and shooting world. The company's famous "featherlight" shotguns were renowned for the fine decorative work — typically waterfowl or hunting dogs — etched by craftsmen onto each gun's breach. The rodeo star Annie Oakley favored Ithaca guns for her trick-shooting exploits. All the metal parts were machined to exact specifications, even as other firearms companies embraced the less costly, less precise system of metal stamping. And every gun was test-fired four times before sale, from a rooftop firing range, or in the factory's basement if the weather was foul.

Over the years, the company also became a symbol of the



Trevor Kapralos for The New York Times  
Shotgun shell remnants and lead pellets from test firings at a gun factory in Ithaca, N.Y., now closed. The lead had fouled a local tourist attraction.

city of Ithaca. Wooden gunstocks with knots or other imperfections were donated to the high school, where, for half a century or more, students in wood shop made these pieces into lamps.

Inside the gorge, residue from the company's gun range gradually became part of the landscape as well. On the trails that lead up a steep slope to the fenced-in factory, where the chain-link is bowed out from people sliding under to trespass among the old buildings, some places are gray with granular lead and corroded brass.

And still the people continue to come, drawn by the falls.

Max Root, a college student, was unpacking his fly-fishing rod on one recent morning, heading past the warning signs.

"It's kind of disturbing to think we've been exposed to it for years," he said. But the allure was strong, too, Mr. Root said. Under the thundering falls, the fishing — for brown trout, rainbows and landlocked salmon — has been "very sweet" lately, he said, though he added that he would not think of eating anything that came from these waters now. For him, it is strictly catch and release.

Ithaca city leaders and officials at the State Department of Environmental Conservation said they knew about the lead in Fall Creek Gorge long before Mr. Hang made a federal case out of it by getting the E. P. A. involved. The gorge was accepted into the state's industrial brownfields cleanup program in late 1998, according to Thomas Suozzo, an environmental engineer at the state agency's Division of Environmental Remediation. Under the brownfields program, the city would have been required to pay 25 percent of the cleanup costs and the state would pay the rest. The gorge would become a city park.

But Mr. Hang, the president of an Ithaca-based company called Toxics Targeting, which does environmental database analysis, said he got a call in July from a resident who said the contamination was worse than people realized. Mr. Hang filed Freedom of Information requests about previous testing and sent his material to the E.P.A., which in turn contacted the State Department of Environmental Conservation.

That exchange, Mr. Suozzo said, set a new plan in motion. If the cleanup were taken over by the E.P.A., the federal government would pay the costs, then seek reimbursement from the responsible parties, who would be identified at a later date. The city would be off the hook for its 25 percent contribution, too. So the state sent a formal letter requesting E.P.A. involvement. The federal testing crews came and the warning signs went up.

Mr. Hang says he worries that the federal cleanup will be superficial, taking only the most visible layers of lead and leaving contaminants beneath that might still work their way to the surface through erosion.

The on-scene coordinator for the E.P.A., Jeff Bechtel, who said the agency would issue its cleanup decision within the next few weeks, added that he thought the main issue would be the unique setting — trying to make a place that looks pristine into one that actually is.

"How do you remove it without disturbing the natural beauty?" he said. "That's the trick."

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