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OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING THE MISSISSIPPI

KNOWING

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An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking the Mississippi
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy

The cover image is of spring flooding at the Bohemian Flats in 1897. Image Courtesy of the Hennepin County Library.

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Contact Us

Open Rivers
Institute for Advanced Study
University of Minnesota
Northrop
84 Church Street SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Telephone: (612) 626-5054
Fax: (612) 625-8583
E-mail: openrvrs@umn.edu
Web Site: http://openrivers.umn.edu

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FEATURE

KNOWING THE MISSISSIPPI

By Iyekiyapiwiŋ Darlene St. Clair, Jennifer Browning, John O. Anfinson, Mark Davis

We asked a diverse group of river people to respond to the prompt "How did you come to know the Mississippi River? What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?" We present below a few of the responses, in no particular order.

Mississippi River from overlook on campground road, Great River Bluffs State Park, Minnesota, USA. Photographer McGhiever. Used under Creative Commons license CC BY-SA.

Iyekiyapiwiŋ Darlene St. Clair

Associate Professor of American Indian Studies; Director of the Multicultural Resource Center, St. Cloud State University

How did you come to know the Mississippi River? What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?

I have a long relationship to this river. I am Dakota and I live within my homelands. Our existence spreads out from the confluence, the bdote, of two rivers—the Mni Sota Wakpa, the River Where the Water Reflects the Skies, and the Ḣaḣa Wakpa, the River of the Waterfalls. My reservation community, Lower Sioux, is situated along the Mni Sota Wakpa at a place called Caŋṡayapi, They Paint the Trees Red. Now I live on the Ḣaḣa Wakpa. I watch it move and grow, thaw and freeze, rise and recede from season to season. I have a daily relationship with this river, as do many other humans, birds, mammals, insects, fish, plants, rocks, stars, and spirit beings. I was taught to understand that I shared this place with "everything seen and unseen." My name, Iyekiyapiwiŋ means Recognized Woman. When I received this name, the man who conducted the ceremony told me it didn't mean "recognized" in the way we think of it in English as special or standing apart. He told me it meant "seeing things for what they are." I look out to this river every day and I know it is holy and mysterious as it moves across the earth. It is wakaŋ. So while I recognize my relationship with this river, I know that I don't know it.

Jennifer Browning

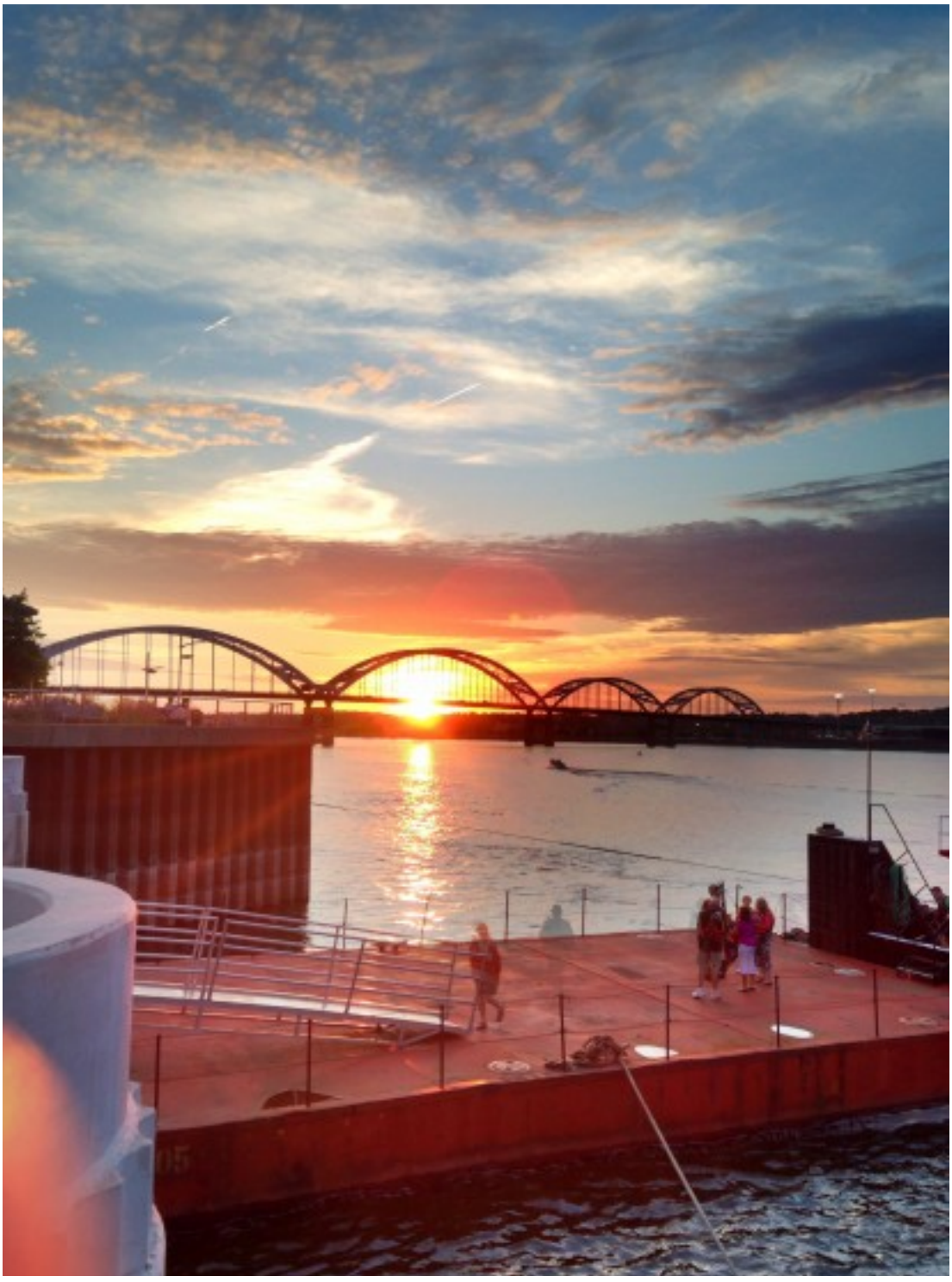
Executive Director, Bluestem Communications

How did you come to know the Mississippi River? What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?

For the past eight years, because of the work I do, the Mississippi River has never been far from my thoughts. From my desk each day I consider this mighty river. More accurately, I worry about it. My daily river perspective is shaped by reading the neverending string of news articles, reports, studies, Facebook posts, and tweets about the decline of our great river or the "dead zone" that now appears to be a permanent fixture in the Gulf of Mexico.

Deep in my memories, however, I have a very different set of pictures, and feelings about the Miss. I often return to these when I need a pick me up. Every Easter when I was young, we used to drive from Chicago to my Aunt and Uncle's home to "*see the rabbits*." I never actually saw any rabbits, but in my child's mind *Cedar Rapids* blurred to an activity that had to do with bunnies, and given that it was Easter, it all made sense at the time.

This trip, of course, entailed crossing the Big Muddy. There was great anticipation as we approached the bridge. My sister, four years older, would start rattling off the spelling of Mississippi. As a five year old, I could not keep up. Faster and faster the letters would roll off her tongue, *M-I-S-S-I-S-S-I-P-P-I,* until we hit the bridge, and then things slowed. The car slowed, the humming of the tires on the bridge became loud, as my Dad, sister, and I chanted *1 Mississippi, 2 Mississippi, 3 Mississippi* in an effort to time the journey across the river. Like an eager dog, I hung my head out the window to try and take in this huge body of water. I looked at the river with simple joy and awe. My thoughts were not clouded with news about pollution and levees. I just took it in and loved it.



There are maps and pictures all over Bluestem's office. These are important because they help remind us that the river is a real, living and breathing force of nature, not just a problem or a project. Photographer Kelly McGinnis. Courtesy of Bluestem Communications.

My sister passed away this year, but the memories of our journey across the river every year as kids are very much alive. And when the daily barrage of news stories

about the river threatens to depress me, I remember us whispering *1 Mississippi, 2 Mississippi, 3 Mississippi*. In my mind, I see the river as I saw it out the window of our car, and remember that pure joy and awe I felt as a five year old. Those feelings revive me, and I can go back to doing what I can to save our river.

John Anfinson

Superintendent, Mississippi National River and Recreation Area, National Park Service

How did you come to know the Mississippi River?

I have to distinguish between knowing of the Mississippi and really knowing the great river. My first relationship to the Mississippi came at my grandparents' house in Brainerd, Minnesota. By cutting through a neighbor's yard and down the bluff, I could find the river, but my parents and grandparents gave me stern warnings to stay away. The few times I stole down to the river, I could enjoy it little for fear of being caught. I lacked Tom Sawyer's devil-may-care nerve.

I next came to know the Mississippi River as something to be crossed as I hustled between classes on the University of Minnesota's East and West Banks. I remember wondering why the river didn't fluctuate more. I had no idea Lock and Dam No. 1 lay just downstream and prevented the river from falling past the level of its fixed-crest spillway.

I didn't really come to know the Mississippi River until I started working for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as a co-op student during my masters program in history. During my 19 years with the Corps, I came to know the river intimately. Not only did I study and report on its history to my managers, I explored all the locks and dams from the Twin Cities to Guttenberg, Iowa. I walked over many one January, filming them before the Corps began a major rehabilitation project. I remember the wind blowing over the frozen river and pushing me across the icy deck of Dam No. 7, near La Crosse, Wisconsin. I conducted archeological surveys in the river bottoms, staying in larger and small communities along the river.

To you, what does it mean to know the Mississippi?

How can anyone know a river that runs for 2,350 miles? I am afraid my answer to this question could become much too long.

To know the river is to get beyond the clichés. A blurb on the back of Harold Speakman's book, *Mostly Mississippi*, proclaims the book is "A classic American travel narrative that captures the soul of the river. . ." I immediately question anyone who claims to have captured the river's soul. The soul of the great river cannot be reduced to clichés.

You can get to know the river in a physical sense. From walking across the stones at Lake Itasca to watching ocean-going freighters cruising the river in New Orleans, the more of the river you can physically experience, the better you will know it.

Immersing yourself in all the humanities have brought to the river is one of the best ways

to know the river. Few geographic names evoke a more powerful a sense of place than the Mississippi River. Have you ever noticed how nearly everyone who writes about the Mississippi seems compelled to call it "the Mighty Mississippi"? It is as if "Mighty" is part of the name.

Most people use this statement without thinking about how the Mississippi came to be mighty or what makes it mighty. Everyone knows, don't they? Europeans considered the Mississippi one of the world's greatest rivers by the late 1600s, although they had only a vague understanding of its physical size, power, and abundance. That we can now quantify the river's physical assets with statistics only confirms what they believed.

The Mississippi River drains the third largest watershed in the world and largest in North America, emptying all or part of 31 states and 2 Canadian provinces. Before levees hemmed it in, great floods on the lower Mississippi occupied most of its 28,000 square-mile floodplain. The Mississippi River flyway draws about 40 percent of North America's waterfowl and shore birds. Knowing the river means understanding that it has an intercontinental importance.

But the river's hold over the American and world's imagination emanates even more from its history. The Mississippi is mighty because of the stories it has accumulated. The Mississippi gathers stories like tributaries, growing culturally stronger and deeper with each one. These stories include contributions to American literature, art, music, and to the national narrative, our national story line.

To know the river is to care for it. Every year we lose cultural resources that are the tangible reminders of those who lived along and used this river before us. We are continually losing or degrading the habitat needed by migratory birds, aquatic and terrestrial plants and animals. Knowing the river means working to slow and reverse these trends.

Mark S. Davis

Senior Research Fellow and Director, Tulane Institute on Water Resources Law and Policy, Tulane Law School, New Orleans, Louisiana

How did you come to know the Mississippi River? What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?

Though I live near the river on land that it built, I can't say that I know the river or ever will. The more I learn from it the more I am convinced of that. People as a whole have done a pretty poor job of understanding rivers and the rest of nature, confusing the ability to boss it around for a little while with knowing it and controlling it. I am pretty sure Sir Francis Bacon had it right when he said, "Nature to be commanded must be obeyed." In the meantime, I will try to be more respectful of what we/I don't know when it comes to that river and more humble about what I ask of it. After all, my future is much more tied to its future than its is to mine.

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About the Authors

Iyekiyapiwiŋ Darlene St. Clair is an associate professor at Saint Cloud State University where she teaches American Indian Studies and directs the Multicultural Resource Center. Her work focuses on: Dakota Studies; Native Nations of Minnesota; the integration of Native cultures, histories, and languages into curricula and educational institutions; and the arts and cultural expressions of Native peoples. She is Bdewakaŋtuŋwaŋ Dakota and a citizen of the Lower Sioux Indian Community in Minnesota.

Jennifer Browning has been the executive director of Bluestem Communications since 2007. She brought to the position over 15 years of experience in environmental education and communications, as well as a dedication and passion for protecting the environment. In addition to traditional executive director duties, she works with the Mississippi River Network, guiding a 10-state, 50-member coalition in implementing national public education and policy campaigns.

John Anfinson is superintendent of the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA) for the National Park Service. He is the author of *The River We Have Wrought: A History of the Upper Mississippi* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), *River of History* (2003) and many articles about the Mississippi River.He has been researching, writing and speaking about the upper Mississippi River for over 25 years.

Mark Davis is a senior research fellow at Tulane University Law School and director of the Tulane Institute on Water Resources Law and Policy at the Law School. Prior to starting the Institute, he served 14 years as executive director of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana.