

ISSUE ONE : FALL 2015  
OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING THE MISSISSIPPI



# KNOWING

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<http://openrivers.umn.edu>  
An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking the Mississippi  
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy

FROM WASHINGTON BY 33 261 LOOKING UP STREAM

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

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## INTRODUCTION

# INTRODUCTION TO ISSUE ONE

By Patrick Nunnally, Editor

Welcome to the Inaugural issue of *Open Rivers: Rethinking the Mississippi!*

What is there to say about the Mississippi River that has not been said already? Google Scholar shows “about 922,000” hits for the query “Mississippi River” and the Library of Congress shows 9,537 items for the same query. Do we really have anything to add?

Obviously, we think so. Over the past decade or so, we have noticed as many “gaps” in the conversations about the Mississippi as there are fruitful connections. We want to address these gaps by connecting engineers with historians, engaging artists with policy folks, and making a space for community people and scholars to learn from and with each other. Few, if any at all, people are speaking with Native Americans, those people



*University of Minnesota on the Mississippi River looking towards St. Anthony Falls.*

*Image from the Metropolitan Design Center Image Bank.*

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whose experience of the Mississippi has extended back millennia. Indigenous voices will be heard here, as well as voices of other groups not commonly thought of as having a “river story.”

The inquiries that have resulted in this journal began in 2013, when the University of Minnesota was invited to apply for a Sawyer Seminar grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. That seminar, “Making the Mississippi: Formulating New Water Narratives for the 21st Century,” was the direct inspiration for what we have developed here. The year-long exploration supported by the Mellon grant taught us that yes, indeed, the “old narratives” of the Mississippi did not adequately address new circumstances or future contingencies. We needed to look farther afield and read/learn more deeply. We are grateful to the Mellon Foundation for its support of this project.

After looking through dozens of blogs, periodicals and journals of all sorts, we decided that we would have to start our own publication if we wanted to gather and connect the richness that’s taking place in various discussions about the Mississippi. “*Open Rivers: Rethinking the Mississippi*” is that publication. For us, “rethinking” the Mississippi means examining the Mississippi, our “home river,” in new ways and also learning from what people are doing on other rivers and on other bodies of water, whether surface water or groundwater. All water on the planet connects; our work will draw from innovation and insight wherever we find it.

What can you look for in this issue? As we deliberated on assembling the project as a whole, we found ourselves returning to a couple of central questions: What does it mean to “know” the Mississippi River? How do the various people we’re interested in working with come to know the Mississippi?

So we decided to ask. The centerpiece of this issue is a set of responses to these two central

questions from a dozen or so scholars, policy people, agency staff, and others who have rich experience with the Mississippi. We found these short pieces extremely thought-provoking and are considering making them a regular feature.

The rest of this issue inaugurates the range of approaches we plan to take regularly.

Primary Sources takes us on a trip to local archives, exploring the distinctive perspectives offered from rich historical materials.

The Perspectives column provides insight onto pressing current events and issues on the Mississippi and beyond it.

In our Teaching and Practice section, we’ll draw on work completed by students or work that might be useful for readers to include in their teaching. This includes work from community as a way to create deeper, stronger connections between the formal and informal places we learn.

We also include a more inclusive take on the traditional review section. Our In Review column is a space for reviewing both traditional and nontraditional media, from books to exhibits to websites.

Many of our questions and thoughts about the Mississippi begin with the question “where”? Our Geographies feature draws from River Life’s River Atlas and other sources to illustrate how historical and current concerns on a particular topic map across the Mississippi and other bodies of water.

Finally, we offer a brief annotated link to items that have caught our eye in the past 4-6 weeks, called The Pulse.

Our intent here is simple, yet complicated. We want people, regardless of what brings them to our site, to learn something that they can use in

their river work, whether they work in resource management, in policy, in “informal education,” on a campus, or in some other field. If you leave our site thinking “That had not occurred to me. I’ll have to think about that some more,” then we will have been successful. Of course, if you are so interested or enthusiastic about what you

read that you make contact with the author, start an investigation of your own, or write to us for more information, that would be outstanding! That’s what we’re about: conversations and collaborations that increase the sustainability and inclusiveness of our relationships with rivers.

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## About the Author

Patrick Nunnally coordinates the River Life Program in the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota. He serves as editor for *Open Rivers* and one of the lead scholars for the University’s John E. Sawyer Seminar, “Making the Mississippi: Formulating New Water Narratives for the 21st Century and Beyond,” funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.



FEATURE

# KNOWING THE MISSISSIPPI

By Sandra B. Zellmer, Angela Miller, Thomas Ruys Smith, T.S. McMillin, Wes Modes

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.



*Aerial view of the Hernando de Soto Bridge across the Mississippi River between Memphis, Tennessee and West Memphis, Arkansas, USA. The bridge was opened in 1973 and carries six lanes of Interstate 40 across the river. View is from the Arkansas side to the east-southeast across the river to Memphis. Photographer Larry Donald, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.*

## Sandra B. Zellmer

Robert B. Daugherty Professor,  
Nebraska College of Law

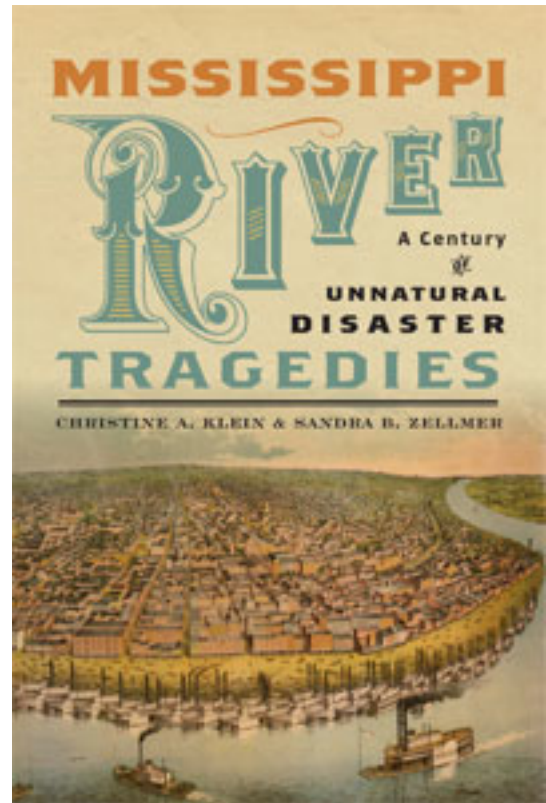
*How did you come to know the Mississippi River?*

*What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?*

*The author retells a story from “The Headwaters: Notes from Sandra B. Zellmer” (Klein and Zellmer 2014, xii).*

When I was little, my mother bathed me in a garbage can filled with Mississippi River water. Not every night, of course, but several times each week during the summer while my family was camping near the river’s headwaters in northern Minnesota. I suppose I smelled a little fishy, but the aroma of river water was completely familiar—and comforting—to me. I savored the names of the headwater lakes where we camped, titles bestowed by Chippewa and Dakota Indians or by European explorers: Itasca, Winnibigoshish, Andrusia, Bemidji, LaSalle.

My passion for the outdoors—and the Mississippi River—comes naturally. My father was a third-generation German American farmer who raised cattle, corn, and alfalfa just outside of Sioux City, Iowa, nestled in the valley of the Missouri River, the longest tributary of the Mississippi. He was following in the footsteps of my great-grandfather, Gustav Zellmer, who arrived at the Castle Garden Immigration Depot in New York in 1883, straight off the boat from Germany. As a sixteen-year-old immigrant, Gustav rode the trains west, marveling as he crossed over the Mississippi River and entered Iowa. He had never seen such black, fertile soil,



*Author of Mississippi River Tragedies: A Century of Unnatural Disasters*

and he took delight in the gently rolling terrain, perfect for the plow.

Fast-forward to 1951, when my parents, Mervin and Jessie Zellmer, were married. They took a weeklong honeymoon to a magical place that my father had discovered a few years earlier on a fishing trip with a buddy—Lake Itasca. Instead of being squeamish like most girls he knew at the time, my mom took to fishing and to the north woods as if she were born to it. They chased each other over the stepping stones that crossed the headwaters of the Mississippi, rented a boat, and snapped photographs of their adventures fishing for walleye. Mom caught the prize-winner—a hefty twelve-pounder.



Farming and my two older sisters occupied much of their attention for the next decade or so, but my parents never forgot about the headwaters of the Mississippi River. Starting with the summer before my second birthday, we frequently made the eight-hour drive up to Lake Itasca and nearby lakes and tributaries. According to family lore, I learned to swim before I could walk. It was not long before I was catching crappie, bass, northern pike, and, with a lot of luck, walleye and, if I caught it, I was expected to clean it. The year I graduated from high school, my mother invested her nest egg in a small seasonal cabin on Long Lake (one of the ten thousand lakes boasted of by Minnesotans, dozens of which are named “Long”), and we became part-time lake residents.

Although my parents are gone now, their lessons have stuck—the power of water, the beauty of the creatures that occupy the rivers, the fertility of the floodplain, and the measure of independence and self-reliance that could only come (for me, at least) from a childhood spent outdoors. Today, as a lawyer and law professor, specializing in

water and other natural resources, my interest in the Mississippi River is both personal and professional. I am fascinated by the tug-of-war between the river’s natural ecological and hydrological inclinations and society’s demands and its laws. As I look back on my childhood, I understand why the river is so special to so many people, but I wonder why many of those people insist on settling the most vulnerable areas of the river valley—the floodplain—despite persistent and often catastrophic flooding. It seems clear that, in many cases, the law has motivated them to move into harm’s way through land use planning (or lack thereof), structural assurances (such as levees), and various kinds of subsidies and other incentives. But according to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, the life of the law is not just logic; it is also experience. Between the two—logic and experience—plus a strong dose of scientific understanding and human empathy, I’m convinced that the law can be improved to do justice to the river and its communities.

## Reference

Klein, Christine, and Sandra B. Zellmer. 2014. *Mississippi River Tragedies: A Century of Unnatural Disaster*. New York.

## Angela Miller

Professor of Art History and Archaeology,  
Washington University in St. Louis

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

I stumbled into the geographical world of the Mississippi River as a graduate student while on fellowship from the Smithsonian in the 1980s. My research took me to the rich historical literature on the settlement of the Mississippi Valley in the

early nineteenth century, located in the incomparable collections of the Library of Congress. Here I found a lost world of promotional tracts and visionary geographies that fueled the expansionist program of the nation as it contemplated the vast

territories acquired in the Louisiana Purchase of 1804, lands still largely ‘empty’ of those white European American settlers who constituted the entering wedge of ‘civilization.’ The literature I found—like the river at its center—linked Whig politicians and trade advocates with regional promoters (one is tempted to say hucksters, as the genre was populated by types who were better known from the scurrilous accounts of Mark Twain and Charles Dickens). These tracts revealed to me a map of hopes and anxieties that made manifestly clear the broader stakes of any enterprise of exploration, settlement, and continental (dis)possession. Such texts reflect a pattern of hopes and fears that took shape in bodily metaphors of ligatures and spines, of corporeal unity and dismemberment.

Central to exploration, settlement, and trade was the promise of mobility: how to move people, animals, and goods physically through spaces of such scale and distance that journeys into these spaces were the nineteenth-century equivalents of space travel. Ever present was the challenge of how to forge connections between the isolated outposts of the Western frontier and the markets, trade depots, and centers of urban life that—however provincial or disreputable—anchored nineteenth-century European Americans’ sense of being ‘civilized,’ kept them from losing touch with the moral refinements of polite society, and held them back from the brink of ‘going native,’ becoming a white Indian, or giving in to the violence of an ungoverned frontier. The river forged such connections, linking the space of the frontier with the time of the nation. The great Mississippi River moderated the hold of the frontier on individuals, promising that no matter how bad things got on the shore, the current would carry them off again toward new territories and markets, tempering the local with the promise of expansive new horizons.

In these same decades before the Civil War, popular new forms of visual culture emerged to

help those in the newly admitted states adjoining the Mississippi and the territories to the north and west—connected to the Mississippi by another great river, the Missouri—to imagine *how* they were connected to the rest of the country. The moving panoramas of the 1840s presented proto-cinematic spectacles that unfurled the landscape bordering the river in a continuous sequence of painted scenery. These river panoramas cranked 800 feet of painted canvas across a stage, enlivened by a narrator who offered anecdotal humor and histories. Such popular spectacles gave audiences who flocked to them from the towns bordering the Mississippi a vivid understanding of the physical and geographical linkages between isolated localities. The fiction of witnessing the landscape of the West from the safe and unencumbered deck of a riverboat further promoted faith in the possibility of a frontier West that was connected to other regions via the mobility of riverways and transportation networks. In the 1840s, George Caleb Bingham—a painter of lyrical power and a classically balanced sense of spatial organization—created landscapes of distilled beauty and clarity. His career might be taken as a sign that the illegibility of western space was being dispelled before the light of art and commerce. Bingham’s art, which circulated in print form, coalesced a new sense of place rooted in the domesticated landscapes of the river. He took what was threatening and disruptive about the emerging communities of the river and offered a reassuring glimpse of a future guaranteed by the flow of commerce and of social and cultural progress embodied in the classical compositions of his own paintings.

It was only when I was able to put my regional tracts and Mississippi Valley promoters, my panoramas and paintings, into conversation with the mythic imagination of nineteenth-century writers that the deeper narrative of my project emerged: a narrative submerged beneath the turbulent waters of trade promotion and settlement. The most profound chroniclers of the Mississippi

River were not promoters or politicians or painters or panoramists, but novelists and writers. Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man* unfolds its vast and mythic narrative on a Mississippi riverboat, populated by a cast of characters who span from the worlds of western frontier humor and folktale to cross-cultural cosmologies and myths. The river of *The Confidence-Man* is a vast ungovernable and godlike force of nature that provides the backdrop for the flickering shadow play of human ambition and deception, across a shape-shifting cast of characters in which the one becomes the many and the many, one. And Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* found in the river a utopian space of possibility where one might escape the social evils, petty feuds, and corrupt institutions that hampered the golden promise of the West as a space beyond history and inherited prejudice.

But the river in *Huck Finn* also had a current that carried its protagonists back toward the plantation South and a return to enslavement for Jim. The river represented flight, liberation from the treacheries of physical terrain, and mobility in all its senses. But it also took one back into the heart of darkness, away from whatever redemption might issue from the networked communities of the West as they aspired to a wider national future. The river flowed both toward and away

from the corporeal integrity of a nation in which part and whole were integrated into a geographical system circulating wealth, knowledge, and the amenities of 'polite' society. If the Mississippi was the main geographical ligature of nationhood, and the "spine" of the national body, it also connected the industrial North of free labor to the slave plantations of the South, binding the two together through an infernal pact in which southern cotton was processed by northern and British manufacturers and sold to northern abolitionists along with everyone else. The corporeal integrity of a nation united by its greatest geographical features—its rivers—in the end was threatened by those same rivers of commerce and empire that eventually led toward the Civil War and the dismemberment of the Union.

The Mississippi River occupies multiple histories. From physical geography spring economic ambitions and cultural narratives, and the intense divisions of sectional politics, but also the binding force of national myths. In reclaiming this kaleidoscopic past we also move beyond geographical determinism to embrace the collective agency of local, regional, and national institutions in shaping our shared present and future. Whether the river divides or binds depends on the actions of the individuals and communities along its banks.

## Thomas Ruys Smith

Senior Lecturer, School of Art, Media, and American Studies,  
Head of the Department of American Studies,  
University of East Anglia

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

I should start by making it clear that however else I have come to know the Mississippi, and whatever else it might mean to me, our relationship

is first and foremost a transatlantic one. As idiosyncratic as that might seem, it at least puts me in very good company. There is a passage



in Jonathan Raban's *Old Glory* (1981) that speaks to this curious dynamic and speaks to me personally, too. Reminiscing about his childhood in Norfolk, England, in the 1940s (my own home county), Raban recalled his "Huckleberry Finn summer":

The only real river I knew was hardly more than a brook.... if I concentrated really hard, I could see the Mississippi there. First I had to think it twice as wide, then multiply by two, then two again....The rooftops of Fakenham went under. I sank roads, farms, church spires, the old German prisoner-of-war camp, Mr. Banham's flour mill. I flooded Norfolk.... It was a heady, intensely private vision.... The Mississippi was my best invention; a dream which was always there.[1]

The stream of my own childhood—the Tiffey—was part of the same river system as Raban's brook, both tributaries of the Yare that snakes through Norfolk to the North Sea. His understanding—echoing Twain and others—that the river is as much a figment of our imaginations as a real waterway, as accessible in Norfolk, England, as Norfolk, Mississippi (it exists, I googled it), remains vital to me.

Yet, despite my long-seated love of Americana, and a particular fondness for the nineteenth century, I didn't really have my Huckleberry Finn summer until I was living by another river—the Cam, which flowed outside my window during my time as an undergraduate at Cambridge. Having finally, properly encountered Twain's Mississippi, I knew I wanted to write something about it for my final-year dissertation. The river's current was starting to exert its pull. I went searching for other books on the Mississippi and quickly got a

sense of the cultural richness that its waters carried—"The Big Bear of Arkansas," Melville's *The Confidence Man*, and *Martin Chuzzlewit* began the flood. Perhaps above all, though, I was fortunate that the University Library had a copy of Walter Havighurst's *Voices on the River* (1964). It was that book, in many ways, that opened my eyes to the magic of the Mississippi—its teeming vastness, its reach across time and space, its position at the heart, perhaps most importantly, of so many human stories. It is, I still think, the ultimate interdisciplinary subject.

Soon I learned that I had other transatlantic antecedents—the parade of Victorian travellers who made their way to the river and made it the star or the villain (or both) of their antebellum travel accounts. Their visions of the river were rooted close to home, too. I learned that Harriet Martineau's childhood home was located five minutes' walk from the school where I spent ten years of my own childhood; one of the houses that Frances Trollope lived in after returning from America (via the river she loathed so delightfully) sits ten minutes from where I now live in London. It turned out that their Mississippis flowed right past my door. What they taught me was that the view from a distant shore could be as much of a benefit as a handicap when it came to taking in a panorama as grand as that presented by the Mississippi. More, I learned what they (and Raban and others) also knew: that the river was a way—the way—to understand the American story, but much more besides. So although I've now met the physical Mississippi, travelling in the wake of those other transatlantic tourists, it still remains an imagined river for me, too—a long way away but always close at hand, meandering its way through my life across an ocean. It is a dream that's always there.

## Reference

[1] Jonathan Raban, *Old Glory* (London: Picador, 1986), 12-13.

## T.S. McMillin

### Professor of English, Oberlin College

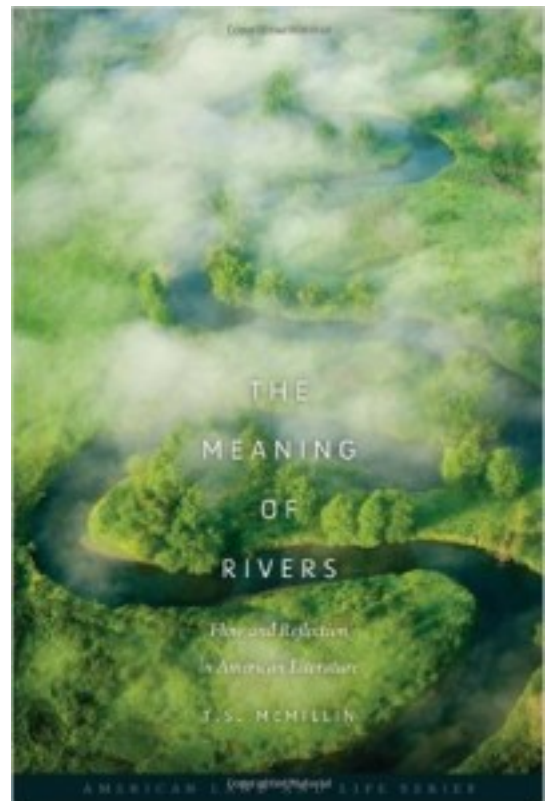
#### *How did you come to know the Mississippi River? What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?*

*The author draws his response from  
“Overlooking the River” (McMillin 2011, 4-5).*

In some cases, by looking at rivers in a certain way, we miss their larger meanings. If you were to climb one of the bluffs overlooking the upper Mississippi River (say, Brady’s Bluff in Trempealeau County, Wisconsin), you would obtain an outstanding view of the nation’s central waterway as well as the prairie below to the north and east and the bluffs across the river on the Minnesota side, with an occasional farm silo glimmering in the distance. If you are schooled in geology, you might be able to discern an ancient history, consisting of long-ago seas covering the land and then subsiding, epochs of erosion and drainage, and sidwinding river-channel migration. The scope and power of that history can overwhelm other elements of the river’s meaning, including tales of human history: traces of the earliest Native American peoples found in burial and ceremonial mounds, demographic shifts due to European colonization and changing economic tides, old-time water-ski recreation and lock-and-dam construction, loved ones lost to drowning. For a family of campers at the state park or a casual hiker, thoughts might revolve around the scene’s effect on the senses, a feeling of being in the presence of timeless splendor and extended horizons. Depending on the measure of interest allotted to each of us in physical sciences, social history, and scenery aesthetics, the Mississippi we see can differ mightily from another’s Mississippi, and the river we see might cause us to miss another river. Even when we do look at rivers, knowledgeably and lovingly, we

very well might overlook important aspects of their meaning. . . .

. . . [Mark] Twain devoted an ample portion of *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) to a discussion of overlooking the river in the sense of missing its meaning, from historical episodes up through the contemporary period, whether due to systems of value, inexperience, poor reading skills, or incomplete thinking. . . .



*T.S. McMillin is the author of  
The Meaning of Rivers: Flow  
and Reflection in American  
Literature*

One could argue that the difference between the man and the author, Sam Clemens and Mark Twain, is academic, of interest only to those scholars and critical theorists who have disputed such matters for thirty or forty years. *Life on the Mississippi*, however, makes evident that the issue has importance for those who delve into the meaning of rivers. Just as the invention and promotion of “Mark Twain” imply a shift in attention from a real fellow (Clemens) to a made-up figure (Twain), so too does *Life* shift readers’ attention from the actual, material river to a literary, conceptual river. These shifts, in turn, suggest that meaning emerges from the intersection of the material and the conceptual; such a

move does not make the river less real, but it does make literature “realer” than we usually consider it to be. And it gives authors themselves a greater material worth in two senses of the phrase: what authors do (craft things out of letters) becomes a substantial activity, something that matters; and thus their craft might be valued more highly. Clemens, shrewd man that he was, reinvented himself as Mark Twain in order to better earn a living; for similar reasons, he reinvented the Mississippi. Both of these inventions accumulated new meanings.

## Reference

McMillin, T.S. 2011. *The Meaning of Rivers: Flow and Reflection in American Literature*. Iowa City: The University of Iowa Press.

## Wes Modes

### Artist

#### *How did you come to know the Mississippi River?*

For the last several years, I’ve participated in an art and history project focused on the river, *A Secret History of American River People*, a multi-year project to travel the river in a homemade shantyboat collecting the personal narratives of people who live and work on the river. Traditionally, art is expected to be about artistic expression, but I wanted to take the time to listen: to river people, to the rhythm of river communities, and to the river itself. That year, I spent a month on the river, and in 2015 I spent three months during the summer season.

*Secret History* is the culmination of an artist’s dream to build a replica of an early twentieth-century shantyboat from scratch and float down the great Mississippi River, listening to the

stories of river people. It is an attempt to step into the river of history. Swimming through narrative, immersed in personal histories, the project travels through the conflicting and complementary stories of river people and the landscape in which they live.

In summer 2014, inspired by historical accounts of shantyboaters on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, I set out on a journey to record the would-be lost histories of river communities. In the tradition of Howard Zinn’s *People’s History* projects, *A Secret History of American River People* uncovers these hidden stories and brings them to life.



The history of poor people living on or adjacent to the river is not well documented, beyond river memoirs, fiction, and pulp novels. Though part of the American landscape for more than a century, there is very little written about the history of shantyboats and boathouse communities. Even broadening the search to include areas of poor and immigrant communities living adjacent to rivers, the research pickings are quite slim.

I've tried to know the Mississippi through listening. And in listening I've gathered a strange

### ***What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?***

In my months on the river, I feel like I've gotten a taste of river life, but am humbled by the knowledge of the people I've met who've lived on the river for six, seven, eight, or more decades. Through the stories told by these people, I've learned a thing or two. I know that the river is cleaner than it has been in 150 years thanks to the Clean Water Act of 1972, the work of enforcers in the DNR (Department of Natural Resources), and to everyone's surprise, invasive zebra mussels. I know that native mussel beds are critically depleted and that no one knows this better than the river people who helped deplete them during the clamming boom of the late twentieth century. I know that as towns turn their face back to the river, they often displace people who've lived on the river for generations, the gentrification of boom times that can be as irreparably damaging as a bust. I know that river authorities are tasked with the contradictory mandates of river conservation and river navigation, a schizophrenic dichotomy that resulted in the lock and dam system and is simultaneously silting in the backwaters, eroding islands and shorelines, and destroying native habitat. These are just a few of the things that emerged from my hundreds of hours of conversations with river people.

Living, eating, and sleeping on the river for months at a time, I learned a few things on my own. I know that a boat should always approach a

assortment of river wisdom. I've recorded over 50 oral history-style interviews that lasted from one to three hours. I heard from scientists, homeless people living under bridges, merchants, bar owners, river rats, artists, researchers, fishermen, boaters, and people who've lived within sight of the river every day of their lives. I've tried to include voices that are not usually included in the dominant narrative—Black, Latino, Hmong, and Dakota people. My knowing the river is influenced by the perceptions of the people to whom I listen.

dock from downstream. I learned that the texture of the water reflects what's going on beneath the waves, and that wingdams make a visible line on the water, even when they are well beneath my hull. I learned that gar are rare these days, sauger are prized, walleye are still plentiful, that I can't catch catfish to save my life, and that picky fishermen who don't keep perch will often hand me a fish dinner. I've learned that barges and locks are not nearly as scary as people make them out to be, and that a slight wind will turn an ordinary docking or launch into a perilous affair. I've learned that people are generous and good, and in my thousands of conversations, I've only run into three genuine assholes.

One of the surprising epiphanies on the *Secret History* journeys is that we are all river people. As humans, we depend on, and indeed are made of, water. The rivers that run through our towns and cities are not merely incidental aspects of local geography. Our towns and cities are located to take advantage of the river's contribution to transportation, agriculture, and the availability of fresh water. Today, rivers are an actively contested landscape with the process of gentrification much in evidence. For cities attempting to reestablish a connection to their rivers, the impulse is to create a shiny, clean, and sanitized parkland—a kind of mall with a river running through it—rather than a wild and natural waterway.

Urban rivers are the site of concrete abutments, river walks, riverside parks, aggressive policing, and the removal of riparian shrubs and foliage to discourage unauthorized use, such as squatting. These restrictions are a continuation of historic enclosures of the public commons.

Like the river itself, river knowledge is both deep and wide. In my months on the river, however, I've barely gotten beneath the surface of that wisdom.

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## About the Authors

Sandra B. Zellmer is the Robert B. Daugherty Professor of Law in the Nebraska College of Law. She is co-author with Christine Klein of *Mississippi River Tragedies: A Century of Unnatural Disaster* (NYU Press, 2014). In 2011, she was awarded "'Best Paper'" by the American Bar Association (ABA) for her work on "'Missouri River Mud: Clean Water and Endangered Species,'" which she presented at the ABA's Annual Water Law Conference.

Angela Miller is the William Seitz Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. She has published a prizewinning book on the national landscape in the nineteenth century, as well as essays on George Caleb Bingham and moving panoramas of the Mississippi River. She is coauthor of *American Encounters* (Prentice-Hall, 2007), a survey of the arts of the United States and its colonial and pre-conquest histories.

Thomas Ruys Smith is Senior Lecturer in American Literature and Culture at the University of East Anglia in the UK. He is the author, among others, of *River of Dreams: Imagining the Mississippi Before Mark Twain* (Louisiana State University Press, 2007) and *Southern Queen: New Orleans in the Nineteenth Century* (Continuum, 2011).

T. S. McMillin is a Professor of English at Oberlin College. He is the author of *The Meaning of Rivers: Flow & Reflection in American Literature* (University of Iowa Press, 2011) and *Our Preposterous Use of Literature: Emerson & the Nature of Reading* (University of Illinois Press, 2000). His latest research project is centered on the Los Angeles River.

Wes Modes is a California artist behind A Secret History of American River People, an art and history project to collect the stories of people who live and work on major American rivers. In other lives, he is a high-tech runaway, educator, sculptor, writer, community organizer, geek, and mischief-maker.

FEATURE

# KNOWING THE MISSISSIPPI

By Mona M. Smith, Mark Muller, Mark Gorman,  
Patrick Hamilton, Richard M. Mizelle, Jr.

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.



*New Orleans: Mississippi River and Crescent City Connection. Photographer Wally Gobetz.  
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## Mona M. Smith

Media Artist/Producer/Director, Allies: media/art

### *How did you come to know the Mississippi River?*

My childhood was spent in Red Wing, Minnesota, a small historic city on the Mississippi—Dakota homeland. My first memory of the river was visiting my Auntie Helen and family across the river from Red Wing. Their house was on Island Road. The river relentlessly flowed on three sides of the house. It was spring. A flood had raised the river beyond its banks. I don't remember how we got into the house but I have a memory of climbing out the back steps and into a fishing

boat. We, I don't remember who (I was maybe 4 or 5 years old), rowed to the shack next door and climbed out of the boat and into the shack. A boat was being made in the big room of the house. My future adoptive father and his friend owned the shack.

The river rising was an accepted part of life in Red Wing; there was no panic, only a feeling of season.

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

To know this river takes time and silence. Knowing the river is to know family, to recognize

the connection between the water in me and the water of the river.

## Mark Muller

Mississippi River Program Director, The McKnight Foundation

### *How did you come to know the Mississippi River?*

### *What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?*

The Mississippi River is a constant reminder of life's cycles and evolution; today it is not the same river that it was last week or last year. I do not know the Mississippi River, but only small stretches of the river during discrete times. And that same stretch of river can convey dramatically different emotions to different people—the promise of fish to an angler, the lure of solitude to the introvert, the exhaustion of practice to the crew team member, the potential for danger to anyone during a storm.

The numerous and often conflicting natures of the Mississippi River inevitably lead one to a sense of humility about knowing the river. And for me, the limits to our knowledge about the river provide insight into spirituality. There is much to life that we can't know, and like river management, efforts to harness and constrain life's ebbs and flows often lead to more frustration than growth.

Like so many others, I first came to know the river as the backdrop for Huck Finn's adventures. I then came to know the river as a case study

for an environmental engineering graduate student. It wasn't until my twenties that I had the opportunity to physically know the river as a place to swim, fish, and boat. Now that I have been a Minneapolis resident for 19 years and at least visually encounter the river on a daily basis, it gives a sense of comfort. And it is a report card

on our progress toward sustainability. And a reminder of Minneapolis's intertwined history and wealth generated, social disparities exacerbated, and peoples displaced along the river. And an avenue for the natural and spiritual world to meander into my modern, urban life.

## Mark Gorman

**Policy Analyst, Northeast-Midwest Institute, Washington, DC**

### *How did you come to know the Mississippi River?*

As an ecologist, one would think that I would be well-practiced in how best to know my home (since that is what the word "ecology" literally means). And that may be true, but the fact remains that the Mississippi River valley has never truly been a place that I called home and began to know in the traditional sense of the word. Most of my life was lived far from the river's edge.

These days, I sit in Washington, DC most days, looking out from my vertical, digital, Beltway-branded world on to a largely horizontal, analog, Mississippi River landscape. Though I constantly find myself translating concepts, thoughts, and notions between those two distinct realms, I rarely see, touch, taste, breathe, or swim in the latter.

### *What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?*

The closest I've come to knowing the river is exploring for 25 years or so many of the upper Allegheny River basin's waters that eventually fed the Mississippi. Perhaps, in that sense, I came to know the unformed Mississippi River prenatally—before it ever came to be. Taking my cue from

Hebrew scripture, maybe I came to know the Mississippi River—and it became acquainted with me—better than had we lived side-by-side all of these years: "Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (Psalm 139).

## Patrick Hamilton

**Director, Global Change Initiatives, Science Learning Division,  
Science Museum of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN**

### *How did you come to know the Mississippi River?*

### *What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?*

I arrived in Minneapolis in fall 1980 for graduate training in geography at the University of

Minnesota. Since the geography department was and still is located on the West Bank campus, I

searched for housing close by since I didn't have a car and so needed to rely on city buses, my bike, or my feet to get to and from campus. I found a 300-square-foot apartment appended to the back of a house in the nearby Phillips neighborhood; it was just big enough for me, my bike, a card table, two chairs, my boyhood bed and desk, and a menagerie of mice and squirrels.

Living in the inner city of Minneapolis was quite a departure from my previous residence in a spacious boardinghouse in leafy east Duluth with easy walking access to streams, forests, and the stunning, rugged shoreline of Lake Superior. As a child of the woods and lakes of west-central Minnesota, I soon felt the tensions of NDD (nature deficit disorder). Fortunately, I discovered

the Mississippi River gorge. Although the intensity of graduate school and the crowded central city lay just beyond the top of the bluff, the banks of the Mississippi River in many localities offered settings where the sights and sounds of human activity were relievedly few.

I spent many hours exploring the river banks and bluffs, attempting to be a photographer but achieving much more success finding fossils left behind by a very ancient sea. Although tightly hemmed in by the surrounding city, the Mississippi down below was a liquid, flowing reminder that a world of woods and wetlands, lakes and sloughs still existed, if one just followed the river in one's mind out of the city and north into the countryside.

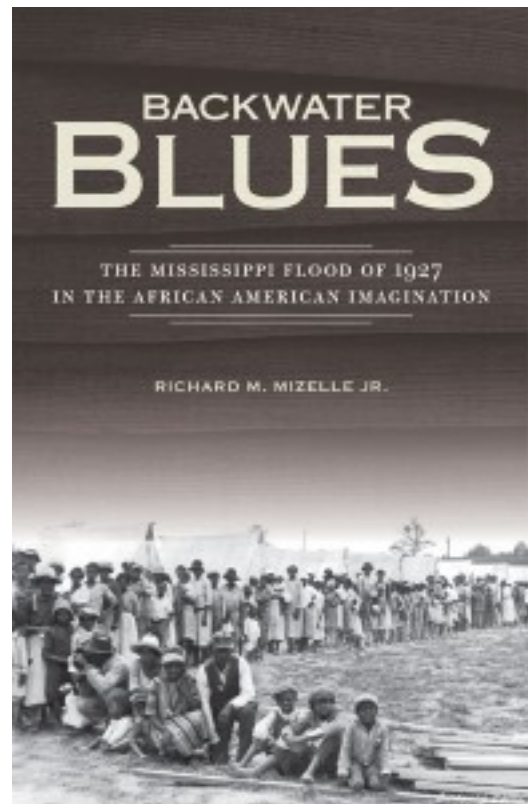
## Richard M. Mizelle, Jr.

### Associate Professor of History, University of Houston

*How did you come to know the Mississippi River?*

*What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?*

My first engagement with the Mississippi River was aboard a steamboat in New Orleans almost a year to the day before Hurricane Katrina. Like many people, I recall thinking that all the reading in the world cannot prepare you for experiencing the Mississippi River for the very first time. It was breathtaking, and seemed more like looking out into an ocean than a river. In the years after this first experience, I would think critically about all that the Mississippi River provided to people living along its banks, including food, sustenance, commerce, and for African Americans in particular, a potential escape route during slavery and the Jim Crow South via steamboats and the shadowy margins of the river. The river was also



*Author of Backwater Blues The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination*

temperamental, however, taking away as much as it provided, particularly when humans began constructing mountains of levees in an attempt at flood control by the late nineteenth century. Knowing the Mississippi River is about the richness of people, not monetarily, but of spirit and strength. Others will speak importantly about the complexity of the Mississippi River's ecological and hydraulic make-up among the world's rivers. The blues sound, born and conceptualized on the banks of the Mississippi River, also helps us understand the complexity of people. In particular, the movement of people, ideas, and music up and down the river helped spread the life stories of Mississippi River people all over the world and exposed people living in

the Mississippi Delta to the world. What does it mean to know the Mississippi River? My answer knows the resiliency of African American people who endured harsh treatment in Red Cross relief camps during the spring of 1927 without protection from the federal government or local officials. It is also about knowing the intelligence and fortitude that blues musicians from the Delta took with them while engaging with record companies in Los Angeles, Chicago, Memphis, and New York. The Mississippi is a mighty river that produced mighty people. My research is about movement, space, and relationships of power, and though I may not always talk explicitly about the Mississippi River it will always inform the ways in which I think about people.



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## About the Authors

Mona Smith is a Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota multimedia artist, educator, owner of Allies:media/art, and artist lead for the Healing Place Collaborative. She is creator of the Bdote Memory Map (in partnership with the Minnesota Humanities Center), Cloudy Waters: Dakota Reflections on the River (exhibited at the Minnesota History Center and elsewhere), and other multimedia installations.

Mark Muller is director of the Mississippi River program at The McKnight Foundation. The program focuses on improving the water quality and resiliency of the Mississippi River. Prior to joining McKnight as a program officer, Mark worked at the nonprofit Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, taught high school science in New York City, volunteered for over a year in Honduras and Guatemala, and worked as an environmental engineer.

Mark Gorman is a policy analyst with the Northeast-Midwest Institute, focusing on water resource issues in the Mississippi River Basin. Prior to joining the Institute in 2009, he directed the Northwest Office of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council, working with partners in the upper Ohio River and Great Lakes basins to promote the sustainable use of built and natural landscapes, particularly by focusing on links between the environment, the economy and quality of life.

Patrick Hamilton is Director of Global Change Initiatives at the Science Museum of Minnesota, where he develops projects that investigate the challenges and opportunities of humanity as the dominant agent of global change. Away from the museum, Patrick and his wife J. like to kayak and grow organic, blue-ribbon-winning pears, peaches, and plums in St. Paul.

Richard M. Mizelle, Jr. is an associate professor of history at the University of Houston and author of *Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014) and co-editor of *Resilience and Opportunity: Lessons from the U.S. Gulf Coast after Katrina and Rita* (Brookings Institution Press, 2012). Trained as an historian of medicine, race, environment, and technology, Mizelle pushes the boundaries of these fields through his research and teaching.

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 McGhievers. 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 Ĥaha Wakpa, the River of the Waterfalls. My reservation community, Lower Sioux, is situated along the Mni Sota Wakpa at a place called Caŋsayapi, They Paint the Trees Red. Now I live on the Ĥaha 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?*

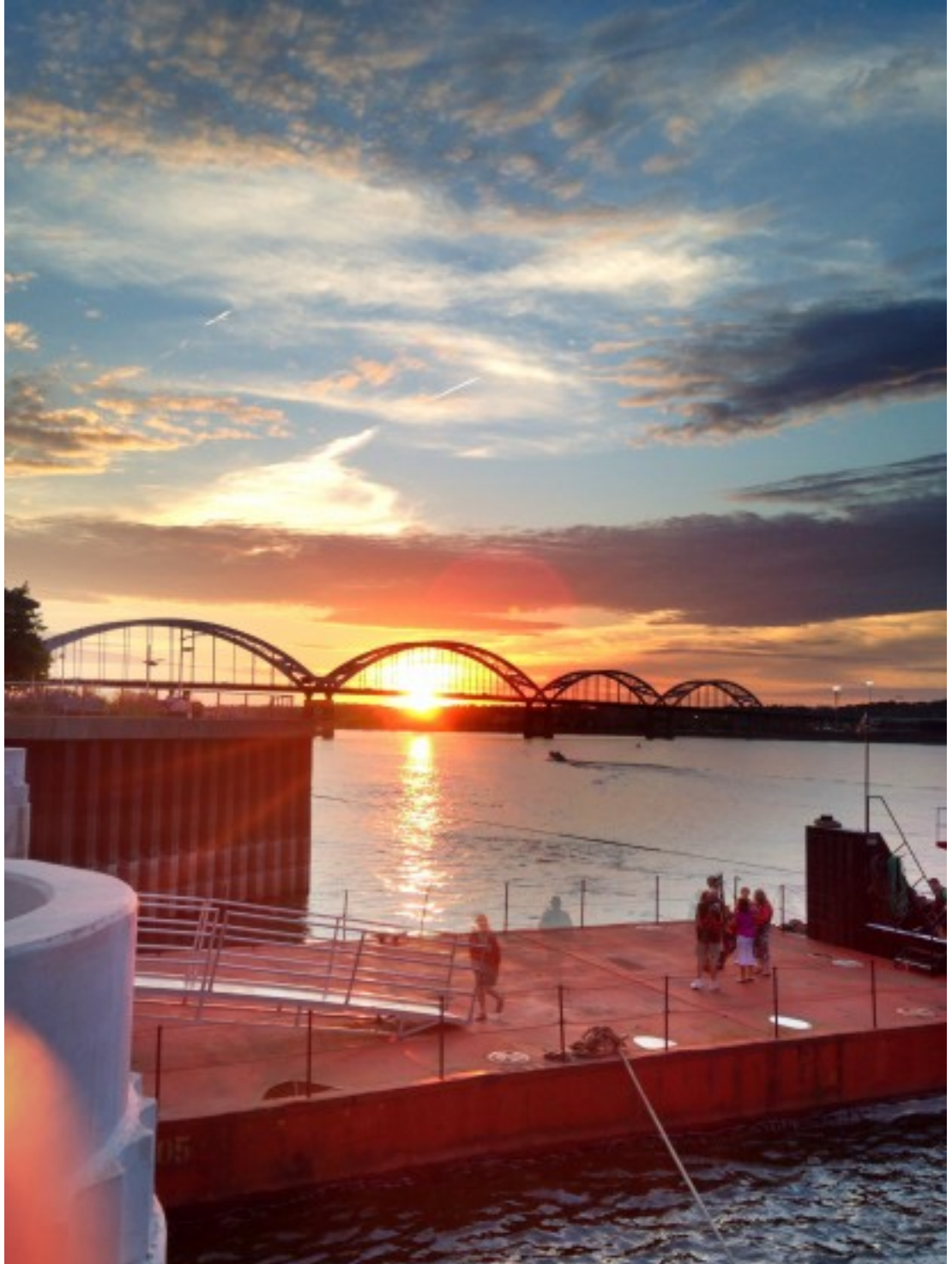
For the past eight years, because of the work I do, the Mississippi River has never been far from my thoughts. From my desk each day I consider this mighty river. More accurately, I worry about it. My daily river perspective is shaped by reading the neverending string of news articles, reports, studies, 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.

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



*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.*



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 Bdewakantunwan 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.

FEATURE

# KNOWING THE MISSISSIPPI

By Sharon Day, Bernard Williams, Christopher Morris,  
Conevery Bolton Valencius, Craig Colten

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.



*The Mississippi River north of Minneapolis, where the river has gentle shores, before it enters its only gorge in south Minneapolis. Image courtesy of National Park Service.*



## Sharon Day

### Executive Director, Indigenous Peoples Task Force, Minneapolis, Minnesota

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

For the past 25 years, I have lived in Highland Park on the south shore of the Mississippi River. I have walked my dogs along Mississippi River Boulevard in the twilight hours when the light on the river is sublime. This area is the only gorge on the river and is frequented by eagles, blue heron, ducks, and many other creatures. Since June of 2013, I have held a water ceremony

down in Hidden Falls near the river's edge. I have walked this river, with the water walkers, from the headwaters to Fort Jackson, Louisiana and have been kissed by the river when I poured the water I gathered at the headwaters into her mouth, two months later. I love this river and I believe she loves me. There is little in life more exciting than to see what is around the next bend.

## Bernard Williams

### Visual Artist

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

Much of what I am sharing here was developed in 2011 during a six week residency in New Orleans as an artist-in-residence with A Studio in the Woods (ASITW).

My residency at ASITW was a unique experience for me. As an artist who regards the industrial urban landscape of Chicago as one of my fundamental inspirations, working in the woods and on the banks of the Mississippi River have provided a load of meaningful material from which to respond. My work in New Orleans involved translating forms found in nature into sculpture and architectural structures. The river became an immediate subject of interest, with its fantastic history of jumping and meandering, its history and continuing role as a major trade route, and its status as a feared liquid body or tomb that

snatches life from even the most robust human soul.

### Getting Onto the River

Early on during my stay, I was taken with newspaper reports of a young man losing his life in the river. His name was Brian Reed, the brother of NFL athlete Ed Reed. I also encountered numerous other stories of the river taking lives. The lives lost to the river suggested a new headline for me to pursue: "Man Survives a Brunt with the River." This became a subtext for my sculpture project concerned with invisible root systems and the river's meandering history. I do not mean to diminish the personal anguish that has occurred around river deaths. I considered inserting names or symbolic elements to suggest or memorialize

the lost, then I decided to mount the river myself, to risk the river. I wanted to somehow get closer to this body of water, the great Mississippi. I really wanted to get *into* the waters of the river, but I settled for getting *onto* the waters in my own makeshift raft. Getting onto the river with the sculpture and the raft became a sort of meditation on all the mentioned aspects of the river: the invisible undercurrents, early riverboat traffic among flatboats, keelboats, and steamboats delivering cargo of all types, the fantastic meandering routes, and the river's appetite for consumption.

## Building a Raft - The Neutrino way and others

I decided to float my sculpture on four large truck tire inner tubes, after finding good on-line information on the process, and realizing the affordable economics of it all. Until a few days before the event, I planned to float on a foam-based structure, inspired by the techniques promoted by Poppa Neutrino and his raft ideas laid out on his website. Though I did not follow

the Neutrino way exactly, the Neutrino spirit was highly motivating for my project. I believe the Neutrinos, who sailed an enormous scrap-built raft across the North Atlantic in 1998, speak to the human condition as we all seek some stable relationship with the natural environment. The Neutrinos have spent long periods of time living on the water, not only sailing. The Neutrino way offers up a format to rethink traditional lifestyles, pointing toward a closer relationship with our natural space, and the possibility of radical departures in any number of areas through the application of pathways such as reuse, refusal of status quo, alternative methods of housing, mobility, energy use, insistence on pursuing ones personal dreams, and more.

## Ghost Trails

The sculpture I produced during the residency is most heavily influenced by the graphic line work of the Harold Fisk maps from 1944. In these maps, Fisk attempted to chart the movement of the Mississippi River over a span of hundreds and



*Ghost Trail on the River, Bernard Williams.  
Image courtesy of the artist.*

thousands of years. The maps contain a network of moving lines that wiggle violently on top of one another and appear to produce echoes of earlier movements. My sculpture takes on a sampling of the Fisk line work and develops into a structure of its own. With paint and pencil I have added more map material, including numbers (many of which remain mysterious to me), names of local streets or highways or parish names. Consequently, the sculpture holds references to recent geography and ancient geographics.

The title, *Ghost Trails*, is a reference to invisible river routes, the routes no longer taken. There is some soft echo of these old routes etched in the soil. Some are visible, others require an informed eye. The white color I have chosen for the sculpture references ghosts, but seeks an opposite

affect of high visibility in relation to the natural setting. The sculpture invites engagement. One is able to actually pass through it or pause within its swirling lines. The sculpture rested temporarily on the grounds at ASITW to speak of my river performance, inviting poetic reflection on the river, on the tangle of the forest, and the complexity of our relationship with the environment.

## Riverside Chat

In one of the images you see pictured here, I sit in a chair facing a small audience. We collectively ponder one of the Harold Fisk maps which I have enhanced and enlarged. It is a moment to sit, ponder, share, and speculate about our relationship to the place. I'm reminded of a river baptism, which some churches perform at the



*Riverside Chat, Bernard Williams.  
Image courtesy of the artist.*



water's edge. The potential and need for spiritual and mental conversion is suggested. An awakening is called up. A convert is symbolically altered by new knowledge. That convert is myself, stirred to new awareness by the complex beauty and enlightening revelation of the river's meandering

and liquid thought revealed in the Fisk maps. My short residency at the river exposed my fear and alienation from the water. I gained new appreciation for those who study and teach about the river.

## Christopher Morris

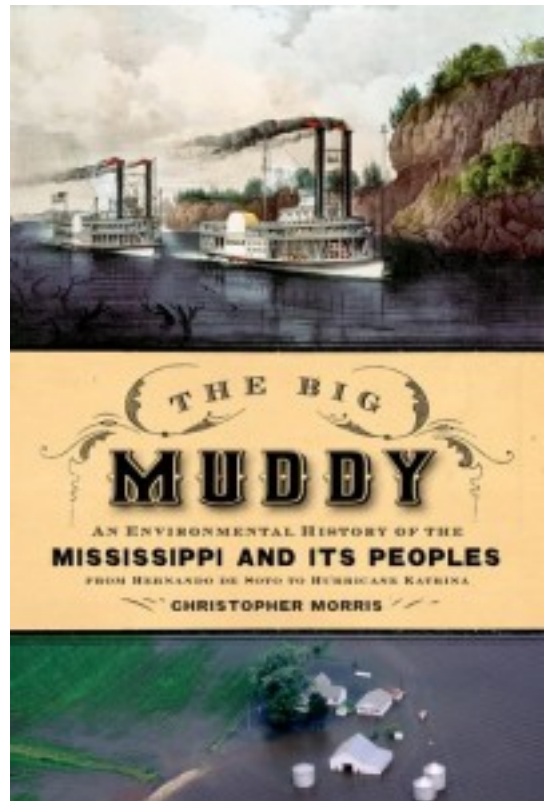
### Professor of History, The University of Texas, Arlington

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

#### How I Came to Know the Mississippi River

I'm not sure that I do know the Mississippi. I'm still learning about it. Getting to know the river might take a lifetime.

I grew up in Ontario, so, nowhere near the river. I first saw the Mississippi when I was in my mid-twenties and a graduate student in history at the University of Florida. I took a trip one spring break to Vicksburg to do some research for a seminar paper, and to see if that paper might turn into a dissertation. (It did, and the dissertation became a book on the development of plantation society in the Vicksburg area between the Revolution and Civil War.) From the top of the bluff outside the Old Court House Museum, I could glimpse the Mississippi about a mile or so away. I knew it had once flowed right past downtown Vicksburg. I would soon learn when it altered course, and somewhat later, I would understand why it altered course. From a lookout park near the Interstate 20 bridge, I saw the Mississippi River for the first time. I had read about the river, of course, but no book, not even Mark Twain's, can fully convey its size, power, movement, color, and up close, where the water touches its banks, its earthy smell. Rivers, like flames in a camp fire, because they move constantly, are captivating. I recently



*Christopher Morris is the author of The Big Muddy: An Environmental History of the Mississippi and Its Peoples from Hernando de Soto to Hurricane Katrina*



spent an hour or so eating lunch in the park along Riverside Drive in Memphis, and watching the river, which was high for the summertime, as it conveyed giant logs past me at a speed, I guessed, of five miles per hour.

I have never been swimming in the Mississippi, nor have I canoed it, although I hope to do that one day soon. Except for the year I spent in Vicksburg conducting historical research, I have not lived near the river. I have not worked the river, as barge crew do, as the few remaining commercial fishers do, and there are others. I have gotten to know the river by studying it, as a historian interested in past human relations with the Mississippi River, more accurately, with the lower Mississippi, which is my Mississippi. I know the river second hand, by immersing myself in the documents produced by others long deceased who knew the river first hand, because they lived and worked with it.

In 1776, in the midst of the turmoil of Revolution, Matthew Phelps of Connecticut, his wife Jerusha, and their four children—one born at sea—arrived in New Orleans, where they hired boats to take them up the Mississippi River to the patch of land that was to be their new home far from the

turmoil of politics and war. The voyage, “against a stiff current and various casual obstructions,” proved disastrous. Everyone got sick, probably from malaria. Jerusha, her newborn son, and a daughter died. Matthew buried them near the river’s edge, and then he and his two surviving children pushed on. Within sight of their new home, Phelps’s boat capsized in a whirlpool and the children drowned. Matthew Phelps arrived at his new home alone and bereft.

Phelps’s story is exceptionally tragic. But it reminds me that as an academic, I know the Mississippi River mostly as an abstraction, an object of study, as something that exists in books, letters, maps, memoirs, in scientific studies, and in the reports of engineers. When I get so far into the documents and into my own ideas about the Mississippi River that I begin to lose sight of what it really meant—and means—to the people who travelled, worked, and lived with it, I think of Matthew Phelps and of many others I have met through my research, people for whom the Mississippi River was real, for whom it was life and death. I will never know the river like that. For me, the Mississippi River has come to represent the possibilities and the limits of my ability to comprehend the past.

## Conevery Bolton Valencius

Associate Professor of History,  
University of Massachusetts Boston

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

I came to know the Mississippi River through books.

Raised in Little Rock, Arkansas, I first recognized the Mississippi as the huge moving expanse we had to cross on a long, metal bridge in early-morning sun to visit relatives in the northeast.

When I was a kid, the game was to hold your breath when you drove over a river or by a graveyard. Otherwise, the ghosts would get you. Crossing the Mississippi, we never could get past those ghosts—no matter how deep a breath we sucked in on the Arkansas side.

The river wasn't real to me; it was enormous in the way of a far-distant horizon or a harvest moon. It had nothing to do with the creeks we played in on occasional visits to friends out in the country. When we crossed the river and drove high over Memphis on our way out into west Tennessee, that's when we kids really gawked: that was a city, a big city, recognizable and impressive on our scale. The Mississippi was not something you could ever really touch.

Growing up, I was constantly in the library—my first job with an actual paycheck was in the children's reading room. All kinds of stories, from children's picture books to *Huck Finn*, had the Mississippi River as a place and a character and a meaning. I could tell it was important, but mostly to past people who spoke differently and wore different clothes and knew how to milk cows.

In college I studied the history of the U.S. and the history of my home region. Again, I read books about the river, and again, they were of a different place and experience.

In graduate school, I wrote about people moving west from older American regions in the nineteenth century. I read accounts by hunters and travelers, missionaries and lonely women leaving families. Through all of them, the Mississippi snaked—the Mississippi and its sibling water roads, the Ohio and the Missouri and the Arkansas and all the others. I wondered at the way that the Mississippi brought everyone to its shores and on its surfaces.

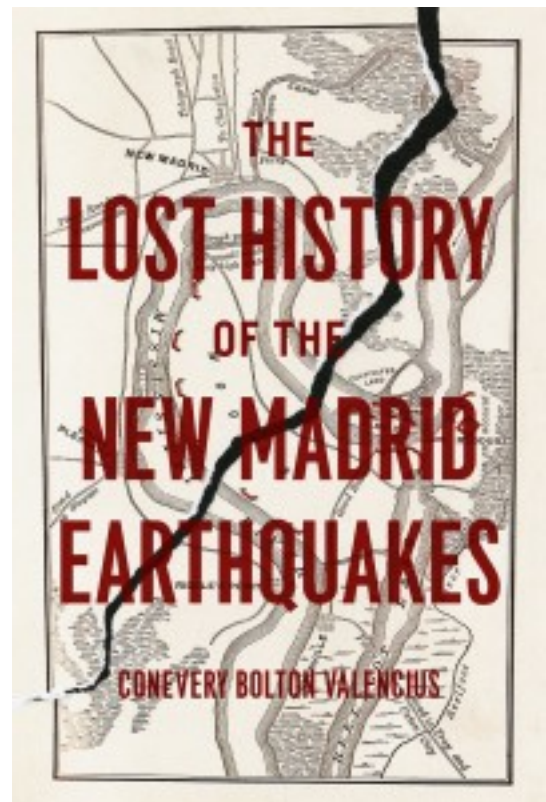
As I read and read, I came to recognize how the river daunted travelers with its heavy implacable current going always only one way: weeks going down, but months working a weary way back upstream again. I shared the mourning of long-ago people when the river sucked someone under during storms and the clenched-stomach worry of farmers and families watching the river rise. Sometimes I shared the exhilaration of people

who used the river to escape from responsibility or from bondage.

Gradually, the Mississippi River came to be real to me: more and more a reachable place whose currents were power and possibility, whose waters were gritty and muddy brown, and whose destiny was to spread out during lethal seasons like some flexing archangel to bring death and destruction and drenching, rich, fertile mud.

After many years of reading, I found myself writing about the Mississippi and its massive but largely forgotten earthquakes. As I did, I realized that all the books I read also worked in me an alchemy of water.

As I cross the Mississippi by Memphis, often in the driver's seat now and heading the other way to visit relatives back home in Arkansas, I find



*Conevery Bolton Valencius is the author of *The Lost History of the New Madrid Earthquakes**

myself telling my own Yankee children to look out the window. As I do, I find myself greeting a place and force that feels now familiar.

Last summer, as my family crossed over the Mississippi again, at an Iowa crossing new to us, I realized how much the river meant to me when I found myself detouring on impulse onto a small island park. Alongside the Mississippi, I pulled over and made everybody get out and cross with me onto a tangled embankment with a faint,

flooded trail. We made our way, kids grumbling, out onto mudflats. With river birds overhead, a morning sun shining on mid-continent, and the river lapping at its banks even louder than the highway traffic downstream of us, I made sure all my children reached out and touched the Mississippi. It was real to me, real because of all the books I had read about it, real through the books I had written about it, and I wanted them always to know how much they too had the Mississippi River as part of their own stories.

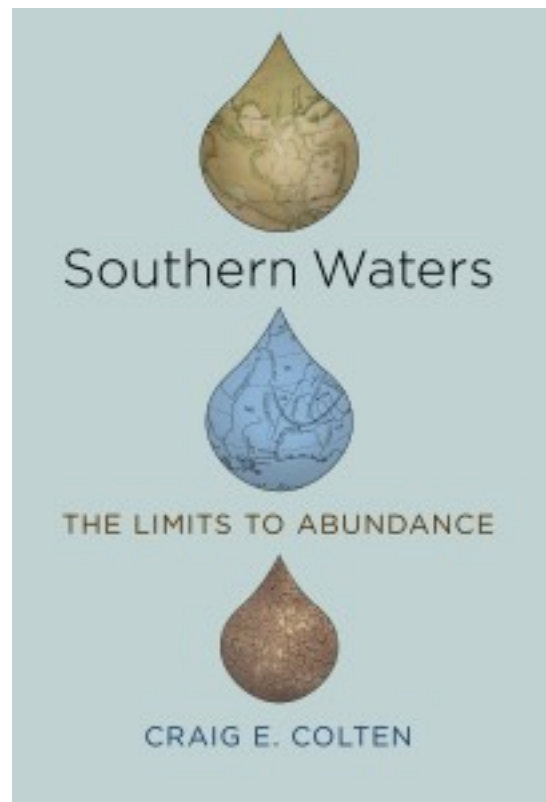
## Craig E. Colten

**Carl O. Sauer Professor, Department of Geography and Anthropology, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge**

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

I wish I could say that I came to know the Mississippi River the year that I dropped out of college (1972) to build a raft and float from Little Rock to New Orleans via the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers. But the plans for that trip ran aground, and I never gained that incredibly rich experience traveling with the river's current. I had to read Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* as a wonderful, but inadequate, substitute.

My earliest encounters with the river go back much further. I have clear recollections as a small child of crossing the Mississippi on massive steel automobile bridges at Vicksburg, Mississippi and Cape Girardeau, Missouri on family vacations. Also those long, slow climbs up the railroad bridges at Baton Rouge and St. Louis stand out as thrilling introductions to the river. In those encounters, the river often was a boundary between two states, a barrier for land-based transport—an obvious geographical delineation. It was only a short, detached segment that was visible



*Craig Colten is the author of  
Southern Waters: The Limits to  
Abundance*

from above, not a fluid system that traversed and connected much of the country.

After I returned to college in Baton Rouge in fall 1972, it wasn't long before I met the river as a giant hazard. The spring of 1973 brought exceptionally high stages. My friend Gilbert and I would hustle over to gawk at the river's steady rise from atop the crest of the saturated levee that felt about as substantial as a bowl of jelly. We drove to the Old River Control Structure and, much like John McPhee, felt the massive engineered structure shudder as water poured through the gates into the Atchafalaya basin. These encounters underscored that the river was a mighty force that when unchecked by levees had created the lower river floodplain since the last ice age and when confined by human-made barriers threatened to undermine the finest structural protection the Army Corps of Engineers had built. The device held, but required substantial repairs in the following years.

Another twenty years later, when I was living in Illinois, the river again rose and challenged the flood protection levees along the upper river. Countless volunteers from Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri heaped sandbags on top of the levees to fortify the riverfronts of towns and cities. The events encouraged community unity in the face of peril. There were numerous levee failures and some intentional breaks that reminded us that the river could present an ominous hazard with the occasional potential to wreak havoc.

Since then, I've studied the river in a more formal way—often writing about the power of floods and the efforts taken by society to reduce the risk of high water or the efforts to re-engineer the waterway to serve human needs. Working on museum exhibits about the river enabled me to share my knowledge with a broad public audience. Again in 2011, I watched the river rise toward the levee crest from the same vantage point where I stood in 1973. Also in recent years, I've been involved in

projects that examine the impacts of levees and upstream reservoirs on sediment delivery to the delta. Louisiana is enduring a serious loss of its coastal wetlands due to the re-engineering of the river and this has implications for the society and economy near the river's mouth.

Through my informal experiences and my scholarly pursuits, the river has continued to fascinate me. In many respects it is a giant paradox. It is an incredibly important resource both for the water it provides for cities and industries and for the cargo that it floats. At the same time it presents substantial risks, even though constricted between protective levees on its lower reaches. It is essential to the aquatic life in its waters and along its banks, yet at the same time poses a clear peril to people and property along its banks. It transports human wastes, while delivering tainted water to downstream public utilities. It is a gargantuan geographic feature that many cities turned their backs on—ever present but invisible behind the levees. It is as reliable as the rising sun and maintains a solid boundary between several states, but it remains seasonally dynamic in the volume of water it carries and sometimes capricious in its course.

To know the Mississippi is to know the fluidity of nature and to understand the dynamic and often inconsistent relationships that society has with big rivers.



## Recommended Citation

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## About the Authors

Sharon M. Day, Ojibwe elder, is the executive director of the Indigenous Peoples Task Force. She is 2nd degree Midewin and follows the spiritual path of the Anishinaabe people. Part of her spiritual practice is to care for water; she has led nine walks along the nation's rivers to pray for the water, including the Mississippi.

Bernard Williams is a visual artist based in Chicago. He creates large-scale sculptural projects, including river-related sculptures developed during a six-week residency on the banks of the Mississippi near New Orleans, where he was an artist- in-residence with A Studio in the Woods.

Christopher Morris is a professor of history at the University of Texas, Arlington, and author of *The Big Muddy: An Environmental History of the Mississippi and Its Peoples from Hernando de Soto to Hurricane Katrina* (Oxford University Press, 2011). He is working on a book on the Coastal South from Virginia to Texas.

Conevery Bolton Valencius teaches history at the University of Massachusetts Boston, on a peninsula looking over Dorchester Bay and out onto Boston Harbor. She is the author of *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (Basic Books, 2002) and *The Lost History of the New Madrid Earthquakes* (Chicago, 2013).

IN REVIEW

# “REMEMBERING THE BOHEMIAN FLATS”: AN EXHIBIT AND A PRACTICE OF PUBLIC MEMORY

By Laurie Moberg

*“Remembering the Bohemian Flats: One Place, Many Voices,” exhibited at Mill City Museum, Minneapolis, April 30 through November 1, 2015.*

From fragments of stories, from the limited perspectives and sources available to us, we create our narratives of history. Yet in the process of representing this history in textbooks or museums, in policy or in practices, other stories are obscured or forgotten. Sometimes we erase these stories because they complicate or contradict;

other times we miss them simply because we are not looking for them. So what happens to the histories we tell when we look for these erased counternarratives, the stories that splinter from and enrich what we know about places, especially those places that seem so familiar? Where do we find these stories?

The exhibit titled “Remembering the Bohemian Flats: One Place, Many Voices” at the Mill City Museum is one of these stories. Drawing from archival resources, the exhibit reveals a complex,



*“No Place Like Home”: Remembering the Bohemian Flats,  
Panel One from “Bohemian Flats: One Place, Many Voices,”  
exhibited at Mill City Museum, Minneapolis, April 30 through November 1, 2015.  
Image courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

contradictory, polyvocal history of a place on the Mississippi River. Between the current location of St. Anthony Falls and the Washington Avenue Bridge, the Mississippi River curves through the limestone, shale, and sandstone banks. On its western bank, beneath the Washington Avenue Bridge that connects the East and West Banks of the University of Minnesota, is a narrow stretch of flats, now a park with manicured lawn, a place to come to the river for recreation. Yet less than a century ago, this area was a bustling neighborhood of immigrants 79 steps below the factories and industry centers that employed them.

Beneath the contemporary park lawn lies a history obscured, forgotten, and now unearthed in the self-guided exhibit of the Mill City Museum.

The exhibit is a history of immigrant communities that called the flats below the bluffs home. Comprised of six curated and thematically aligned panels, this history of Bohemian Flats remembers the immigrant communities through photos, maps, and primary source texts that capture the flats as both home and temporary residence, as filled with “good immigrants” and squalor, of neighborhood connection and



*“Bohemian Flats: One Place, Many Voices,” exhibited at Mill City Museum, Minneapolis, April 30 through November 1, 2015.  
Image courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

eviction. The introduction explains the exhibit as a project initiated through the engaged curiosity and research of University of Minnesota anthropology undergraduate student Rachel Hines. She worked with Associate Professor Kat Hayes and graduate student Stefanie Kowalczyk, also from the University's Department of Anthropology, as well as students in Hayes' archives class. The team also collaborated with staff from the Mill City Museum and other members of the joint Minnesota Historical Society and University of Minnesota Heritage Partnership. The goal articulated in the exhibit introduction is to explore "how collaborative teaching could connect diverse students to public audiences and professional heritage management." The exhibit itself is this practice in action. The project claims two main objectives: to offer a critical perspective on how early immigrants, the primary residents of this flats area in the late 1800s and early 1900s, are represented in the archive and also to make these findings and interpretations public in collaboration with the Mill City Museum and Minnesota Historical Society. The exhibit is the generative product of these objectives and an invitation to the public see the flats afresh.

Located in the gallery just inside the museum's main doors the exhibit was free and open to the public during museum hours. As I lingered over the panels one afternoon, I noticed that many people spent only a few moments scanning the mostly black and white images and the larger headings on each board, pausing only on the images or stories that piqued their curiosity most. Yet even without a protracted viewing, the exhibit is designed to make an impact on viewers, to impart a fresh perspective on the now grassy flats, and to complicate ideas of local history.

The central device for producing this effect is contradiction: the primary source images show homes that once populated the flats and occasionally floated downstream during floods, bars that doubled as centers for cultural education for

children, and newspapers with headlines about evictions or crime beside headlines about good immigrants and the quaint village. The panels are a practice in contradiction, reproducing and upholding the contested nature of the site and its residents and revealing the variability of perceptions and opinions documented in historical records. Rather than attempting to create a unified narrative, the exhibit advocates for the multiple perspectives and experiences that populated the Bohemian Flats. This is public memory work at its best, allowing a space for voices that not only contradict the dominant story, but also diminish the idea that there is a singular story. Public memory work is becoming increasingly common in museums. Scholars Jens Andermann and Silke Arnolde-de Simine write that "by granting a voice to what has been left out of the dominant discourses of history, diversified and sometimes even incompatible narratives have supposedly been granted a locus in a museal space that seems no longer to aspire to any totalizing synthesis" (2012, 4). The Bohemian Flats exhibit as a project of public memory work not only resists simplifying or foreclosing this period and place, but also compels us as its audience to question how we contribute to the formation of history, and how we might be complicit in either opening space for alternative histories or obscuring them.

Throughout the exhibit, the panels pose provocative questions to engage even a fleeting audience. One in particular caught my attention and continues to resonate with me long after the exhibit has closed: the curators of the exhibit asked "How might we better remember the community that once flourished under the Washington Avenue Bridge?" The exhibit itself and the ripple effects it will continue to have on audiences provide part of the answer to this question. Yet the question is not about only this one site; it is about practice and the ways we practice memory and remembering. Perhaps part of the answer, then, is in the practice of advocating for the varied perspectives that shape our present before they become



obscured, before they need to be recovered in the archive. I wonder how contemporary immigrant populations in the Twin Cities, or anywhere, might respond to this exhibit. I wonder how they might answer the question about how we could better remember communities. Might we be able to see parallels between immigrant experiences

of the early 1900s and those of the early 2000s? Perhaps this exhibit is also asking us to work to ensure that our stories and communities are remembered well, to develop a contemporary practice of creating a polyvocal, contradictory, and rich public memory.

## Reference

Andermann, Jens, and Silke Arnold-de Simine. 2012. "Introduction: Memory, Community, and the New Museum." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 29 (1): 3-13.

## Recommended Citation

Moberg, Laurie. 2015. "'Remembering The Bohemian Flats': An Exhibit And A Practice Of Public Memory." *Open Rivers: Rethinking The Mississippi*, no. 1. <http://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/remembering-the-bohemian-flats-an-exhibit-and-a-practice-of-public-memory/>.

## About the Author

Laurie Moberg is the 2015 Sawyer Seminar Graduate Fellow in the Institute for Advanced Study and a PhD candidate in anthropology at the University of Minnesota. Her dissertation fieldwork examined recurrent episodes of flooding on Thailand's rivers as climate change disasters and their impact on human imaginings of the future and relationships with nature. She serves as assistant editor for *Open Rivers*.

PRIMARY SOURCES

# A HOME WORTH FIGHTING FOR: THE EVICTIONS AT THE BOHEMIAN FLATS

By Rachel Hines

When University of Minnesota students walk across the Washington Avenue Bridge between the East Bank and West Bank campuses, they not only travel over the Mississippi River, but also over a public park located on the west

river flats. While few probably notice this nondescript, grassy strip of land, fewer still are aware of its history. This park was once home to the Bohemian Flats, an Eastern European immigrant community occupied from the 1870s until the

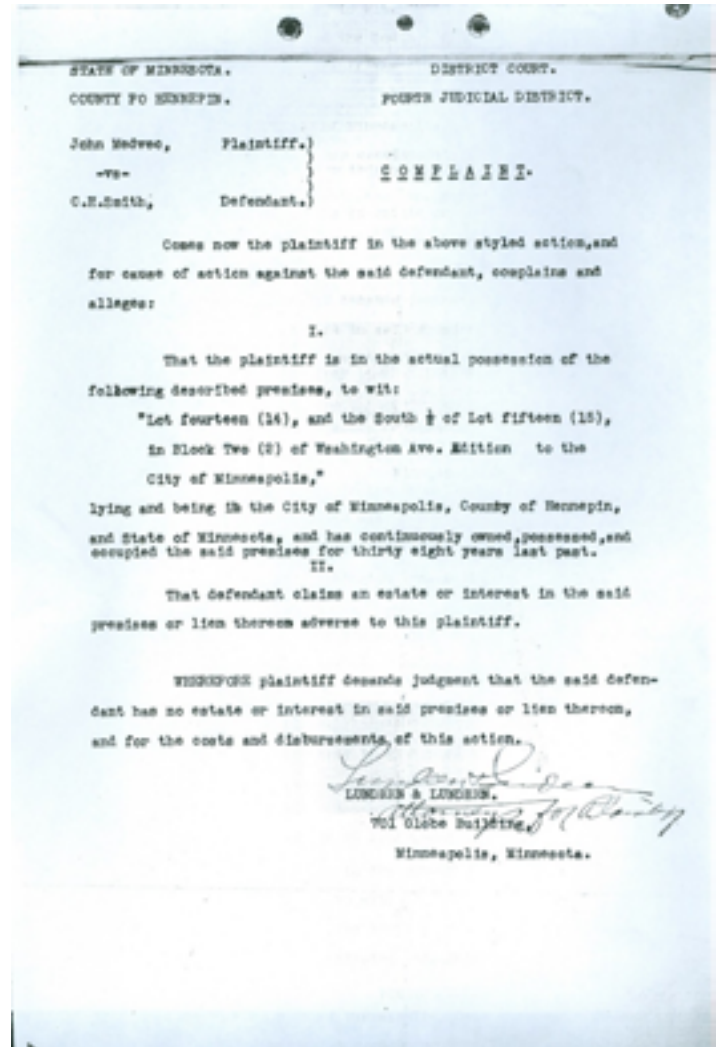


*Spring Flooding at the Bohemian Flats in 1897.  
Image Courtesy of the Hennepin County Library.*

1930s. Though today the riverfront is considered prime real estate, the neighborhood was viewed as a slum and faced issues ranging from spring floods and sanitation problems to poverty and crime. Yet, it was because the land was so unfavorable that the people of the Bohemian Flats were able to make it a home. The majority of the community immigrated from what is now the Slovak Republic and settled there upon their arrival in Minneapolis. Despite setbacks, many stayed for decades, finding the secluded neighborhood provided an opportunity to maintain traditional customs and speak native languages.

Though many living at the flats believed they owned their homes, they were considered squatters by law. With owners as prominent as D.W. Washburn of Washburn Mills (today General Mills) and Dorilus Morrison, the first Mayor of Minneapolis, the land changed hands a few times before it was sold to Charles H. Smith, a real estate developer, in 1921.[i] When Smith sent a rent collector down to the flats, many refused to pay a man they didn't know, prompting Smith to evict them. Led by John Medvec, eight residents, including John Blasco, Mrs. John Hreha, Mike Sabol, Susie Lash, Mike Rollins, Joe Filek, and John Gabrik, decided to challenge Smith in court in 1923.[ii] The documents from this case, kept in the Minnesota State Archives by the Minnesota Historical Society, tell a touching story about these people who once made their homes on the banks of the Mississippi.

The group of eight ranged from single young men to widowed housewives; the oldest, John Medvec, was in his 70s. They represented all social tiers at the flats, hailing from each of the three major streets: Mill Street, regarded as the upper stratum for its dry location on a terrace halfway up the bluff; Cooper Street, located in the middle; and Wood Street, known as the neighborhood's "lower class," located adjacent to the river. All eight residents were Slovak, illustrating the sense of place the Slovak community felt at the river's edge. Most of them had lived there for over a



*Excerpts from John Medvec's case file.  
Image courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

decade; John Medvec had lived there the longest, his 38 years almost equaling the duration of the neighborhood itself.

When they appeared in court, the group tried to claim squatter's rights, arguing it was unfair for Smith to charge rent for a riverbed. They explained they would gladly pay rent to the city, which provided them with clean water and electric lights, but did not feel allegiance to a man who had never offered them help. Though



many held the title of landlord, none made repairs to the shanties or offered help during flooding season. The land owners remained distant until the land was deemed desirable.

The court case gives depth to the story of the Bohemian Flats. To the people who lived there, it was not an undesirable place to live, but a home worth fighting for. John Medvec poignantly stated in his testimony, “I bought that little house in May 1884. I paid \$210 for it but never paid for the land. I’m there all the time. I move in the spring because the river rolls over my floor. I raised my family there.”<sup>[iii]</sup> Though legal documents are often perceived as dull, these records elicit compassion for the people who lived there, anger toward the man who evicted them, and frustration with the court system they bravely attempted to navigate in a second language. The documents are more than words on paper; they represent the community’s refusal to accept an end to their life along the Mississippi.

Though it is easy to sympathize with their story, it is impossible to argue with the deed to the land. Ultimately, it was decided that the residents at the Bohemian Flats had to pay rent to Smith or face eviction. Not only did they have to cover court fees, but it was also determined that some owed Smith back rents as well.<sup>[iv]</sup> Some agreed to pay Smith rent, but many decided to move

away, dispersing the once cohesive community. Just eight years later, the land was sold to the city of Minneapolis and the neighborhood was demolished, making room for a municipal barge terminal. Over 300 houses once dotted the banks of the river, but by 1931 a mere 14 remained, crowded along the edge of the bluff.

The evictions at the Bohemian Flats represented a change in the way the river was valued. When a new lock and dam was constructed, the Bohemian Flats became a useful place for barges to unload coal and oil. What was once considered an eyesore was now valuable. Though many mourned



*Excerpts from John Medvec’s case file.  
Image courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

the loss of the immigrant community, progress was regarded as inevitable and a barge terminal was deemed necessary. A *Minneapolis Journal* article noted that for the residents at the flats, “it was a losing fight. ‘Progress’ was against them—and progress always shatters traditions.”<sup>[v]</sup> In his review of *The Bohemian Flats for Minnesota History*, John T. Flanagan noted that the story of the flats “reminds us that the development of industry and commerce is sometimes possible only by sacrificing the picturesque non-conformity of our ancestors.”<sup>[vi]</sup>



Today, the Mississippi River is valued as a natural space. The Bohemian Flats has evolved along with it, creating a space to enjoy a view of the river. When Stefanie Kowalczyk and I created the exhibit “Remembering the Bohemian Flats: One Place, Many Voices” for the Mill City Museum, we not only portrayed the former immigrant community, but also presented the variety of ways the flats has been used over time and challenged our audience to question its future. Bohemian Flats Park is essentially a blank slate, with little interpretation and few facilities. How can we better

honor the people who once lived at the Bohemian Flats? The court documents are integral to telling their story. The fight for their homes differentiated the residents of the Bohemian Flats from those at similar communities, like Swede Hollow along Phalen Creek in St. Paul. There, immigrants quickly moved out of the ravine as soon as they possessed the necessary means. The Bohemian Flats was unique for its residents’ sense of place along the river and their willingness to fight for their home.

## Notes

[i] Case Files 213203, 213256-213260 and 213291-213292. Minnesota. District Court (Hennepin County). Civil Case Files and Index. Minnesota Historical Society.

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Works Progress Administration. *The Bohemian Flats*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1941.

[iv] Case Files 213203, 213256-213260 and 213291-213292. Minnesota. District Court (Hennepin County). Civil Case Files and Index. Minnesota Historical Society.

[v] “Picturesque River Flats Doomed Homes to Be Vacated by April 1.” *Minneapolis Journal*. 22 February 1931.

[vi] Flanagan, John T. “Review of *The Bohemian Flats*.” *Minnesota History*, 23 (1942): 68-69.

## Recommended Citation

Hines, Rachel. 2015. “A Home Worth Fighting For: The Evictions At The Bohemian Flats.” *Open Rivers: Rethinking The Mississippi*, no. 1. <http://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/a-home-worth-fighting-for-the-evictions-at-the-bohemian-flats/>.

## About the Author

Rachel Hines is an archaeologist whose work has taken her to several rivers, including the Noatak River in Alaska and the Klamath River in California. The majority of her research has focused on historic immigrant communities located on the flats of the Mississippi River in the Twin Cities, one of which is the Bohemian Flats.

PERSPECTIVES

# THE NEW MADRID LEVEE: A NEW TAKE ON AN ENDURING CONFLICT

By Olivia Dorothy, Patrick Nunnally

**O***pen Rivers* contacted Olivia Dorothy [OD], Associate Director for Mississippi River management at American Rivers. American Rivers is a national nonprofit group dedicated to improving the health of rivers and communities across the country. We wanted to learn more about American Rivers' work in the Mississippi River basin and, more particularly, understand its highest priority project, halting the proposed St. Johns-New Madrid levee.

She spoke by phone with Patrick Nunnally of *Open Rivers* [OR] in September 2015. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**[OR]** Your web site lists your title as “Associate Director, Mississippi River Management.” What do you do, and why is American Rivers so particularly interested in the Mississippi River?

**[OD]** My work is part of a plan under development by American Rivers where we take a more place-based approach to conservation, protection, and management of rivers. The Upper Mississippi is a priority basin for us, so we have established some offices and are expanding our programs within the basin.

I focus on the main stem of the Upper Mississippi, particularly the ways it is managed



*Mallard Jump by Chris Young*

by federal entities. I work with the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the EPA. There are many debates about operation and maintenance of the navigation channel, investments in the lock and dam system and things like that. We are intensely involved with agencies in hashing out solutions for a variety of stakeholders, so we aren't doing a huge public outreach right now. We'll be more visible as more offices open and our presence expands.

**[OR] We're talking today about the St Johns Bayou New Madrid Floodway project. What exactly has been proposed?**

[OD] The St. Johns Bayou/New Madrid Floodway is part of the broader, regional Mississippi River and Tributaries Project (MR&T). After the 1927 flood, which is cited as the most damaging flood on the Mississippi in recent history with massive loss of life, Congress and the Corps of Engineers decided that such a flood could never happen again, so MR&T was proposed and has guided a lot of work since then. Much of MR&T is a system of levees and floodways designed to protect communities. In certain areas, levees are designed to be breached during high water to take pressure off levees by putting water back in the floodplain. St. Johns/New Madrid is one of those places that allows for intentional breaching, which protects communities like Cairo IL and even as far away as St. Louis. When it's breached the levee is broken at a designated point, and is also broken downstream from there to allow water to leave the floodplain. One of the drainage points is an intentional gap in the levee near New Madrid MO. The gap at New Madrid allows water to be intentionally let into the floodplain during high water, even if the levee is not breached, so every couple of years an area the size of Washington DC is inundated.

The problem is that there's a lot of agricultural development in the floodplain now, even though the land has easements that allow for flooding.

With the expansion of agriculture and the increasing investment in ag facilities, there's growing opposition to the operation of the floodway. In 2011, during the last major flood in this part of the river, the State of Missouri sued the Corps of Engineers to try to stop the floodway from being used. They lost, and the Corps breached the levee upstream, but the delay caused a great deal of flood damage to the small community of Olive Branch IL.

Local people at New Madrid are proposing to close the gap in the levee there and to drain the wetland that has been there all along, to protect farm land and ag processing facilities that have been built more recently. If this is successful, it would close the largest remaining connection of the Mississippi to its floodplain in the middle Mississippi, which is the area between Memphis and the Missouri River junction at St. Louis. The connection is incredibly important for fish spawning and migrating birds; closing the levee and draining for agriculture would constitute a significant environmental degradation.

**[OR] Why is this such a bad idea?**

[OD] Well, there are a lot of reasons, including the impacts on fish spawning, bird migration, and all the other ecological benefits that come from having a substantial wetland connected to the river's main stem. It's also important to note that closing the levee will lead to further development in the floodway, which will in turn make the floodway much harder to operate in extreme floods. This is a broad regional impact.

American Rivers is part of a broad coalition that has come out in opposition to the project. The National Wildlife Federation, Prairie Rivers Network and the Missouri Coalition for the Environment all oppose it. Others against it include the NAACP, the City of Cairo IL and other communities who would be threatened by high water if the floodway could not be used.

A number of state and federal agencies have voiced concerns about the project and its impacts. The US Fish and Wildlife Service is concerned about the impact on the Middle Mississippi fishery, as are the Missouri Department of Conservation and the EPA. Even the peer review on the Corps of Engineers proposal has called into question the scientific and economic analysis the Corps has used to justify the project.

**[OR] So who could possibly be supporting this?**

[OD] Well, powerful landowners have political influence. One of the members of the Mississippi River Commission, folks who are appointed by the President to be on the commission that advises the Corps of Engineers, is a farmer and ag processing facility operator in this area. The project is very much a political beast, and a small number of people are influencing the Corps to keep it on the docket.

As history, the levee project was initially proposed by landowners in the 1950s. It got through the planning process the Corps had then, which was before there was a robust federal environmental review. It never got to the top of the funding list, and once environmental reviews were required it got delayed further. At one point the Corps even started to build it without review under the National Environmental Policy Act, but a judge made them take the work out. So the Corps, probably through its Memphis District, is dedicated to getting it completed.

**[OR] Is this just an example of competing uses for the same space, nature vs. human use of the land?**

[OD] Yes, we've had this age-old conflict ever since the rise of the conservation and environmental movements. There are limited spaces left where ecological functions can work, and those spaces are always threatened to be diminished by expanding human development.

**[OR] What is American Rivers' desired outcome at St Johns New Madrid? How might that outcome be brought about?**

[OD] Our "win," the goal, is to stop the levee from being built so this wetland and the relatively small floodplain can remain connected to the river. This connection would allow the natural flooding process to continue to happen seasonally.

The only way to stop it permanently is for the EPA to veto the project under the Clean Water Act. The EPA has authority to tell the Corps that the proposed project would cause an unreasonable degradation of water resources. Section 404c of the Clean Water Act permits a veto or the failure to grant a permit.

This provision has been very rarely used; the EPA has vetoed 13 projects in 42 years, which include 2 during the Bush administration and none during Obama's term. We think this project would meet the requirements because it is so egregiously bad.

It's important to remember that the Clean Water Act is not just about contaminants, although that's how most of us know it. It also governs dredging and fill permits, addressing operations in a floodplain that damage floodplain and wetland resources either by dredging or by disposing of dredged materials in a wetland.

**[OR] So, what is the larger river planning and management context that we need to see for this one particular project?**

[OD] A lot of the bigger context has to do with disconnection of the river from its floodplain. In the middle part of the Mississippi between 80% and 90% of the river is physically separated from the floodplain. On the upper river the figure is about 50%, but on the lower river, it's above 90%. This is important because interaction with the



floodplain is necessary for the river to operate well, to clean the water by sediment dropping out and to support fish and wildlife.

But it's not just about the animals and fish for their own sake; when we cut rivers off from floodplains we lose the ecosystem services that the floodplains provide. When the river is degraded, human lives along the river are also negatively impacted. The river does not exist in isolation from us. If nothing else, the presence of levees creates a false sense of security. Manipulating the river as much as we have will ultimately be a significant economic problem.

Ultimately, this is a significant and special place in the region; why take the one last place away?

**[OR] What are some of the broader principles/lessons that can be taken out of this particular case?**

[OD] Aside from the importance of keeping rivers and floodplains connected, I think the bigger lesson is how hard this work is. Protecting natural

form and function is really, really difficult. We have very few tools to use, and the deck is stacked against those who are working to preserve natural areas. We have to be really persistent and at the same time come out swinging against a project as bad as this one. This project has been on the books for generations and it hasn't gone away; a couple of my predecessors have fought this project. The St. Johns-New Madrid Floodway battle is one of the multi-generational fights on the river in this part of the country.

**[OR] So in that multigenerational struggle, what skills and abilities do you use most? What might you offer college students who want to get involved in work like what you are doing?**

[OD] I think my key advice on environmental advocacy and organizing is to make sure your basis is in science. Don't necessarily start out with a more general perspective. It's always very helpful to have a basis in the sciences, then do other work in whatever you find most interesting such as law, policy, or whatever.

## Recommended Citation

Dorothy, Olivia, and Patrick Nunnally. 2015. "The New Madrid Levee: A New Take on an Enduring Conflict." *Open Rivers: Rethinking The Mississippi*, no. 1. <http://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/new-madrid-an-interview-with-olivia-dorothy/>.

## About the Authors

Olivia Dorothy is associate director for Mississippi River management at American Rivers, which she joined in 2014. Prior to that she worked in Illinois Governor Pat Quinn's administration as an environmental policy advisor, with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, and with the Izaak Walton League of America. She has a background in natural resources and environmental sciences.

Patrick Nunnally coordinates the River Life Program in the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota. He serves as editor for *Open Rivers* and one of the lead scholars for the University's John E. Sawyer Seminar, "Making the Mississippi: Formulating New Water Narratives for the 21st Century and Beyond," funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

## TEACHING AND PRACTICE

# TEACHING ABOUT RIVERS

By Patrick Nunnally

Teaching about rivers is complicated. Higher education has for the past century and a half, or longer, been divided into academic disciplines such as History, Psychology, Chemistry and the like, and leavened by professional schools in realms such as law, planning, and engineering. Very recently, there are trends toward community-engaged learning, interdisciplinary classes, experiential learning and other patterns that get students and faculty out of the constrictions

imposed by studying just within one discipline.

This is where “river studies” comes in, but challenges remain. Rivers are unarguably complex biological and physical systems, so some instruction from scientific perspectives would seem to be in order. Rivers are also human systems, though, modified in material ways by what people do to them but also affected strongly by the complex webs of meanings and values associated with



*University of Minnesota campus and the Mississippi River.  
Image courtesy of University of Minnesota.*

rivers in general or one river in particular. It could be argued that much of the debate about policies affecting the Mississippi River accrues because of the river's iconic, near mythic, status. We don't hear as much about the "conflicts between nature and navigation" on the Ohio or Missouri, for instance.

These tangled threads make a class like the recent Honors Seminar "Living with the Mississippi" both a challenge and a tremendous opportunity. Honors Seminars are courses, offered exclusively to students in the University of Minnesota Honors Program, which take a deliberately interdisciplinary approach to subjects outside the normal realm of a department's offerings. Courses might take an intellectual approach to exploring a popular social phenomenon, for example, or pursue juxtapositions between subjects such as law and film, for example. In spring semester 2015, a seminar "Living with the Mississippi" was offered that coincided with a symposium "The Once and Future River: Imagining the Mississippi in an Era of Climate Change."

"Living with the Mississippi" was a service learning course, which means that there was a significant connection between the concerns raised in the course and one or more community partners. The University of Minnesota's campus is less than two miles from Minneapolis' St. Anthony Falls Regional Park, which is centered on the only waterfall along the entire length of the Mississippi River. In 1988 the State of Minnesota established the St. Anthony Falls Heritage Board to ensure that the historical qualities of the area around the falls were taken into account in local planning efforts. The Board, comprised of the Minnesota Historical Society, Hennepin County, The City of Minneapolis, the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board, along with state and local elected officials and appointed citizens, has advisory and persuasive power only.

Students in "Living with the Mississippi" were assigned a final, summative exercise to "Prepare a 'water story' for the St. Anthony Falls Heritage Board." The summative exercise, due at the end of the semester, asked students to incorporate all of their learning from the semester and to use that learning to inform a project that would provide beneficial impacts to the community partner. Students were invited to focus on water, and how stories about water might inform the work of the Heritage Board, as a means of drawing attention to the river that is, after all, at the heart of the St. Anthony Falls district. In the case of this class, students took advantage of the fact that we had been talking about water and devising new "social narratives" about water to make recommendations pertaining to policy, to urban design, and to festival/event possibilities.

All of the submitted projects were extraordinary, but two in particular stood out as suggesting something that could be implemented pretty much "as is."

### **Advancing the Reach: The Heritage Board and the Centrality of Water**

Aaron Grossman, a senior majoring in Political Science, proposed a project "Advancing the Reach: The Heritage Board and the Centrality of Water." Grossman acknowledged that the original reason for the establishment of the Heritage Board was to protect historic resources in and around St. Anthony Falls, an internationally-significant location for industrialized production of flour from Midwestern wheat. Recent concerns about water quality and quantity in Minnesota and elsewhere in the nation create urgency, Grossman argued, for the Heritage Board to address issues of water directly. Moreover, many visitors, particularly those from international locations, have a great deal of interest in the stories and cultures of American Indian people. The Heritage Board and its member agencies



have recently engaged more fully with indigenous people, particularly Dakota people for whom the St. Anthony area is part of their ancestral homeland.

### **Download the project: “Advancing the Reach: The Heritage Board and the Centrality of Water” by Aaron Grossman**

Grossman’s recommendations to the Heritage Board fell into two areas. First, he suggested that the Heritage Board ask entities proposing projects within the district to complete a “Water Impact Statement (WIS).” A program of WIS review would allow the Board and the public to make water central in the district, and would assess development projects in terms of their impacts on storm water through addition of impervious surfaces. To allow the Board to develop expertise with which water impacts could be assessed, Grossman recommended that the Board add a member, perhaps a hydrologist or other such water specialist from the Department of Natural Resources, watershed management organization, or related entity.

Grossman also recommended that the Board add a member from the local indigenous communities, ensuring that cultural sensitivities are foremost in Board selection of interpretive programs relating to indigenous people. In this way, he felt, the Board could be planning “with” local native people instead of “for” them or “about” them.

### **The Key to the Lock**

Sam Petrov, a junior majoring in Communication Studies, took a different approach to his project. Petrov’s project “The Key to the Lock,” focused on the Upper Lock at St. Anthony Falls, which was not yet closed at the time the course was held. (The lock was closed, by federal mandate, on June 10, 2015; the course had concluded the previous month.) Drawing on his understanding of the recently completed St. Anthony Falls

Regional Park Master Plan, Petrov envisioned the lock and the support facility for it as key interpretive facilities for the regional park. Repurposing these facilities for interpretation, argued Petrov, would also provide basic visitor services such as restrooms and water fountains, which are scarce in the public spaces around the falls, despite the fact that the park as a whole draws more than a million users per year.

### **Download the Project: “The Key to the Lock” by Sam Petrov**

One of the strengths of Petrov’s work is the detail with which he worked out how new interpretive facilities would allow for important updates to the stories currently told at and about the Falls area. There is currently no “official” digital platform for interpretation in the area that is maintained by any of the Heritage Board member agencies. Furthermore, the interpretation that does exist, largely signs in the physical landscape, address a relatively narrow range of subjects. Most concern some aspect or another of the historical exploitation of water power for hydroelectricity, to grind wheat into flour and, before that, as a sawmilling center. While it is true that these historical developments have international significance, there are many, many stories left out of current interpretations. If the area is ever to reach its full potential as a space of civic education and public interest, stories from a wider range of historical experience and current development will have to be conveyed in a dynamic, interactive manner.

Service learning such as that modeled in “Living with the Mississippi” can be a tricky business. It’s easy for a student to come across as a “know it all” making naïve recommendations without suitable awareness of nuance or context. Both Grossman and Petrov, though, grounded their recommendations in detailed knowledge of the relevant plans and policies governing their subjects. They also defined the problem they



chose to explore with appropriate awareness of Heritage Board existing concerns, so that their work aligned with concerns public staff are facing. Suitably grounded and contextualized, work such as these two projects offers distinct insights in large part because they don't know "that will never work" or "we tried that approach years ago already."

Good students, thinking clearly, can apply fresh thinking and insights to problems that challenge even veteran public staff. These students will be our "river leaders" in 2050; it's important that they get started early!

## Recommended Citation

Nunnally, Patrick. 2015. "Teaching About Rivers." *Open Rivers: Rethinking The Mississippi*, no. 1. <http://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/teaching-about-rivers/>. University of Minnesota campus and the Mississippi River. Image courtesy of University of Minnesota.

## About the Author

Patrick Nunnally coordinates the River Life Program in the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota. He serves as editor for *Open Rivers* and one of the lead scholars for the University's John E. Sawyer Seminar, "Making the Mississippi: Formulating New Water Narratives for the 21st Century and Beyond," funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

## GEOGRAPHIES

# MUSSELS: A RIVER LIFE ATLAS COLLECTION

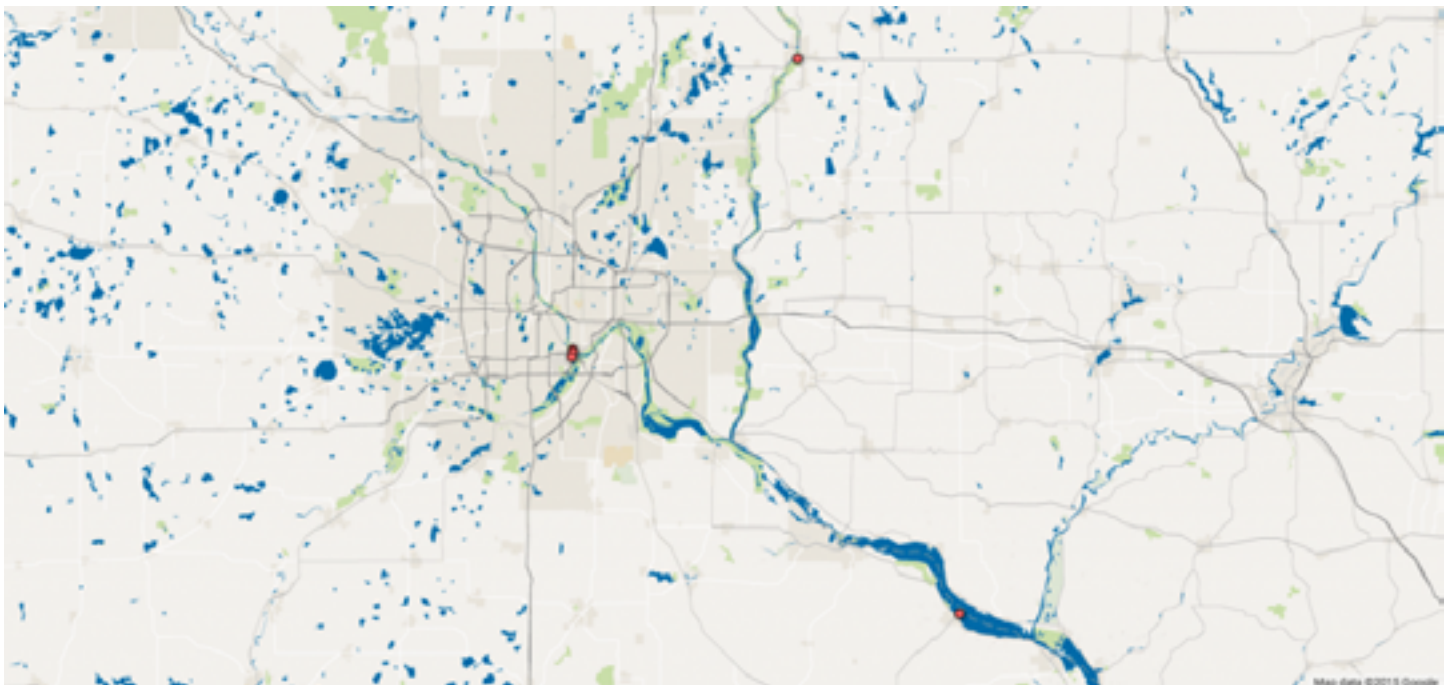
BY JOANNE RICHARDSON

One of the key components of people's sense of self is a sense of place, which becomes a meaningful precursor for knowing what courses of action to take, and why. To facilitate the development and exploration of a sense of place, particularly in the Upper Mississippi River, the University of Minnesota's River Life program developed a River Atlas to explore issues critical to understanding the river in a relevant and place-based manner.

Originally developed in 2010, [River Atlas](#) is a collaborative project of [River Life](#) and multiple partners, both on- and off-campus at the University of Minnesota. It is a searchable, curated collection of the people, places, and projects of significance on the Mississippi River and around the world. With over 340 individual entries,

collections have been prepared by students, partners, or River Life and may cover science, policy, engagement or all three. Some work relates to geographic features, St. Anthony Falls, Bdote, or Lake Pepin, for instance. Other work relates to Dakota people, mussels, floods, art, public agencies or organizations, interpretation, or heritage.

The River Atlas' collection detailing the history of mussels in the upper Mississippi River explores the history of the river itself. Through the seemingly quiet lives of these unassuming bivalves, we see how they have borne witness to the pollution and cleanup of the river, through the booming of new industries and their eventual decline, through the policy structures that threatened then saved them, and how the biological



*River Life's River Atlas showing the mussel collection.*

processes of their watery lives help us understand the systems of the river.

This collection was prepared by a research assistant from [Water Resources Science](#) at the University of Minnesota. Her work focused on mussels because it is a subject that is broadly interesting, and has significance for water specialists; she did historical research and talked to

Department of Natural Resources staff who were experts on the topic. The interdisciplinary and community-engaged work done here has relevance for public, student, and scholarly audiences alike.

The collection clusters in three main areas, the Mississippi River Gorge, Lake Pepin, and the St. Croix River.

Visit the collection at [River Life : River Atlas Mussel Collection](#)

## The Mississippi River Gorge



*Brooding display of the Black Sandshell mussel.*

*Courtesy of Mike Davis, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.*

This is an area where the pollution from upstream industry, sanitary, and stormwater discharges so significantly polluted the river that in 1926 the Minnesota Board of Health reported that “all fish life has been exterminated,” whereas previously the river had been rich with life. The

passage of the Clean Water Act of the early 1970s has improved water quality significantly, and this area is home to a flourishing mussel population and its impressive brooding displays.

# Lake Pepin



*Mussel propagation cages in Lake Pepin at the site of the present day public boat ramp. August 30, 1919.*

*Image courtesy of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.*

Mussel propagation cages in Lake Pepin at the site of the present day public boat ramp. August 30, 1919. Image courtesy of Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

Lake Pepin is a wide and slow moving section of the Mississippi River about 60 miles downstream from St. Paul. It was the site in the late 19th and early 20th centuries of a booming industry in which the mussel shells were harvested and used to make buttons. Worries about protecting the populations necessary for the industry led to early conservation efforts and some of the methods developed are still being used today to help regrow the mussel population in Minnesota.

# St. Croix River



*Winged Mapleleaf mantle display. Courtesy of Mike Davis, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.*

The St. Croix River is a tributary that joins the Mississippi River upstream of Lake Pepin. Relatively pristine in comparison to the more agricultural and industrial Mississippi, it is protected as a National Wild and Scenic River. Stretches of the river boast impressive biodiversity, and in the words of Aldo Leopold, “The first rule of intelligent tinkering is to keep all the pieces.” This genetic diversity of the mussels in the St. Croix has provided healthy and diverse populations to support repopulation of other rivers in the area as new areas of habitat become available.

Comparatively untouched by invasive Zebra mussels, this also provides scientists opportunities to study native mussels in isolation and help scientists do a better job reintroducing mussels into the Mississippi River by choosing propagation areas with similar conditions.



## Recommended Citation

Richardson, Joanne. 2015. "Mussels: A River Life Atlas Collection." *Open Rivers: Rethinking The Mississippi*, no. 1. <http://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/mussels-a-river-life-atlas-collection/>.

## About the Author

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PRIMARY SOURCES

# AN ENCHANTED LANDSCAPE: REMEMBERING HISTORIC SWEDE HOLLOW

By Stefanie Kowalczyk



*Photograph of Swede Hollow circa 1930.  
Image courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

Tucked away in a glacially carved ravine along Phalen Creek, a tributary of the Mississippi River, just a stone's throw from the Minnesota state capitol, sits Swede Hollow Park. Many of the people who use this park—its green spaces and paved bike and walkways—would probably not notice the fragments of foundation walls or other miscellany, which, strewn around the wooded areas, are one of the only indications of the thriving immigrant community that once called this place home. Swede Hollow, or *Svenska Dalen*, the Swedish Dale, as it was called by Euro-American settlers<sup>1</sup>, was home to numerous immigrant families between the 1850s and 1956. The area was initially used by Native American peoples and the remnants of six burial mounds in nearby Mounds View Park are a lasting testimony to the area's significance. When St. Paul was chosen as the site of Minnesota's capitol, its steamboat dock, and later railroad lines, became a main entry point for immigrants to the city. From here, it was easy for Swedish immigrants to walk to Swede Hollow, which is on the city's eastern boundary, beginning in the 1850s. They were followed by Italian and Mexican immigrants, among others, in the 1900s and 1930s respectively.

The community is infamous for being deemed a health hazard and burned to the ground in 1956 by the St. Paul Fire Department. Even at that time, the residents had no city water or sewer<sup>2</sup>. One of the more famous images of Swede Hollow is that of a burning home; it speaks powerfully to the magnitude of destruction and loss the community and its inhabitants endured. Today, many of those people who grew up in the Hollow, or who had family who lived there, remember the fire, but they also remember something more. They tell stories of a difficult life and the struggle to move out of the Hollow. They tell of Swede Hollow as its own little world, something never quite a part of the larger city. They tell stories of comradery. This is the essence of Swede Hollow as it is remembered today. These feelings are captured in an etching simply titled *Swede Hollow*

by George Earl Resler, a Minnesota printmaker. The etching, dating to 1915-1925, is currently part of the collections at the Minnesota Historical Society. I came across this photo while conducting background research on Swede Hollow in preparation for an archaeological excavation. Many of the black and white photographs, such as the image of the Hollow from the 1930s, show either no people, or one or two individuals standing stiffly side-by-side. As a result, these photographs often make it seem as though the residents of Swede Hollow were isolated, not only from the city, but from each other as well. The etching is different. The feeling of community is brought to life in the simple action of women doing laundry together while children play underfoot.

Life in the Hollow was not easy. Homes, many of which were originally fur-trapper cabins, had a ramshackle appearance as additions and repairs were done using repurposed wood as well as new lumber. The steep incline in parts of Swede Hollow meant that most houses clustered along the banks of Phalen Creek, which was problematic when the creek overran its banks. As a result, many homes were built so that the front portion was raised on small stilts and the backside was built right into the hill. In addition, outhouses lined the creek. Some were erected on stilts over the water, but some were simply placed over boards spanning the creek. Families sometimes kept small pens of animals, like chickens and pigs, and grew gardens on terraces along the hillside if they could. There were no roads into Swede Hollow. Instead, residents followed a set of stairs down from the city above. Railroads and tenement housing lined the bluff along Swede Hollow and, to the north, Hamm's Brewery dominated the landscape. Noise and garbage from the city above were inescapable.

While it was undoubtedly chaotic, there was also comfort in living in the Hollow for many residents. Away from the prying and judgmental eyes of the city, many immigrants were happy to





*Swede Hollow by George Earl Resler, circa 1915-1925.  
Image courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

be able to continue practicing traditions and using native languages. Nels Hokanson, whose family immigrated to Swede Hollow in 1887, wrote of his time living there, saying, “They lived much as they had in Sweden, with a penchant for snuff, potato sausage, pickled herring, *flat bröd*, and especially coffee, which they drank at all hours. Friends often came to share the warmth, drink coffee, take snuff or smoke their curved Swedish pipes...under a picture of King Oscar II of Sweden”<sup>3</sup>. Gentile Yarusso, an Italian immigrant who lived in the Hollow in the early 1900s wrote of his time there, “Our people chose this place because they were with their own countrymen with familiar faces, familiar noises, gestures, facial expressions”<sup>4</sup>. Yet even when they were seemingly not the same, residents of the Hollow would help their neighbors. Alberta Silva Rodriguez, one of the last people to live in Swede Hollow, remembers her mother giving onions, garlic, and peppers to their



Italian neighbors in exchange for homemade bread. She remembers, “I don’t know how [they communicated], but they did”<sup>5</sup>.

For many, Swede Hollow was a stepping stone, a temporary stop on the way to a better life. Resler’s etching of the community, a community which was for a long time officially ignored by the city<sup>6</sup>, reflects the poor living conditions for the residents and the hardworking people who called it home. But it also stands as an illustration of the pride felt by those whose families had humble beginnings in the Hollow. While Swede Hollow may not have been an ideal place to live for most, it was for some a physical manifestation of their determination to begin a new life in Minnesota.

## Notes

1 Nyberg, Polly and Jerome Bette. “Swede Hollow: A Community’s Love Affair With Its Past.” *Common Ground*. 3(Fall 1974): 4-11.

2 Price, Mollie. “Swede Hollow: Sheltered Society for Immigrants to St. Paul.” *Ramsey County History*. 17 (1982): 12-22.

3 Hokason, Nels M. “I Remember St. Paul’s Swede Hollow.” *Minnesota History*. 41 (1969): 362-371.

4 Trimble, Steve. “The Sage of Swede Hollow.” St Paul Historical website. <http://saintpaulhistorical.com/items/show/294>

5 Ibid.

6 Price, Mollie. “Swede Hollow: Sheltered Society for Immigrants to St. Paul.” *Ramsey County History*. 17 (1982): 12-22.

## Recommended Citation

Kowalczyk, Stefanie. 2015. “An Enchanted Landscape: Remembering Historic Swede Hollow.” *Open Rivers: Rethinking The Mississippi*, no. 1. <http://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/an-enchanted-landscape-remembering-historic-swede-hollow/>.

## About the Author

Stefanie Kowalczyk is a masters student in Cultural Heritage Management at the University of Minnesota. Swede Hollow on the Mississippi River in St. Paul was the site of her thesis fieldwork. Her research interests focus on the intersections of public archaeology, education, and community revitalization projects.