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The Big One, the Flood of 1927

By David Syring

Nothing brings a river into public awareness as effectively as a flood. The 1993 Mississippi flood. The 1997 Red River flood. The Ohio River flood last spring. Most Americans know about these stories, but none of them match the spring surge of 1927 — the "Great Mississippi Flood."

John M. Barry's new book, Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America, ($27.50, Simon & Schuster) engagingly tells the story of that flood and its aftermath. The book traces the history of river management prior to the flood and convincingly argues that the devastation wrought by the high waters, while ostensibly a "natural" disaster, was at least partially caused by human mismanagement of the lower river.

Barry compares the flood of 1993 with the one of 1927:

At the peak of the great Mississippi River flood of 1993, the river in Iowa carried 435,000 cubic feet of water a second; at St. Louis, after the Missouri River added its waters, it carried 1 million cubic feet a second. It was enough water to devastate the Midwest and make headlines across the world. In 1927... the Mississippi River would be carrying in excess of three million cubic feet of water each second.

In addition to describing the river's sweep across the Delta, Barry traces the engineering, political, economic and social processes that affected the flood and were transformed by it. The (Flood of 1927 continued on page 2)
Great Flood changed river planning policy; catapulted Herbert Hoover to the presidency; accelerated the migration of blacks from the South, ending the control of black labor by white Southerners; and helped topple New Orleans’ claim as the center of political and economic activity in the South.

Barry’s story begins in the optimistic age of engineering, during the nineteenth century, a time when “progress” became a national religion and the applied science of engineering promised to control the Mississippi River.

To control the Mississippi River — not simply to find a modus vivendi with it, but to control it, to dictate to it, to make it conform — is a mighty task. It requires more than confidence; it requires hubris. It was the perfect task for the nineteenth century.

In the mid-1800s, two men emerged to argue the fate of the Mississippi River. Andrew Atkinson Humphreys, who became chief of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, fought fiercely over control of the Mississippi with James Buchanan Eads, a largely self-taught entrepreneur and engineer who was later ranked with Leonardo Da Vinci and Thomas Edison as one of the five greatest engineers of all time. “The consequences of their fight,” writes Barry, “are still felt on the Mississippi today.”

At the argument’s center was the question of how best to deal with the Mississippi’s well-known tendency to overflow its banks and cover its floodplain, an area which, especially in the Delta region of the lower river, is said to contain some of the most fertile soil in the world. Barry writes:

There were two basic, and to some extent contradictory, approaches that engineers historically embraced to protect this valley from floods: levees or outlets. Levees confined the Mississippi; outlets released it. Levees represented man’s power over nature; outlets represented man’s accommodation to nature.

Given nineteenth century America’s faith in human activity, it’s not hard to guess which approach prevailed.

The Mississippi presents one of the most complex engineering problems in the world, one that Barry says remains unresolved:

... the complexity of the Mississippi exceeds that of nearly all other rivers. Not only is it acted upon; it acts. It generates its own internal forces through its size, its sediment load, its depth, variations in its bottom, its ability to cave in the riverbank and slide sideways for miles... engineering theories and techniques that apply to other rivers, even such major rivers as the Po, the Rhine, the Missouri, and even the upper Mississippi, simply do not work on the lower Mississippi, which normally runs far deeper and carries far more water. (In 1993, for example, the flood waters that overflowed, with devastating result, the Missouri and upper Mississippi put no strain on the levees along the lower Mississippi.)

The strategy that Humphreys eventually forced into policy, though his own early research suggested it would not work, was to prevent “levees only” policy on the lower Mississippi. Eads, whose engineering brilliance and entrepreneurial savvy had built the first bridge across the Mississippi at St. Louis, and who had successfully used the river’s own force to open the mouth of the river for large, ocean-going ships, dismissed the “levees only” approach as faulty reasoning.

The expensive and extensive levee system built and maintained by the Mississippi River Commission (created in 1879) on the lower reaches of the river created a false sense of security among Delta residents. In the spring of 1927, with the Mississippi and its tributaries swollen from fall rains and runoff from deep snowpacks up north, months of intense and widespread thunderstorms pushed the levees past their limits. Whole areas collapsed, creating “crevasses” that released immense walls of water, driven higher than a natural flood by the impounding levees. The water swept away everything in its path.

Barry describes the flood’s first crevasse, at Mounds Landing, Mississippi:

The crevasse was immense. Giant billows rose to the tops of tall trees, crushing them. While the force of the current gouged out the earth. Quickly the crevasse widened, until a wall of water three-quarters of a mile across and more than 100 feet high — later its depth was estimated at as much as 130 feet — raged onto the Delta... It was an immense amount of water. The crevasse at Mounds Landing poured out 468,000 second-feet onto the Delta, triple the volume of a flooding Colorado, more than double a flooding Niagara Falls, more than the entire upper Mississippi ever carried, including in 1993. The crevasse was pouring out such volume that in 10 days it could cover nearly 1 million acres with water 10 feet deep. And the river would be pumping water through the crevasse for months.

The repercussions of the flood would be felt throughout the nation,
looking for better opportunities and transforming the cultures of many northern cities.

The loss of black laborers devastated the Delta’s economy, and eventually New Orleans lost its place at the center of the South’s economy, to be eclipsed by Houston, Atlanta and other cities.

The river planning consequences were equally immense. Barry writes that the flood ended “...forever the argument over whether levees alone could control the Mississippi River, forcing an admission even from Army engineers that nothing could control the Mississippi. So man would have to find a way to accommodate it.”

Barry’s appendix on the state of the river today points out that accommodation has not been wholeheartedly embraced. Later attempts to control the Mississippi include a huge (and many argue flawed) control dam completed in 1963 to prevent the river’s flow from naturally seeking a new path to the sea where the Atchafalaya River flows out of the Mississippi. Recent studies also show that levees still cut off the river from almost all of its floodplain.

The current debate about management on the Upper Mississippi suggests that a compromise between human needs and the demands of the river is far from settled.

David Syring is associate editor of Big River.

Vicksburg and consisting primarily of engineers, made its first inspection tour of the upper river. None of the seven commissioners are from this area of the country, and for some, the cruise on the towboat Mississippi was the first glimpse of the Upper Mississippi.

The new, 6,300 horsepower towboat is the river flagship of the Army Corps of Engineers.

On August 12 Corps officials, river planners, environmental activists, industry representatives and journalists were invited aboard the Mississippi to have a look at the commission and voice their concerns about the management of the river. They checked each other out as the monster boat cruised passed herons and egrets, whitetail fawns half-hidden in island foliage, small towns and habitat restoration projects between La Crosse, Wisconsin, and Lock and Dam 9 near Harper’s Ferry, Iowa.

Congress created the Commission in 1879 to improve navigation, prevent floods and facilitate trade. The Commission’s focus, especially after the disastrous flood of 1927, has been on flood control and navigation from Cairo, Illinois, to the Gulf. Both the Corps division and the commission are headed by Major General Phillip Anderson.

Wisconsin Congressman Ron Kind, D-La Crosse, said he is leading an effort in Congress to add members from the Upper Mississippi to the commission.

The lower river is deep and lined with levees. New to the commission-
Waterman's,
Long View on
Lake Pepin

By Ken McCullough

From the dining room of Waterman's, looking south down Lake Pepin, you just know that this spot on Central Point on the north end of Lake City has always been a favorite place to while away an afternoon, since way before there was a town here. Every spot in Waterman's takes full advantage of a spectacular view of the lake.

Rick and Teresa Marciano own and operate Waterman's. Rick says that he's been involved in the food service business since he was 12, and if back then he had closed his eyes and imagined an ideal restaurant in an ideal setting, it would have been pretty close to what he has now.

The Marcianos bought Waterman's three years ago. Before that there were several other incarnations of the restaurant: in the 1930s to early 50s it was The Shanty, in the late 50s it became Fudd and Flo's, then, in the late 70s, Souza's Pizzaria. Next door to Waterman's is Digger's Bait Shop. Digger, who has white hair and a clipped white mustache, is the son of Fudd and Flo. Waterman's opened in 1983.

Rick Marciano is originally from Long Island and owned a bar in downtown Chicago for ten years. He read an ad for Waterman's one February, and reasoned that if they saw the place in the dead of the Minnesota winter, they would have no illusions. They fell in love with it.

On average busy days Waterman's serves 500 to 600 people, and upwards of 900 on peak days. With a deck, dining rooms and banquet facilities, they can seat 350 people. Their chef, Todd Diepenbrock, 24, has learned his trade quickly but thoroughly, and his instincts seem to be faultless.

Waterman's makes its own dressings, bakes its own dinner rolls, hand-trims all the meats, and all the fish is fresh. The wine coolers are made from scratch and many desserts are prepared in house. Most of the items on the lunch menu are in the $6 to $8 range. Dinner entrees range from $12 to $20. It attracts a local following, and many of the customers arrive by water. There also seem to be a fair number of regulars who come up from Winona and La Crosse and down from the Twin Cities.

The menu boasts a good cross-section of beers, domestic and foreign. The wines are affordable and well-chosen. If you want to impress your prom date you can, of course, order a bottle of Dom Perignon at $140 a pop.

All the items on Waterman's lunch menu are succulent and larger-than-life. Marciano obviously honed this menu in his Chicago bar. He tells me that many of his customers are "older" and are used to Midwestern cuisine, hence, the food is "subtly" spiced. Big band music plays in the background, for the older customers, but Marciano says he plans to switch to some new tapes, which are more eclectic and contemporary. He plans to keep varying the menu, too, and will soon add Cajun dishes, including crab legs. The lunch service was cheerful, attentive and efficient. The raspberry vinaigrette dressing on my salad brought it to life. Through the window we watched jet skiers galore, a titanium-white cigar boat passed by, and a rainbow from Wisconsin across the lake to somewhere near Read's Landing.

For dinner, I ordered the salmon stuffed with crab, knowing salmon is often dry if not cooked just right, but Todd prepared it perfectly. The stuffing was delicate and complemented the salmon, as did the basil cream sauce. The wild rice was covered with steamed red and green peppers, cauliflower, squash and carrots. I had a glass of Chardonnay.

As I cleared my plate with tasty grasshopper pie, a light rain started to rustle the leaves of the cottonwood between Waterman's and Digger's. Digger emerged, and his Lab hopped into the Bronco next to him. They were done for the day. I settled up and headed south. The sky had cleared and — I'm not making this up — there was a rainbow from Wisconsin across the lake to somewhere near Read's Landing.

Ken McCullough is a freelance writer, poet and translator who lives in Winona, Minnesota.

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editors:

The St. Paul (Minn.) Yacht Club is planning new winter boat storage 3/4 mile upstream from its present center of activities. This spring, a rumor developed that the club had an interest in condemning three Harriet Island businesses for its expansion plans.

August Big River states that "Discussion about development on Harriet Island...include possibly forcing the sale of land occupied by three small businesses near the St. Paul Yacht Club." This only lends substance to the rumor that developed earlier this spring.

All of the members of the club regret this rumor because it has caused a great deal of tension on Harriet Island. The rumor is not true. There are no plans and there never were any plans by the St. Paul Yacht Club to occupy the space of these three businesses.

The Yacht Club looks to the future to continue to develop and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with community groups and local businesses using Harriet Island.

Dennis Olivero
St. Paul Yacht Club

September 1997
Festivals on the River
Fall 1997

Wisconsin Tourism Info 1-800-372-2737

Minnesota
Tourism Info 1-800-657-3700

Iowa Tourism Info 1-800-345-4692

Illinois Tourism Info 1-800-223-0121

A rainy afternoon.
Aquatic Hitchhikers

Minnesota — It’s hard for people to thumb a car ride in the 1990s, but water plants have no trouble hitching from one place to another. According to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), one in five inspected boats was illegally transporting water plants. While few of the plants discovered during DNR road checks were invasive species, such as Eurasian watermilfoil, DNR officials worry that this indicates the likely spread of exotics. The DNR recently discovered five more lakes in Minnesota infested with milfoil.

Meanwhile, the Wisconsin DNR wants citizens to help locate invasive purple loosestrife. Residents can report locations and sizes of loosestrife populations by contacting DNR research ecologist Brock Woods at DNR-Integrated Science Services, 1350 Femrite Dr., Monona, WI 53716; or call (608) 221-6349; or email, woods@dnr.state.wi.us. Woods says purple loosestrife beetles, which appear to be effective at controlling the wetland weed (see Big River, June 1993), could be sent to your area by next spring, according to the La Crosse Tribune (8-11-97).

EMP Funding

Washington, D.C. — Congress is considering a report and recommendation from the Army Corps of Engineers to reauthorize and fund the Environmental Management Program (EMP), which was established in 1986. The report recommends that Congress enhance funding and authorization.

In return for expanding navigation with a larger lock and dam at Alton, Illinois, Congress created the EMP to monitor the river’s long-term health and to restore wildlife habitat. While the new lock was funded and completed according to schedule, the EMP has struggled to maintain its annual funding level, set in 1986 at $19.455 million. Last year, the EMP received only $16.7 million, halting several habitat restoration projects and cutting back monitoring. President Clinton’s proposed 1998 budget cut the program’s funding to $14 million.

What’s Biting

Alma, Wis. — When Jane Wieczorek caught a fish near her home in Buffalo City she knew what it wasn’t, a sunfish, but she didn’t know what the foot long, pound-and-a-quarter, toothy critter was.

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources biologist, Brian Brecka, identified the catch as a healthy piranha.

Brecka speculated that the fish, which is native to South America, was likely put into the Mississippi recently, thought it may have survived a longer period by living near the Dairyland Power plant. Piranhas have been caught in Wisconsin near power plants, which discharge warm water. The fish cannot survive in colder water.

The piranha was given to Randy Anderson, owner of the Alma Sports Shop, according to the Winona Daily News (8-16-97). The fish, however, bit the dust after two days in Anderson’s bait tank.

Mad Bomber for Blast

Springfield, Ill. — Employees of Fireworks Partners, Inc./Mad Bombers endangered public safety during the July 3 fireworks display where an explosion killed three company workers, according to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

The DNR levied the maximum allowable fine, $5,000, against Andrew James, owner of the company. The DNR found that none of the employees handling explosives that night were licensed, as required by state law. The DNR is sending its findings to Madison County state’s attorney for possible criminal prosecution.

Fishing Tournaments

Fishing tournaments have become big business, with trade shows, laser light spectacles, internet sites, winners pulling in $300,000 purses and big name corporate sponsors. The Bass Masters Classic, held in early August this year, has grown from its small-scale beginnings in 1967, to pack thousands of people into an arena to watch televised weigh-ins.

The fish have, in a sense, become “extras” on the set, as pointed out by Dalton Bobe, an amateur fisherman who qualified for this year’s classic by winning a regional competition, according to an Associate Press story (8-6-97).

“A lot of people want to be professional fishermen, but what they don’t realize is that you don’t make a living fishing, you make a living promoting. It doesn’t matter so much how you fish, it’s how you can promote.”

Tournament organizers are asking the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to relax some regulations for tournament anglers. They want contestants to be allowed to possess more than the legal limit of certain game fish for televised weigh-ins. Earlier this year, for example, the In-Fisherman Professional Walleye Trail asked to waive the limit for walleyes on the St. Louis River for a 1998 tournament.

The DNR cannot grant such requests, but a state rule currently being considered would authorize the DNR
Ducky Waterfowl Season

Five years of good rains in duck breeding areas have created rich habitat for migrating ducks and have led the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to let states on the Mississippi Flyway allow a 60-day duck season, with a six-duck-per-day bag limit this year. In Minnesota, that would be the most liberal duck season since 1958. Duck populations are estimated at nearly 100 million, though some hunters along the Mississippi may not see as many ducks as they might wish. Wet conditions and ample feeding to the west of the Mississippi may encourage many ducks to migrate through the prairies.

Regulations are developed using Adaptive Harvest Management, which sets rules according to yearly assessments of waterfowl numbers. 

Canada goose hunting seasons will be similar to last year’s, while snow, blue and Ross’ goose seasons and limits will be expanded.

Corps Case Settled

Memphis, Tenn. — Sixteen African-American, seasonal barge workers won a settlement arguing that the Army Corps of Engineers systematically passed them by while advancing white employees to year-round status. In the 64 years that dredges have worked the Mississippi, no African-Americans have been promoted from seasonal to permanent positions. Seasonal workers earn less than permanent workers and are laid off from fall until late spring.

The Defense Department reported that the Corps dredge Hurley, was "permeated with malicious and reckless indifference toward African-American employees." The workers will each get about $62,500 to compensate for receiving lower wages than permanent workers, according to an Associated Press story (7-25-97).

Signs of the Times

La Crosse County, Wis. — Current requirements for signs announcing local boating regulations are too costly, according to La Crosse County Harbor Commissioners. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) requires that regulations be displayed in 3-inch letters.

Commissioners say the resulting 4-foot-by-8-foot signs at the 20-plus boat landings in the county on the Mississippi and Black rivers would cost too much. Each sign would cost $200 to produce, plus the added expenses of installation and upkeep. The county asked the DNR to change its Administrative Code to allow counties to post and enforce local laws without undue costs.

Bucks for Bike Trails

Illinois — Bike trails throughout Illinois, including along the Mississippi, got a big boost when Gov. Jim Edgar approved $3.4 million in grants for 27 communities. Towns on the river receiving grants include: Fulton ($26,300), Rock Island Forest Preserve District ($150,000), and Savanna ($10,000) according to Outdoor Illinois (August 1997).

- The Department of Natural Resources administers the bike path program. The funds will help complete the trail system from Rock Island to Savanna.

Swum the River

Atchafalaya Bay, La. — Billy Curmano is scheduled to complete 10 years and over 2,000 miles of swimming, rapping, singing and dancing his way down the Mississippi River next month.

The Rushford, Minnesota-based performance artist began “Swimmin’ the River” at Lake Itasca in July 1987. With the help of many volunteer crew members and supporters on shore, Curmano spent much of the next 10 summers extending his performance and promoting awareness of river problems. He had close calls with touts and asked the Army Corps of Engineers to install water slides on the locks and dams to make it easier for river swimmers (see Big River, October 1994). He postponed the swim during the Flood of 1993 and helped with sandbagging.

On the morning of October 4 he plans to brave sharks and alligators to make the official last stroke at the mouth of the Atchafalaya River. That evening in New Orleans he will celebrate and perform at the opening of his exhibit, “Selections from Objects Collected and Created in the Course of a Swim” (see River Calendar).

Big River Moves

Winona, Minn. — After three city-bound years, Big River moved its office to within sight of the river in August. The new office is on the second floor of 111 Riverfront, Suite 204, at the foot of Lafayette St., overlooking Levee Park and the Main Channel.

We’ll have an open house on September 12, from noon to 5:30. Drop by, enjoy the view and join us for smoked carp and other river treats.

No Prison for the Depot

Savanna, Ill. — The Illinois Department of Corrections didn’t pick the Savanna Army Depot for the site of either of its next two prisons. The Depot is in the process of closing (see Big River, August 1997). Several hundred acres of the site on the Mississippi River are earmarked for development. The Savanna Army Depot Local Redevelopment Authority had worked to get a prison on part of the depot.

Steve Haring, executive director of the Redevelopment Authority, said committee members will evaluate their effort and consider making a bid for the next prison project.

“We’re looking at seven or eight other opportunities — from a youth academy to a telemarketing firm,” he said. 

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Big River
River Calendar

Special Events & Festivals

September
4 Downtown Hoedown, St. Coud, Minn.
4-6 Audubon fundraiser, 9 a.m. - 6 p.m., Dubuque Econo Foods, (319) 556-5212.
6 Butterfly Tagging Demonstration, Bellevue (Iowa) State Park, (319) 872-5830.
6-7 Great Mississippi Sailboat Race, Andy Wilberding, (319) 582-2681.
6-7 Kellogg (Minn.) Watermelon Festival.
6-7 Villa Louis Carriage Classic, Prairie du Chien, Wis.
7 Classic Bike Tour along the Mississippi, St. Paul, Minn. (612) 372-3424.
12 Open House, Big River's new office overlooking the Mississippi, 111 Riverfront at the foot of Lafayette, noon-5:30 p.m.
12-14 Riverfest, Dubuque, Iowa.
14 Hog Roast, Lynxville, Wis.
14 Erin Feis, Rock Island, Ill.
15-21 River Rendezvous, Bloomington, Minn.
20-21 Take A Kid Hunting Weekend, Minn.
20 Flood Run, Twin Cities south on the Great River Road.
20-21 European Oktoberfest, Minneapolis.
20-21 Laura Ingalls Wilder Days, Pepin, Wis.
20-21 Take A Kid Hunting Weekend, Minn.
20-21 Classic Bike Tour along the Mississippi, St. Paul, Minn. (612) 372-3424.
27-28 Voyageur Encampment, Wtlliam and McGregor, Iowa.
27-28 Victorian Fair, Wtona, Minn.
27-28 Riverssance, East Davenport, Iowa.
27-28 Minnesota-Wisconsin Boundary Area Commission, open house and meeting, Hudson, Wis., (612) 436-7131.

Meetings & Hearings

September
4 Minnesota-Wisconsin Boundary Area Commission, Miss. Regional Committee, 10 a.m., AmericInn, Winona, Minn.
9-10 EMP Coordinating Committee, Radisson Inn, St. Paul, Minn., (309) 794-5605.
11 Lower Wisconsin State Riverway Board, 5 p.m., Tower Hill State Park, Spring Green, (608) 739-3188.
11 Dubuque Audubon Society, 6 p.m., potluck, Swiss Valley Nature Center.
12-13 Sons & Daughters of Pioneer Rivermen, annual meeting, Marietta, Ohio.
October
20-21 Laura Ingalls Wilder Days, Pepin, Wis.
20-21 European Oktoberfest, Minneapolis.
20-21 Billy Cumano's Final Stroke celebrations, (507) 864-2716.

Billy Cumano’s Final Stroke celebrations, (507) 864-2716.
Exhibit: Selections from Objects Collected and Created in the Course of a Swim
Mid-Sept. thru Oct. Exhibit, Winona Art Center, Winona, Minn.
Oct. 4 Exhibit opening, Contemporary Art Center, 900 Camp Street, New Orleans, 9:30 p.m. performance.
Oct. 24 Reception, Catherine E. Nash Gallery, Wiley Hall, U. of Minn.

Almanac

By Kenny Salwey

September seems in a quandary. Will it be summer or autumn or a mixture of both?

In September the breath of the big river often rises to hang in thick clouds until the mid-morning sun burns it off. If we could gain a bird's-eye view, we could easily trace its tributaries in the thick fog banks drifting lazily down the valleys. Sound seems to travel farther these days. Bird songs are not plentiful -- warblers and their kin are busy getting ready for the long, hard journey south. Some are already on their way. The squirrels and chipmunks work feverishly on their layaway plan for winter. Many worried aloud that the upper river may be managed more like the lower river primarily for shipping.

After too long in the enclosed meeting room, a few speakers bemoaned not being able to see the river. Upon orders from the commission's secretary, the crowd flung open the curtains between them and the beauty of the passing scene.

Molly McGuire is assistant editor of Big River.

Effigy Mounds National Monument, Marion, Iowa, 319-873-3491.
September
13-21 Archaeology Week
27-28 Hawkwatch Weekend

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Meetings & Hearings (Commission continued from page 3)

ers were the towering bluffs, sharp meanderings, rich backwaters and myriad recreational boats of the upper river.

"I've been on this commission for 18 years, and I saw more pleasure boats yesterday [on Lake Pepin] than I've seen in all these years," stated commissioner Sam Angel of Lake Village, Arkansas.

Also new to commission members were the passions and concerns of the people who avidly use the Upper Mississippi in a variety of ways.

Locals asked the commissioners to give environmental issues at least equal weight with river shipping. Many worried aloud that the upper river may be managed more like the lower river primarily for shipping.

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