Winona State University

OpenRiver

Volume 6 – 1998

Fall 9-1-1998

Big River

Reggie McLeod
Big River, reg@bigrivermagazine.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://openriver.winona.edu/bigriver1998

Part of the Life Sciences Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://openriver.winona.edu/bigriver1998/9

This Newsletter is brought to you for free and open access by the 1990s at OpenRiver. It has been accepted for inclusion in Volume 6 – 1998 by an authorized administrator of OpenRiver. For more information, please contact klarson@winona.edu.
Master of the Lock

By Mi Ae Lippe-Butterbrodt

Being a lockmaster requires great flexibility and a willingness to "fill in to do just about anything," according to lockmaster Dale Ebner. "Anything" includes inspecting equipment, coordinating staff schedules, talking to salespeople ("who are always coming through the door"), conducting safety meetings and employee training, logging boats, mowing lawns, choosing contractors and filling out lots of paperwork.

"I'd rather be outside than at the desk," admits Ebner. Not necessarily on the river, though. "I used to get out on the river a lot," he said as he watched the Frank H. Peavey enter the 600-foot by 110-foot lock, "but now I just get away from it" on vacations and days off. One of Ebner's hobbies is rebuilding motorcycles, an avocation definitely not connected to the river.

At work at Lock and Dam 6 at Trempealeau, Wis., his biggest challenge is mastering the computer systems. "Just when you got one (Lockmaster continues on page 2)

Drawdown Cancelled

By Gary W. Kramer

An uncooperative river forced the Army Corps of Engineers to suspend an experimental Mississippi River drawdown that was three years in the planning.

The drawdown of Pool 13, which stretches from Sabula to Clinton, Iowa, was requested by the Fish and Wildlife Interagency Committee (FWIC), a five-state group of representatives from federal and state natural resource agencies.

(Drawdown continues on page 3)

What's Inside...

Reader Survey Results ........ 4
Big River Awards ................. 4
Fall Festival Map .................. 5
Current Events
Heritage River, Fish Kills
Pfiesteria ............................ 6
River Calendar & Almanac
Harvest Fests, Hawk Watch ....... 8
down,” he sighs, “they get in some­thing new.” A computer network operated by the Army Corps of En­gineers’ Rock Island District con­nects all the locks and dams on the Upper Mississippi. Each day the St. Paul District sends instructions to ev­ery lock and dam telling each one how to position its gates based on predicted water elevations for that day.

At each lock and dam, information on every ves­sel locked through is logged into the computer, including name, type, commodities if com­mercial, time and date. Even when the system does oc­casionally go down, Ebner says, all 28 locks and dams are fully operable and safe. After all, the statistics used to be logged by hand before computers, and now messages can be faxed to the locks and dams.

The Corps constructed most of the locks and dams in the 1930s to maintain a nine-foot channel for navigation. They are not, as many people believe, used for flood control or to generate electricity.

A typical day for Ebner begins with a safety meeting with his staff, followed by an examination of the lock and dam. There is always a lockmaster, five head lock-and-dam operators, one equip­ment repairman and various lockpersons.

There are no women lockmasters and no women equipment repair­men, in spite of Corps of Engineers efforts to advance women in those positions. There are several women lockpersons, Ebner said. “Most locks have one or two women locking,” he said, so there should soon be a woman lockmaster somewhere on the river.

There aren’t likely to be any women equipment repairmen soon, however. “I don’t think any women have ever applied for that,” Ebner said. There is little turnover in any of the positions, he points out, and there is only one lockmaster and one equipment repairman per lock.

The lockmaster and equipment repairman typically work only the day shift and have weekends off.

Ebner has 33 years of experience as a lockmaster. A native of La Crosse, Wis., he started at the St. An­thony Falls Lock and Dam at Min­neapolis in 1965. “Back then, there was one lockmaster for both’ the upper and lower locks at St. An­thony Falls. As a lockman, he worked on both. In 1967, he transferred to Lock and Dam 6 and spent the next 12 years there. Then he worked at Lock and Dam 7, at Dresbach, Minn., be­fore returning to Lock and Dam 6 in 1992.

As with most aspects of life on the river, the sea­sons dictate the activities on a lock and dam. De­pending on weather condi­tions, a lock and dam usu­ally opens around the be­ginning of March and clos­es the first week of Decem­ber. During a normal sum­mer, Ebner gives tours to hundreds of schoolchil­dren. The tours are off this summer, because all of Lock 6’s buildings are being overhauled and are under con­struction.

Work that is difficult to do in the summer because of river traffic is scheduled for winter, such as gate and timber replacement. In the winter the lock and dam operates with a reduced staff.

Daily commercial traffic through 6 varies tremendously. Between March and June of 1998, Lock and Dam 6 saw 1,775 lockages, with al­most half for recreational traffic.

“We have a 10- to 15-minute average for recreational traffic; lock­ing, and a 2-hour average for barges,” says Ebner. Locks and dams 3 and 7 (near Red Wing, Minn., and La Crosse, Wis., respectively) have the most recreational traffic, because of 3’s accessibility to Twin Cities boaters and also for the scenery on the Upper Mississippi.

“We’ve seen an increase in recre­ational traffic in recent years, espe­cially in pontoons and rental boats.” Is there any advice that Ebner has
for recreational boaters that would make life for lockmasters (and others) easier? “Give barges more room,” he says. “They're so much bigger than you, and they can't maneuver or stop as easily as you.”

Emergencies have been rare, notes Ebner. In case of a spill or accident, the dam's gates would be lowered to cut off water flow. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Coast Guard would be alerted, and boat traffic in the area would be radioed and halted. All lock and dam workers are tested on spill response activities and regularly perform drills.

Although there is always plenty to do, life at the Trempealeau lock and dam has been relatively quiet. Ebner says they have been pretty fortunate, even during the flood of 1993. “We had to do some sandbagging and replacing of riprap on the spillway,” Ebner recalled, “and all the locks and dams were out of control [meaning that all gates were open and the river flowed freely] for a couple weeks in late spring. But that was all.”

Mi Ae Lipe-Butterbrodt is associate editor of Big River.

(Drawdown continued from page 1)

They hoped that lowering the water level in the lower end of the pool would stimulate the growth of such plants as smartweed, wild celery and sago pondweed. The plants would provide additional food for waterfowl and shelter for fish. Planners also hoped that muck on the exposed shoreline would dry out and compact, which would increase water clarity and further stimulate aquatic growth.

The plan was to gradually lower the water level by one foot at the lower end of the pool over a five-day period, then leave it there at least 30 days. There is a 62 day period during the plant growing season where records indicate flow rates might be sufficient to maintain the commercial shipping channel during a drawdown.

However, fluctuating water levels interfered with the plan. The drawdown began on June 19, but was suspended 13 days later due to high water. It was resumed on July 11, but abandoned on July 17, due to low water flow.

Planners were disappointed, but not surprised. Charlene Carmack, a community planner for the Corps and one of the project coordinators, says they knew the chances of success were limited. They proceeded with the drawdown based on a favorable two-week forecast, but were aware that beyond that was unknown. Unfortunately, she said, the high water probably halted any plant growth that had started.

The FWIC monitored sites during the process and will analyze data to determine any long-term benefits.

Recreational users did report some inconveniences. The lower half of the pool, especially the bottom, was affected the most. Some fishermen and people who lease cottage sites complained of being unable to use boat ramps. Fish off the shore or near the Thomson Causeway also may be related to the experiment.

Drawdowns have been done in the St. Louis District, but this is the first time the Rock Island District has tried one. The St. Paul District is studying whether the long-range environmental benefits would offset the short-term cost of a more extensive drawdown of perhaps two or three feet in Pool 8 (between Genoa, Wis., and Dresbach, Minn.).

Gary W. Kramer is a boater and part-time freelance writer who lives in Rock Island, Ill. His last article for Big River was “Minding Your Manners on the Mississippi” (May 1998).
Reader Survey Results

By Reggie McLeod

As we hoped, the first survey of Big River subscribers turned up a few surprises and a lot of good ideas.

The first surprise was the terrific response. We were advised that we might have to pester folks a bit to get the needed 33% return, but we quickly racked up a 39% return without any extra coaxing. Thank you for this exceptional response. It tells us that our readers are very supportive of Big River and that they enjoy the opportunity to tell us about their relationship with the river.

We plan to follow up with at least one survey a year. In the meantime, we welcome any comments, suggestions or letters to the editor you would like to share with us.

We were not surprised to find that boating and birdwatching were the most popular activities listed on the survey. However, we were surprised to find that the results for the two were almost identical, with 41% birdwatching more than 12 times a year and 39% boating; 10% birded and 13% boated 7 to 12 times a year; 29% birded and 28% boated 1 to 6 times a year; 19% never birded and 20% never boated.

The other popular activities (at least once a year) were hiking (71%), fishing (61%), swimming (55%) and biking (52%). The least popular activities (never) were snowmobiling (94%), sailing (92%), kayaking (90%) and water-skiing (81%).

We were heartened to find that 81% recommended Big River to a friend or relative and that 96% planned to renew their subscription.

Sixty percent of respondents live in a Mississippi River town or city. Sixty-seven percent are male. Employment status is almost evenly divided between company employed (24%), retired (24%), self employed (23%) and government employed (21%), with part time (4%) and homemaker (2%) rounding out the total.

Only 3% of respondents were 30 years old or younger, and 10% were older than 71. The bulk were 51 to 70 (50%) or 31 to 50 (36%).

The survey will give us a better idea of who we are creating Big River for. We hope it will also help us find more folks who will enjoy reading this newsletter.

The survey, comments and story ideas will provide us with valuable information for future stories and perhaps books and maps as well.

We enjoyed reading the comments at the end of the survey, especially ones like "It is the best publication on the Mississippi River. Well done!"

Many readers told us about the place where they live or about the things they do on the river. A few asked us to look into things, including Weaver Bottoms and mallard nesting tubes.

Thanks again for taking time to share your thoughts with us. We will do our best to answer your questions, pursue your story ideas and surprise you now and then.

Reggie McLeod is editor of Big River.

---

Announcing the Big River Awards

We are accepting nominations for our 1998 Big River Awards, designed to recognize the best and worst examples of human activity on the Mississippi River every year.

Named for a flow condition that requires dams to be fully opened, the Open River Award will be given to a person, group or project that has made the river more accessible, worked to improve the river as a natural resource or has increased our understanding of the river.

The Golden Sandbag will be awarded (if that's the right term) to an egregious, wasteful or downright silly and misguided plan or activity that has the effect of keeping the river out of people's lives, obscuring our understanding of it or damaging the river ecology or economy.

Anyone can nominate an individual, group, government body, corporation, plan, project or activity for either of the awards. Send a note explaining why you believe your nominee deserves the award to:

Awards
Big River
PO Box 204
Winona, MN 55987

or by email to editors@big-river.com
or fax to (507) 454-2133

Nominations close on Nov. 1.

Judging will be done by a panel that includes our staff and three other river folks. A list of nominations will be posted on our web site at www.big-river.com, and finalists will be announced in the December Big River. Winners will be featured in our January 1999 issue.
Duck Hunt

Waterfowl seasons along the Mississippi flyway should be much like last year's. Based on last spring's breeding bird surveys, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) recommended duck hunting season between Oct 3 and January 17, with slightly different seasons for geese. Although breeding bird numbers were down from last year, the numbers are still 20 percent higher than the 1985-97 average. Pintail bag limits are reduced to just one per day.

As in the last two years, the FWS is recommending another Youth Waterfowl Hunting Day before or after the regular season. The tentative duck season in Minnesota is Oct. 3 through Dec. 1, with youth day on Sept. 19. Goose seasons will give hunters a good shot at burglary, locally-breeding giant Canada geese before the declining migrant Canada goose populations fly south.

All hunters must register with the Harvest Information Program. FWS will ask some hunters to keep a daily hunting diary to help analyze the connection between waterfowl numbers and hunting.

Legal, non-toxic ammunition approved this year are steel shot, nickel-plated steel shot, copper-plated steel shot and bismuth-tin shot. You can comment on the federal regulations until Sept. 7 by writing the Office of Migratory Bird Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, 1849 C Street, NW, Mail Stop 634, ARLSQ, Washington, DC 20240.

You can comment on the federal regulations until Sept. 7 by writing the Office of Migratory Bird Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, 1849 C Street, NW, Mail Stop 634, ARLSQ, Washington, DC 20240.

The ban on lead shot for waterfowl hunting in waterfowl production areas could be extended to some upland hunting in the areas. Although upland hunters usually don't shoot over wetlands, biologists worry flooding could carry lead shot into wetlands, where waterfowl can ingest it and get lead poisoning.

Under a rule proposed by the FWS, upland hunters, except deer and turkey hunters, would be required to use non-toxic shot, according to an article in the St. Paul Pioneer Press (8-2-98).

Hot Boats

Another product using hot pepper to repel zebra mussels and other pests is expected to be on the market soon. Developed by the New Mexico Tech Research Foundation, the fiery substance can be added to paint, caulk, glue and rubber-coating materials. Its heat comes from habanero peppers, which are about 60 times hotter than jalapenos and 10 times hotter than cayenne peppers. Cayennes are used in HOTBottom Paint, patented by Bar-nacle Ban, to deter barnacles and zebra mussels on boats and other aquatic structures (see Big River, January 1994).

Fish Kills

Minneapolis — Almost two miles of West Indian Creek in Wabasha County lost most of its brown trout in an unexplained kill in mid-August. Biologists estimate that almost half of the 4,000-or-so fish were at least six inches long and some were over 18 inches. The stream is the focus of special attention by the DNR to improve habitat and encourage the growth of large trout.

At least 100,000 fish were killed in early August in a Mower County tributary of the Root River. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources attribute the kill to columnaris bacteria, common in nutrient-rich lakes in southern Minnesota, according to the Winona Daily News (7-31-98).

Storm sewer runoff gives Lake Winona its rich nutrient mix, resulting in excess vegetation and oxygen depletion, stressing fish and making them vulnerable to infection.

Route 55

Minneapolis — On August 10, members of EarthFirst! occupied three empty houses scheduled for imminent demolition to protest the expansion of Minnesota Highway 55 (Hiawatha Blvd.). Opponents of the rerouting argue that the new road through an old-growth burr oak savanna above the river bluff between Minnehaha Falls and Fort Snelling would destroy the forest and pollute the neighborhood and river (see Letter to the Editor, Big River, January 1998).

Heritage River

Although President Clinton has designated the Upper Mississippi River one of 10 Heritage Rivers, many of the towns on the river won't benefit from the designation.

For instance, river towns in southeast Minnesota aren't included, because the towns didn't sign up for the program.

"The value of the designation wasn't clear," said Dick Larson, an aide to Rep. Gil Gutknecht, R-Minn. Gutknecht opposed the Upper Mississippi's designation, but none of the cities in his district, which runs from near Hastings, Minn. to the state's border with Iowa, asked to participate.

Larson said the current procedures for funding river-related projects work fine, and the designation doesn't affect that. Besides, he said, there "was some suspicion about the designation" on the part of some
property rights groups and others who worry that such programs are a way for the federal government to take over land.

Heritage rivers are each to be assigned a "river navigator" whose job will be to help communities find federal programs to improve their riverfronts. Only towns that signed up will be able to ask the river navigator for help.

**Pfiesteria Memories**

Scientists from the University of Maryland and Johns Hopkins University have identified the effects of Pfiesteria toxins as a syndrome that includes memory loss and reduced reasoning.

Reporting in the August 15 edition of British medical journal *Lancet*, Professor Glen Morris Jr. and his colleagues said they assessed 24 fishermen who complained of headaches, diarrhea, weight loss and memory problems. All had been working on the Pocomoke River and nearby estuaries in Maryland, waterways where fish have died or been observed with lesions associated with Pfiesteria.

The investigators found that people with high exposure were significantly more likely to complain of the neuropsychological symptoms of Pfiesteria poisoning. They found that once exposure to the waterways was curtailed, the symptoms lessened dramatically, with neuropsychological test scores returning to the normal range.

**Round Gobies Around**

Superior, Wis. — Biologists hoping round gobies wouldn't continue invading U.S. waters were dismayed to learn that a couple of kids in Superior caught more than 100 of the little fish recently.

Researchers using trawling nets had previously caught nine gobies in the harbor off Minnesota Point, the *Duluth News-Tribune* reported (8-5-98).

"It's indicative of a major infestation in the Duluth-Superior Harbor," said Doug Jensen, exotic species coordinator for Minnesota Sea Grant at the University of Minnesota-Duluth.

Gobies are native to the Black and Caspian seas. They reproduce at a younger age, and faster, than native species in North America, and have been found in Mott Reservoir in Michigan and Wolf Lake in Indiana. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staffer Tom Busahn told the newspaper he's seen many of them near the Chicago shoreline.

Gobies have displaced sculpins in some areas, and may be one of the causes of the dramatic crash of the Lake Michigan perch population, researchers say.

**Koch Corrected**

Rosemont, Minn. — A newspaper advertisement touting its environmental record fetched Koch Refining Co. a letter from regulators asking for a correction.

The ads trumpeted a 40-percent reduction in water emissions at its Rosemount refinery as part of an effort to counteract bad publicity over spills.

In a letter to Koch, reported by the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* (7-25-98), Rod Massey, acting manager of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's Water Quality Division, suggested Koch correct the ad. Massey said water emissions at the plant are up 7.7 percent, not down 40 percent.

Koch told the *Pioneer Press* that in its ad it used the industry-standard measure of emissions per barrel of refined oil, not total emissions. Production was up, the company said, so total water emissions were, too.

**Shredder Scrapped**

St. Paul — Scrap metal trader Alter Trading Co. may not be able to build a metal shredder on the banks of the Mississippi River in St. Paul, but it will get $90,000 to drop the idea.

The city agreed to pay the company, according to the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* (8-1-98), if the company will drop its lawsuit charging that the city violated its rights by not acting on a special use permit application.

Alter, based in Bettendorf, Iowa, has a scrap collection and shipping operation on a 20-acre parcel along the river at 801 Barge Channel Road. In 1995 it applied for a permit to build a shredder, mainly to grind up junked cars.

The Neighborhood Organization to Stop Hazards of All Metal Shredders fought against the idea, and the city council passed a moratorium on shredders in 1996. Last year, it passed an ordinance banning shredders from the city.

**Prison Sited**

Thomson, Ill. — The small river town of Thomson will apparently get the new maximum security prison state officials had proposed building at the Savanna Army Depot. People complained that the Savanna site would destroy rare prairie habitat (see "Big House on the Prairie" Big River, August 1998). Illinois Gov. Jim Edgar announced July 30 that the 1,000-cell prison, and an adjoining 200-inmate minimum security unit, will be built on a 150-acre site a mile north of Thomson, according to KCLN-KLNT radio in Clinton, Iowa.

**No Roads**

St. Paul — The plan unveiled for Harriet Island doesn't include automobiles, reports the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* (7-30-98).

The $13.5 million renovation plan includes a riverwalk, a huge greenward for festivals, and a grand staircase leading from the pavilion to the edge of the Mississippi River, but eliminates roads from the center of the park.

William H. Roberts of Wallace, Roberts & Todd developed the plan, which the St. Paul Riverfront Corp. has approved. 

---

*September 1998*  
*Big River*
**River Calendar**

**Special Events and Festivals**

**September**

3 Downtown Hoedown, St. Cloud, Minn., (320) 259-4010.
4-6 Antique Motorcycle Swap Meet, Davenport, Iowa, (319) 359-1545.
5-6 Lumberjack Fest, McGregor, Iowa.
5-7 Melon Days, Thomson, Ill.
6 St. Joseph Pork Roast, Bellevue, Iowa.
6 Wisconsin Music Jubilee, 10 a.m. - 4 p.m., Stonefield Village, Cassville, Wis.
6 St. Joseph Pork Roast, Bellevue, Iowa.
7 Charlie Maguire, the Singing Ranger, 5 p.m., DNR Outdoor stage, Minnesota State Fair, St. Paul.
11-13 Prescott (Wis.) Daze.
11-13 Riverfest, Dubuque, Iowa.
11-13 Riverfest, Dubuque, Iowa.
14 International Dragon Boat Festival, Dubuque, Iowa, (319) 582-5406.
15 Light up the Night, 6 p.m. - 9 p.m., Harriet Island Park, St. Paul.
15-16 Millstream Arts Festival, St. Cloud, Iowa.
16 Great River Walk, Onalaska to Trempealeau, Wis., (651) 372-3424.
16-17 Riverfront Pops Concert, Davenport, Iowa.
16-18-20 Wild Wings Fall Festival, Lake City, Minn.
17-20 Applefest, La Crescent, Minn.
18-20 Victorian Wedding and Dance, 1 p.m., Oliver H. Kelley Farm, Elk River, Minn., (612) 441-6896.
19-20 International Dragon Boat Festival, Dubuque, Iowa, (319) 582-5406.
20-22 Henry Bosse/Mississippi River Cyanotypes, Landmark Center, St. Paul.

**Meetings and Hearings**

**September**

2 La Crosse (Wis.) River Marsh Coalition, 6:30 p.m. - 8 p.m., North-South Corridor plans, S. Branch Public Library.
2 Hiawatha Valley Audubon Society, 7 p.m., Lake Lodge, Winona, Minn.
16 RiverForum for Community Involvement, 7 p.m. - 9:15 p.m., Kelly Inn, St. Cloud, Minn., (651) 297-4951.
16-19 Mississippi River Parkway Commission annual meeting, St. Louis, Mo., (612) 449-2560.

**Workshops and Conferences**

**September**

20-24 Wetlands '98, St. Louis, Mo., (518) 872-1804.

**Almanac**

By Kenny Salwey

A two-foot-tall plant stands proudly before me on a heavily forested, north-facing river bluff. Twenty bright red berries form a cluster in its center. Each of its four branches holds five drooping leaves. It is September and this ginseng plant, like many others, has completed its growing cycle, and the power of the plant is now in its root.

As I sit down to dig it, I marvel at the blueness of the big river. My gaze turns to the deep azure sky. A long, blue sigh escapes me, when I think of summer vanishing and autumn approaching. River kids are probably doing the same as they enter the schoolhouse door.

In September, blue is beautiful — sky blue asters, New England asters, bluebells, blue cohosh, big and little bluestem, and leftover chicory plants. Grapes and elderberries hang plump and ripe along fencerows. Great blue herons, kingfishers and blue jays hunt the backwaters, along with large flocks of migrating blue-winged teal.

The fresh dug earth smells good. The root is large and well formed. I carefully plant all 20 berries. In 10 years someone will come here and find beautiful ginseng plants, and the circle will be unbroken.

---

September 1998

Big River