Big River

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Rock Walls along the River

By Robert E. Sloan

The character of the river is determined in large part by the shape of its valley and the rocks that line its sides from the Twin Cities downriver to Burlington, Iowa. To the casual observer they appear to be level, but they are not, generally tilting about 10 feet per mile to the southwest. The particular rocks at river level differ from place to place because of this tilt.

In the 1970's the Burlington Northern Railroad quarried away a large amount of Ironton and Galesville from the side of Trempealeau Mountain. It took away the support of the hillside and a large block of Franconia and St. Lawrence slid downhill about 30 feet. The vertical cut of the landslide scar can be seen in this 1998 photo above, where there are no longer any trees.

Rock units such as these are called formations and named for places. So we have the St. Peter Sandstone, named for the mouth of the St. Peter River (now known as the Minnesota), the Shakopee Dolomite, the Platteville Limestone, and many others.

If you have ever heard a guide talk about the magnificent "formations" in his cave, or called the erosional remnants in the Grand Canyon “formations,” he has spilled the beans — he doesn’t know anything about geology! A formation is a mappable rock unit, big enough to have its upper and lower boundaries drawn on a map of scale about one-quarter inch to the mile (or

Blizzard of the Century

By Gretchen Schade

If it happened today, most people would hear grim weather alerts, warning them of a tremendous storm. They would be prepared for the blizzard of the century. But on Monday, November 11, 1940, people faced the Armistice Day Blizzard with little or no warning.

Many Midwesterners enjoyed a perfect Indian summer weekend, unusually mild for Armistice Day. Warm October weather had continued through the beginning of November. Much of Iowa had just received the first frost of the season on November 6 and 7, followed by

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larger), and a unit of rock all more or less the same, different in detail from the overlying and underlying units.

The rock's color is less important than its content. Most limestones have two basic colors: a yellowish-buff weathered color at the surface and a blue-gray color in a fresh cut. There is a little bit of iron oxide in the rock. When absolutely fresh it is FeO, and basically blue-green. Exposure to air, rain and soil acids converts it to Fe₂O₃, or hematite, better known as rust.

There is occasionally a little bit of FeS — pyrite or fool's gold — in limestone. It weathers to rust and sulfuric acid, which dissolves the limestone around it. The fool's gold was deposited by the same solutions that made the Galena-Platteville ore deposits of southwestern Wisconsin and northwestern Illinois about 250 million years ago. Those ore deposits have been mined since before the Civil War to produce lead and zinc.

Limestone and dolomite have very similar physical properties, although limestone is calcium carbonate and dolomite is calcium magnesium carbonate.

Less-than-solid Rock

Water flows readily through most of the sandstones and limestones, but very poorly through the clay shales, because the spaces between the grains are so very small. The sandstones are often colored rusty red or ochre-yellow from the iron moving through the rocks in the groundwater. That is why our softened well water usually leaves limestone and iron deposits in our pipes.

These rocks are full of holes. A sandstone has about 30 percent hole space between the grains, usually full of flowing water. More resistant sandstones have some of the space filled with natural cement, the less cement the gentler the slope it will form.

A limestone or dolomite is made of tightly interlocking grains of calcite or dolomite, which is why they usually form cliffs. Here the underground water is found in the joints or cracks in the rock. Calcite and dolomite are soluble in slightly acid water, so these joints are slowly dissolved to produce underground channels for water and ultimately widen into caves. These cracks are not what you try to reach with a well. Because they don't provide any filtration at all, they may carry water from fertilizer, your neighbor's cesspool or industrial waste.

Running water, small landslides and soil creep erode poorly cemented rock slopes. The slope angle that is stable depends on just how well the grains are cemented. If the slopes are artificially steepened, as for a highway or railroad cut — as the Burlington Northern found out on Trempealeau Mountain — landslides will move the slope back into the hill.

Well-cemented rocks, such as limestone and dolomite, form steep cliffs that retreat from the river by caving away to form vertical cliffs. All of these rocks are fractured with vertical cracks that go all the way through. You can see these cracks (called joints) if you look in a quarry floor, where the cracks are full of weeds. In southeastern Minnesota these joints are usually directed east-west and northeast-southwest. They may run in other directions. They are not the result of blasting — they were there before the quarry was cut.

Heads Up

When these rocks fail or are undercut they fall away in big boulders that come rolling down the slope. The famous (or infamous) “Rock in the House” of Fountain City, Wisconsin, is a recent example. As you drive along the river you will see occasional boulders of the rock from the top of the bluff lying beside, and occasionally in, the road.

When making cuts such as those for the highway or a basement, just...
how steep you can safely cut depends on the character of the rock. The Ironton and Galesville sandstones are well enough cemented so a steep slope will be stable. On the other hand, the Franconia sandstone will not be stable at that steep slope. Most limestones will hold a vertical cut.

When Highway 61 was widened to four lanes in the 70s, the highway department cut off the bases of many hills to make room. The slope of the hills has been moving back every year since, by landsliding. Civil engineers often think they can get away with steeper slopes than nature allows. So every year the highway department has to put out warning signs and clean the spring landslides out of the ditch.

Those who drive the river road know that every winter huge, spectacular icicles form on the steep cuts along the road from Winona to La Crescent, Minn. There is a gentle up-dome of rocks centered on the village of Witoka, Minn., which reverses the normal tilt of the rock toward the river. This means the rainwater falling on the uplands moves away from Witoka in all directions, but especially toward the river.

The Lamoille public roadside spring across from Trempealeau Mountain disappeared when Highway 61 was widened to four lanes. During the spring and summer the springs still seep out of the cliff along the tops of beds of rock that are too well cemented to allow water to flow through them. The water is always at the average annual temperature, about 49 degrees, until it reaches the surface. In the winter the water freezes into those great icicles, which look bluish green, like glaciers, because they reflect the sky's color.

Bob Sloan was a professor of geology at the University of Minnesota for 44 years. He now lives on the big river at Winona, Minn. His last article for Big River was "Where Does All That Sand Come From?" (August 1998).
warmer days. In Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois, people who lived near the Mississippi set out duck hunting in shirtsleeves or light jackets, with no notion of the approaching hardships.

From November 9 to 12 remarkable temperature drops, extremely strong winds and heavy snow rolled across the country, from the Northwest and the Rockies, through the Midwest and on to the Mid-Atlantic states.

On November 11 light snow fell in west-central Minnesota. West of Minneapolis, the forecast was warm and rainy, changing to snow and sleet. St. Cloud awoke to a grey and gloomy morning. Snow fell near Elk River.

William H. Hull documents Minnesotans' experiences of the Armistice Day Blizzard in his book, All Hell Broke Loose. In Minneapolis, ice and deep snow stopped transportation. Hull explains, "People simply couldn't move." Some found hotel rooms. Some sat in automobiles, streetcars, farmhouses, garages, even sheep sheds — strangers together praying for rescue. Others at home awaited loved ones, often without electricity or telephone. People died in cars, snowbanks and icy waters. It took days for roads to be opened and cars dug out.

We now call November 11 Veterans' Day, but the blizzard that killed 49 in Minnesota and more than 100 in other states will always be the "Armistice Day Blizzard."

Recreation then Rescue

Clarence Loerch, an 87-year-old Houston, Minn., implement dealer, recalls the "rugged storm" vividly. He was putting up storm windows at home in Winona when a neighbor became concerned that her husband hadn't arrived home from duck hunting. Loerch and his wife drove to Minnesota City to look for him in almost-blinding snow.

Many duck hunters in the Winona pool were caught in the hurricane-like wind, which whipped waves as high as four, five, even six feet. Five Winona men in Pickerei Run, half a mile above Minnesota City, burnt $40 worth of decoys for heat. Seventeen people stranded on an island off Minnesota City shot dry limbs from trees for a bonfire. Others made wind breaks of piled-up boats. They burned willows and boards from their boats. In the marshy backwaters near Buffalo City, Wisconsin, rescuers retrieved 22 hunters during the night.

Winona pilot Max Conrad flew above the river in the raging storm to locate missing hunters and direct rescue boats to them. Conrad shouted encouragement to the men below and dropped them food, cigarettes and even whiskey. The lucky ones were rescued, some suffering only from smoke in their eyes.

Waves surged against the Whitman and Winona dams, giving them the appearance of great ice-covered ocean liners in the winter sea. Downed power lines darkened the Winona Dam early Monday evening for half an hour. Soon lights run by the emergency power plant served as a guide for lost hunters. Thirteen were brought in to shelter near the dam that night.

Long, Cold Night

Near Ferryville, Wisconsin, an estimated 30 men spent Monday night stranded on islands. Shortly
Greetings!

We'd like to give you, a fellow river lover, an opportunity to save money, simplify your holiday shopping and introduce others to the joys of settling into a comfortable chair to read about the people, places and critters of the Upper Mississippi River. Until December 31, 1998, if you buy a one-year subscription to Big River for $28, the second subscription will cost only $14 and an additional subscription for a friend or relative - or perhaps your local school or library - will be FREE!

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Reggie McLeod, editor

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"Big River is always interesting. I like the mix of stories about nature and history, and the restaurant reviews."

— Corps of Engineers employee

"Cool maps and stories about places to explore."

— boater

"I laughed with the pleasure of recognition when I read in the July Star Tribune article on you that, while many people see the river as a border, you see the need for a publication that sees the river as the center. Amen."

— Minneapolis resident

"We’re new to the area. Big River has just the kind of information we need to get in touch with this place.”— parent in La Crosse, Wis.

BIG RIVER
after sunrise Tuesday, parties on both sides established contact, waving their arms in the frigid morning. After several thwarted efforts, rescuers brought in many cold, wet and hungry hunters, but feared more were missing.

Crawford County, Wisconsin, Sheriff Lys Day reported that one body was found in a capsized canoe. He had watched. He they had watched. He had watched. He continued search operations near the island in the Winnesheik Slough area of the Mississippi, where the river is nearly three miles wide.

At Brownsville, Minnesota, the day changed abruptly. Joe Toomey, a retired riverman who has lived in Brownsville 87 years, remembers that he and some friends watched a duck hunter on the river just across from Brownsville Monday morning. Suddenly wind started blowing hard from downtown, straight across the river. Joe recalls, "When that cold blast of ice got to the water, the fog was so dense you couldn't see the length of a car."

The next day, a lady from La Crosse came looking for her brother, who she thought was duck hunting there. Joe figured he was the man that cold wave hit St. Louis November 11, with a 28-degree temperature drop. A 10-minute driving rain, combined with winds of 45 to 63 miles an hour, downed trees, wires and telegraph poles in the sudden storm.


Mrs. Bernice Danielson, 87, of Rushford, Minnesota, recalls the blizzard as if it were yesterday. She worked at a beauty shop in Winona in 1940. On the day after the storm, women would come into the shop, even if they didn't have an appointment, just to commiserate with one another. For days, customers might cry when they saw someone who was affected by the disaster. "They never got over it. Each year, when Armistice Day comes, we remember again," she admits sadly.

Gretchen Schade is an English teacher from Peterson, Minn., who is currently on leave.

This is her first story for Big River.
Swans Shot

Goose Lake, Iowa — Three trumpeter swans from the Iowa Trumpeter Swan Restoration Program were shot and killed, apparently out of boredom, by two eastern Iowa teenagers.

Jake Arterberry and Nathan True, both 17, of Maquoketa shot the birds the second day of Iowa's waterfowl hunting season at Goose Lake State Wildlife Area, according to KZEG-Attorney's office, and the state will file civil lawsuit to collect some of the money invested by the restoration program. Under Iowa law, the civil penalty for shooting a swan is $50, but the birds' market value and maintenance costs make them worth $1,500 dollars each. The teens could also lose their hunting licenses and guns.

Jason Sandholdt, a conservation officer with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in Clinton County, praises the hunters who turned in Arterberry and True. "They did all the right things: they took down license plate numbers and called the DNR using the Turn In Poachers hotline."

Nav Study Off Course

Rock Island, Ill. — The Army Corps of Engineers is coming under fire from environmentalists and business interests for delays in the final year of its $50-million Upper Mississippi River-Illinois Waterway System Navigation Study. The Corps is conducting the six-year study to determine how to improve shipping on the river.

The length of the current locks requires that 15-barge tows lock through in two parts, which increases congestion and transportation costs. Doubling the lock size would eliminate these problems, according to the Midwest Area River Coalition 2000 (MARC 2000), a St. Louis-based shipping industry lobbying group.

Environmental groups, such as the Sierra Club and National Wildlife Federation, charge that the Corps is reworking its study to support full-scale expansion of the locks. They say initial results indicated that smaller, less ecologically destructive modifications to the current locks would clear up congestion, but that the Corps has quietly put aside these findings, according to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch (10-1-98).

The study is officially slated for completion in December 1999, but delays are almost certain. Ken Barr, environmental manager for the study, told Big River that laboratory studies on the impacts of navigation on fish, plants and mussels are complete. He said that in early October the Corps met with officials from the Departments of Natural Resources in five Upper Mississippi River states and the Environmental Protection Agency to discuss these preliminary results. The Corps is now waiting for economic work to be completed.

According to Dave Tipple, a civil engineer with the Plan Formulation Office of the Corps' Rock Island District, the delays also stem from the Corps' use of new analysis tools. "In the past, the Corps has done things on a site-by-site basis," says Tipple. "This time we are examining 37 locks and 1,200 miles of river, and we are having to look at the broader picture. Before we release information to the public, we want to be very comfortable with these tools."

The Corps cancelled two Governors' Liaison Committee (GLC) meetings scheduled for June and August, because it was "not yet prepared to provide sufficiently new information to warrant a meeting at this time," according to Corps.news releases (5-15-98 and 7-24-98).

MARC 2000 president Chris Brescia says the Corps is using incomplete data to assess the project. "After six years, I still cannot tell you what the essence and substance of the economic model are, because we haven't been told. We're a little frustrated, because in the meantime, we've seen our competitive advantage [of U.S. farmers who rely on barge traffic for grain shipping] evaporating."

Corps spokesman Ron Fournier admits the Corps has questioned some of its own assumptions for the study. "People are saying, 'You guys are reneging.' That's not the case — it just doesn't look great. The Corps is simply trying to make sure its work is complete and accurate." But Fournier says brand-new locks and dams won't be built. "It isn't looking like it's very feasible to do a lot of massive construction throughout the river basin, because the projected traffic isn't that great," according to the Post Dispatch.

Another GLC meeting has been scheduled for November 18 in Rock Island, where the Corps will discuss economic and environmental perspectives of the study. The public is encouraged to attend (see "River Calendar").

Metro Prairie on the River

Cottage Grove, Minn. — A 220-acre natural prairie in Cottage Grove will be saved as part of a settlement by a major oil company for environmental violations in Kentucky, Ohio and Minnesota. Marathon-Ashland Petroleum LLC will donate the
prairie as an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Project in a $32.5 million settlement, according to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. The site, called Grey Cloud Dunes, is one of the last areas of its kind left in the Twin Cities metro area, providing habitat for several rare plant and animal species. The prairie, which fronts about a half mile of the Mississippi River, has been a target for protection since 1987. In recent years, the prairie has deteriorated from all-terrain-vehicle traffic and the lack of burning. As a protected state nature preserve, the prairie will be rejuvenated and open to the public. This is the first debt-for-nature swap in an EPA settlement.

Highway 55 Resisted
St. Paul, Minn. — Protesters against the Minnesota Highway 55 project in south Minneapolis have occupied vacant homes along the construction route, chained themselves to a bulldozer and backhoe, held hunger strikes, rallied at the state capitol and been arrested for disorderly conduct.

For two months, protesters occupied vacant homes on Riverview Road and set up tent cities in hopes of blocking construction crews. On September 21, the Minnesota Department of Transportation (DOT) asked the protesters to end their actions peacefully, citing safety concerns.

On October 15, while the protesters were at a rally at the state capitol, in St. Paul, the DOT cut water, sewer and gas service to the homes. The protesters rushed back from St. Paul and six were arrested (St. Paul Pioneer Press, 10-15-98). A spokesman for the protesters says the activists are planning a “mass civil disobedience” in early November.

The proposed reroute of Highway 55 involves expanding Hiawatha Avenue into a four-lane divided boulevard. Protesters say the highway construction — slated to begin next spring — will eliminate rare old-growth oak forests in the area, destroy areas they claim are culturally significant to Native Americans and route more urban traffic and pollution along Minnehaha Park and nearby Mississippi River bluffs.

Park or Suburbs?
Cottage Grove, Minn. — Conflicts between Washington County, the Metropolitan Council and landowners are brewing over the fate of 1,440 acres of Lower Grey Cloud Island. The land, which is the site of the Twin Cities' largest active mining operations, is also one of the last pristine areas along the Mississippi River in the metro area and on a major migratory bird route.

The Camas Mining Company, the county, the council and 76 percent of Cottage Grove residents want to turn the land into a park. However, the island's primary landowner, the Schilling family, wants to sell it for development, creating 600 housing units on 500 acres, a new sewage system and a marina, according to Eileen Weber, a Washington County commissioner candidate.

Complicating matters, the Schillings claim the land is worth $22 million, well over what the county can afford, according to the St. Paul Pioneer Press (10-14-98). The city of Cottage Grove is debating how to zone Grey Cloud. No decisions are likely to be made until early next year, Weber said.

The area is also a prime candidate for a state park, according to Bill Morrissey, director of the Division of Parks and Recreation for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

Sneaky Duck Bill
Washington, D.C. — In a controversial move opposed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott extended the duck hunting season in his home state of Mississippi by 11 days.

Mississippi hunters supported the extension, claiming that the previous ending date of January 20 prevented them from enjoying the bulk of the migratory population. But the longer hunting season may hurt duck populations and make fewer ducks available to hunters up north. Already Mississippi hunters bag more birds than hunters in most other states: 19 versus seven in Minnesota in 1997 (Knight-Riddler, 10-16-98).

Swan Song
Alma, Wis. — Every fall, thousands of people flock to the viewing platform at Rieck's Lake to see the spectacle of thousands of tundra swans resting and feeding on their migration down the Mississippi Flyway to Chesapeake Bay. Trouble is, this protected lake at the end of the Buffalo River is steadily filling in with sediment, threatening the vegetation the swans like to eat. Already, many of the swans rest here but commute to other areas to feed.

Much of the sediment washes into the river from farmland. Lock and Dam 4, a short distance downriver from the mouth of the Buffalo River, probably increases the rate of sedimentation by raising the river level.

The swans bring a welcome economic boost to Alma. Concerned citizens, fearing the swans may eventually find somewhere else to rest, met with federal, state and county agency representatives on October 21 to explore funding possibilities for habitat work in Rieck's Lake, the Buffalo River and nearby Beef Slough.

Years ago, travelers along on the Minnesota side of the river watched masses of swans downstream in the Weaver Bottoms, which used to be rich in vegetation. As this area filled in and lost its allure, the swans left for greener pastures. Now only a few stop there. A management project in 1987 failed to reverse the decline.
River Calendar

Special Events & Festivals

**November**

3 North-South Highway referendum, La Crosse, Wis.

4 Mississippi River Coordinating Commission appreciation event, 6:30 p.m., Castle Hotel, South St. Paul, Minn., (651) 290-4160, ext. 238.

7 Wisconsin Bluffland Tour with Kenny Salwey, 1 p.m. - 5:30 p.m., north of Fountain City, Mississippi River Revival, (507) 457-0393.

7 Tundra Swan Field Trip, 7:30 a.m., Minneapolis Audubon Chapter, meet at HUB parking lot, 66th and Nicolet, (612) 821-1191 to register.

7-8 Swan Watch Weekend, Winona, Minn., 1-800-657-4972.

14 River Critter Puppet Show, 2 p.m., West Coon Rapids Dam, Brooklyn Park, Minn., (612) 424-8172.

27-29 Thanksgiving Along the Mississippi, museum at Fort Crawford, Prairie du Chien, Wis.

**December**

20-21 Upper Mississippi River Eagle Watch, 11 a.m. - 3 p.m., Dresbach Information Area, (I-90 Rest Area), between La Crescent and Winona, Minn.

**Meetings & Hearings**

**November**

5 Landowner's Seminar, Mississippi Valley Conservancy, 7 p.m. - 9 p.m., Days Inn, La Crosse, Wis., (608) 784-3606.

5 Minnesota-Wisconsin Boundary Area Commission, Mississippi River Regional Committee, 10 a.m. - 3 p.m., Upper Mississippi Science Center, La Crosse, Wis., (608) 781-6206.

10 Mississippi Flyway Campaign, Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis, 7:30 p.m., Plymouth Church, Minneapolis, Minn.

11-12 Midwest Area River Coalition 2000 (MARC 2000), annual meeting, St. Louis Airport Marriott, (314) 436-7303.

12 Lower Wisconsin State Riverway Board, 5 p.m., Avoca Village Hall.

18 Navigation Study Governors Liaison Committee, 1 p.m. - 5 p.m., Plaza One Hotel, Rock Island, Ill.


19 Upper Mississippi River Basin Association (UMRBA), 9 a.m. - 3 p.m., Plaza One Hotel, Rock Island, Ill., (651) 224-2880.

20 Environmental Management Program Coordinating Committee, 8 a.m. - 2:30 p.m.

21 Mississippi Corridor Neighborhood Coalition, 9:30 a.m., Bottineau Park, Minneapolis, Minn., (612) 788-0249.

December

3 Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, 9 a.m., consideration of environmental review and permits for Kondirator metal shredder, Minneapolis, 1-800-657-3864. Comment period ends Nov. 18.

Conferences

December

2-4 International Workboat Show, New Orleans, La., (207) 842-5541.

10-12 Acres U.S.A. Annual Eco-Agricultural Conference, Minneapolis, Minn., 1-800-355-5313.

Almanac

By Kenny Salwey

A white-tailed buck stands over his scrape, pawing at the soft, rich earth. His antlers shine and his coat glistens in the early November sun. Rut-swollen neck muscles bulge as he carefully nuzzles an overhanging tree branch. As he walks slowly away little white puffs of smoke shoot from his nostrils into the frosty air.

The leaves crunch like corn flakes as I ease through the big river’s backwater forest. At a beaver dam, I find muskrat and raccoon tracks in the fresh black mud. Along the bank of a running slough, some otter and frog parts lying next to a small hole under upturned tree roots indicate a mink’s den. Farther downstream, a few carp and bullheads lay strewn about near an otter slide and toilet. We move along and come to an old den tree where my handy dandy pocket light reveals a possum curled up at the bottom of the hollow.

It feels good to sit on a log and listen to blue jays and chickadees and the “goose talk” in the sky. But it’s the haunting, yet soothing, song of the wind that I hear most as it drifts among the dry brown cattails, the tangled wild rice and the mostly-naked trees — ancient song of harvest moons, frost on the pumpkin, wood smoke, roast turkey and Thanksgiving. Certainly, I am thankful for family, friends, the harvest and good health, but most of all for the chance to walk the Circle of Life in the big river valley.