Big River

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Moving a Neighborhood Out of Harm's Way

by William J. Burke

The Flood of 1965 overtopped the 1997 and 1993 floods by about four feet in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. In April 1965, St. Feriole Island was completely flooded, as were homes and businesses along the mainland shoreline of the city east of the island. Over 1,100 people from a 17-block area — about a fifth of the city — were evacuated from 250 homes and 25 businesses.

Public utilities and transportation facilities were severely damaged, with about two million dollars in costs. A public meeting in January 1966 with the Army Corps of Engineers launched the search for a solution.

This island was flooded several times between 1965 and 1975. The city adopted a flood plain ordinance in 1971 which regulated development in flood prone areas, including all of St. Feriole Island.

Many people, weary of flood damage, wanted the Army Corps of Engineers to build dikes and flood walls to protect island residents and businesses. Instead the Corps began its first "non-structural" flood-control project. In other words, it removed the neighborhood from the island — a more permanent and far less expensive solution.

The project was authorized by Congress in March 1974. The Flood Damage Reduction Project acquired 121 properties between February 1978 and September 1984.

(At about this same time another nearby Wisconsin city, Soldiers Grove, initiated a non-structural solution to reduce flood damage from the Kickapoo River. This effort began in 1979 after a serious flood in 1978. Most of the downtown was simply rebuilt on higher ground.)

Empty streets, sidewalks and shade trees are all that remain of the old neighborhood on St. Feriole Island.

The City's Birthplace

Prairie du Chien had its beginnings

(A Island continued on page 4)

A Light in the Dark

By Leslie A. Werden

Ray Lary had been waving a light in the dark for over eight hours, hoping that someone would see him. After he was able to get the fire burning, he lit the end of a stick and started waving it. And waving it. And waving it. He could see a road in the distance, cars would periodically drive by, but no one saw him sitting on the banks of a backwater of the Mississippi.

Lary had begun the day, January 5, 1989, in his De Soto, Wisconsin, home with thoughts of fresh fish for dinner.

(A Light continued on page 2)

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Getting Lost, Falling In

Lary travelled through the hills and passed some islands on the way to the fishing spot. Around 4:30 p.m. he decided to pack it up, drive his snowmobile back to his truck and head home. He cruised back between the islands, through the hills and by some beaver dams. Suddenly, he realized he wasn’t getting any closer to his truck. The hills all looked the same. The islands all looked the same. Lary thought to himself, “I must have gotten turned around somewhere and headed in the wrong direction.” The temperature was dropping to what felt like 20 below. He was unsure of his original path and knew that he was lost.

Near a beaver dam, he tried desperately to get the snowmobile over an icy hill. He’d get part way up the hill and slip back down. After several attempts, he managed to pull his fish shack up this hill, then the snowmobile died. It was out of gas. Lary left all of his fishing gear with the snowmobile and set off on foot. In his pockets he carried some fishing line, a knife and an old lighter.

From where his snowmobile had stopped, Lary could see a light. He wasn’t sure what it was, but he headed toward it. He walked on the edge of the ice, since the bank was covered with brush and there was no clear path. He picked up a prodding stick and began taping his way along the ice toward the light. He’d tap the ice, checking for thin spots, then proceed. Tap, tap. Walk.

Tap, tap—crash! Lary hit a thin spot, and he and the prodding stick broke through the ice. He threw his arms out to catch himself before going completely under water. His boots were full and the freezing water was up to his chest. He pulled out the self-locking knife and stabbed it into the ice. Holding on to the knife, he pulled himself out of the water as far as he could. Balancing, he stabbed the knife into the ice further away from the hole and pulled himself out some more, until he dragged himself from the hole.

Wet and In Pain

Boots filled with water, his outfit soaked and his gloves now missing, he proceeded toward the light. Lary knew what it was like to be in a perilous situation; he flew thirty-six missions over Germany in World War II and was hit a few times, even had a shot pass right through his shoes. But the aches and the pains of this night were just beginning. His leg began to throb and the knot quickly turned into a charley horse. The stinging sent him to the ground in agony. He couldn’t go on. He waited for the pain to disappear, got up and started walking. Pain! Now in the other leg. Again, he fell to the ground. He managed to continue, but not without falling at least 50 more times.

Nearing the light, he fell through the ice again. He saved himself again using his knife. By now, Lary’s knees and arms were throbbing, swollen and bloated. Fatigued, Lary fell through the ice for a third time. After getting out, he told himself that was it, he had been lucky three times and it was time for him to stop. He had also reached the light, which turned out to be a channel marker.

Tips for Safe Ice Fishing

Captain Britt Hendrickson of the Winona Fire Department offers these reminders for ice fishing:

• Watch your alcohol intake; too much alcohol can give a false sense of warmth.
• Bring a radio and listen to the weather reports. If there’s a chance of a storm or inclement weather, head for home.
• Be extra careful on rivers. The security of the ice on a river can be deceptive because of the flow below the ice.
• Use small heaters with care; they may cause carbon monoxide poisoning.
• Do not travel alone.
• Be prepared for abrupt weather changes. When good weather turns bad, hypothermia can set in.
• Keep warm. If you sense frostbite, warn with additional layers. Do not rub the cold area and do not use hot water.
• Bring along a cellular phone, if possible.
• Carry a survival kit, which should include lighter, matches, flares, candy bars and first aid supplies.

To Build a Fire

He knew he needed a fire soon. All he had was his dilapidated lighter, from which he had planned to take a spring to use for fishing. He said to himself, “Well, I gotta get a fire or something going here,” then prayed that there would be at least a flicker of energy left in that lighter. Lary gathered a small pile of twigs and shaved some wood onto the pile. He took the fishing line from his pocket and snaked it through the twigs. Lary pulled the lighter from his pocket and said one final prayer. His hands felt frozen stiff, and they shook as he held the lighter to the plastic leader. “I hope this thing works,” he thought as his thumb flicked the switch. A faint
Personal Narrative:

Saved by the Buckets

by Kris Fitzgerald

I hoisted the gear from the back of the truck: two pails full of fishing tackle, thermos, a captain's flask, and cigarettes. Clear skies, crunching snow, soft padding on ice — promising plans. I was thinking about soon-to-be-supper fish when the bottom dropped out.

I inspected the situation.

Those pails now provided handholds to the above-ice world. I hung there, already numb. My brother heard the crack and splash; he turned and sprang from his pail, then shuffled towards me. I waved him off — his weight might negate whatever balance my precarious pails had achieved. I watched him return to his pail, confident that his big brother had relieved him of any heroic duty that might interfere with a good day fishing.

I pushed against the ice and slid one water-swollen knee out of the hole. Gradually, I made my way onto the ice, belly first, pails upright, tackle saved. My water-sodden layers cracked with cold as I stripped to underwear and crawled into the still-warm truck.

I drove around French Island, wondering where a nearly-naked potential fisherman should stop and regroup, and found a laundromat teeming with life. I perched on my pail, confident that his big brother had relieved him of any heroic duty that might interfere with a good day fishing.

I drove around French Island, wondering where a nearly-naked potential fisherman should stop and regroup, and found a laundromat teeming with people. Red-faced, barefoot, wearing only underwear, I went inside and threw my ice-block of cloth into a dryer. In an attempt to look normal, I lit a cigarette, nodded to my astonished fellow laundromat users, flashed them an I'm-so-cool-I-can-even-pull-this-off smile and took my nearly-naked self back to the truck.

I drove to the back of the building, cranked up the heat and waited. I hoped I wouldn't have to face the same bunch of giggling teenagers when I returned for my clothes, but each prideful moment I hesitated, wasted an equal moment of fishing time.

Damp clothes may lead to hypothermia, but the fish don't care if you're cold, and besides, I was running out of gas. I sauntered into the laundromat, opened the dryer and, clutching the warm semi-dry clothes, nearly ran to the truck.

I returned to the scene, parked, secured the tackle pails in two soggy-gloved hands and picked a different route across the ice. My father barely looked up, and my brother gestured to an ice hole. I perched on my pail.

That day I got one keeper, a sauger. I got a little wetter, humbler, and more respectful of the river in winter. Most importantly, I got a lesson in river etiquette. There was no comment, no ribbing, not the slightest acknowledgment of my recent experience. River rat etiquette does not allow such things to interrupt a good day fishing.

If you've got a good story to tell about an experience on the river, send it to us. If we put it in Big River, we'll send you a pair of Big River mugs. Please limit your story to less than 500 words.

-- Kris Fitzgerald

Leslie A. Werden works as a marketing consultant at Hiawatha Broadband in Winona, Minn., and is a graduate student in English at Winona State University.
They provide moving testimony about the way life used to be on the island and the strong ties among those who lived there. Ted’s mom, Zella, was relocated. Ted says one important reason for the relocation was that the island was served by septic systems, which didn’t work well when flooded.

Now that the area is mostly cleared, they would like to see it used for a four-unit ball field complex and other active recreational uses.

Bill Howe, a long-time river conservationist and editor of the Prairie du Chien Courier-Press, covered much of this project for the newspaper. He believes it is a credit to the community that the city never had a closed meeting regarding the project. Howe points out that a common slogan for island residents at the time was, “We like it here.” He says that living on the island was more than possessing a home, “It was a way of life.”

Once governmental officials initiated the project, the task of carrying out the relocation rested on the shoulders of Dale Klemme, who was employed by the city. Only one property had to be condemned, according to Klemme. He says that roughly half the residents opposed the relocation, and the other half went along with it.

“There were emotional highs and lows for both the residents and myself,” Klemme recalled.

Klemme believes that time is softening some of the hard feelings, but he understands the lingering emotions of families uprooted by this project. He thinks that the project has probably already paid for itself, considering the floods of 1993 and 1997.

The Future

In 1979, Mayor Fred Huebsch appointed a “Committee for the Re-Use of St. Feriole Island.” With the help of Madison’s Environmental Awareness Center, this committee and the citizens of Prairie du Chien produced a Re-Use Plan, which is part of the city’s Master Plan.

Current mayor, Karl Steiner, sees the island as a place for family-orientated activities, including an historical feature commemorating the last residents who called this island home. An annual rendezvous on the island commemorates its more distant heritage, from the early fur trading era.

The traumatic and emotional effects on relocated residents and businesses should never be minimized or forgotten. These human impacts also become part of the heritage of a community. Perhaps this heritage will be commemorated by family reunions and festivals centered around those who lived on or had ancestors who lived on the island.

The Mississippi Valley has probably not seen the last of such non-structural approaches to floodplain management. The imprint of almost 200 years of floodplain development is not easily undone. The Prairie du Chien project has helped lead the way to reinventing history and the environment along the Mississippi.

William J. Burke, a city and regional planner, operates W. J. Burke & Associates, in Lansing, Iowa. He also owns Mississippi River Tours. His last story for Big River was “Excursion Boat Tragedy on the Mississippi River” (February 1997).
Health of the Watersheds along the Upper Mississippi

Key

Overall status:
1 Better water quality, low vulnerability to stressors such as pollutant loadings.
2 Better water quality, high vulnerability to stressors such as pollutant loadings.
3 Less serious water quality problems, low vulnerability to stressors such as pollutant loadings.
4 Less serious water quality problems, high vulnerability to stressors such as pollutant loadings.
5 More serious water quality problems, low vulnerability to stressors such as pollutant loadings.
6 More serious water quality problems, high vulnerability to stressors such as pollutant loadings.

Land use percentages include overlapping uses.

Source: United States Environmental Protection Agency
http://www.epa.gov/surf

December 1997
Current Events

By David Syring

Last Tow
Trempealeau, Wis. — The last towboat of the season passed through Lock 6 on the morning of November 26, 1997.

The shipping season ended early because Lock 14, near Davenport, Iowa, closed on December 1 for repair work.

Cruising with Elvis
New Orleans — If your twin objects of nostalgia are Elvis and riverboats, then clear your calendar for August 15–22, 1998. That's when the American Queen will offer "The Elvis Years," a theme cruise from New Orleans to Memphis.

On board for the festivities will be Elvis' former nurse, his road manager and the Jordanaires, the singing group who backed the King on 28 movie soundtracks. An obligatory Elvis impersonator will perform.

The price tag for the extravaganza starts at $1,600 per person for double occupancy, and can be booked through the Delta Queen Steamboat Co. at 1-800-543-1949, or through a travel agent. Book and make a deposit by December 15 to get free round-trip airfare to New Orleans and from Memphis.

River Grants Doubled
Minneapolis — The McKnight Foundation announced that it would more than double its funding — up to $23 million — for environmental projects on the Mississippi over the next five years. Funding in 1998 will rise to $3.75 million (up from $2.89 million in 1997), and increase to $5 million for the years 2000 to 2002.

The announcement cites the importance of the Mississippi for drinking water, recreation and the economic vitality of the Midwest.

The foundation will continue to support the types of projects that have been successful since the program began in 1992, including urban greenways, rural watershed protection, education, increasing public commitment to the river and working to ensure environmental protection receives equal consideration with economic development in federal navigation and flood control projects.

Drawdowns Rained Out
The weather did not cooperate with river managers this summer, scuttling two drawdown demonstrations on small backwaters of the Mississippi (see Big River May 1997). Drawdowns, temporary reductions in water levels, appear to be useful tools for rejuvenating water plants and improving habitat.

The Army Corps of Engineers began pumping water out of Peck Lake, near De Soto, Wisconsin, in July, but heavy rains through July and August cancelled the experiment. The drawdown may be tried again next year.

A second experiment, at Lizzy Pauls Pond, near Alma, Wisconsin, continued despite the weather. Water levels dropped about a foot for two months, but missed the best season for rejuvenating aquatic plants.

Though the results are not what planners had hoped for, a multi-agency group is still considering a poolwide drawdown for pool 5, 7, 8 or 9. Public meetings are planned for mid-January to gather input on which pool should be lowered.

Towboat Burns
Greenville, Miss. — If you haven't put the Midwest Pioneer on your list of towboats spotted, don't expect to fill in that slot in your 1997 Little Towwatcher's Guide. The 6,000 horsepower tow exploded on October 20 below Greenville, Mississippi. While the crew safely evacuated to one of the 36 barges pushed by the Pioneer, fire gutted the craft and ended its season of pushing cargo. Investigators are looking into the cause of the explosion, according to The Waterways Journal (10-27-97).

Making a Big Splash
New Orleans — The waters of the Mississippi rose up in apparent protest when the Coast Guard launched its first new ice cutter in 20 years. When the ship was dropped into the river it kicked up a surge of muddy water, sand, gravel and driftwood that hit the viewing stands and injured about 20 people. Most injuries were cuts and bruises, but a few people suffered broken bones.

The spokesman for the company that built the icebreaker Healy said they had no idea why the launch caused such a splash. Hundreds of similar side launches — where the ship slides 40 to 50 feet out into the water on skids — have caused no such problems for the company, according to an Associated Press story (11-15-97).

New Law for Fisheries
Wisconsin — A new law passed by the Wisconsin state legislature tightens regulations on private fish farms in the state. They must register with the state and meet tougher standards for fish health, inspections and record keeping. The law also sets tougher restrictions on the use of natural bodies of water as fish farms, and creates a new category of private "fish preserves."

Fish preserves must be self-contained bodies of water with all shoreline controlled by a single owner. Public access cannot be allowed, nor
can there be a business on the body of water. No fees can be charged for guests to fish, and no fish from the preserve can be sold. Preserves are basically just private fishing holes that an owner and her/his guests can fish in without a license. They must still obey state regulations on fish size, seasons and bag limits, according to state senator Dale Schultz (R-Richland Center).

Rules Reconsidered

Minnesota may change fishing regulations on the Mississippi River downstream from Hastings. Current rules for the four-mile stretch follow the same standards as inland waters, while nearby areas follow the more lenient Mississippi border rules agreed on by Wisconsin and Minnesota. The proposed change would designate the stretch a border water, and would include a continuous fishing season for walleye, sauger, largemouth bass, smallmouth bass and northern pike. It would also increase the number of lines allowed to two, and include new possession limits for some species including northern pike, bluegills and crappies.

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is also concerned that harvesting of painted and softshell turtles might need to be restricted. With expanding markets for painted turtles as pets, and increasing commercial and recreational takes of soft-shells, the DNR is worried that harvests may no longer be sustainable. The DNR hasn’t yet made specific proposals, but officials want public input on the issue.

Harvesting live mussels is a third area of potential regulation. The DNR is considering banning harvest of mussels for personal use because most recreational harvesters can’t tell legal from endangered species. Minnesota currently lists 30 species of mussels as endangered, threatened or of special concern.

To comment on any of these topics, call Steve Hirsch at (612) 296-0791, before December 19.

Helping the Long Necks

With human help, a great blue heron can enjoy a good meal again, and six endangered whooping cranes are warm in New Mexico for the winter.

The heron, rescued near Sauk Prairie, Wisconsin, had two fishing swivels and a hook caught in his stomach, along with 50 feet of line wrapped around its neck. Bird rehabilitator Linda Bethke said the heron had been unable to eat for about three weeks, and weighed only three pounds — half its normal weight. The hook was imbedded in the bird’s stomach and the attached line prevented the bird from straightening its neck to stab for fish. Dr. Joseph Kelly, a local veterinarian, performed his first ever bird surgery to remove the hook.

Bethke, who will feed and care for the heron throughout the winter, caught the bird with the help of Devil’s Lake Park ranger, Steve Schmelzer. According to the Sauk Prairie Eagle (10-23-97), Bethke has helped about 1,300 injured birds since 1990.

In another human-bird story, an Idaho rancher led twelve birds — four whooping cranes and eight endangered whooping cranes — onto a business in New Mexico for the winter.

Letter to the Editor:

One Sunday while kayaking we met a jet-ski. Of course we heard it first and we checked to make sure the dog was not in a position to be run over by someone going too fast to care. The skier waved as he passed without slowing down. (I’ve heard the slower those things go the harder they are to control!) We were left for about a minute with his waves and the sound of his wake slapping the shoreline of the islands we were near. His scent stayed around as exhaust fumes and oil smell. Soon he was back, having run into a dead end in the backwaters, passing us again in the opposite direction without slowing down. Noise and waves and fumes emanating in all directions. We saw him for a third time, crossing ahead of us and heading up another canal, now accompanied by two other jet-skiers.

What was their pleasure in the backwaters? I cannot answer for them, but there is certainly not much more elemental a contrast than between a modern kayak and a jet-ski. Yet surprisingly they have many similarities. Both are products of contemporary technology and design incorporating modern plastics. Both are single-rider vehicles.

Both are highly responsive and maneuverable. But a kayak is relatively slow and quiet. Using it as a means of transport in the backwaters is a choice of how to fit into this area and to minimize impact on an environment. Whereas a jet-ski is fast and loud and never inconspicuous and represents a different kind of choice of how to fit in.

Contemplating and observing are not what one does on a jet-ski. Consider some model names: Wave Blaster, Super Jet, Bombadier, Wave Runner. Minimizing impact is not part of its conception. An exclamation point is! Radiating an aura of power and domination is. And a necessary accompaniment to power and domination is making one’s presence felt — felt by the water, the shore, the plants, the animals and other craft and people. Was this their pleasure?

There is an obvious contradiction between the backwaters and a jet-ski. In the kayak that Sunday I felt the contradiction, I smelled the contradiction, I heard the contradiction. But for some that “obvious” contradiction is not so obvious. I am not sure how to deal with this lack of insight but to register my opposition: Jet-skis do not belong in the backwaters!

Jeff Falk,
Fountain City, Wisconsin
Special Events & Festivals

**December**
4 Christmas Walk, Clinton, Iowa.
5 Tree Lighting, Heritage Square Park, Wabasha, Minn.
5-6 Old Fashioned Christmas Walk with Luminarias, Fulton, Illinois.
5-7 Hot Air Balloon Rally, Caledonia, Minn.
5-7 Christmas Walk, Le Claire, Iowa.
5-7 Ice Fishing Show, St. Paul, Minn. (612) 943-2002.
6 Light the Steamboat Wilkie, Winona, Minn.
6 Jack Frost Magic, snowshoe hike, Itasca State Park, Minnesota (612) 296-6157 or 1-888-646-6367.
6 Old Fashioned Christmas, Maiden Rock, Wis.
6-7 Heritage Canyon Christmas Walk, Fulton, Illinois.
6-7 Lamplight Tour of U.S. Grant House, Galena, Illinois.
6-7 Christmas Arts and Crafts, Dubuque, Iowa.
7 Tour of Homes, Prairie du Chien, Wis.
13 Christmas Stroll, Alma, Wis.
13-14 Country Christmas, Trempealeau, Wis.
20 Luminaria Night, Galena, Illinois.
27 A Victorian Christmas, Stonefield State Historical Site, Cassville, Wis.
27 Christmas Bird Count, Dubuque, Iowa.
27 Christmas Celebration, Pepin, Wis.
27-Jan. 1 Winter Wonderland Light Display, Riverside Park, La Crosse, Wis.

**January**
21-25 Boat show, Minneapolis Convention Center.
24-25 Klondike Kapers, winter snow festival, Chestnut Mountain, Galena, Illinois, 1-800-397-1320.
24-25 Winterfest, Lake City, Minnesota.

**January Eagle Watches**
3 Clinton, Iowa. Programs and exhibits: Community College; viewing at Lock & Dam 13 near Fulton, Ill., and at Albany, Ill. Boat Landing. (815) 259-3628.
3-4 Le Claire, Iowa. Indoor programs: Mississippi Valley Welcome Center; viewing at Lock & Dam 14. (319) 289-3009.

11 Through March: Wabasha, Minn., Eagle-watch deck staffed 1 p.m. - 3 p.m. Sundays. (612) 565-4989.

**Meetings & Hearings**

**December**
3 Strategic Planning Workshop, 5:30 p.m. - 9:30 p.m.
4 Strategic Planning Workshop, 8 a.m. - 11:30 a.m.
4 Commission meeting, 1 p.m.-4 p.m.
11 Lower Wisconsin State Riverway Board, 5 p.m., Muscoda Village Hall.

**Workshops & Conferences**
11-13 Annual Meeting of the Wisconsin Association of Nature Centers, Madison, Wis.
11-13-14 State Water Resources Conference, Milwaukee, Wis.
28 State of the Rivers, Rivers Council of Minnesota, Hamline University, St. Paul, Minn., public invited. Purpose: to create a statewide river protection strategy. (218) 547-3675, or riversmn@eot.com.

(Cont'd from page 7)

sandhill cranes — on an 800-mile migration from Grace, Idaho, to Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico. Kent Clegg flew an ultra-light plane painted to resemble a whooping crane in an attempt to teach the migration route to cranes that had been hatched at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland, and the International Crane Foundation near Baraboo, Wisconsin.

The experiment, partially funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is part of the efforts to prevent the extinction of endangered whooping cranes. Only 371 of the birds are known to exist, of which 180 migrate as a single flock each year. The rest of the whoopers are nonmigratory residents of several refuges. Some researchers are concerned that the migratory flock, which summers in Canada and winters on the coast of southern Texas, could be vulnerable to hurricanes, chemical spills, red tides, diseases or other problems, according to an Associated Press story (10-20-97).

**Almanac**

By Kenny Saltve

The big river lies quiet, no waves lap against the shores, no whitecaps pound the islands. Boat traffic ceases altogether. A few “black holes” of open water stand in stark contrast to surrounding ice and snow — the water moves, but it

Below the tree we find parts of fish and bits of muskrat fur — the eagle is dining well.

A bald eagle perches in a cottonwood tree with a good view of the open water.

A big eagle - perfches in a cottonwood tree with a good view of the open water. Below the tree we find parts of fish and bits of muskrat fur - the eagle is dining well.

A bald eagle perches in a cottonwood tree with a good view of the open water. Below the tree we find parts of fish and bits of muskrat fur - the eagle is dining well.

Merry Christmas to all who travel together in the circle — fins, feathers, fur, crawly things and river folks alike. The new year will be a happy one as we have wild things and places like the big river valley to call home. Until next month, my friends, it's been good travelling with you during the past year.