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FEATURES

- 18** **Iceboating**
Lake Pepin is a hot spot for the oldest and coldest extreme sport on the river.
By Pamela Eyden
- 22** **Backwater Classroom**
In "School on the River," in La Crosse, Wis., students learn on the water as well as in the classroom.
By Meggan Massie
- 26** **Green Tree Hotel**
LeClaire's riverfront elm tree was a witness to river history.
By Robert Stumm
- 28** **River Condo Bubble?**
Are condos on the river the new cabins up north?
By Pete Beurskens



DEPARTMENTS

- 5** **From the Riverbank**
WRDA Weirdness
By Reggie McLeod
- 7** **River News**
Snails & Snot, Island Getaway, The Ibis & the Manatee.
- 17** **Know Your River:
Cold Fish**
By Pamela Eyden
- 35** **Advertiser Index**
Where did I see that ad...?
- 36** **River People**
Judy Patsch: Nobody recognizes me without my cookies.
By Gary Kramer

Cover: Iceboaters photographed by a radio-controlled camera mounted on a large kite. (Craig Wilson, Kite Aerial Photography)

*Top: Student Joey Yoshizumi paddles to class. (Meggan Massie)
Middle: Eagles Landing condos in Wabasha, Minn., overlook the Mississippi. (Pete Beurskens)
Bottom: The iceboat Friluftslui (Sig Anderson)*

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From the Riverbank

Reggie McLeod
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Reggie McLeod.....editor/publisher

Molly McGuire.....managing editor

Pamela Eyden.....news/photo editor

Contributing editors

Marc Hequet.....Twin Cities

Gary Kramer.....Quad Cities

Pete Beurskens.....Red Wing, Minn.

Maureen J. Cooney...office/sales

Kathy Delano.....sales/design

Robert Copeland.....bookkeeping/subscriptions

Patricia McGuire.....bills & renewals assistant

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WRDA WEIRDNESS

The Navigation Study recommended expanding seven locks on the Mississippi and Illinois rivers. This recommendation made it into the Water Resources and Development Act (WRDA), which has passed both houses of Congress in slightly different forms. However, senators John McCain, R-Ariz., and Russ Feingold, D-Wis., added a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reform provision to the Senate version, which is intended to eliminate pork-barrel projects.

Feingold dug in his heels on the Corps reform issue, so, as of early December, WRDA seemed unlikely to go anywhere during the lame-duck session of Congress, and it will probably expire at the end of the year.

Meanwhile, a very strange thing is happening with the Navigation Study: the Corps is in the process of rewriting the economics part of it, even as WRDA is in conference committee and people are lobbying for its passage.

The crux of the issue is a discredited methodology, called the tow-cost model, that the Corps used to calculate the economic benefits of expanding the locks in the first study. Economists had stopped using it a long time ago, because it didn't work. It was used in the first Navigation Study, because it could be manipu-

lated to make expanding the locks look like a very good idea. After the first study was discredited and scrapped in 2000 (see "Donald Sweeney, Holding the Corps Accountable," *Big River*, July-Aug. 2006), a review committee created by the National Academies of Sciences told the Corps

Feingold dug in his heels on the Corps reform issue, so, as of early December, WRDA seemed unlikely to go anywhere during the lame-duck session of Congress.

not to use that methodology in the new study. Congress and the Pentagon backed up the review committee.

So the Corps used the tow-cost model again in the new study, basically making the economic part of the study worthless, according to the committee that reviewed it. Undaunted, both the House and Senate passed the study's recommendations anyway.

This is all pretty strange, in and of itself, but in the Sept. 2006 issue of the *UMR-IWW System Navigation Study Newsletter* the Corps announced that it is redoing the economic part of the study, this time using more cred-

ible economic modeling and newer shipping data.

According to the newsletter, John Paul Woodley, assistant secretary of the Army for Civil Works, asked for the re-evaluation. The interim report is scheduled for completion in September 2007.

It is amazing that our legislators passed this discredited plan in the first place. They may pass it again without waiting until September. Stay tuned. 🌊

Contacts (800) 303-8201. For information about stories, columns and River News, contact Reggie McLeod, Pamela Eyden or Molly McGuire (editors@big-river.com). For information about placing an ad in Big River or for information about selling Big River magazines contact Kathy Delano or Maureen J. Cooney (ads@big-river.com). We must receive ads by January 11 to get them into the March-April 2007 magazine.

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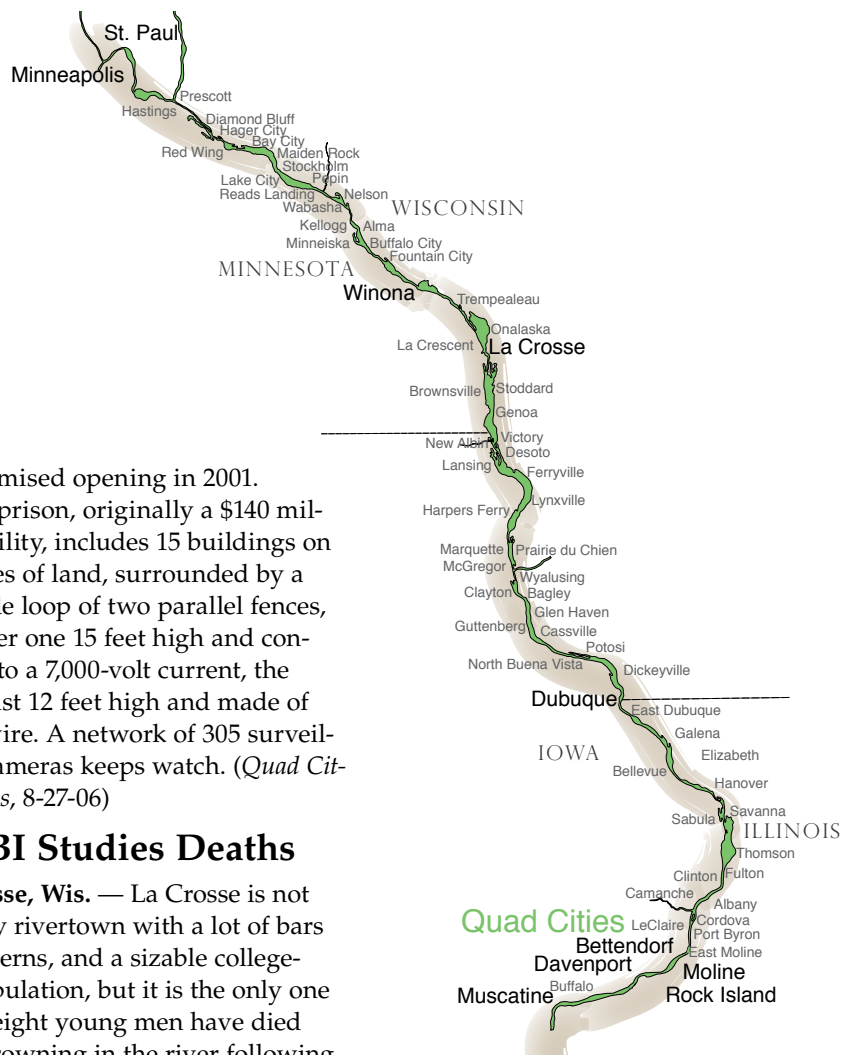
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River News



The Ibis & the Manatee

Fountain City, Wis. — No one knows why an ibis, a long-legged, long-necked bird with a long curving bill that usually hangs out in warm coastal waters, was competing for fish with gulls in a slough near Fountain City in early November. The bird was definitely not a scarlet ibis, but its precise identity was never determined — it may have been a white-faced ibis or a glossy ibis.

Maybe the ibis was flying down to meet the manatee that was spotted in the Mississippi River at Memphis. Manatees are thousand-pound marine mammals that also live in warm coastal waters. Since manatees can't survive in water colder than 66 F and the Mississippi River was 60 degrees or less in early October, rescuers from Sea World in Orlando, Fla., flew in to try to help. After a week of searching, everyone gave up, assuming that the manatee had turned tail and followed the current back downriver.

Manatees have occasionally been found in the river, but never as far north as Memphis, which is 700 miles above the Gulf of Mexico.

Pokey Progress

Thomson, Ill. — Five years after it was built, the Thomson Correctional Center received its first 200 minimum-security prisoners last fall. The prison hired 75 employees to open the prison and get things going. Thirty-one of the 41 new corrections officers just graduated from the state training academy.

The new inmates are being trained to maintain the grounds and do laundry and kitchen work. Eventually 1,600 maximum-security inmates will move in. They will remain in their cells 23 hours a day, under tight security provided by sophisticated and costly electronic systems.

Nearby Thomson hopes to see a revival of its economy, which declined after hopes were raised and investments were made in anticipation of

the promised opening in 2001.

The prison, originally a \$140 million facility, includes 15 buildings on 146 acres of land, surrounded by a one-mile loop of two parallel fences, the inner one 15 feet high and connected to a 7,000-volt current, the outer just 12 feet high and made of razor wire. A network of 305 surveillance cameras keeps watch. (*Quad Cities Times*, 8-27-06)

FBI Studies Deaths

La Crosse, Wis. — La Crosse is not the only rivertown with a lot of bars and taverns, and a sizable college-age population, but it is the only one where eight young men have died from drowning in the river following a night of heavy drinking.

The most recent death was in October 2006.

The mayor, police and county medical examiner all believe the deaths occurred accidentally. Each victim had a blood alcohol content of 2.0 or more. But rumors have persisted that a serial killer was stalking downtown bars, so police forwarded their files to the FBI in November, where they will be reviewed by the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime.

Similar deaths have been reported in other towns. After the body of a young man was found in the river in Minneapolis in 2002, police insisted that he was not the victim of foul play, but they reclassified the case as a homicide late last fall. In Dubuque, a young man who disappeared from a bar on Christmas Eve last year was found in the river in March. His father, a U.S. Marshall, called for an investigation by the FBI later that month.

Tourneys Tough on Fish

La Crosse, Wis. — Preliminary results from La Crosse's participation in Wisconsin's Bass Tournament Mortality Study show that tournament-induced stress increased bass mortality by about 18 percent within five days after they were released.

The University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point study called for 100 bass to be caught by Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) staffers, and 100 bass to be caught by tournament participants on both the first and second day. All three groups of fish were placed in 12-foot-square pens in an area of slight current. After five days, 6 percent of the smallmouth and 13 percent of the largemouth bass from the DNR pen died — an average of 10 percent. Of the tournament fish, 37 percent of the smallmouth and 27 percent of the largemouth died — an average of 28 percent.

Death rates are known to be affected by water temperature (warmer water kills more fish), fish species (smallmouth are more susceptible than largemouth), wind and wave conditions (bouncing around in a livewell increases stress) and the presence of a specific virus called LMBV.

In 2004, the Wisconsin Legislature directed the DNR to study the impacts of tournaments. Final results compiled from several sites and tournaments were expected to be released in December.

Death By Flukes

La Crosse, Wis. — Intestinal parasites known as flukes killed thousands of coots, lesser scaup, blue-winged teal, buffleheads and ruddy ducks in pools 7, 8 and 9 during the fall migration of 2006, according to a report from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Flukes have killed birds during every migration since they were first documented in 2002. As of late November, 2,400 dead birds had been

counted, a number similar to last year's count.

Flukes, also called trematodes, are parasitic flatworms with complex life cycles that usually require two different hosts before they infect the birds. A species of snail native to Europe is the intermediate host for the two fluke species thought to be responsible for the waterfowl deaths. When birds eat infected snails, the flukes then either feed on the bird's blood or disrupt their water and electrolyte balance, causing death either way.

All birds found in this year's die-off had exceptionally high concentrations of flukes in their intestines.

Predators and scavengers of waterfowl are apparently not affected by eating the trematodes. There is no known health threat to humans who clean, handle or eat the birds.

Research Center Planned

Alton, Ill. — The state of Illinois will contribute \$6.8 million toward building a field and research station next to the National Great Rivers Museum

in Alton, which focuses on river ecology, the mechanics of the river, and locks and dams, as well as indigenous peoples of the river region.

The museum is next to the Melvin Price Locks and Dam, and operated by the Army Corps of Engineers.

Island Getaway

St. Louis — The city of St. Louis is considering a plan to build a series of islands and terraces in front of its landmark Gateway Arch. The island barges, connected by floating walkways, would support recreation and social events, beer gardens, restaurants and a skating rink. Million-dollar feasibility studies to investigate the project's effects on river flow, sediment and commercial navigation were to be completed by January. (*Waterways Journal* 8-21-06)

Meanwhile, just south of St. Louis, the Army Corps of Engineers will remove about 4,700 cubic yards of rock from the navigation channel in 270 locations. The jagged limestone rock that forms the riverbed from Chester,



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Ill., to Cape Girardeau, Mo., is interfering with shipping after water levels dropped, following seven years of low rainfall in the mid-Mississippi River Valley.

In late November several tows bumped the bottom. When the Upper Mississippi freezes, the flow will drop even more.

Fish Fever


Stress from overpopulation may have caused a sudden die-off of Asian carp on the Illinois River last summer. An estimated 1,000 fish per mile died in a 110-mile stretch between Starved Rock and Havana, Ill. The initial suspect was the *spring viremia* virus, known to be fatal to carp, but the die-off had different characteristics than those usually found with viremia, according to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists. No viral or bacterial cause has been discovered.

Shovelnose sturgeon died off suddenly last summer along a 50-mile stretch of the Des Moines River between Ottumwa and Bonaparte, Iowa, about 35 miles above the river's confluence with the Mississippi. The die-off was limited to sturgeon, which meant that the cause was more likely to be disease than pollution, but research was inconclusive.

Sturgeon-only kills have been recorded on the Des Moines, the Mississippi and other rivers where water levels dropped and temperatures rose.

Take the Wheel

What do you do when the captain of the boat falls overboard or has a heart attack? What do you do if the boat catches fire? What do you need to know to safely rent or buy a boat?

The U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary offers a variety of courses, including one for non-boaters called "Suddenly in Command." The four-hour course deals with getting help, coping with fire, avoiding collisions, handling the boat, surviving in the water and generally being prepared for an emergency. 

Going to the Palace

Alma and Stockholm, Wis. — Two artisans from Mississippi River towns

are working hard this winter to prepare for a gala far from the river next June.

Kristine Kjos, artist and owner of The Commercial gallery in Alma, will plan and sew 60 very large floor-length damask tablecloths and 60 silk table toppers, to be used in entertaining 600 guests at a fête at the Palace of Versailles, near Paris.

Allison Lisk, owner of Clementine flower shop in Stockholm, will provide and arrange flower centerpieces for the ball.

The ball is part of a four-day event sponsored by the Friends of the Palace of Versailles, an American group with a mission to encourage cultural exchange in education, architecture and the arts, and to raise funds to help restore the palace. The French government spends more than \$55 million a year to keep up the famous 2,500-room palace, which was built by Louis XIV in the mid-17th century, but that doesn't cover new restoration. Grounds, gardens and many buildings were neglected for two centuries.

"I'm excited! I would never have thought this was likely, living in a small river town," said Kjos, who moved from Milwaukee 10 years ago. "After I finish the tablecloths, I'm going to sew a ball gown."

Snails & Snot

Another invasive species has become a matter of urgent concern, not for the Mississippi River, but for many cold water tributary streams. A diatom algae *Didymosphenia geminata*, or "Didymo," for short, has infected trout streams in Virginia, Montana and South Dakota. Anglers describe it as looking something like wet toilet paper. Others call it "bubblegum" or "rock snot."

It poses no direct threat to human or fish health, but it does clog up ecosystems used by bugs and fish, just like heavy sedimentation would. (*River Crossings*, July-August 2006)

Biologists have found several specimens of an exotic snail called the channeled apple snail on the west bank of the Mississippi River near New Orleans. The snail is a voracious eater and became a serious pest to



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rice and other agricultural crops in Southeast Asia after it was imported from South America to start a gourmet escargot business and escaped. It is huge, compared to native snails — up to four inches long. So far it has been found no farther north than Indiana. (*Waterways Journal*, 11-13-06)

Trail & Protection Bills

Washington, D.C. — In late September, Congress passed the Mississippi River Trail Study Act, which will amend the 1968 National Trails System Act and add the Mississippi River to the list of potential additions to the national system of historic and scenic trails. Nineteen trails are now part of the system, including the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and the Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail. The bill was sponsored by Betty McCollum, D-Minn.

Also in late September, the House passed the Upper Mississippi River Basin Protection Act, to develop a coordinated public-private approach to reducing nutrient and sediment

losses in the Upper Mississippi River basin. The bill relies on existing federal, state and local programs.

Fixing the Gulf Coast

New Orleans — Since the 2005 hurricanes ripped up the Gulf coastline, everyone's been talking about Louisiana's rapidly eroding coastal wetlands. The state still has 30 percent of the nation's coastal wetlands, but it's lost a third of its area since the 1930s, mostly due to levees, canals and other human engineering.

One proposal calls for dredged river sediment that was previously cleared from navigation channels and dumped off the continental shelf to be deposited instead in the eroding shallows near land.

Another proposal would reinforce the shore using dredged material pumped through a network of sediment pipelines.

Another would divert the outlet of the river itself to send muddy water over shallower areas, where waves and currents could rework it

into coastline. This alternative won unanimous approval of researchers at a meeting in New Orleans last spring, but left unanswered the question of how ocean-going ships would make it up to the port. Lawsuits have already been filed against the Army Corps of Engineers to close the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MR-GO) canal, which is blamed for directing the storm surge from the Gulf directly into the Parish of St. Bernard last year. The MR-GO is a shipping channel dug in the late 1960s to provide better access to New Orleans.

Many scientists point out that the most natural solution would be to let the river change its course, as it has always done from time to time. Such a change would likely push it through the Atchafalaya River channel and out to the Gulf, to form new wetlands to the west. The Army Corps has installed an enormous system of locks and dams to prevent this from happening, because Baton Rouge, New Orleans and chemical plants between them would end

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Photo Contest Winner



Tim Powell of West Burlington, Iowa, took this shot of the Burlington harbor in November 2006.

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Or send a print to Photo Editor, *Big River*, PO Box 204, Winona, MN 55987. (We cannot return photographs, though.)

Include your name, address, phone number and a short description of the photograph — who or what it is, when and where it was taken, etc.

up on a backwater. Nonetheless, the threat of global warming, bigger storms, higher seas and increasing erosion is shifting priorities. (*PlanetArk* 10-8-06, *New York Times* 9-19-06)

WRDA Stalled

Washington, D.C. — The Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) that would authorize expansion of seven locks on the Mississippi and Illinois rivers was approved by both the House and Senate last summer, but the Senate's version included an amendment sponsored by Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., and Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., requiring independent peer review of all Army Corps of Engineers projects that cost more than \$40 million.

As of November, a joint committee was unable to reconcile the two versions of the bill and final passage was unlikely. Feingold refused to give up the amendment. If the bill fails to become law this session, proponents would have to reintroduce it again next spring.

Awards

This fall, four Mississippi River enthusiasts received recognition for their work.

Storyteller Roald Tweet, Rock Island, Ill., received the Illinois Humanities Council 2006 Studs Terkel Humanitarian Service Award. In nominating Tweet for the award, which honors cultural contributors, Rock Island Mayor Mark Schweibert

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said, "from the visual and performing arts to Mississippi River historian, his long and distinguished service has enriched our entire area."

The Iowa Chapter of the Sierra Club gave a Public Service Award to Clayton County Planning and Zoning Commissioner Kathy Koether, honoring her for her sustained opposition to the River Bluff development project near McGregor, Iowa. The club also gave a Grassroots Activist Award to Clayton County resident Tim Mason for his work to protect the environment in the Marquette-McGregor area.

McGregor native John M. "Corky" Bickel was elected president of the board for the National Rivers Hall of Fame, founded by his late father, John P. Bickel. The younger Bickel was once a cabin boy on the excursion steamboat *Avalon*.

Lock Repair

Locks 2, 4, 9 and 10 are scheduled to close from early December until March 1 for repair work.

Lock 11 at Dubuque will be closed from January 2 to February 28 for major rehabilitation of the lower land guide wall.

Queasy on the Queen

The paddleboat *Mississippi Queen* cut short a fall foliage tour to the Upper Mississippi in October when passengers fell ill with gastrointestinal symptoms. On Oct. 25, the boat left St. Louis heading for St. Paul, but turned back in Hannibal, Mo., when about 40 people got sick.

A week earlier, about 153 passengers and 15 crew members on an Ohio River trip got sick, prompting a two-day *Queen*-clean in St. Louis. After the Oct. 25 cruise turned around, the *Queen* got a 10-day scrubbing and cruised again Nov. 8 from St. Louis, heading to Hannibal and back with Food & Drug agents on board. Officials think that the illness was a highly contagious Norwalk-like virus. (11-9-06, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*)

Earlier, all 2006 *American Queen* cruises were canceled, because the

big boat was leased to a private energy company in the Katrina effort. The *Delta Queen* remained downstream from St. Louis this summer.

All three boats are scheduled to cruise the Upper Mississippi in 2007.

No Name Change

Clinton, Iowa — A Clinton City Council member's idea to change the name of Riverview Drive to Veterans Memorial Drive sank out of sight after council members realized how awkward that might be for the city, whose marketing slogan is "Things to Do with a River View."

Instant Fish Passages

Alton, Ill. — The Army Corps of Engineers is considering a fish passage at Melvin Price Lock and Dam at Alton, as part of its Navigation and Ecosystem Sustainability Program. Melvin Price is the first obstacle to big fish trying to swim upstream to spawn and feed. The project is still in the planning stage.

On July 25, the Corps held a public

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Army Corps slide shows a structural option to facilitate fish passage. (From link on website of Jim Bensman)

meeting about the proposed project at the National Great Rivers Museum, next to the locks. After the Corps presentation, which mentioned several possible scenarios, such as adjusting dam gates, building a rock ramp or bypass, or removing the dam altogether (illustrated by a picture of a dam exploding), members of the audience asked questions and made comments. Jim Bensman of Alton urged that the dam be torn out. A story in Alton's *The Telegraph* reported that Bensman said he "would like to see the dam blown up." Oops!

An Army Corps security manager forwarded the newspaper clipping to the FBI, who then called Bensman for a little talk. The Associated Press (8-26-06) and *New York Times* (8-22-06) picked up the story, reporting that Bensman, a coordinator with Heartwood, a hardwood-forest protection group, is a perennial critic of the Corps, but not regarded as a terror risk.

Trumpeters Nest in Illinois

For the first time in more than 150 years, a pair of trumpeter swans nested in Illinois last summer, hatching two cygnets in a wetland near

Savanna. Both adults had been raised in captivity and released in different marshes near the Mississippi a year apart by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

According to Iowa DNR biologist Ron Andrews, the Savanna pair left the nesting area and were seen on both sides of the river, but with only one cygnet. Swans need open water in the winter, so this family may stick around or may migrate south. Trumpeters winter in west-central Missouri, east-central Kansas, southern Illinois, or sometimes in open water below dams. The largest wintering concentration of trumpeters is in Monticello, Minn., just downstream from a nuclear power plant.

The swan population is nearing sustainable levels in Iowa.

With an eight-foot wingspan, trumpeters are the largest waterfowl in North America. They were once common in the Midwest, but disappeared in the 1890s, due to wetland loss and indiscriminate hunting.

The Iowa DNR has released more than 700 trumpeter cygnets into the wild since 1995. Each bird wears a numbered neck collar.

Bridges Reconfigured

St. Paul — The developer of a proposed riverfront megaproject withdrew the plan's rezoning request in November to consult with community groups and gain city support.

Neighbors objected to the \$1.5 billion Bridges project, which featured 30-story buildings with more than 1,100 condos and 4,000 square feet of retail space, plus hotels and a cultural center.

Mayor Chris Coleman called for developer Jerry Trooien to deliver a project more in keeping with the existing residential neighborhoods. The city's comprehensive plan for that side of the Mississippi River, opposite downtown St. Paul, limits buildings to six stories.

Meanwhile, across the river from the proposed Bridges site, developer Rottlund Homes dropped plans to tear down the abandoned Ramsey County Jail and build a 25-story luxury condo tower on a prime piece of riverfront. Rising construction costs and a softer housing market nixed

the deal, according to the county.

County commissioners want a developer "to find a reuse for the jail or knock it down," said David Twa, county manager. Now nearly half a mile of riverfront is for sale.

The abandoned jail, a unique de-

The 1920s-vintage hydro plant on the Mississippi at Lock and Dam 2 is in good shape and still generates up to 18 megawatts.

sign that seems to climb the bluff to downtown street level, will be more costly to demolish than a freestanding structure, because it is partly under St. Paul's Wabasha Street Bridge.

Also for sale is the former West Publishing building, which now houses county offices. The county thinks that such prime property should be on the tax rolls instead of in government hands.

Finally, just downstream from the Bridges site and on the same side of

the river, opponents of a proposed floodwall to protect St. Paul's Holman Field airport sued the city to stop the mile-long structure, saying it would create more noise from air traffic and would obstruct the natural beauty of the riverfront. (*St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 11-14-06)

Green Potential

St. Paul — An abandoned riverfront factory may be transformed to a green residential or mixed-use development powered by its own hydro plant on the Mississippi River.

That's a distinct possibility for the soon-to-be-shuttered Ford Motor Co. truck plant in St. Paul.

Mayor Chris Coleman expressed interest in a "zero-emissions" redevelopment of the 122-acre Ford site, which already has retail and upscale single-family housing nearby.

Such a development project could draw power from an existing hydro dam on the Mississippi River and other energy sources — without producing carbon dioxide or other emissions.

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Ideas are in the "concept phase," said Anne Hunt, the mayor's deputy policy director for environmental issues. "Can we as a community provide low-cost, reliable energy but also make it as green as possible?" asked Hunt. "These are discussions we want the community to have."

The 1920s-vintage hydro plant on the Mississippi at Lock and Dam 2 is in good shape and still generates up to 18 megawatts, enough to power as many as 14,000 households.

Ford Motor Co. is looking for prospective buyers for the hydro plant.

Michael Lander, a Minneapolis developer, called the Ford plant location "one of the best if not the best redevelopment sites in the Twin Cities," except that it lacks immediate free-way access.

Canal Shore Drive Protest

LeClaire, Iowa — In late November the LeClaire City Council approved a request to build one of the four bars and restaurants that were included in a recent proposal to create attractions along Canal Shore Drive, but the building has to be finished by June 2007.

Neighbors protested the proposal to build four restaurants and bars and a banquet facility. They feared the plan would create a party cove with loud music, and parking and run-off problems.

Two-mile-long Canal Shore Drive is separated from the Main Channel by a lateral dam. It was a residential area for a long time, with two marinas. When developers proposed building a hotel in the area, residents protested, but the hotel was built. Later, residents protested a plan to create a docking facility consisting of a moored barge. After that, they protested the idea of a marina sticking out into the narrow canal.

Proponents of the new restaurant-and-bar plan say the project would bring money to the community.

Casino Development

Bettendorf, Iowa — Bettendorf has broken ground for a new 53,000-square-foot event center and placed the final beam atop the new 12-story, 256-room Isle of Capri Hotel, which

is part of the same new riverfront complex that houses the Isle of Capri gambling boat.

A variety of businesses — engineering, accounting and real estate firms — have already moved into the area, soon to be joined by a new, themed retail shopping center. Bettendorf is proud of the \$104 million project, which is being funded with a combination of public and private money, and will not increase the tax burden on citizens. It is hoped that the project will create 125 new jobs and bring \$290 million into the community.

The event center will be managed by the Isle of Capri. In exchange, they agreed to absorb any operating losses over the life of the agreement.

Vision Needed

Davenport, Iowa — The city of Davenport is asking the Vision Iowa Board for \$14 million in grants for its riverfront development projects. The projects include \$10 million for construction of Centennial Park, \$2.8 million toward the construction of a public pier and a million dollars for a waterfront festival ground. The Vision Iowa Board in November said the plan looked promising, but it had questions about the involvement of private developers.

Faced with disagreement among city council members, the city will create a separate Community and Attraction Task Force to answer these and other questions.

If the project wins approval, funding would be spread over several years because the board only grants about \$12 million a year. (*Quad Cities Times*, 10-18-06)

Old Wetland, New Trail

Davenport, Iowa — An always-soggy, frequently-underwater section of the walking trail through 513-acre Nahant Marsh, an urban wetlands area adjacent to the Mississippi River, recently got an extreme makeover.

Volunteers from the Alcoa Davenport Works and several other public and private groups, coordinated by nonprofit River Action, provided labor. They laid down a new trail surface that prevents the fill for the trail



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from sinking into wetland mud. The material, called "Geo-Web," is a mesh of perforated, vertical-standing cells that is laid on the ground, with a gravel surface on top.

Nahant Marsh, one of the last wetlands in the Quad Cities urban area, is now a popular environmental education site. It was used for skeet and trap shooting for nearly 40 years. In 1996, the Environmental Protection Agency declared it a Superfund site because of lead shot. Eventually, 143 tons of lead-contaminated soil were removed from the area.

The Nahant Marsh Educational Center, managed by the Putnam Museum, sponsors activities to teach the importance of wetlands and how they benefit water quality, wildlife and humans.

Whooping Progress

Necedah, Wis. — The snow birds have all gone south — not winter-shy senior citizens, but migrating whooping cranes, a species that was nearly extinct in the 1940s.

Thanks to a coalition of agencies

and organizations, whooping cranes continue to make a slow comeback. Three birds from Winnebago County, Iowa, arrived at their wintering grounds in Florida on November 10.

They will be joined, if all goes well, by their Wisconsin neighbors

Nahant Marsh, one of the last wetlands in the Quad Cities urban area, is now a popular environmental education site.

from the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge. From Necedah, new cranes follow ultra-lights on their first autumn journey. As of November 27, the Wisconsin flock and the ultralight crew were resting in Cumberland County, Tenn., having traveled 674.8 miles. In 2005, the cranes had made it to Florida by Dec. 12.

There are 66 birds in the eastern North American wild flock. The only other migrating wild flock consists of some 220 birds at the Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest

Territories of Canada. And about 55 wild birds live year round in central Florida. 🦅

Starting Small

Hastings, Minn. — One way to improve water quality and habitat on the big river is to protect water quality on the little ones.

The small but prized Vermillion River in southeastern Minnesota is about to get improved protection through new watershed standards adopted by the Vermillion River Joint Powers Board. The river drains about 300 square-miles, including most of Dakota County, one of the fastest growing counties in the Twin Cities Metro area. The new standards will cover floodplain and wetland alterations, stormwater management, agricultural activities, and other water quality factors in two counties and in the 20 communities along the river, including Hastings.

The Vermillion, a clear, cool trout stream, empties into the Mississippi near Red Wing, Minn. (*Hastings Star Gazette*, 11-2-06) 🌊

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Cold Fish — Life and Death Under the Ice



By Pamela Eyden

When the water cools to 50 F, most river fish move from their summer places to their winter places. Most don't go very far, but some travel a surprising distance. One study in Pool 7 found that smallmouth bass near Black River Falls, Wis., migrated down the Black River to the Mississippi River for the winter, and then back up for the summer. Bluegills migrate as far as three miles in the Mississippi. Largemouth bass migrate as far as 16 miles between their spawning grounds and their wintering grounds.

These fish — bluegills, largemouth bass and their relatives — move to spots at least four feet deep with little or no current that are slightly warmer than surrounding water. They tend to go back to the same places every winter.

Fish don't freeze in icy water because their bodies have slightly higher concentrations of salt, and, therefore, a lower freezing point than water. The cold slows their metabolism. They eat less and move less.

Jeff Janvrin, Mississippi River habitat specialist for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, just completed an inventory of bluegill and largemouth bass wintering sites between Red Wing, Minn., and Dubuque, Iowa. He found that all the good wintering sites were in the upper third or upper half of each pool, where there are more islands and sloughs.

"There are big gaps, 10 to 20 miles long in some places, where there are no wintering places for fish. The Cold Springs area, for example, is the only wintering spot from Lansing down

to Lock and Dam 9," Janvrin said.

Fish spend a lot of energy to get back to their traditional wintering sites, where they have a reasonable chance of surviving winter. A lot of these sites have disappeared since the 1950s and 60s, because of siltation.

The Army Corps of Engineers built islands in Pool 8 to provide wintering habitat for fish. Five years later, the

"They just lay there, stacked up like cordwood."

"Stoddard project" has drawn lots of fish, Janvrin said.

"It went from zero bluegills per hour to 400 per hour, which puts it among the top 10 sites between Red Wing and Dubuque." ("Fish per hour" is a measure of the number of fish found by electroshock testing.)

Paddlefish and catfish, too, move to deep holes for the winter.

"They get together in big groups when they home into their wintering areas," said Scott Yess, fish biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and coordinator of the Upper Mississippi River Conservation Committee. "They just lay there, stacked up like cordwood."

They eat little and move little during the winter.

"You can dive down right next to them, and they won't move," Yess said.

Catfish lay with their heads pointed upstream into the current, one behind the other, like bicyclists saving energy by riding in another bicyclist's slipstream.

Longnose gar, one of the most ancient species in the river, at least 100

million years old, breathes air during summer months right from the surface of the water, but during the winter it finds deep water, settles down and holds its breath for weeks at a time.

Northern pike stay more active than most other fish, but they prefer cold water in the summer, too. These tough guys go about their business under the ice, following their prey, at least until about late January. Even pike slow down then.

"Winter's a good time to catch pike. A lot of anglers go after them then, but the end of January is a tough time to catch any fish," Yess said.

Walleyes and saugers settle into the deep water below the dams for the cold months.

Brown bullheads have the oddest winter strategies. They swim like mad to push their way head first into the muddy bottom. Then they turn around and blow water out of their mouths, creating little cones of mud open at the top, and stay there until the warming water draws them out at the end of winter.

Fish of the frozen North are built to handle cold, but their immune systems take a beating when winter goes on too long, making them susceptible to disease.

Bald eagles convene on the river ice in February looking for an easy meal of dead fish, mostly gizzard shad. Gizzard shad are abundant in the river, but they get stressed by prolonged cold. People often report fish kills when they see large numbers of dead shad at the end of winter, but pollution is not usually the cause, it's just winter taking its toll. ❧

Fish illustrations by Duane Raver/USFWS.

Top: bluegill; center: largemouth bass; bottom: channel catfish.





A DN-style boat steers by the runner in the front. (Craig Wilson, Kite Aerial Photography)

Flying Low, Flying Fast Over the Ice

By Pamela Eyden

Winter sports enthusiasts usually avoid those open spaces where the icy wind sweeps across miles of frozen river. Except iceboaters. They go out looking for it.

Iceboaters harness the wind to push boats that are mounted on skate-like runners. All they need is a good wind and good ice. Good ice is at least four inches thick, covered by less than four inches of snow, and free of holes, heaves, fissures and pressure ridges. When they find good ice, they'll converge on the site at the speed of the internet.

"Iceboating is about the most fun you can have in the winter!" said Sig Anderson of Lake City, Minn. Lake Pepin is one of the country's well-known sites. Last year, the National Regatta was held on the lake.

These cross-shaped rigs glide across the ice on three steel runners. They move much faster than sailboats — 60 mph is common, 120 mph is possible.

There are two basic types. The older, bigger, stern-steering boats have one runner in the back connected directly

to a tiller, and two runners extending out to the sides like outriggers. They generally hold two to four people and are powered by two sails. The newer, more stable *DN* style has the two outrigger-like runners extending out to the sides, with a third at the bow of the boat. *DN*s carry just one person and have a single sail. They are lighter, easier to move and assemble and are more responsive than the stern-steerers. The *DN* got its name by winning a design contest sponsored by the *Detroit News* in 1937.

In his 11-foot *DN*, Anderson stretches out feet first and steers with a tiller between his knees. All it takes is half an inch of knee movement to control the tiller, which is connected to the front runner. He keeps one hand on the line that controls the boat's 75 square feet of sail. That isn't much sail, he said, compared with a sailboat, but it's plenty. Iceboats whip along at as much as five times the speed of the wind.

As with ice skates, the pressure of the stainless steel blades on the ice creates a thin layer of water. The iceboat actually glides on this water.

"After you push the iceboat five or ten steps to free it from drag, you jump in and sheet the sail down. The boat jumps. You go from five miles per hour to 30 miles per hour instantly!" Anderson said. He's clocked his boat going six miles in six minutes, or 60 mph.

It's easy to stop. You just turn up into the wind, as you would in sailing a boat on liquid water.

For protection, Anderson dons layers of winter insulation, coveralls, insulated boots, nice thick gloves and a snowmobile helmet with a full face mask. Still, he says, "It's the adrenaline that keeps you warm."



Last year's North American Championship Regatta for the International DN Iceboat Association drew 80 iceboaters from several nations to Lake Pepin. (Geoff Sobering)





The Lake City Ice Yacht Club in 1898. (Courtesy of Bob Kemp)

Lake City Ice Yacht Club

Anderson is one of the last people in Lake City to continue this traditional river sport, although many people in town still own old boats and remember when they used them.

Iceboating has a long history on Lake Pepin. In fact, it's one of the oldest sports on the river. In the 1880s farmers built big stern-steering iceboats that carried 10 or 12 people. Some of the crew rode in the boat; others stood on the side runners to give the boat weight and prevent it from lifting off the ice and tipping over.

"They'd race from one end of the lake to the other. They'd even race the trains!" said Anderson.

Some of the original stern-steering boats, or at least parts of these old boats, are still sailing the windy lake. When the Lake City Ice Yacht Club burned down around 1900, the wooden boats burned leaving only their steel runners. They were salvaged and used to build other boats.

Love of the Sport

Pepin, Wis., just across the river from Lake City, is a hotbed of iceboating. The 25 or so members of the Lake Pepin Ice Yacht Club own 14 boats, ranging from kids' boats to small *DN*s and larger, older stern-steering boats. They meet at the Pickle Factory Bar and Grill on the waterfront. Their biggest boat is the *Rum Runner*, an antique 33.5-foot long by 18-foot wide boat that carries four people. Club members restored it 10 years ago, and they sail it every year.

"It's not terribly fast, but it will go 50 or 60 mph," said Ed Newcomb of Menomonie, Wis. Newcomb started iceboating when he was ten years old, on a *DN* his father built for him. That was 46 years ago, and he still sails the same boat.

"In the winter, when I'm not out iceboating, I'm working on the boats, and when I'm not working on the boats,

I'm talking about it," he joked. "I'd say the ratio is 70 percent talk, 20 percent work and 10 percent actual iceboating time."

Iceboaters love the thrill of speed, but they also like the technical details of sailing, and making and fixing the boats. Iceboats are all home-made, except those made for national and international racing. They are bought, sold

"When you hit something solid at speed, it's pretty common that something on the iceboat will break and the whole mess comes to a sliding stop."

and upgraded frequently via the internet. Hobby *DN*s cost from \$600 to \$1,500, with the stainless steel runners accounting for most of the cost.

Knowing the Ice

Repair is part of the game. Holes hidden under the snow can snag a runner; fierce gusts of wind can lift the boat off the ice and tip it over; cables can fail.

"When you hit something solid at speed, it's pretty common that something on the iceboat will break and the whole mess comes to a sliding stop," said Geoff Sobering, a Madison, Wis., iceboater who also sails on the Mississippi. "Injuries are remarkably uncommon, given the speed and proximity in a race."

One rule of iceboating is to wear a good helmet. Another is to always watch for other iceboaters on the ice.

"Two friends of mine had a nearly head-on collision on Lake Pepin last year," said Sobering. "Both their boats were pretty much destroyed. One fellow sprained his ankles and the other was unhurt, but they had to walk the two miles back to the landing."

The most important safety precaution is to know the ice in the area or sail with someone who does.

"You have to be watchful for cracks, pressure ridges and other local conditions, like places where the water comes up over the surface," Anderson explained. "For example, on the downstream side of points that stick out into the current, there are fluid formations called 'gyres.' The water is warmer and moves at higher velocity. It makes for thinner ice." Anderson, an engineer by profession, said he always carries ice picks with him, just in case he has to haul himself out of the water.

Since the speed of the boat depends on both wind and good ice, some years, iceboaters only get a few good days. In Ed Newcomb's memory, iceboaters got their fill of the sport only once.

"Four years ago, we were out there from about Thanksgiving to mid-March," Newcomb said. "We iceboated so much we got sick of it."

When the ice isn't good, some iceboaters pack up and travel to lakes in Wisconsin, northern Minnesota, Michigan and farther. For races, they think nothing of driving 1,000 miles to find good ice.

Last year about 80 iceboaters from the United States, Canada and Europe gathered on Lake Pepin for the North American Championship Regatta for the International DN Iceboat Association. The race had been scheduled for Montreal, Canada, but conditions there deteriorated, so two days before the race it was relocated to Lake Winnebago in



The Pepin Club's fleet includes small DN-style boats, like the two in the front, and larger stern-steerers, like the two in the back. The iceboat at the rear is an original Lake Pepin boat from 1900. (Ed Newcomb)

central Wisconsin. After two days of drizzle and melting ice, they moved again, to Lake Pepin.

The annual World Championship ("Gold Cup") alternates between North America and Europe, and usually draws from 130 to 150 sailors. This year it is scheduled for February 18 to 20, with the location to be determined by ice conditions. ❄️

Pamela Eyden is Big River's news and photo editor.



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Backwater Classroom



Students fan out in all directions on Running Slough.

Story and Photographs by Meggan Massie

Most students spend their days in classrooms, lunchrooms, labs and gyms, but students enrolled in Longfellow Middle School's "School on the River," in La Crosse, Wis., are learning on the water as well as in the classroom.

The School on the River program brings more than 100 seventh and eighth grade students to the Mississippi River to study a variety of subjects. The curriculum combines natural science, social science, humanities and philosophy in a two-year program that alternates between earth and life sciences. Students study the river's ecological systems, because these systems illustrate how political, cultural, economic and organizational systems work in the real world.

The students, along with four dedicated faculty members — Pam Popp, Debra Buswell, Mike Johnson and Jeff Hansen — take more than 20 field trips each year. Trips include architectural walks through downtown La Crosse and visits to a La Crosse wastewater treatment plant; Devil's

Lake State Park in Baraboo, Wis.; Silver Mound archaeological site in Jackson County, Wis.; and Effigy Mounds National Monument in Harpers Ferry, Iowa.

In addition to field trips, the students are responsible for a two-year capstone research project. Modeled

"When you are actually outside experiencing what you are learning, you can get up close, pick things up and turn them over."

after a full-scale action research project, the kids start by choosing a topic they are interested in, developing a question and then developing a body of knowledge to begin researching. Topics range from the negative effects of acid rain to which food variety do whitetail deer prefer.

In November the students travelled to Goose Island, a wooded island park just off Hwy. 35, five miles

south of La Crosse, to follow up on a project they started last May, when they planted a mixture of more than 200 swamp white oak and silver maples to protect the island from eroding.

The still water was framed by a thin layer of ice along the shallow banks. Squirrels rustled through the leaves. Gulls sat on the shoreline. Then the peace of the island was broken by childish laughter, innocent bickering and singing as the 50 students poured from a yellow bus.

"In so many ways, this program is much better than regular school," said William Ottow, 13, now in his second year in the series. "It's interactive. So often we just learn about things from a two-dimensional text book. When you are actually outside experiencing what you are learning, you can get up close, pick things up and turn them over."

"The current from the Mississippi backwaters is taking away the islands. Because they don't have any solid root systems, there is nothing

for them to hold on with. So, that is why we planted the trees, to give the island a chance," he explained.

"When you are in the canoe, on the river, you can clearly see exactly where and how the islands are deteriorating," Ottow said. "It's really cool."

Thirteen-year old Jourdan Stacey explained the negative effects of reed canary grass, an invasive perennial grass, which she'd learned about firsthand.

"In class we learned that the grass was overpowering tree life and killing all the trees on the island before they had a chance to grow," she said. "The trees are important because without them, in 50 years there might not be anything left of the islands."

When the students planted trees last year, their first task was to remove the grass to make space to put the seedlings in the ground.

"When we went back to measure the trees, a lot were completely taken over by the grass. You could see just how fast-growing and suffocating it was. It's kind of sad," Stacey said.

Each trip, each class session, is an adventure in and of itself.

With a cascade of splashes and uncertain screams, the cluster of canoes took to the 40-degree water of Running Slough. Orange paddles shifted awkwardly from side to side. Each canoe held a group of three or four students rocking unsteadily to and fro. Two students paddled each vessel, sitting high at each end, while the others sat cross-legged in between.

"They tend to use the whole river," said science teacher Mike Johnson as the kids shouted commands and directions to one another.

"No, turn to the right," one girl yelled. "Ugh, your other right."

A round of "Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream," echoed through the river valley accompanied with laughter and the occasional feminine shriek.

The teachers divided the classes into two groups, and each took a different route.

Johnson took the lead, counting each canoe as he glided along. "Okay, we've got everyone," he said. He shouted back a warning as his oar dug into the unusually shallow river



Leah Youngblood and Kelsey Freit measure the growth of trees planted in the spring.

Science teacher Mike Johnson leads a flotilla of canoes.



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bottom. "Keep up, we're heading to the left, and watch out for these logs," he said, pointing with his paddle to a gnarled mass of tree trunks protruding from the bank.

"This is where we separate the boys from the men," one kid spouted. "Mr. Johnson, you should get us a yacht," another suggested.

Canoes edged in front of each other, all striving to lead the pack.

"Canoeing is all about teamwork," Johnson said. "Just put the kids in a boat and it forces them to work together — it just doesn't work otherwise."

The canoes also serve as a vehicle to overcome fears, Johnson said, either of the water or the unknown.

"Big, rough boys who you would never expect to admit a fear of anything are in tears two feet off the shore, begging us to take them back," he said. "You just look at them and tell them it will be all right."

It works.

"It's those same boys who are running laps around everyone else by the end of the year," Johnson said. "Not all of them get better, but they at least get the chance to try."

Once they reach their destination, nearly a mile away from the starting point, the kids transform into researchers. Each tree must be carefully exposed from beneath its protective tubing, measured and recorded.

For Ottow, this was one of the coolest parts of the trip.

"Last year, we just put sticks in the ground, and they tell you they're going to grow," he said. "But seeing that they actually did was amazing. You really feel like you are making a difference."

The program and its faculty has earned national recognition, including the Sea World/Busch Gardens Environmental Educator of the Year in 2001.

"Most kids just see this sort of thing on a video in class, where we actually go and do it," he explained. "Maybe what we do will be on a video that other kids can see."

Five months after the planting, the students found that about 70 percent of the maples survived and were growing quickly. About 60 percent of the oaks survived.

Interactive learning occurs by establishing an educational classroom base and then making connections in the real world, said Debra Buswell, social studies and language arts teacher.

"What students do, they tend to re-



Students hike to tree-planting sites.



Canoeists pick a sandy beach to land on a backwater island.

member," she said. "And they are doing a lot."

Back on the island, a burst of wind gets teeth chattering. The kids endure the cold, misty, gray morning to get the job done. The pitter-patter of rain drops on winter coats accompanies the faint mumbling about numbness in various extremities.

Their concentration fades. "Is there a port-a-potty on this island?" one girl asked.

"They are amazing kids," Johnson said. "But like anyone that age, they can only stay focused for so long."

They paddled back to the bus and headed back to the school. Inside hangs a bulletin board with a quote by educational philosopher Robert Hutchings: "It must be remembered that the purpose of education is not to fill the minds of students with facts. It is to teach them to think, if that is at all possible, and always to think for themselves."

The School on the River does just that. Created by associate principal Jacque Durnford 13 years ago, it was introduced as an experimental project with 14 seventh-graders. Since then, the numbers have continued to rise each year. The program and its faculty has earned national recognition, including the Sea World/Busch Gardens Environmental Educator

of the Year in 2001 and the *USA Today* Teacher Team in 2000. Many local businesses and organizations have donated time, knowledge and resources to the effort, including the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Friends of the Upper Mississippi Fisheries, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Geological Survey, La Crosse Historical Society, the University of Wisconsin La Crosse's Mississippi Valley Archaeology Center and its Student Teacher Mentoring Program.

The students themselves give the program high marks. Several participants have gone on to study natural resource-related fields in college.

Johnson concluded, "We try to apply what we do out in the field to what we do in the classroom. It's the difference between environmental education and outdoor education. We center on making connections from the inside out." 🌿

Meggan Massie is a student at Winona State University. This is her first story for Big River.



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The Green Tree Hotel

LeClaire's Green Tree Hotel, Witness to River History

By Robert Stumm

In the halcyon days of the steamboat era, the riverman's number-one enemy was the tree. The Mississippi River teemed with snags (trees embedded in the river) that could ensnare and sink any boat with a wooden hull. In fact, prior to the damming and re-engineering of the river, more boats sank from running into snags than from any other cause. So, one can appreciate why river pilots had such loathing for trees.

The illustrious "Green Tree" of LeClaire, Iowa, was an exception to this rule. Situated on the town's riverfront, the Green Tree was viewed with fondness and affection by a generation of rivermen, and it was a pre-eminent landmark for many years, until it succumbed to old age and Dutch elm disease more than a century later. LeClaire continues to revere this tree as a connection to a time when this community played a key role in river traffic along this great waterway.

LeClaire's development was shaped by its position at the head of the Upper Rock Island Rapids, a swirling cauldron of boulders and sandbars extending 15 miles below LeClaire to Davenport, Iowa. Navigating them in a canoe was relatively easy, but tackling them in a sizeable craft was a hazardous and sometimes deadly proposition.

Embarking on a mission to discover the source of the Mississippi River in 1805, Lieutenant Zebulon Pike made the ascent in a 30-foot vessel called a barque. Pike's boat was thrust about and nearly reduced to kindling wood, but he and his crew made it through unscathed, thanks to an unexpected rise in the river.

The town of LeClaire was founded at the head of the rapids in 1837, during a period of unbridled optimism.

Growing in tandem with the steamboat trade, LeClaire quickly matured into a thriving port. By 1850 it had nearly 1,000 residents, several hotels, a plethora of saloons and a livery stable, but the real action was down at

*A crowd of 150 mourners
watched as the tree hit the
ground with a sickening thud.
In the eerie quiet everyone
realized they were paying
homage to both the tree
and an era.*

the riverfront. It was busy and noisy from sunrise to sunset. Dusty wagons trafficked back and forth, while an army of roustabouts trudged the levee carrying oversized sacks, and cart vendors sold their wares to travelers headed upriver.

SULTANS OF THE RIVERFRONT

The sultans of the riverfront and the most respected class of this community were LeClaire's fabled rapids pilots, whose only job was to safely guide boats through the treacherous shoals of the Upper Rapids. These intrepid rivermen assumed command of a boat heading downriver at LeClaire, guided it through the rapids, and then disembarked at Rock Island, Ill., or Davenport. Then they hitched a ride back upriver to LeClaire.

Sometime around 1850, the rivermen of LeClaire started waiting for boats beneath the sheltering branches of a riverfront elm tree. No one knows why they chose this particular tree, but it soon became the rendezvous point for the rivermen working on this section of the river.

Nicknamed the "Green Tree," this

elm provided shelter and a commanding view in both directions. Approximately 65 feet high, with a span of nearly 110 feet, 15 to 20 men could rest beneath its irregularly shaped limbs. It was also close to the town's boisterous commercial district.

Whiling away the hours underneath this tree was never a problem for rivermen whose favorite activity was shoptalk. With great fervor they would discuss and update each other on recent steamboat accidents, changes in the channel and the idiosyncrasies of the boats they were familiar with. Eventually some men felt so at home here that the spot became an overnight campsite. As time elapsed, the tree was rechristened the "Green Tree Hotel."

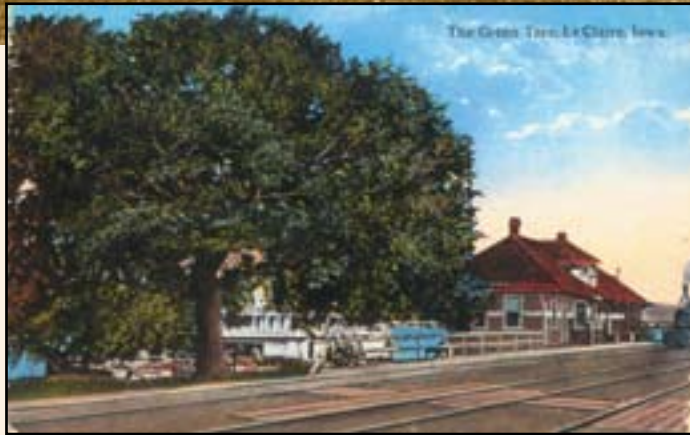
In 1852 it became the playground for a local lad who became the country's premier showman — William "Buffalo Bill" Cody. Cody, like many other youngsters in LeClaire, was drawn to the river. The Green Tree became both a gathering place and a playground for him and his friends. With Cody's rise to superstardom, he became the person most often identified with the Green Tree. That connection was given the town's stamp of approval when a monument honoring Buffalo Bill Cody was erected near the base of this tree in 1924.

REROUTING A TRAIN

The glory days of the steamboat epoch began to wane in 1860, when the Civil War dealt a staggering blow to river commerce. In the years that followed, the railroads gained the upper hand, and by 1880 the steamboat had become a relic. LeClaire, like other river towns, suffered a long and painful period of adjustment, while the Green Tree Hotel became just a big



The Jennie Gilchrist is docked just above the Green Tree in this 1880 photo.



The railroad tracks passed close to the Green Tree.

tree on the riverfront.

In subsequent decades, the tree took on a new identity as part of the town's riverfront park. With the river as a backdrop, the tree served as a venue for church socials, political oratory and Fourth of July picnics.

In 1899 the Davenport, Rock Island and Northwestern Railroad proposed building a rail line through LeClaire. Noting that the route would bisect the Green Tree, LeClaire responded with righteous indignation: sacrificing the tree was unthinkable. After a protracted stalemate, the railroad re-routed its line to bypass this sacred landmark. Perhaps as a peace offering, the railroad erected a protective fence around the Green Tree several years later.

Early in the 20th century the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution placed a Civil War cannon at its base.

HALL OF FAME

In 1912 the tree secured a measure of immortality when it was enshrined in the "Hall of Fame for Trees," thanks to the labors of Joe Barnes, a life-long LeClaire resident and Civil War veteran who for many years was the tree's guardian and protector. This honor was a coup for LeClaire, because the Green Tree was the first tree in the Midwest to win a place in this exclusive club.

By the 1930s, the Green Tree showed signs of decay. In 1934 the town hired a tree surgeon who cleared out its cavities and attached supporting wire to its main branch system. In 1945 it was diagnosed and treated by another tree surgeon. Sometime around 1960 the old Green Tree was afflicted with Dutch elm disease. After hesitating as long as possible the LeClaire City Council voted to cut it down.

With all the trappings of a funeral, the Green Tree was felled on July 20, 1964. A crowd of 150 mourners watched as the tree hit the ground with a sickening thud. In the eerie quiet everyone realized they were paying homage to both the tree and an era.

Today the Buffalo Bill Museum in LeClaire contains a wealth of information and items associated with this landmark, but overshadowing everything else is a slab of the Green Tree's trunk. 🌳

Robert Stumm's last story for Big River was "Captain Harris' Eagle," November-December 2004. He is the author of A Postcard Journey Along the Upper Mississippi.

Photos courtesy of the Buffalo Bill Museum.

River Condo Bubble?

Story and Photographs by Pete Beurskens



Buyers pay for panoramic views of Lake Pepin.

News stories report a real estate bust, especially for condominiums, but development continues on the banks and bluffs of the Mississippi, even though a few bubbles have indeed burst.

In the Midwest, things are stable, said Larry Nielson of the Pepin Valley Companies, owners of Willows on the River condominiums in Lake City, Minn.

"If you're talking about a premium property with a view of the water or on the water, sales are brisk." Nielson is looking at sites for new developments. The Willows condos, built in

1999, and purchased by Nielson four years ago, have all long since been sold.

"Condos on the river are the new cabins up north," he said. "It takes a lot of work to keep those places up. Here, owners can relax. The units take the place of a hotel room." People can drive an hour or two and begin enjoying their weekend immediately, perhaps golfing, fishing, taking a river walk, heading to a fitness center, boating, sailing, waterskiing, bicycling or bird watching. When owners are not using the luxury units, they can rent them out with the help

of a property manager who handles the details."

Also in Lake City, Jerry Green, executive vice president of the Villas at Pepin, Bella Vista and The Rivage — all condominiums, beginning at \$189,900 — is also sanguine about the condo market: "People want to buy second homes within one-and-a-half hours of a metro area near a major-league amenity, such as mountains."

Our mountain range is the Mississippi River, with Lake Pepin as an impressive peak, he added.

"There is a serenity to a lake. You can sit up on the sky decks on the condos and look at sailboats. It's tranquil," Green said.

He expects the just-completed Bella Vista's 34 units to be sold by next summer.

Asked why the Jewel, a much touted residential golf course development in Lake City, failed, Green explained, "The Jewel was a fantastic vision, beautiful, a great place, a great course, but people don't want to maintain a second home property."



The condos at Eagles Point at the St. Croix, in Prescott, Wis., have a view of the Mississippi just below its confluence with the St. Croix River.

Value the Riverfront

Eagles Landing in Wabasha, Minn., is another condo development with brisk sales.

"Of 27 luxury units, 18 have sold, with the higher-end units selling first," said Blaine Marcou of Marcou Realty. "And there's lots of activity on the nine remaining units," with a month to go before completion. Marcou attributes the success to the historic, charming downtown on the river, with no railroad tracks or highway between it and the water. The condos cost from \$355,000 to \$520,000. Eagles Landing will also be adjacent to the new National Eagle Center, scheduled to be completed by next summer.

Disagreements about the development came to the forefront in November when voters replaced their mayor and all three councilpersons who were up for re-election, mainly over

Many locals have realized that they may have taken access to the riverfront for granted, while developers and out-of-towners place a greater value on it.

concerns about the new development.

"The incumbent from my ward was very instrumental in working with the company building the condos," explained newly elected First Ward Councilperson Melody Gibson. "There was the appearance of some conflict of interest."

Gibson defeated the incumbent 233 to 158, in the city of about 2,600.

Many residents felt that after the original plans were presented to the public and approved, the developers returned repeatedly to the city council asking for more. They asked to extend the height of the building 10 feet to make room for mechanicals, which blocked the view of the river for some. They asked for the road between the building and the river and got it. The city only retained a right of way on the river bank.

"A lot of people feel taken advantage of," said Gibson.

Not much can be done to reverse



Pepin Shores Condominiums in Pepin, Wis.

those decisions, but many locals have realized that they may have taken access to the riverfront for granted, while developers and out-of-towners place a greater value on it, she said.

The new council members plan to change the decision-making process.

"Less will be decided before the meetings, and more will be decided at the meetings," Gibson said.

Room for Weekenders

At Prescott, Wis., Prescott Land Development, Inc., built Eagles Point at the St. Croix. These luxury units, each with a view of the Mississippi at its confluence with the St. Croix, have been for sale since 2005. Only 18 of 43 units have been sold and are occupied, although Daniel Desrochers, director of sales and marketing, said they hope to have the remaining units sold by the end of next year. The units range from \$369,900 to \$544,900.

The towering structure has only a public river walk between it and the water. But the 30 trains a day that pass behind the building each sounds a whistle at a crossing nearby, according to one local real estate agent.

On the north edge of Pepin, Wis., Pepin Shores Condominiums, built in 2003, has some of the best views of any completed development in the area. Dave Peters of Edina Realty, who has sold 23 of the 32 units, said the condo and real estate markets have slowed down. "But rates are down, and in the near future it will pick up, in a year to year-and-a-half.

Last year was still the third best real estate year in history in the country."

Peters, too, believes the Upper Mississippi is "insulated from major swings, because there is not all that much available on the water."

Most of the owners at Pepin Shores are weekenders, although there are few permanent residents. Prices range from the low- to mid-\$200s for the 1,400- to 2,040-square-foot luxury units.

Sustained Resistance

In McGregor, Iowa, the Concerned Citizens of Clayton County have fought against the 300-acre Highland Bluffs Resort (formerly River Bluffs Resort) development near Highway 18. The developer's plans include an 18 hole golf course, hotel, water park and some condominiums.

Concerned Citizens member Tim Mason said, "They have done some large scale preliminary earth moving and a commercial clear cut."

At one point, a huge amount of sediment washed off the site and damaged a trout stream. Work has stalled, and the developer is suing Concerned Citizens for \$10 million.

"They threatened that if we didn't stop our activities, they would sue us. We would not stop," said Mason. A trial is scheduled for January.

The Iowa Chapter of the Sierra Club recently awarded Mason and fellow Concerned Citizen Kathy Koether awards for their efforts.

Downriver, developer A.J. Spie-



The Willows in Lake City, Minn.

gel and his Royal Oaks Development are busy with several projects in or around Dubuque, Iowa.

"We don't see the 'burst bubble' applying here. That applies to places like Florida, Las Vegas and California. In the Midwest, where things didn't go up so fast, the market is more stable," said John Greenwood, Royal Oaks marketing director. "There's a strong demand for waterfront property. Much of the region's lakefront property is taken."

Efforts by rivertowns to improve their riverfronts and add amenities, such as museums, trails and hotels have made the river more attractive.

Royal Oaks' projects include a nearly half completed nine-unit condo development in Bellevue, Iowa, overlooking the lock and dam, and the first phase of the bluff-top River Point Condominiums near Mercy Hospital in Dubuque, a 120-unit project scheduled to begin soon. Spiegel and Greenwood have also purchased property in Cassville, Wis., where they plan to build a riverfront development with views of the Cassville Ferry and a park.

One controversial Royal Oaks project, now on hold — according to Greenwood, because the company has so many other projects going — is a proposed 10-story, two-block wide, 64-unit luxury condo development at the base of Eagle Point Park, a bluff-top park in Dubuque. The group Pre-

serve Our Bluffs organized to fight the project.

"Originally, the developer was told by the city engineer and city manager that they had to take 10 feet of bluff to build. They ended up destabilizing the bluff, doing damage that would require \$80,000 to mitigate for pub-

Preserve Our Bluffs claims the development would damage views from both the park and the river.

lic safety and \$300,000 to stabilize for development," said Charlie Winterwood of Preserve Our Bluffs. "Spiegel has signed a document taking responsibility for any damage, but the city is trying to pay for it."

Preserve Our Bluffs claims the development would damage views from both the park and the river, Winterwood said. The group's attempt to halt the development failed because it missed a court filing deadline. Winterwood is "not optimistic about stopping the development, but a bluff overlay ordinance is being looked at and a citizens committee formed" to try to prevent similar problems in the future.

In St. Paul, another ambitious and controversial project is stalled. The Bridges of St. Paul, a condominium, retail, and entertainment development proposed for the West Side

Flats, failed a planning commission rezoning vote in October. The 33-acre project would reorient St. Paul's downtown towards the river, proponents argued. Opponents claimed that the development would be elitist and would crowd the river with tall buildings and provide mostly low paying jobs. Jerry Trooien, the developer, has withdrawn his application and is working on a revised proposal.

Moline, Ill., recently built a plaza with a performance area and a fountain on the river near downtown as part of its Bass Street Landing project. Developers, working with the city, have built a hotel and conference center along with retail and office space at the site, which includes some former industrial land that received an environmental cleanup, according to Pat Burke, the city's economic development manager.

The Great River Trail runs through the site.

The next phase of the project will be construction of about 40 condos and townhouses, most with views of the river. The city is working with a developer on the plan. Units will cost \$300,000 and up. The schedule has not been set yet, but everyone hopes to get started soon, said Burke. 🌿

Pete Beurskens is a writer based in River Falls, Wis. His last story was a review of the exhibit "Catfish Planet," November-December.

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Advertiser Index

12th Annual Wetlands Conference .13	Lake City, Minnesota 37
2007 Minneapolis Boat Show 2	Lake Pepin Inn 33
American Trails 4	Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum 32
Beno's Deli 4	Magnolias 31
Best Western Quiet House & Suites 38	Natural Gait, The 13
Big Muddy Ghost Hunter.org 6	Nola's Flowers 31
Bird-Song.com, Inc. 1	On-Deck 33
Blooming Grounds Coffee House 31	Pepin, Wisconsin 32-33
Blue Heron Coffeehouse 25	Piccadilly Gallery 10
Bluff Country Co-op. 10	Pickle Factory 33
BNOX 32	Pieces of the Past 31
Catfish Charlie's River Club 9	Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin 24
Century 21 Pepin Office 33	Preferred Adventures Ltd. 12
Dan's Pepin Marina 32	Pretty Things on Third 31
Duke Addicks Storyteller 6	River Road Bp 32
Edina Realty 16	Riverwise Publishing 1
Festival of Owls, Houston, Minn. 24	Signatures Restaurant 15
Galena Cellars 13	Smith Brothers Landing 32
Great River Cafe 33	Stoney Creek Inn 8
Gregory's Gifts & Greetings 31	T&C Latané 33
Guttenberg, Iowa 16	Touch of Class Interiors 12
Harbor Hill Inn B&B 32	Twisted Chicken, The 6
Hartland Log Homes 21	Visit Winona, Minnesota 11
Hawks View Cottages & Lodges 25	Waterways Journal 4
Houghton Mifflin Publishing inside front cover	Wild Rose Timberworks 4
Iowa shows.com 6	Willows, The 37
Island City Harbor 4	Winona County Historical Society 11
	Winona Downtown 31

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Judy Patsch

Nobody recognizes me without my cookies.

By Gary Kramer



Judy Patsch was five years old when her parents took her to see the steamboat *Avalon* and listen to its calliope in Rock Island, Ill. Judy doesn't remember anything earth-shattering about the experience, but it may have sparked a lifetime passion for steamboats.

Patsch has taken countless steamboat trips, been aboard all six of the currently operating steamboats, ridden the *Delta Queen* 42 times since 1973, and worked part-time and ridden on the *Natchez* in New Orleans for over 20 years.

During one of her early trips, she ran into some crew members on shore looking for a "junk food fix," and they told her about cravings they had for food not available on the boat. Cookies were high on the list, so she has baked chocolate chip cookies every time a boat comes through her area.

She estimates she has given out 102,000 cookies so far to the crews of the three "Queens" and the *Natchez*. She usually delivers the cookies while the boat is locking through, but she has also left them hanging from a post where they dock and has even dropped them from a bridge as the boat passed below. On some boats she is known as the "Cookie Lady." She refers to the cookies she takes to the *Natchez* as her "gangplank boarding pass."

"Nobody recognizes me without cookies," she laughs.

After one of her *Delta Queen* trips, Patsch stayed in New Orleans and took a ride on the *Natchez*. When she told the crew about her childhood visit to the *Avalon*, she discovered that the captain of the *Natchez*, Clarke

"Doc" Hawley, was the calliope player on the *Avalon* at the time.

In 1987, she rented an apartment in New Orleans' French Quarter and from then until 2002, when she retired

from teaching in Rock Island, spent school breaks and holidays working on the *Natchez*. She learned enough to serve as the narrator during the boat's cruises.

Last October, Patsch worked 16-hour days in the gift shop on the *Nat-*

She estimates she has given out 102,000 cookies so far to the crews of the three "Queens" and the Natchez.

chez during the Tall Stacks Festival of steamboats in Cincinnati.

"They were long days but it was a way I could help out," she said.

Her home is a museum of steamboat memorabilia. One room is totally devoted to her collection. She has a bit of everything from a variety of boats but especially those that were part of the Streckfus and Greene lines. There are postcards, photos, pictures, boarding passes, advertising cards, harbor books, buttons, hats, plates, models and more. She has one of the few, rare photos of the W. J. Quinlan burning.

Patsch has artifacts from several boats, including a cabin arch from the *Robert E. Lee*, a pilot running light from the *Gordon C. Greene*, a piece of a pilot's wheel from the *Belle of Louisville* and a window from the *President*.

Her most valuable item is a ladle

from the *Effie Afton*. One of her favorite pieces is a signed photo President Jimmy Carter gave her when he rode the *Delta Queen* in 1979. She was on the boat when his advance team boarded to prepare for his visit. After they mounted an additional antenna as part of the security preparations, Judy asked them whether it could be lowered. When they told her it couldn't, she pointed out the number of bridges that were too low for the antenna to pass under.

She is a member of the Mississippi Riverboat Buffs and gives presentations to schools and civic groups. In one school she is known as the "Boat Lady."

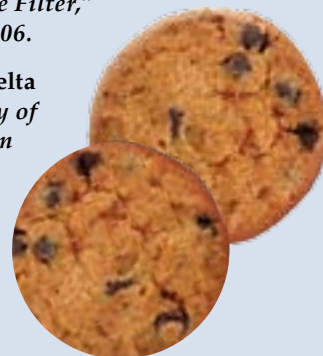
Patsch is a local contact person for the "Queens." One of her unofficial duties is to act as a "wharfman" when they dock.

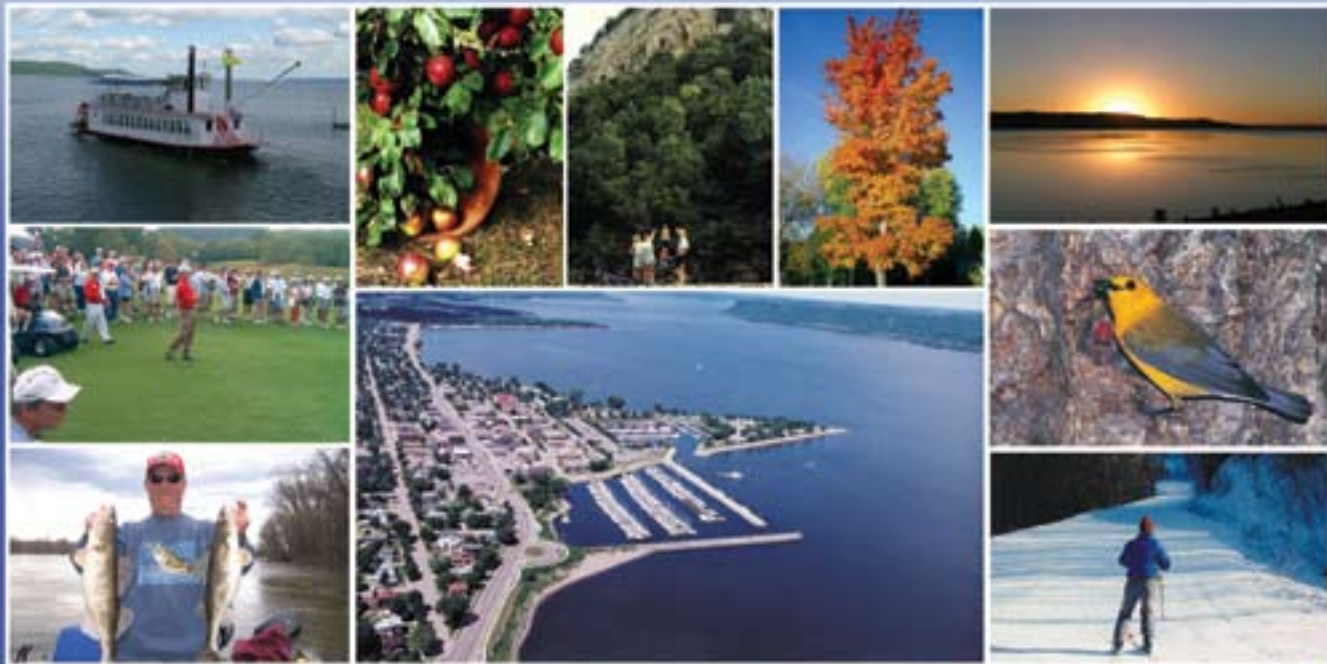
"They usually come in very quietly around 4 or 5 a.m., and the docking process is like a ballet," she said. She runs errands for the boats while they are in town, and once had to rush a sick crew member to the hospital. The *American Queen* has had repair parts shipped to her home.

Patsch has a musical photo cube that plays calliope music from the *Natchez*. In some ways, the music serves as a reminder that childhood experiences can make lasting impressions. 🍪

Gary Kramer is a boater and freelance writer who lives in Rock Island, Ill. His last article was "Greener Boating with a Bilge Filter," July-August 2006.

Photo of the Delta Queen courtesy of the Delta Queen Steamboat Co. Judy Patsch by Gary Kramer.





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