

A Mostly Civilized Stretch of River Clinton to LeClaire, Iowa

Photos and text by Reggie McLeod

The Mississippi River between Clinton and LeClaire, Iowa, is so civilized that in stretches folks can sit in their back yards and wave to folks across the river sitting in their back yards. One of the finest stretches of bike trail on the river follows the Illinois shore. The trains on the Iowa side crawl along the tracks so slowly that many crossings don't have gates or lights. The steep, rocky bluffs upriver in the Driftless Area have mellowed into hills that slope down to the river. There's plenty of industrial activity, including a gigantic corn processing complex on Beaver Slough, in south Clinton, and the

Quad Cities Nuclear Plant and a 3M plant upstream from Cordova, Ill. Yet, you are never far from soulful backwater stretches with countless islands and wetlands.

The towns along the Illinois side have the feel of quiet bedroom communities with little in the way of retail activity besides bars, banks and gas stations with an occasional diner, antique shop or B&B. They all have boat ramps and riverside parks, and often a marina.

Albany, Ill., (pop. 913) is built on a gentle hill rising from the river, across the Main Channel from lower Beaver Island. It has good river access and a

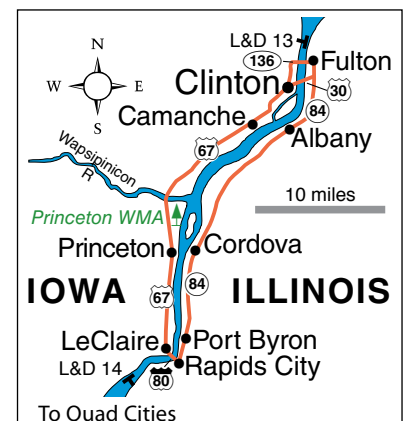
fishing dock on the river.

On the downstream end of Albany, just up the hill from the river, the **Albany Mounds State Historic Site** contains at least 39 of the 96 mounds that were originally on this bluff overlooking the river. The mounds were built about 2,000 years ago by the Hopewell people. The Great River Trail loops through the site, which also contains about 100 acres of restored prairie and a picnic shelter.

The **Great River Trail** follows the river for 62 miles, from Savanna to Sunset Park, in Rock Island. Much of the trail follows former railroad rights of way, residential streets, the tops of dikes or paved trails alongside of



This gift shop on LeClaire's Cody Road was originally a river pilot's home.

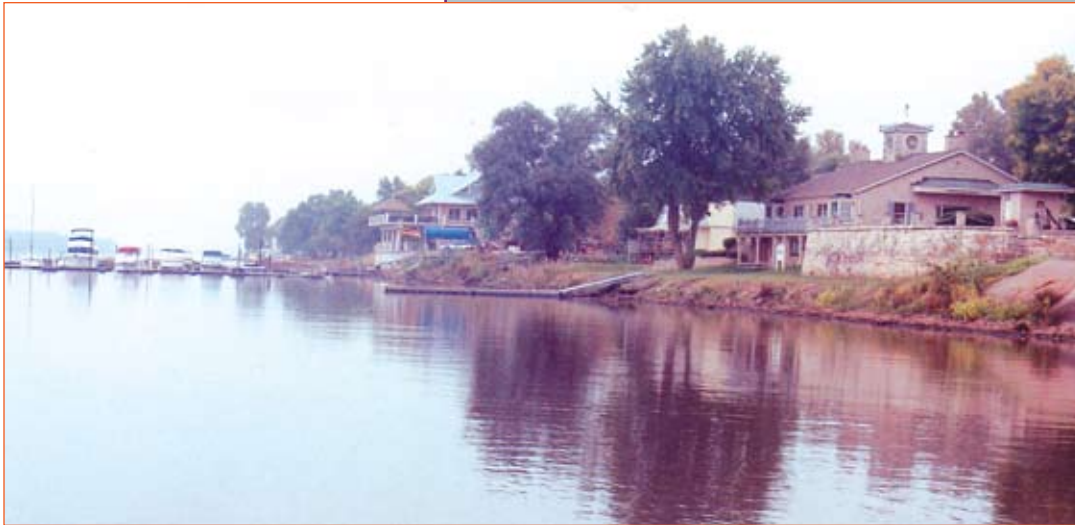


In each River Loop column we explore a stretch of the Upper Mississippi where you can make a circle trip in one day. Follow along with us as we prow for interesting places and things to do.



Above: The Princeton Wildlife Area provides access to quiet backwaters and wetlands..

Left: The bank in Princeton, Iowa, welcomes boaters with its courtesy dock.



Highway 84, which connects the rivertowns. It's free and well marked, though maps are available in the area. It's a great way to explore this stretch of river.

On the downstream side of Albany, you may notice Meredosia Road, a Spanish-sounding name. A bit farther is Meredosia Island, across Marais D'osier Slough. Mystery solved. Apparently *marais d'osier*, French for "swamp of willows," has morphed into Meredosia. The highway at this point is atop a levee, which creates rich agricultural land from wetland with the help of a big pump on the inland side of the levee. You don't see many agricultural levees upstream from Savanna, due largely to the Upper Mississippi Refuge, which protected many of the backwater areas from development.

A few miles downstream, past the nuclear plant, the highway comes back to the river at **Cordova** (pop. 682), another quiet rivertown. The islands and backwaters upstream from Cordova are the last you'll find until the Quad

Cities.

A few more miles downstream, **Port Byron** (pop. 1,670) has a different vibe than the other towns, perhaps because it's closer to the Quad Cities. The business district, along the river, sports a new retail building with "For Rent" signs in the windows. The population has increased 67 percent since 1990. A new restaurant and bar, named "It's on the River," has a long

Eagle Point Park includes river overlooks with a view of the widest stretch on the upper river.

deck along the river side of the building where a the weary river explorer might enjoy a pizza or sandwich and a beer or two as the riverboat *Twilight*, ablaze with lights, glides downstream with its cargo of tourists to its port just across the darkening river in LeClaire. In fact, LeClaire is so close to Port Byron that every August they

stretch a rope across the narrow river and hold tug-of-war contests, called the Tug Fest, between teams from each community.

As the river flows from Port Byron to Rapids City (pop. 990) it takes a hard right where a daunting series of rapids existed before the construction of lock and dams 14 and 15 drowned them in the 1930s. The I-80 Bridge crosses the river from Rapids City to LeClaire. This bridge is in the process of extensive repairs, so expect delays or even closures in the near future. However, the next bridge, the I-74 Bridge at Moline, is only about 10 miles downstream.

The West Bank

It appears that most of the buildings in **LeClaire** (pop. 2,994) were built in the 19th or 21st century. A large tourism center is perched on top of a hill next to I-80 near two new chain motels. On the riverbank downtown a new building was constructed around the fragile paddlewheeler *Lone Star*. Typically, paddlewheelers had short



Beaver Slough is busy with barges and Clinton's Archer Daniels Midland plant.



The Clinton Showboat presents shows and plays on the levee.

life expectancies, but the *Lone Star* was built in 1869 and retired in 1968. The *Lone Star* is part of the **Buffalo Bill Museum**, named after William F. Cody, an early resident of the town.

Shops and restaurants line Cody Road through downtown, along the river. Some of the fine old houses across the highway from the river were built by riverboat captains, who favored the town during winter breaks and when they retired. Fullmers Fish Market, on the upstream end of town, sells fresh and smoked fish from what might be the cutest fish market building on the river.

You could drive through **Princeton** (pop. 953), about five miles upstream on Highway 67, without appreciating how much of a rivertown it is. The most interesting part of town is off the highway, stretched out between the railroad tracks and the river. As proof of its connection to the river, Blackhawk Bank & Trust in this tiny downtown has a courtesy dock, even though it's between two marinas. The marina upstream from the bank rents canoes and kayaks. Looking across the narrow river to the downstream end of Cordova, one might wonder why anyone would want to paddle on this straight and narrow stretch of the river, but just around the bend upstream, the **Wapsipinnicon River** has created plenty of interesting backwaters and islands to explore.

Less than a mile north of Princeton, on Highway 67, take a right on 285th Avenue, then take another right at the railroad tracks to reach two boat ramps in the **Princeton Wildlife Management Area**. (If you're coming from upriver, you can reach the wildlife area if you turn left on 286th Street.) This 1,193-acre area is three-quarters wetlands that includes extensive hunting areas and areas protected from hunting. It's also reputed to be a good bird watching

At the top of the slough, the Archer Daniels Midland corn processing plant has pretty much consumed the former neighborhood of south Clinton.

area. There are several parking lots and another boat ramp on its periphery, and a hikeable dike road that's closed in the fall.

Farther up Highway 67, across the Wapsipinnicon, take a right on 291st Street, next to a sand-and-gravel operation, to reach **Rock Creek Marina & Campground**. This peaceful backwater park, which is operated by the Clinton County Conservation Board, has cabins, campsites, a boat ramp, store, restaurant and rental canoes, kayaks and boats. Kiosks display en-

vironmental information and maps of the backwaters showing several paddling loops through the backwaters. **Blue Heron Eco Cruises**, based at the marina, takes individuals and groups out for river tours on a 30-foot pontoon boat.

A few miles upriver, at **Camanche** (pop. 4,280), the railroad tracks and highway are several blocks from the river, leaving plenty of room for a quiet neighborhood. A marina, several small parks and boat ramps provide good river access.

Clinton and Beaver Island

Highway 67 joins Highway 30 as it enters Clinton (pop. 26,407). Highway 30 was once part of the Lincoln Highway, which was the first coast-to-coast highway in the United States. It crosses the Mississippi River at the southernmost of the two highway bridges in Clinton.

Clinton looks like a town that has seen better days, but city leaders and activists have been working mightily to change things for the better. Their successes are most visible along the riverfront near downtown. A trail lined with park benches follows the top of the levee upriver from downtown to **Eagle Point Park**, past the **City of Clinton Showboat**, a marina, swimming pool, **Clinton Lumber-Kings' baseball stadium** and bottom-land forest trail. Eagle Point Park in-



Home of the LumberKings, Clinton's Alliant Energy Field was originally Riverview Stadium, built in 1937 as a WPA project. Orel Hershiser, Candy Maldonado and Ron LeFlore all passed through the Clinton franchise on the way to the big leagues.

cludes river overlooks with a view of the widest stretch on the upper river, just upstream, and a stone, castle-like tower to get even higher above the river.

Plans are underway for a sawmill museum that would tell the story of Clinton's growth in the late 19th century, when sawmills along the shore were busy turning logs from the northern forests into boards for expanding settlements.

Beaver Island — downstream from downtown Clinton and across the Main Channel from Albany — offers an interesting boating opportunity. This island, which is more than three miles long and a mile wide, once contained a small community that ferried back and forth to Clinton across Beaver Slough. Now a few cottages and a barge fleeting area occupy the upper part of the island on the Main Channel side. The rest of the island is Upper Mississippi Wildlife and Fish Refuge land. The interior of the island is punctuated by lakes and sloughs that can be entered through a channel at the lower end of the island.

Parts of Beaver Island are high enough to support oak trees. At the head of the island, one can look upstream to the railroad swing bridge and the Highway 30 Bridge. To the right, the river is wooded and quiet, with the exception of barge fleeting areas. However, Beaver Slough, to the

left, is busy with industrial activity. At the top of the slough, the Archer Daniels Midland corn processing plant has pretty much consumed the former neighborhood of south Clinton (see "Chewing Up a Neighborhood," *Big River* July-August 2007). It and other operations line the entire Clinton side of the slough, though across the water the wooded refuge lands prevail.

The northern part of Clinton used to be a separate city named Lyons until the two merged. The northern bridge links the Lyons District to **Fulton, Ill.**, where **De Immigrant**, a 90-foot-tall functional Dutch windmill dominates the downtown riverfront. Across the street, the building that will house a windmill museum was recently completed. The museum may open by next spring. 🌊



At the gift shop you can buy flour ground on blue basalt millstones in Fulton's windmill, "De Immigrant."



Barges and bridges crisscross the river upstream of Beaver Island.