

River Loop

Wind Around the Wide Mississippi Clinton, Iowa to Savanna, Ill.

By Reggie McLeod

Many people believe that Lake Pepin is the widest spot in the Upper Mississippi River. Not so. At its widest point, about a mile below Lake City, Minn., Lake Pepin is about 2.5 miles wide. At Thomson, Ill., the river is a full three-quarters of a mile wider than that. The two stretches, how-

ever, are very different. Unlike Lake Pepin, you won't find clusters of sailboats racing at Thomson. The river's too shallow here. Before Lock and Dam 13 was built, a narrow channel ran through the valley with Pomme de Terre Prairie on the Iowa side and Fultons Island on the Illinois side. A small slough behind the island ran

past Thomson. First, the lock and dam flooded the island and prairie and turned this stretch into a big shallow lake, then wind and wave erosion wore away most of the remaining island fragments.

Thomson (pop. 559) is well connected to the river, with two boat landings and an island park — **Thomson Causeway Recreation Area** — which

has picnic areas and camping, and provides a panoramic view of the wide river. The **Great River Bike Trail** passes through two restored prairies on the edge of town. Less scenic, but important to local economy is the huge, new, nearly empty state prison that may become a federal prison soon.

Down the road, **Schafer Fisheries** (see *Big River* September-October 2009) processes tons of Asian carp,



Above: A volunteer miller turns the sail cap for a group of children. (Terry Dingmon)



Right: Twenty-one European windmills in the Windmill Cultural Center display the wide variety in windmill design and function. (Fulton Chamber of Commerce)

ships a lot of it out and converts the fish scraps into organic fertilizer. Schaffer's retail store sits at the intersection with the road to the lock and dam, which has a boat ramp, picnic area and benches for watching boats lock through.

Just below the lock and dam, in **Fulton, Ill.**, (pop. 3,881) you'll find several unlikely and charming attractions fueled by volunteer labor and voluntary contributions. The **Windmill Cultural Center**, **De Immigrant Windmill** and **Heritage Canyon** must absorb a record number of volunteer hours per capita in this small, quiet town.

De Immigrant, the 90-foot working windmill, dominates the riverfront. Good-natured volunteers will

The big windmill across the street will look different when you leave the museum, more windmill-wise than when you went in.

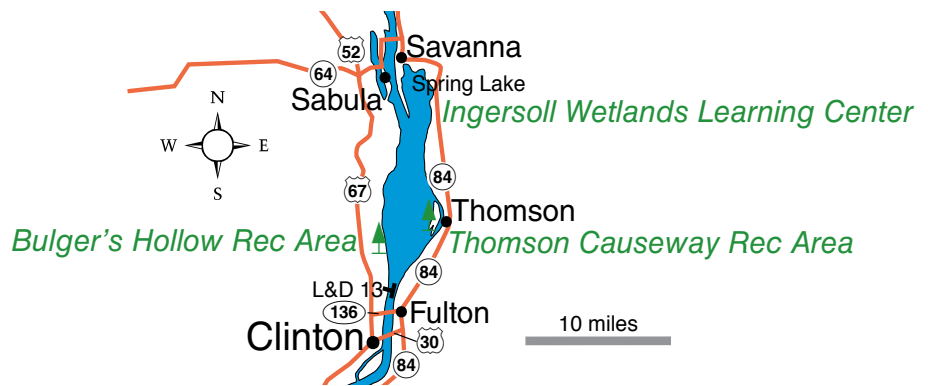
explain how the wooden gears transform the energy of the wind into flour and how the top of the mill can be cranked around so that the vanes face into the wind.

The Windmill Cultural Center, across the street, opened this spring to expand on the theme, when Henk and June Hielema, who built 21 replicas of of European windmills, decided to donate their creations to the new museum. The museum's interior is open and light. Many of the models are cut away so you can see how the mechanisms inside worked. Interpretive panels provide brief, clear explanations of each windmill's function and design. It's more interesting than you might expect. You learn how a Danish windmill is different from a Dutch windmill and how new designs grew out of the need to solve problems or take advantage of special situations. The big windmill across the street will look different when you leave the museum, more windmill-wise than when you went in.

Follow the river upstream on Fourth Street for about a mile to Her-



The church and schoolhouse at Heritage Canyon are nostalgic replicas of typical buildings from the 1800s. (Fulton Chamber of Commerce)



itage Canyon to visit another hobby that evolved into an attraction. Harold and Thelma Wierenga bought an abandoned quarry, cleaned it up and built replicas of historic buildings with a minimal disturbance of the natural setting. Then they furnished them

Right across the street a small park offers a serene spot to sit and watch the river before you slip out again into the real world.

with period tools and furniture. It felt more than a little surreal on a very hot and humid August afternoon as I wandered alone between the build-

ings as a chorus of cicadas whined loudly in the trees. There's a church, a one-room school, a stable, log cabins, doctor's office, print shop and many more buildings nestled into the canyon. It's all very charming, but some of the displays were a bit jumbled up and in need of dusting. I signed in at the little unstaffed entry post when I arrived and dug out a contribution for the box there when I left. Otherwise I was on my own. Right across the street a small park offers a serene spot to sit and watch the river before you slip out again into the real world.

The bridge across the river to **Clinton, Iowa**, (pop. 27,772) leads to the city's Lyons District. Downtown Clinton is two miles downstream. In between you'll find a minor league baseball field, a paddlewheeler show-



Built by the WPA, the stone-and mortar, 50-foot lookout tower in Eagle Point Park overlooks the Mississippi upstream of L&D13. (Wikimedia)



An eagle monument greets visitors to Eagle Point Park. (Reggie McLeod)



Savanna-Sabula Bridge. (Reggie McLeod)

boat on the levee and a restaurant overlooking a marina and the river. A trail atop the levee connects Lyons and downtown, and a walking trail branches off and through the floodplain forest. On the upstream end of Clinton, 200-acre **Eagle Point Park** has gardens, overlooks of the wide river, a playground and a stone castle-like tower.

Just upstream from Clinton, take a right on Deer Creek Road to drive a one-lane gravel road to **Wide River Winery**. You can sample wine at the bar or go out on the deck, which looks out on hillsides and the river valley. You can't quite see the river.

A few miles farther upstream

another, curvier gravel road leads to **Bulger Hollow Recreation Area**, an out-of-the-way park and campground with a boat ramp and a big view across the wide river.

A few more miles upstream, the river road curves toward **Sabula, Iowa**, (pop. 670) one of those very rare island communities on the river. It wasn't an island until Lock and Dam 13 flooded the fields on the west side of town, creating Upper, Middle and Lower Sabula Lake. The Main Channel runs along the dike on the east side of town. Backwaters and the causeway to the bridge to **Savanna, Ill.**, mark the north end of town. Go to the south end of town and under

the railroad tracks to find **Island City Marina** and a popular campground on Lower Sabula Lake.

The bridge to Savanna, built in 1932, is one of the oldest on the Upper Mississippi. **Savanna** (pop. 3,542) is a city in transition, since the nearby **Savanna Army Depot** closed a decade ago. Part of the Depot has become the new **Lost Mound Unit** of the Upper Mississippi National Wildlife and Fish Refuge. The community has been courting other businesses to come in and open operations on former Depot land or in town. Nevertheless, unemployment is still a problem.

The city still has its charms. Many of the old buildings in the downtown business district are still intact, if underutilized. A fine park stretches out between the river and railroad tracks on the upstream end of town. At the downstream end of town a new narrow metal bridge soars over railroad tracks to the marina and diner here. As of August this became the trailhead of the **Great River Trail**, perhaps the most impressive stretch of trail along the upper river. From here the trail heads downriver, much of it following former railroad right of ways and levees, 62 miles to Sunset Marina, in Rock Island, Ill. Bring-

ing the trail into Savanna took more time and money than anybody expected, but now the challenge will be to extend it through town to **Mississippi Palisades State Park**, just upriver, then to the Lost Mound Unit and eventually to Galena and perhaps the Wisconsin border. For now, though, trail users and town promoters are happy with the new link.

The **Apple River** joins the Mississippi north of town and the **Plum**

Both rivers overtopped their banks and bridges in flash floods this summer, as evidenced by flattened muddy cornfields and flood debris clinging to tree branches.

River ends just south of town. Both rivers overtopped their banks and bridges in flash floods this summer, as evidenced by flattened muddy cornfields and flood debris clinging to tree branches.

Highway 84 crosses the Plum River and railroad tracks south of town. You'll find several access roads to parking lots and viewing platforms overlooking **Spring Lake**, a 3,600-acre backwater that was farmland for a few decades, thanks to a levee separating it from the Mississippi. In 1967 the problematic levee blew out for the last time and Spring Lake became a popular fishery and later the site for the offices of the **Savanna District** of the Upper Mississippi Refuge. The offices house interpretive displays in the **Ingersoll Wetlands Learning Center**. A nearby viewing platform overlooks the lake and a four-mile trail around the lake. Bicyclists on the Great River Trail often stop here.

Go a few miles downriver and you'll be back at Thomson. 🌊

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