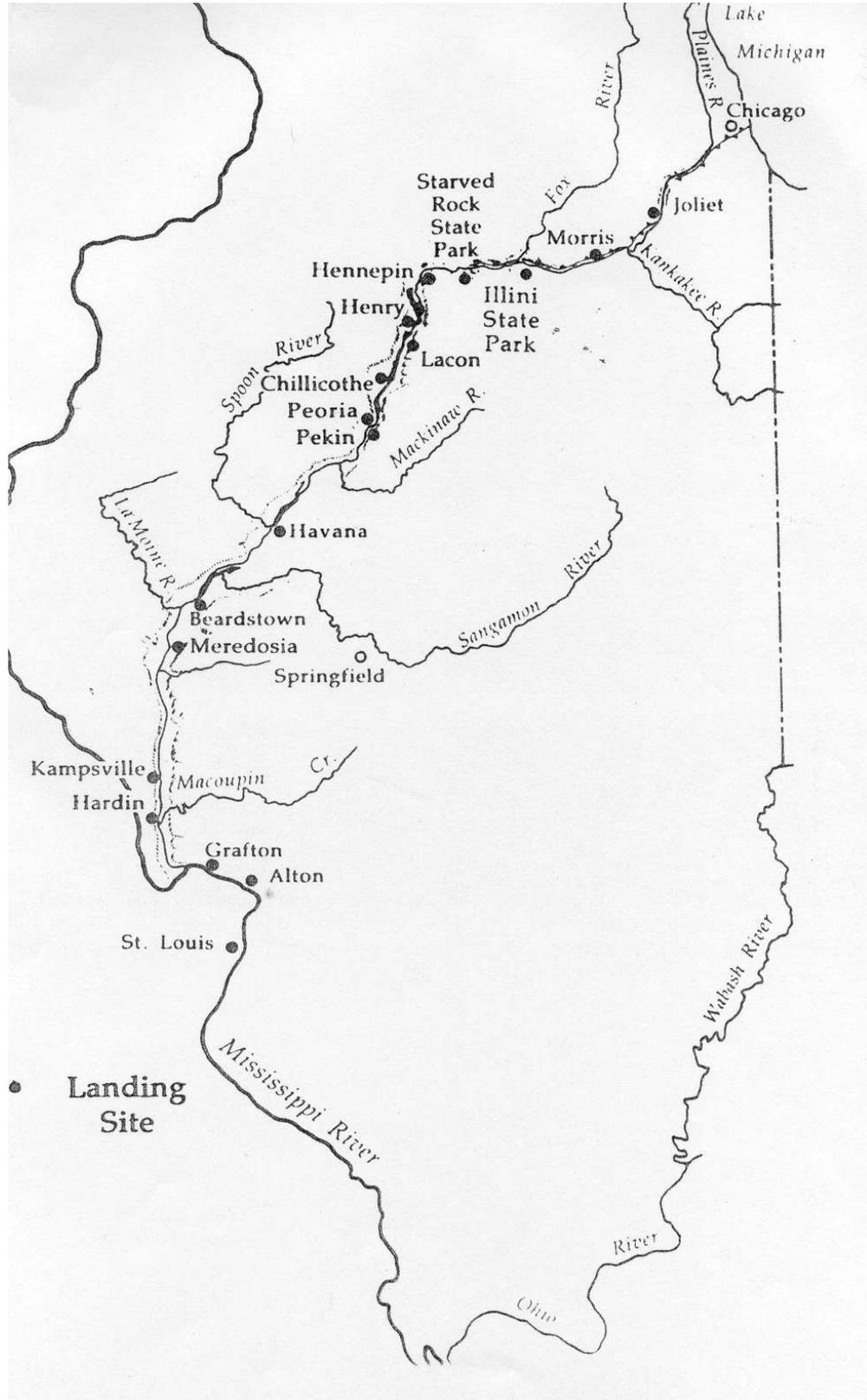


“Traveling by Water Across Illinois from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.” A paper read at the Midwest History Association, St. Louis, Mo., 1989.



## **Traveling by Water Across Illinois from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

**John M. Lamb**

The rivers have been, since the Europeans first touched these shores, a path to the interior, a reminder of Europe and a gate to the wilderness. But with settlement and development, different concepts of the river began to emerge, and it was shunted to the background except insofar as it can be used for transportation. In order to better serve that end, it had to be manipulated, dammed, locked, leveled and controlled.

In 1602 James Rosier sailed up what was apparently the St. George River in Maine and described it as "...the most rich, beautiful, large and secure harboring river that the world affordth." He went on to say that "...on its banks was good ground pleasant and fertile, ...fit for pasture through which it flowed." There was power for mills and "...branching streams...whereby is afforded an unspeakable profit by the conveniency of transportation from place to place...and by shipping to bring in all traffic of merchandise, a benefit always accounted the richest treasury to any land." He compared it to the Thames, the Seine, the Bordeaux and the Loire.<sup>1</sup>

I want to examine a river in the interior of America which was seen by its earliest European viewers as a waterway to adventure and the exploitation of the interior of America. This river was the Illinois, which for over three hundred years has been seen as many different things and had expanded and receded in the consciousness of the inhabitants on its banks accordingly.

The Illinois River begins about forty miles southwest of Lake Michigan and Chicago where two rivers unite and empty into the Mississippi above the mouth of the Missouri. One of these two rivers is the Des Plaines that rises in Wisconsin and flows south to within about fifteen miles of the southwest shore of Lake Michigan. The other is the Kankakee that rises near South Bend, Indiana. I want to examine the Illinois and the Des Plaines as one river. Also, as part of that river system, I want to examine the Illinois and Michigan Canal, which formerly connected Lake Michigan at Chicago to the Illinois at La Salle. It was built parallel to the Des Plaines and the Illinois and even used the former's bed at Joliet. This paper proposes to examine the various views of this natural and man-made inland waterway from the view of those who sailed its surface, as well as those who examined it from the shores.

The first Europeans to see the Illinois were Jolliet and Marquette who, in 1673 after traveling down the Mississippi as far as the Arkansas, returned via the Illinois and the Des Plaines and crossed the Chicago Portage to the Chicago River and Lake Michigan into which it emptied. It is remarkable how Jolliet's view of the Illinois mirrors James Rosier's view of a river hundreds of miles away and seventy-one years earlier. Jolliet observes:

"The river which we named St. Louis [the Illinois] which rises near the lower end of Lake Michigan, seemed to me the most beautiful and most suitable for settlement. The place at which we entered the lake [Lake Michigan] is a harbor, very convenient for receiving vessels and sheltering them from the wind. The river is wide and deep abounding in catfish and sturgeon. Game is abundant there; oxen [buffalo], cows, stag, does and turkeys are found there in greater numbers than elsewhere...."

"A settler would not spend ten years in cutting down and burning the trees; on the very day of his arrival he could put his plow into the ground. And if

he had no oxen from France, he could use those of this country, or even the animals possessed by the western savages, on which they ride as we do on horses.”<sup>2</sup>

Jolliet also felt it would be easy to dig a short canal between the Chicago River and the Des Plaines so that boats could easily travel from Lake Erie to the Gulf of Mexico. He seemed also interested in encouraging settlement in the “Illinois Country” as it was called.

Around 1695 another Frenchman, De Gannis, waxes lyrically as he describes the Illinois and its shores.

“Here [after the Des Plaines and the Kankakee join] you begin to see the beauty of this country both for the soil, which yields beautifully, and for the abundance of animals, you see places on one side that are unwooded prairies requiring only to be turned over by the plow, and on the other side spreading half a league, and the same on the other side spreading half a league as can be seen from your boat. Afterwards you find a virgin forest on both sides, consisting of tender walnuts, ash, whitewood, norway maple, cottonwood, a few maples and grass taller than a man. More than an arpent in the woods you find marshes which in autumn and spring are full of bustards, swans, duck, cranes, and teals. Ten steps further on are the hills covered with woods extending about an eighth of a league from which the prairies are of extraordinary extent.”<sup>3</sup>

The Frenchman who would try to really exploit the Illinois Country was La Salle. In 1680 he entered the area, and despite consistent setbacks, sought to develop trade and bring in settlers, in the end to no avail. In 1680 he built a fort at Peoria called Fort Crevecoeur. He then left it under the direction of his lieutenant, de Tonty. At the fort under Tonty’s direction, La Salle’s men went about building a large vessel to carry goods down the Illinois to the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico. The goods were furs mainly, as La Salle had gathered the Illinois Indians into his plans. However, the Iroquois were equally anxious to control the furs from this area. They moved into the area from the east and successfully attacked the Illini. De Tonty, while out searching for a better place for a fort, learned that the party remaining at Fort Crevecoeur had mutinied and burned the fort. When La Salle returned to the site of the Fort, he passed a number of Illini camps destroyed by the Iroquois. He found the fort ruined and on the boat, half completed, his former employees had written, “Nous somme tous sauvages” before disappearing forever into the wilderness.<sup>4</sup> There was by the frontier river a path to the heart of darkness as well as the sylvan scene described by Jolliet.

In 1683 a party of Frenchmen traveled from Montreal to the new fort that La Salle had Tonty build atop the rock on the Illinois, now called Starved Rock. The fort was called St. Louis. This party ran into trouble above the fort. They reported their adventures in 1684.

“To our surprise after two hours we saw 200 Iroquois waiting for us at a rapids; there was no chance to defend ourselves, so we resolved to cross to the other side of the river and use our canoes and trade goods to fortify our position....

“All this was in vain, because sixty of them jumped into the rapids, yelling ‘Don’t be afraid, we are your brothers, we want to negotiate with you.’ We answered that we were going to stop after the rapids to talk to them; our intention however was to go beyond to a little island that was extremely advantageous for our defense. But the sixty men having stopped our canoes

in the middle of the rapids, began to caress us saying, 'Don't be afraid we want to negotiate.'

"The rest of our people seeing that we had been stopped, came immediately to see what was going on, but as soon as they arrived the Iroquois stopped them yelling, 'Don't be afraid we are your brothers, we only want to negotiate with you.'

"In the meantime they confiscated our arms and they brought us and the seven canoes on land where they pillaged our trade goods and our canoes, unwilling to listen to any reason even though we showed them the general's letter which they tore up with contempt.

"Having asked why they treated us in such a manner, and why they pillaged our merchandise they replied, "What are you looking for here? This is our land. Don't you know that?" We told them that they were not treating us as brothers, and that they had lied to us when they said we should not be afraid. They answered proudly that they had no ears to hear us, that our words were arrogant, and that in a word, we should stop talking. When we asked what they wanted to do with us they said that we were their slaves and that their intention was to bring us to their land. They kept us nine days walking on land on the side of Fort St. Louis escorted by 150 while the rest of them were in our canoes with our merchandize."

Eventually the Frenchmen were let go at the Chicago River with no supplies and one gun. They were rescued by some friendly Mascoutin Indians.<sup>5</sup>

One of the important links in this river system was the nine-to-ten miles of wet prairie that separated the Des Plaines from the Chicago River called the Chicago Portage. It was here that Jolliet proposed digging a canal to connect the Great Lakes to the Mississippi. In 1682 La Salle wrote of this area:

"One goes to Lake Michigan by a channel formed by the junction of several small streams or gullies of the prairie. It [Chicago River] is navigable about two leagues to the edge of the prairie. Beyond this at a quarter of a league distant toward the west there is a little lake [Mud Lake] a league and a half in length which is divided in two by a beaver dam. From this lake issues a little stream which after twining in and out among the rushes for half a league falls into the Des Plaines, and from there into the river of the Illinois. When this is full either from the great rains of summer or from the floods of spring; it is discharged into this channel which leads to Lake Michigan whose surface is seven feet lower.

"The river Des Plaines does the same when its channel is full. It discharges by this little lake a part of its water into Lake Michigan; and at this time should one make a little canal of a quarter of a league, says Jolliet, from the Lake to the basin which leads into the Illinois River, ships could in summer enter into the river and descend into the sea. This might happen in the springtime but not in the summer, because there is not enough water in the river as far down as Fort St. Louis where the navigation of the Illinois River begins at this season and extends as far as the sea.

“...Moreover the utility of a canal would not be very great, for I doubt when everything should succeed, if a boat is overcome by the great flood which the currents of the Des Plaines cause in the springtime. These are much heavier than those on the Rhone.”<sup>6</sup>

The knowledge of the existence of this portage integrated the new country United States because of the possibility of a link enabling one to travel by water from the east to the Mississippi and the west. Around 1790 a map and description of the river were transcribed by a certain Lieut. Armstrong. Who actually drew the map and made the notes is not clear. Whoever it was, however, saw the river flowing through green and verdant fields.

“The river in general is about 60 yards broad and runs nearly Southwest, there is not much winding, and the current is not strong until you arrive at Isle de Cache, or hiding island, after which there are small rapids in diverse places.... In this river flows a considerable quantity of wild rice, and in some places the whole breadth of the river is full of it. On the river, on both sides, are fine beautiful hills with a very easy ascent. Some of them have wood and others more, which makes them appear at a distance like so many beautiful country farms, the building excepted.”<sup>7</sup>

The two themes echoed by these travelers and subsequent visitors and residents were the twin appreciation of the garden setting of the river and its valley and its commercial possibilities indicated first by Jolliet's idea of a connecting canal. In the 19th century the knowledge and interest in the commercial development of the Illinois connection between Lake Michigan and Mississippi intensified. However, the sylvan viewpoint was also frequently expressed. In 1824 Henry Schoolcraft came through the area and recorded his impression of a riverside landmark, Mount Jolliet. This glacier-formed mound tended to astound visitors because it looked man made, which was noted by the French and subsequent visitors. Schoolcraft writes of this landmark.

“The view from the eminence is charming and diversified. The forests are all sufficiently near to serve as a relief to the prairies, clumps of oak are scattered over the country. The Lake Jolliet [actually a widening of the Des Plaines river at that point] is fifteen miles long and about a quarter of a mile wide lies in front. There is perhaps not a more noble and picturesque spot for a private mansion in all America. Few persons will pass it without feeling it is the work of human hands.”<sup>8</sup>

By the time Schoolcraft passed through, other visitors had written about this river system. But sometimes the commentators give two almost completely different views. For example, views of the link or lack thereof between the Des Plaines River and the Chicago were very different in the reports of two visitors in 1817 and 1818. Major Stephen Long was at Fort Dearborn at the mouth of the Chicago River in 1817. This is his description of the Chicago Portage in the spring of 1817.

“In the flat prairie above mentioned there is a small lake about five miles in length and six to thirty or forty yards in width, communicating both with the river Des Plaines and the Chicago River by means of a kind of canal which has been made partly by the current of water, and partly by the French and Indians, for the purpose of getting boats across in that direction in time of high waters. The distance from the river Des Plaines to the Chicago River by this water course is about nine miles, through the greater part of which there is more or less water, so the portage is seldom more

than three miles in the driest season, but in the wet season boats pass and repass with facility between the two rivers.”<sup>9</sup>

One year later a young clerk working for the American Fur Company passed over the portage with a company of voyageurs and traders. He recollected the experience some years later in his reminiscences.

“Mud Lake drained partly into the Aux Plains and partly through a narrow crooked channel into the South Branch [of the Chicago River], and only in the very wet weather was this sufficient water to float an empty boat. The mud was very deep, and along the edge of the lake grew tall grass and wildrice often reaching above a man’s head, and so strong and dense it was almost impossible to walk through them.

“Our empty boats were pulled up the channel and in many places there was no water.... When we reached the lake where we found mud thick and deep, but only at rare intervals was there any water. Forked tree branches were tied upon the ends of the boats’ poles, and these afforded a bearing on the tussocks of grass and roots, which enabled the men in the boats to push to some purpose. Four men only remained in a boat and pushed with these poles, while six or eight others waded in the mud alongside, and by united efforts constantly jerking it along, so that from early dawn to dark we succeeded only in passing a part of our boats to the Aux Plains outlet, where we found the first hard ground....

“Those who waded through the mud frequently sank to their waist, and at times had to cling to the boat to prevent going in over their heads; after reaching the end and camping for the night came the task of ridding themselves from the blood suckers.

“The lake was full of these abominable black plagues, and they stuck so tight to the skin that they broke in pieces if force was used to remove them.

“Having rid ourselves of the blood suckers we were assailed by myriads of mosquitoes that rendered sleep hopeless.”<sup>10</sup>

By the 1840s there was a more intense interest in the Illinois River system as a way of developing the Northern and Central part of the State, and helping the sod busters now coming into the area to take advantage of the rich soil noticed by Jolliet in 1673. In 1836 construction was started on the Illinois and Michigan Canal and although a variety of forces would slow its completion until 1848, construction acted as a major magnet drawing both settlers and workers. By the 1840s steam travel on the Illinois River was an important fact in both commerce and the perception of those who traveled on the river. In 1840, for example, Eliza Steele took a steamboat from Peoria to Alton in her travels on the Western Frontier. Her impressions of the river were similar to earlier travelers.

“The Illinois looks beautiful this afternoon. Its glassy water scarcely moved, and it seemed so content with its sweet resting place; and at the silent admiration of those stately trees, which were sending their cool flickering shadows over her and gazing down at loveliness, that it would fain linger upon its course, as some young languid beauty, conscious of a graceful position which is winning admiring glances from every beholder....

“We passed several towns today, as Liverpool, Havana, Beardstown – the former small settlement, but which its inhabitants intend to make larger as they have already a railroad in contemplation across the Mississippi....”

Ms. Steele also makes some observations on the boat itself. There were numerous signs around indicating the proper etiquette for particularly the male passengers, such as, ‘no gentleman was to lie down on a berth with his boots on, and none enter the ladies salon without permission from them.’ She notes, “We found in the boat three indications of being near the south, liquors on the table, gambling in the gentlemen’s cabin, and a black chambermaid slave to the captain.”<sup>11</sup>

In 1851 another traveler on the Illinois describes with more detail and anxiety than Eliza Steele, the vessel on which he embarked was not concerned with gambling and liquor, but the flimsy thing itself.

“A western steamboat is at first sight a novelty to one familiar only with eastern models. The boats on western waters are very slightly built – mere sheets of pine, shallow, long, narrow, flat bottomed, narrow open and flaring in all sides.... There is no cabin either below deck or upon it.

“Huge flaming brands and coals are dropping continually upon the thinnest possible sheeting of sheet-iron, in many places worn through to the plank; heated pipes on which you cannot bear your hand, are in immediate contact with boards as dry as tinder, and perhaps already charred; goods you know not how inflammable, are strewn promiscuously around the boilers, while huge piles of dry pinewood waiting to be consumed are crowded in the vicinity of the fires.... However there is nothing like getting used to it, and I learned to sleep quite soundly....

“The scenery of the Illinois river is rather low and monotonous, but sufficiently picturesque to arrest the eye of a stranger. It savored of the romantic to sail at times through the trees -- the water spreading indefinitely among the trees -- and in the middle of the stream to bring up at the second story of a house that seemed to say ‘for freight or passage apply within.’ Peoria is the most beautiful town on the river.”<sup>12</sup>

Travel on the Illinois and Michigan Canal after 1848 was not by steam. Boats were towed by horses or mules pulling a towline attached to the boat as they walked or trotted along the towpath. This, like other means of travel, had its inconveniences, as a British Army Officer named Cunyngham notes in 1853, particularly at night.

Into the berths we were ordered to get; and after some difficulty, especially amongst those to whom this method of traveling was new, we obeyed....

“I soon became insensible to the uncomfortable position which I occupied, although only six inches above my face a tremendous man threatened every moment to burst through the sacking which supported him, and had the cords given way, I felt I must have been squeezed as flat as a pancake.

“With so many passengers in so confined a space, no wonder on the following morning I should awake with a severe headache, the effect of the heated nauseous vapours [sic] that surrounded us....

“At early dawn I contrived to slide off my shelf and effected my ablution on a bucket on deck, before any of my fellow passengers had taken themselves down.

“From Ottawa to La Salle is a distance of about 20 miles, rocky islands occasionally present themselves, now surrounded by fertile prairie and cornfields. These islands in the plain much resembled some I had seen in China, within the Yang-tse-kiang-River....”<sup>13</sup>

Passenger travel declined on the Illinois River after the coming of the railroads in the 1850s. The completion of the Rock Island railroad in 1853 destroyed the passenger business on the Illinois and Michigan Canal. However, freight traffic continued to ply the waters. One of the canal boat captains recalled how he started out on the canal in the 1880s as a mule boy.

“I drove mules along the towpath, three, four or five mules. I was thirteen or fourteen; these old mules you had to know their language. From Lockport down you’d need three or four mules, hung in tandem, one behind the other, you know. The towrope, we called it the towline, reached back to the barge about 300-350 feet, you know. A man on the barge had to steer that barge, but the mules (they had them trained) they’d walk along the towpath as nice as you please.

“You’d walk or ride. The back mule we called the saddle mule, and that had a saddle on, you could get on and ride or walk – whatever you wanted to do.”<sup>14</sup>

Capt. Schuler recalled that the mule boy worked from sunup to sundown with no relief. Another view of life on the canal was that expressed by a juvenile boy’s author of the 1920s and 1930s, Leo Edwards, in a series called *Jerry Todd*. Much of the action takes place in Utica, Edward’s home town, which he called ‘Tutter’ and on the canal. The attitude toward the waterway is very similar to that of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, a boy’s adventure on a waterway apart from the adult world. In *Jerry Todd and the Oak Island Treasure* the adventure revolves around an old canal boat and the summer spent on it.

“Coming to the small wide waterways, halfway between Tutter and Ashton [Utica and Ottawa] we anchored the scow close to the right hand wooded shore, putting out the required lights. Then we turned in.

“Just before I dozed off I heard a big fish flop close to the boat. It must have been a big carp. Then a screech owl settled on a limb directly over the boat and told us in mournful plaintive hoots, what it thought of us. There were a thousand fire flies in the air. The night was wonderfully still. I filled my lungs with the cool air, wouldn’t it be fine I thought, if I could always live like this, and never again have to sleep in a stuffy bed room.

“Peg was the first one up the following morning. We heard him give a yell, which was followed by a large splash.

“ ‘Come in, you sleepy eyed bums,’ he shrieked, splashing around in the water.

“ ‘Next,’ I shouted, showing off my underwear.”<sup>15</sup>

Leo Edwards’ imagination looks backward. It is doubtful if this aquatic adventure took place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Edwards undoubtedly wrote from memories of his 19<sup>th</sup> century boyhood. A more thoroughly modern look at the Illinois and Michigan Canal or perhaps a look imbued with visions of progress occurs in a 1905 promotional pamphlet for Lockport. The concluding chapter is on “Possibilities of Lockport.”

“When one looks upon the long vista of years that have elapsed since Lockport was evolved from the primeval forest [at most 75 years] of the region it seems almost incredible that Lockport has not progressed more rapidly. When you think of the beautiful hills and high bluffs on which the town is located, it would seem an ideal spot for a modern town. But there are several reasons why people have not cared to locate here, chief among which is the Illinois and Michigan Canal. The disagreeable odor has been widely talked of as a menace to health... Think what a great boulevard could be made from the old channel; it could be filled up and macadamized! One could come down from Chicago, with nothing to bar the way. It is possible that such may be the case.”<sup>16</sup>

In fact the voracious automobile would devour part of the old canal, as its bed was used in the Chicago area to build the Stevenson Expressway, or I-55. By the 1950s the old canal was either a place to build a highway on, or an historic site to take in on a Sunday drive.

By the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a great push to enlarge the canal and raise the level of the Illinois River so that boats or larger tonnage could use this waterway. The argument for this was first of all military, based upon the presumed threat of a potential British control of the Great Lakes. Commerce took second place to a military need as far as those who appealed to Congress were concerned. In 1867 after making a survey of the river and canal for the purpose of raising the level by means of a series of locks and dams, General Wilson appealed to Congress to support the project giving this reason:

“The recent confederation of the British American provinces shows the anxiety felt by the English government in this behalf, and must be regarded as a movement in hostility to the people and institutions of the United States. While it does not actually increase the aggregate British strength on our northern frontier, nor in any way encroach on our territorial rights it consolidates the policy in regard to canals, as well as other matters, and reorders available the entire force of those provinces in any difficulties which may arise between England and the United States.

“The government must either connect the lakes and the Mississippi River by a Canal of sufficient capacity to accommodate gunboats suitable for service on the lakes, or prepare for the annexation or conquest of Canada. [emphasis in original] <sup>17</sup>

Although Congress did not see fit to follow the General's advise to conquer or construct, the State of Illinois did in the 1920s begin construction of what would become the Illinois Waterway. This waterway by

means of a series of locks and dams, and a large influx of water from Lake Michigan, maintains an eight-foot depth and large capacity locks from Chicago to the Mississippi.

But this waterway was not regarded as an aquatic wonderland sheltered by trees and peacefully languid. In 1950 in his autobiographical novel *A Stretch of the River*, Richard Bissell has all the action taking place on the Upper Mississippi, but a drowned barge worker reminisces from his muddy grave about his experiences of the Illinois Waterway.

“After that I went over to the Illinois again on the Marcin T., quite a comedown after the big Mack, and we messed with them ice cakes all winter and punched a hole in her bottom at Marseilles, and all got off but the mess boy – when they raised her they found the poor bastard down in the hole. Looking for some soap powder I suppose when she went down. And we used to go over there to the “Ace of Clubs” by the landing in Joliet, and play the juke box and get lit up, and go out in a cab to the warehouses when we got a chance, and then two months on the little Mortimer Jones in the drainage canal and a few trips down the Sag to South Chicago with one load at a time; that run gets awful old awful quick.”<sup>18</sup>

And finally the modern poet of the industrial mid-west locates the waterways in a completely industrial setting. Carl Sandburg in his poem *Joliet* contrasts the present industrial scene with a pre-historic glacial grinding and tearing free. No sylvan peace here.

*Joliet*

*On the one hand the steelworks  
On the other hand the penitentiary  
Santa Fe trains and Alton trains  
Between smokestacks on the west  
And grey walls on the east  
And Lockport down the river*

*Part of the valley is God's  
And part is man's  
The river course laid out  
A thousand years ago  
The canal ten years back*

*The sun on two canals and on river  
Makes three stripes of silver  
Or copper or gold  
Or shattered sun flower leaves  
Talons of an iceberg  
Scraped out this valley  
Claws of an avalanche loosed her.  
(Cornhuskers 1917)*

Finally, what do these various views over three centuries add up to? They are changing views of a waterway as the river itself changed. It was first recorded as a romantic ribbon wandering through the prairies and woodlands. Seen as almost settled, a sylvan wonderland with rich soil and wooded hills, was suitable for commerce and agriculture, a road carrying promise or a threat. However, eventually the river was tamed,

canalized, although it was never a wild river as its descent was always moderate, still the Illinois was unique in itself. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries it became less and less a carrier of goods and people, and more a carrier of sewage pumped into it by Chicago, less-and-less romantic as traveling on it 'got awful old, awful quick.' Although the river would not be that pristine carrier of the visions of promise or the vision of ruin, except in the boyish imagination, it still maintains echoes of that which certainly must to some extent be awakened in the minds of the multitude of recreational boaters who currently tear around on its surface, as well as in the mind of the commercial boatmen themselves who still ply it with large tows of heavy commodities.

But to those 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century travelers, the rivers were 'America.' The steamboat and, to a lesser extent, the canal boat conveyed romance before Hollywood canonized the cowboy as the quintessential American heroic figure. And as a result, the western landscape eclipsed the river as the setting for the adventure of America.

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