

**Yesterday was the 2008 Summer** Solstice. Today the sun is hot once again, and the afternoon winds rapidly desiccate the sandy soils of Mason County, Illinois, stressing our growing vegetable garden. So my wife and I hope for more rain, despite the fact that this spring has been particularly cool and rainy. Those abundant rains over the last few weeks have produced a spectacular wildflower display in my reconstructed sand prairie and encouraged a healthy spring growth in my ten-year-old oak and hickory trees. But, unfortunately, those same rains have resulted in widespread flooding across the Midwest—flooding on a scale that has been compared only with the Great Flood of 1993 on the Mississippi River.

In 1993, I was also living high and dry as events slowly and daily unfolded around me. Safe as I was, it was difficult to discern the true magnitude and scale of the flooding of the Mississippi and its tributaries, as it was occurring from day to day. But after a while I began to notice that headlines with the word “flooding” were not going away; and the afternoon rains were so regular, one could almost tell the time of day by the

### *Side Channels*

mid-afternoon peal of thunder and lightning that seemed to appear from nowhere even on the sunniest of days.

Then the big rivers began cresting and the levees breaking. Small river towns that few had ever heard of were suddenly in the media spotlight. Obscure places such as Grafton, Illinois and St. Genevieve, Missouri became synonymous with disaster or impending disaster. And today, the same place names are rolling off the media tongue once again; until, like the last time, the floodwaters recede, and folks are left to deal with the aftermath and to wait until the next big flood.

Many of those who were flooded out in 1993 have moved off of the floodplains, but many have stayed, and new developments on the floodplains have continued. Even though everyone knows the rivers will flood again, when and how high can never be predicted with any comfortable degree of certainty. The 1993 flood has been called a 500-year flood. Gamblers understand such terminology. There is a 1-in-500 chance of a flood as large as the 1993 flood occurring in any given year. But a similar event could still occur next year or not for 1000 years or more. What is certain, though, is that once a 500-year flood occurs, it is absolutely wrong to expect that a comparable flood will definitely not occur for another 500 years. Misinterpretation of this statistic continues, sometimes with fatal consequences.

On this hot June day it is, of course, impossible to know how events will play out this time. The massive rainstorms of earlier in the month seem to have passed. But will they return next week? The week after? As anyone with even minimal experience with rivers knows, the spring flood is a normal part of a river's yearly cycle in the Midwest, just as summer droughts are also part of the cycle, when the rivers fall to their lowest levels. But will they fall to normal this time before going back up again next spring? Or will 2008 harbor a worse disaster than 1993?

As distant thunder peals outside of my office window this afternoon,

*As the Rivers Rise Again*

the sun continues to shine. And except for the isolated storm to the west, the skies look as peaceful and inviting as a summer day could be. And so it was in 1993.

[Author's Note: The summer of 2008 did, indeed, see record flooding in some areas of the Mississippi River, but not on the scale of the 1993 event.]