

A glance at any map of North America shows that the Midwest is a landscape of rivers, with the Mississippi as its centerpiece. On the Mississippi River's watershed—from the Allegheny River in New York and Pennsylvania to the headwaters of the Missouri River in Montana to the obscure birth of the Mississippi River itself at Lake Itasca, Minnesota—traveling across Middle America, one is never far from flowing waters.

My home lies fairly in the central portion of and in the middle of this well-watered river basin, a few miles east of the Illinois River, one of the Mississippi's many tributaries. The Illinois River valley and adjacent largely-forested bluff lands are quite unlike the gently rolling to flat landscape of central Illinois, dominated as it is by expanses of farmland, largely of corn and soybean. The Illinois River is a force on the landscape through which it travels, though it is a much lesser river (by any measure) than the Mississippi.

The headwaters of the Illinois River arise in the greater Chicago met-

*Side Channels*

ropolitan area and northwestern Indiana, with the Des Plaines and Kankakee rivers the two main feeder streams. Then 273 miles downstream, the Illinois joins the Mississippi River opposite the town of Grafton, Illinois, about 20 miles upstream from where the Missouri River also joins the Mississippi. In between, the Illinois River valley corridor provides a wonderful sense of place with discernable boundaries, a beginning and an end.



*Towboat-barge on the Illinois River*