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Starved Rock and the Illinois River's Locks and Dams

The Illinois River came into view as I approached the base of Starved Rock, just before beginning a daunting climb with my father and brother to the top of the rock, 125 feet above the river. It was the first time I had visited Starved Rock State Park, sometime in the middle 1960s, and the first time I had seen the Illinois River. A short distance upstream of the rock, the crashing, turbulent waters of the river passed through the partially open gates of the Starved Rock Dam. Behind the dam, the water spread out into a large lake nearly one mile wide and seemed, to all appearances, stagnant. Was this a river, as I had been informed? I was quite familiar with the sluggish Des Plaines River coursing through the forest preserves near my Chicago home, and that river flowed freely. So the body of water before me only vaguely seemed like a river; not even the dam seemed consistent with the image in my mind of what a dam should be: a large concrete wall completely holding back a large body of water, with nary a drop of water making it through the dam. What purpose, I thought at the time, could there be for a dam that allowed a torrent

Side Channels

of water to pass through?

Of course, the answer, as I discovered years later, is that the Illinois River is a regulated, highly managed river, not a natural free-flowing river; water flows and levels are carefully manipulated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to maintain a commercial navigation channel to a minimum depth of 9 feet. The Starved Rock Dam, in fact, is one of five similar navigation dams built in the 1930s along the Illinois River that work together—opening and closing gates, holding back water or letting it through—to allow barges and other watercraft to ply the river's waters throughout the year, droughts notwithstanding. Each navigation dam has an accompanying lock chamber that allows river traffic to bypass the dams. Without the navigation dams, the river would frequently become too shallow for large crafts to navigate, and the rapids at Starved Rock and Marseilles, now submerged beneath backed-up water behind the dams—referred to as *navigation pools*—would remain insurmountable barriers.

But such engineering technicalities aside, from atop Starved Rock, one cannot help but be pensive, literally standing upon history, with thoughts pulled back hundreds of years. Names such as La Salle, Hennepin, Tonti, Marquette, and Illiniwek float in the air and are written upon park landmarks and trail heads. Yet all around the park, the modern works of man cannot be ignored, and one may wonder what the river and its valley might be like hundreds of years into the future, how primitive today's view from the rock would be to a hyper-technological society with everyday contrivances unimaginable during our era, much as cell phones and wireless Internet on laptop computers would have been unimaginable to the French explorers of the seventeenth century.

Today Starved Rock seems less impressive and less massive to me than it did over four decades ago. And though the park may be slightly more developed around the lodge and day-use parking areas, it otherwise remains much as I first experienced. In the intervening years, I have trav-

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eled the length of the river valley many times; canoed the river's waters; explored its backwaters, bluffs, and floodplain forests; studied its ecology; and lamented its degradation as an unfortunate consequence of modern prosperity and progress. Yet, despite my travels elsewhere, before too long, I always return to Starved Rock, though sometimes several years may pass between visits. The rock certainly is the main attraction, but perhaps it is also the dam that draws my attention, as it did many years ago. Today I see the dam as it is juxtaposed against the backdrop of natural beauty and history preserved at the park, a poignant reminder of our power to manipulate and manage the environment, while also recognizing limits and consequences. Few places—certainly not the river's other locks and dams—generate such inspiration, and maybe that is why I continue to return often and remember.