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First Glimpse of the Upper Mississippi River Valley

When I first entered the working world in the 1970s, the time did not seem to be one of limitless opportunities. Looking back today, the mid-1970s seem to have been a wasteland: recession; Watergate, and Vietnam fatigue; good-paying manufacturing jobs apparently on the way out, flipping burgers and frying fries on the way in; gas lines; the Misery Index and Jimmy Carter, with his message that America's best days were behind us.

So at 20 years of age, I was quite depressed; living at home and dulling my brain daily at work running a dirty, noisy paper-cutting machine for a low wage that was not enough for me to live on my own; wasting away the evening on inane television programs, then back the next work day for more dullness, dirt, and noise. The pattern of my life seemed laid out before me in the older middle-aged men working beside me at the paper company: 30-year mortgages for a matchbox-sized home and lot, hearing loss, back pain, job-related injury, retirement. Done. Like young men throughout the ages, I asked myself if there was not more to life. Where

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was there meaning in this uninspiring routine followed by so many? If there were answers to be found somewhere, I could not find them; but I did know that a new motorcycle would not hurt, and might help matters, at least for a while.

With summer and a one-week vacation from work, I hit the road on my new 1978 750K Honda, carrying along only a small bag of belongings strapped to the back seat, plus a vague notion that the further from Chicago I traveled, the better, less hurried, and less crowded the land would become, and the more wild and pristine everything would be. Of course, I had no real basis for such an idea, and I likely did not even form it in so many words, but the idea equated distance with answers; and I instinctively felt that being in the outdoors surrounded by nature was where I would find contentment, a feeling that had deep roots in my childhood experiences in the Chicago area forest preserves—a priceless gift from my parents, I now know.

Solely based on its place on a highway map, I chose Mississippi Palisades State Park as my destination. I had no idea what a palisade was, but the Mississippi River was at the edge of the state, and the park was at the far northwest corner of the state. *Far enough for now*, I reasoned. Longer trips would come later.

Living most of my life on the tabletop flat lands of Chicago, on a drained wetland in fact, I called any slight rise in the land a “hill.” So the Driftless Area of northwestern Illinois (that is, an area missed by the land-flattening glaciers) seemed truly mountainous, and I felt to be very far from home, though it was only about 150 miles. When the highway suddenly dropped in elevation to a flat bottomland, I saw the upper Mississippi River for the first time: a wide expanse of greenish-gray turbid water, floating leaves of vegetation in the backwaters, forested islands and banks; all wild. Yet it was not until I first viewed the river and its flood plain from the cliff tops of the state park that I was most impressed. The information

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kiosk stated that below me the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge stretched northward for 260 miles along the Mississippi River, from Princeton, Iowa, to Lake Pepin in Minnesota and Wisconsin. With a lazy turkey vulture soaring by at eye level and the late afternoon sun in my eyes, I felt, reality to the contrary, that I was gazing upon a pathless wilderness, with Chicago left far behind in a different world; this was a theme I would return to, mostly with disappointment, many times throughout my life of travels.

At that moment, I wanted to drop everything and hike those forests, canoe the channels and bays, get lost in the wilderness, and forget completely about living at home and being strangled by my life of no direction. Here was something better than I had ever before imagined. I knew, though, that I was unprepared for such journeys, and embarking unprepared on an aimless trek through the “wilderness” would have been folly. So I made a mental note to return one day; it was clear that I first needed to find a way to escape the quicksand of the lifestyle I was being pulled down into with each passing year. I needed a plan, and I would return. There would be no Misery Index for me.

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Mississippi Palisades State Park, Illinois