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Illinois' Continental Divide:
Mud Lake and the Chicago Portage

Long before Chicago was settled by Americans of European descent and the landscape became highly altered, the Mississippi River and Great Lakes basins were separated by a shallow marshy area called Mud Lake. This prairie marsh fed into the Chicago River, which, at that time, flowed into Lake Michigan. (The Great Lakes' waters empty into the North Atlantic Ocean via the St. Lawrence River.) The nearby Des Plaines River flows toward the Illinois River, the Mississippi River, and ultimately the Gulf of Mexico. The Chicago Portage, a traveler's trail across the Mud Lake marsh, was located at the point where the Des Plaines and Chicago rivers were at their closest approach. The strategic importance of this site was never obscure to anyone, least of all the Native Americans.

Never far from the Illinois River during most of the last two decades, it seems somehow appropriate that I spent most of my childhood days literally on land long ago reclaimed from Mud Lake at the headwaters of the Illinois River. I recall myself as a boy nosing around railroad yards and abandoned land beyond the safe boundaries of Chicago's Lawndale Park,

Side Channels

excited by small pools of clear water with cattails and crayfish. These pools must have been the most difficult areas to fully drain, and today I am convinced that they were remnants of Mud Lake itself.

My parents forbade me to wander beyond the “back of the park,” as we used to say. There were dangers, no doubt, as the burned out hobo campfires, discarded whiskey bottles, and occasional dead dog attested. And most of the time, I followed their rules.

These days, passing over the Stevenson Expressway (Interstate 55) near Chicago and seeing the sewage treatment plant, ship canal, factories, roads, businesses, and homes, it is nearly impossible to imagine Mud Lake and its environs 300 or more years ago. The location of the Chicago Portage is now marked as a historic landmark, located west of busy Harlem Avenue, where one can walk through the forest preserve on well-worn trails to the Des Plaines River. Engineers had long ago reversed the direction of the Chicago River, and it now flows into the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal; then, southwest of the Chicago area, into the Des Plaines River. Yet a dedicated adventurer may still be able to find those small pools of clear water with cattails beyond the Lawndale Park boundaries, where unknown dangers are likely to still lurk. The rest lives only in the history books.