

Mississippi River Full Circle

By Thomas V. Lerczak

"In any kind of travel there is a good argument for going back and verifying your impressions."—from ***Riding the Iron Rooster***, by Paul Theroux

It was May 8, 2018, and after nearly 22 years as a natural areas preservation specialist, my last public meeting with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission (Commission) was behind me. It was a bittersweet moment when my vehicle left the indoor parking lot at the DeSoto House Hotel, the meeting's location, and with a sense of finality I slowly turned onto Galena's historic Main Street. With retirement less than two months away, I, of course, eagerly looked forward; but I also thought quite a bit about the decisions and chance occurrences that brought me to that point. And so, ever since I was aware that my last Commission meeting would be in northwestern Illinois, I planned a visit to Mississippi Palisades State Park, along the Mississippi River, a location with deep personal meaning going back four decades.

I had been out of high school for three years, first knocking around for two years as a stock man at Jack's Shoe Center in Cicero, moving around, in a never ending stream,

thousands of shoe boxes from delivery trucks to shelves, and from one set of shelves to other shelves, as the sales staff gradually moved the shoes out with customers. Not much more can be said about that experience, except that I learned to be diligent and to view time as measured in money and work. When the novelty of that low-paying job wore off (some nights I even dreamed of moving shoe boxes), I found a different job, again requiring few skills, at Sabin Robbins Paper Company running a noisy, dirty paper sheeting machine. And to have accomplished that simple move I felt lucky, because it was the middle of the 1970s, a time seemingly not of great opportunities, but one of high unemployment; recession; Watergate; Vietnam fatigue; good-paying manufacturing jobs on the way out, flipping burgers and frying fries on the way in; gas lines; and the Misery Index of the Jimmy Carter presidency, with his message that America's best days were behind us.

So despite having a bit more money in my pocket, I remember being quite depressed; I still lived at home in my parents' attic and most weekday evenings wasted away my mind on inane television programs, and then returned to work the following 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

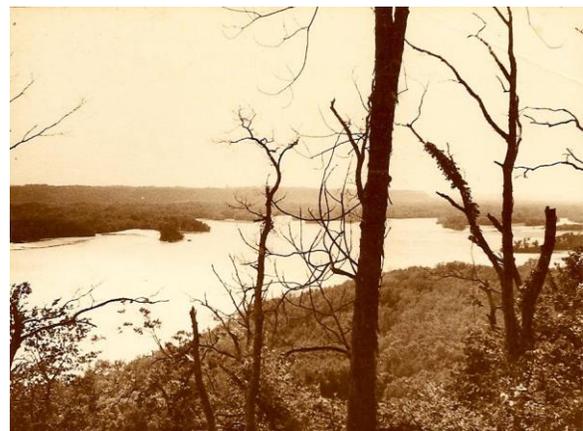
at the paper company: 30-year mortgages for a matchbox-sized home and lot, hearing loss, back pain, job-related injury, retirement. Done. Like young men throughout the ages, I asked myself if there was not more to life. Where was there meaning in this uninspiring routine followed by so many? If there were answers to be found somewhere, I could not find them, but I did know that a new motorcycle would not hurt, and might actually help matters, at least for a while.

With summer and a one-week vacation from work, I hit the road on my new 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. Distance equaled answers; and I instinctively felt that being in the outdoors surrounded by nature was where I would find contentment.

And so I chose Mississippi Palisades State Park as my destination because it was at the far northwest corner of the state. I would find out what a palisade was when I got there.

When I entered the Driftless Area of northwestern Illinois (that is, an area missed by the land-flattening Pleistocene Ice Age glaciers) the hills seemed truly mountainous, and I felt

to be very far from home, though it was only about 150 miles. My life experiences so far had been mostly on tabletop flat lands. When the highway suddenly dropped in elevation from the rugged uplands to the flat bottomlands, 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. But I was later most impressed from the cliff tops of the state park. With a lazy turkey vulture soaring by at eye level and the late afternoon sun in my eyes, the full Mississippi River valley before me, 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 many times throughout my life of travels, though mostly with disappointment.



Mississippi Palisades State Park, 1978

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 in a Berwyn bungalow and being strangled by my life of no direction. Here was something better than I had ever 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 escape the quicksand of the lifestyle I was being pulled down into with each passing year.

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Given my urban upbringing, my childhood perspective was that everything around me was manmade or put there by someone. Because my little world consisted mostly of buildings, streets, sidewalks, lawns, and neatly planted front yard trees, all carefully placed and domesticated, that view was really not very far from the truth. I can even remember being on the shores of Lake Michigan, with Chicago’s downtown skyscrapers and busy Lake Shore Drive in the background, wondering where all of the sand came from to make the beach. The idea of an area not made by and under the control of mankind was not part of my worldview.

But on one school field trip, probably in the third or fourth grade, we visited the Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Center in the Cook County

Forest Preserves. I remember seeing prairie grass for the first time; it towered over me, and the teacher said that much of Illinois was once covered in prairies of these tall grasses. From my experience, grass was supposed to be all green and no more than about three inches tall; this tall prairie grass seemed out of place in the modern world. About the same time, I recall learning that massive glaciers once scoured the surface of Illinois and flattened the landscape on the very ground on which Chicago was built. And I thought if that ice ever returned, we would be in big trouble. Illinois had clearly once been a very different and wild place, probably quite threatening and unpredictable. The thought was a bit frightening, but there was comfort in the fact that that dangerous past was long dead and gone. There was also some sadness in the thought.

These early experiences made lasting impressions, which remain vividly clear. Also clear is the recollection of my first encounter with an Illinois Nature Preserve. On one of my increasingly frequent visits to Cook County’s Palos Hills Forest Preserves in the 1980s, I noticed a trail head just off the highway and a large sign that said the area was called Cap Sauers Holding. There was also a small triangle sign with an image of a cardinal perched on an oak leaf which signified that the site was an Illinois Nature Preserve; in fact, it stated that “Everything is Protected by

Law.” Clearly there was something special about this site. With everything protected by law, I wondered whether I would be in violation of the law just by entering. I went for my hike, nevertheless, and was relieved not to see a police car waiting for me upon my return.



A few years later, just after I had moved to Edwardsville, Illinois, to attend the university, one of my first priorities was to find local public lands to hike in the woods. One day, driving west of town, I saw one of those triangle Illinois Nature Preserve signs and I quickly pulled off the highway. A larger sign said the site was called the William and Emma Bohm Memorial Nature Preserve (11 acres) and that it protected a remnant old-growth forest. This I wanted to see. I was used to reading about old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska, and I was becoming fascinated by the idea of wilderness from reading books by John Muir and Sigurd Olsen. But in Illinois? The sign also stated that the

site was privately owned and permission was necessary to enter. So I drove on, and made a mental note to find out more about these Illinois Nature Preserves.

What I soon discovered that impressed me the most, and took me back to my first prairie grass encounter, was that Illinois Nature Preserves are, in fact, remnants of the original Illinois landscape. They were not planted; they were in place long before Illinois was settled by Americans of European descent, and they are natural areas (original prairies, virgin forests, wetlands) of what remain from that time. My youthful perception that all of Illinois had long been manipulated and re-worked by someone at some time was wrong. The Illinois Natural Areas Preservation Act of 1963, which established the Illinois Nature Preserve System, refers to such natural lands as “living museums of the native landscape wherein one may envision and experience primeval conditions in a wilderness-like environment.” And it was that aspect, the “wilderness-like environment,” that I was most drawn to.

In this regard, Sand Prairie-Scrub Oak Nature Preserve (1,515 acres), far from any major road in rural Mason County, immediately comes to mind. On my first visit in the early 1990s—several years before I began working for the Commission to protect and manage sites within the Illinois Nature Preserves System—

given its name, I was surprised to find such a heavily forested site. In the large prairie that I expected, I would be able to see where I was going, but in a forest without trails, I was a bit intimidated, and so I brought along a compass. Carefully entering the woods on a warm July day, I proceeded westward. The preserve measures one mile from east to west and about two and a half miles from north to south; so I planned to walk about a half mile west and then turn northwest to see what I could find. Very quickly, the small parking lot with my vehicle was obscured by trees; all I could see in any direction were more trees. But a short distance ahead I soon noticed some prairie vegetation; it was a small opening in the woods, with enough light to support a little bluestem-sand lovegrass community. The gnarled blackjack oaks, prickly pear cactus, and open sand gave it a desert-like feel. I earlier read that during the waning days of the last ice age as the climate warmed, the sand now in Mason County had been brought down the Illinois River valley in glacial melt waters and then blown by prevailing winds into upland sand dunes. The quiet was almost overpowering. I continued walking slowly westward while the narrow prairie opening gradually became a bit wider, but then it ended abruptly in a wall of forest. Here I turned to the northwest and soon noticed a larger opening ahead through the trees. I

thought this must be the western boundary of the nature preserve and I expected to see boundary signs or a road. But no; this was an even larger prairie opening with large, widely scattered, black oak trees: I was looking at a remnant sand prairie and savanna, one of those rare, hidden pieces of the original Illinois landscape. I climbed about half way up the slope of a small rise, took a seat among the prairie grasses and wildflowers, and remained still. The only sounds were of insects, the gentle breeze, and a singing eastern towhee.



Sand Prairie-Scrub Oak Nature Preserve, 1992

After I began working for the Commission, my relationship with Illinois Nature Preserves soon became serious, matter of fact, and in certain ways routine. A typical day might have included writing a comprehensive site management plan, talking to a private nature preserve owner worried about an encroaching neighbor, studying scientific research articles, investigating a lead on a

prospective new nature preserve, pounding steel posts into the ground and attaching nature preserve boundary signs, answering numerous e-mails and phone messages that arrived while I was in the field, and a surprising amount of time in front of a computer.

One result from being so wrapped up in day-to-day responsibilities and occasional crises, mesmerized by the computer's glow, was that I sometimes needed to break through the bureaucratic walls and remind myself of my original inspirations. And in doing so I would eventually recall the 1978 motorcycle trip to the Mississippi River bluffs. At the time, I must have sensed that the pathways through life that I was seeking were somehow directly in front of me; the experience, in fact, allowed me to ponder my situation, something I rarely did in those days. Ready for change, by the fall of that year I was enrolled at the local community college taking night classes, trying to make up for lost time. I remember feeling like a different person than I had been only months before: happier, more focused, more alive, more in control of my life than ever before, working hard every evening and weekend to steer my life in a new direction. And I soon learned that answers would not miraculously appear because one stares out over a river valley.

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A few weeks before retiring, I was leading a volunteer workday at a protected natural area in Tazewell County, where the crew consisted of ten female inmates from the local prison. It was a pleasant, breezy spring day, with clear skies, billowy white clouds and cool air, the new spring vegetation expressing every shade of green. The nearby creek reflected the forest and sky from its clear waters. Sounds of migrating songbirds filled the air. It was a good day to be outside. Every once in a while I heard one of the women utter the words "sweet freedom," and several others would agree. It made me realize how special this day was to each of them and how different their lives were from mine.

Near the creek, I directed the group to spread out over a five-acre area to control invasive plants, pulling garlic mustard and seedling bush honeysuckle by hand and using tree wrenches to pull the larger honeysuckle shrubs right from the ground. Most stayed close together, but several of the women moved off, clearly preferring to work alone. I caught snippets of conversation, and could easily identify the dominant individuals, although everyone seemed to get along, joking, laughing, and cheering when large honeysuckle shrubs were successfully pulled. I told them it was a good way to work off frustrations. So once I was sure

everyone knew what to do, I spent some time walking over the area, looking for results of the previous year's work.

It was during this time away from the main group that I came upon one of the women further down the creek, looking out over the swiftly flowing water, seemingly in a daydream-like state. She was one of the “leaders,” a hardened, tough, no-nonsense individual, with a serious look. When she saw me, she looked up, and in a soft voice said, “Such beauty, so beautiful.” “Yes it is,” I replied. And then she told me how as a child, she and her friends played in a similar stream near their home on hot summer days. I excitedly pointed to a group of minnows swimming against the current in the clear water over a sand-gravel bottom, the small fish shining in the dappled sunlight. “So beautiful,” she whispered. I left the conversation there and walked away, wishing to intrude no longer. She may have been thinking of her childhood home, but I was pretty sure she was also thinking about the dark hell that she would return to in a short time. And, I wondered, was it too fanciful a notion to think that staring off into a creek for a few moments could provide the inspiration that would set a person's life on a different trajectory?



View from Mississippi Palisades State Park, 2018