

Spirit of the Mississippi: Locals Embracing our River

By Wendy Allen

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The Mississippi River is undoubtedly our city's most obvious yet most overlooked feature. While tourists will travel from across the country for the sole purpose of taking a river cruise, we residents tend to ignore it unless it presents some excitement, like overflowing its banks or as a venue for fireworks.

But this underappreciated body of water has some of the most intriguing, drama-filled history—from adventurous Huck Finn to heart-wrenching slave stories, from the paddlewheel boat heyday of the early 1900s to the laying-up of the famous Julia Belle Swain in 2009, which brought tears to the eyes of river rats from La Crosse to Peoria, Ill.

Life With the River

Former Julia Belle pilot Erik Dykman has been around water most of his life and says the slow pace of the river “fits my personality to a T.” After serving in the Navy, he somewhat fell into becoming a river pilot, moving up from a deckhand while earning a marketing degree from UWL.

“People are very drawn to the river,” he says. “For some who come to La Crosse, the only thing they want to do is take a river cruise. Every group you get is excited to be here. Growing up, vacations were always very important in my family, so I put emphasis on the crew to give these people the best cruise they can get.

“It’s a unique job,” he continues. “It lets you explore the river more than you would on your own. I’ve been on the river every day, 12 hours a day, from April to October for the past 13 years.”

For a muscle-powered river tour, Michelle Sheffer leads group kayaking excursions two evenings a week for Three Rivers Outdoors. They haul the equipment and provide instruction; all a participant has to do is show up and have a fun and relaxing time.

“Our median age for Paddle Time is around 50,” says Sheffer. “More and more retired people are looking to try something new, and kayaking is easy on your body.” Of the younger people who join, many are college grads who have decided to make La Crosse home and are looking for active ways to meet their new neighbors. “It’s been fun to see the paddling community that we’ve been creating.

“I like watching the waterway change from summer to fall,” she says. “The different islands pop up like lily pads, and you see wildlife and plants that you can’t see when driving around. We shouldn’t take for granted that we have this beautiful river in our community.”

Born and raised in Trempealeau, David Mikrut relocated west for the mountains and elk after his military service but fell in love with this area again during a goose hunting trip one mid-November. “The day had such a refreshing purity as I was gliding over the water. I remember thinking to myself, ‘Wow, this is what beauty is.’ The mountains paled in comparison.”

Mikrut became a fishing and hunting guide after moving back to La Crosse and says that the water quality has improved dramatically since he was a kid (he used to get a rash after being in the water, but no more), and he says the water clarity has improved fourfold since the zebra mussels were established. It’s kind of a catch-22 situation: Though zebra mussels are invasive and a very serious concern, the improved water clarity is good for fishing and stimulates weed growth, which is good for habitat restoration and island preservation.

Mikrut teaches his clients to respond to how the fish are changing in their environment, sort of a “fish psychology”: how they’re affected by the weather, air pressure, spawning and more. He says this isn’t hard stuff, but it takes focus and dedication, a dedication three young people I met seem to have in abundance.

Nieyah Mallory and brothers Zillon and Ronan Magiera-Kmiecik fish the French Island-Onalaska spillway nearly every day in summer, riding out on their bikes with fishing poles waving, their own version of a Norman Rockwell-esque scene. Thirteen-year-old Zillon is already catching onto fish habits through the power of observation and teaching his younger brother. His voice came alive as he talked about lures and line and the effects of weather and time of day. Nieyah, 11, often fishes with his grandfather as well, completing the passage of knowledge from generation to generation through an ages-old tradition.

Life On the River

My first impression descending the hill to the Chut’s Landing dock was of mosquitoes (self-preservation tends to trump all other senses), but a close second was of the instant quiet. Road sounds were muffled by the hill and dense trees, bringing the flap of wings, bump of boats and occasional fish-splash to my ears.

Bob Heilman, a local welder only 70 hours away from retirement at the time of our chat, has physically lived on the river for 28 years in a cozy houseboat he built himself named Sweet Dream. He lives there year-round, heating his small space—only about 10 to 12 paces long—with wood or LP in the winter. “My folks never had anything to do with the river. I guess I just had a bad case of the river since I was little. I don’t know what got into me.”

He said the river has changed quite a bit in 28 years: fewer muskrats and more pelicans, fewer pontoons and more fishing boats, higher water levels, more extreme weather.

As thunder rolled in the background and a weather warning buzzed on the radio, Heilman mentioned his tough little boat made it through two EF2 tornadoes: one in 1980 and the one that trundled down Green Bay Street in 2011.

Traveling with a houseboat even short distances is an all-day event thanks to lock time. Pair that with the rising cost of fuel and he pretty much sticks to the area these days. "It helps to be able to fix your own stuff. It really gets expensive otherwise." Like Dykman, Heilman seems to have fallen into his boat welding side business, mainly through word-of-mouth from other boaters. "When you start up a welding machine in a marina, they come runnin'!"

When asked what he'd say to someone who thinks there's nothing to do in La Crosse, Heilman looks incredulous. "That's the thing most people don't get. They travel away, but here we got all this public hunting, the river, state land. Highway 35 is one of the top 20 scenic highways in the country. We live in a damn paradise here! People should use it!"

Life Around the River

Not a water person? Landlubbers, never fear. The land around the river boasts some of the best hiking, biking, motorcycling, driving, birding, photography and hunting in the state—some would say the country.

The Wisconsin section of the Great River Road (state highway 35) covers 250 miles and 33 river towns from Prescott to Kieler, with La Crosse smack in the middle. Two- and four-wheeled vehicles flock to the constantly changing scenery along the River Road, from spring flood to barge traffic to fall color reflections to ice fishing shanty towns.

As the continent's largest migratory flyway, birders say bald eagles are so plentiful on the river that it's more exciting when they see other birds—they kid, of course. Who could help staring open-mouthed at a bald eagle swooping down to snatch up a fish no matter how many you've seen?

And for those who simply want to enjoy a good happy hour with a good view, Huck Finn's on the Water, the Waterfront and Pettibone Resort all have comfortable river-view patios and delicious food.

You're thinking, *Why are you telling me all this? I live here, for crying out loud.* Why? Because it's easy to get in a rut when we live in a place so long, and sometimes we all need a little push to remember why we love it here.

No matter the method of enjoying the river, everyone emphasized the same thing: *Pay attention.* Pick up your litter. Notice the seasonal changes. There's no need to travel to other bodies of water; we have an amazing resource for natural beauty, fun and food right here at our fingertips. Let's take care of it and fall in love all over again.