

ISSUE ONE : FALL 2015
OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING THE MISSISSIPPI



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<http://openrivers.umn.edu>
An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking the Mississippi
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy

FROM WASHINGTON BY 33 261 LOOKING UP STREAM

The cover image is of spring flooding at the Bohemian Flats in 1897. Image Courtesy of the Hennepin County Library.

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FEATURE

KNOWING THE MISSISSIPPI

By Mona M. Smith, Mark Muller, Mark Gorman,
Patrick Hamilton, Richard M. Mizelle, Jr.

We asked a diverse group of river people to respond to the prompt “How did you come to know the Mississippi River? What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?” We present below a few of the responses, in no particular order.



*New Orleans: Mississippi River and Crescent City Connection. Photographer Wally Gobetz.
Image used under Creative Commons License CC BY-NC-ND.*

Mona M. Smith

Media Artist/Producer/Director, Allies: media/art

How did you come to know the Mississippi River?

My childhood was spent in Red Wing, Minnesota, a small historic city on the Mississippi—Dakota homeland. My first memory of the river was visiting my Auntie Helen and family across the river from Red Wing. Their house was on Island Road. The river relentlessly flowed on three sides of the house. It was spring. A flood had raised the river beyond its banks. I don't remember how we got into the house but I have a memory of climbing out the back steps and into a fishing

boat. We, I don't remember who (I was maybe 4 or 5 years old), rowed to the shack next door and climbed out of the boat and into the shack. A boat was being made in the big room of the house. My future adoptive father and his friend owned the shack.

The river rising was an accepted part of life in Red Wing; there was no panic, only a feeling of season.

To you, what does it mean to know the Mississippi?

To know this river takes time and silence. Knowing the river is to know family, to recognize

the connection between the water in me and the water of the river.

Mark Muller

Mississippi River Program Director, The McKnight Foundation

How did you come to know the Mississippi River?

What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?

The Mississippi River is a constant reminder of life's cycles and evolution; today it is not the same river that it was last week or last year. I do not know the Mississippi River, but only small stretches of the river during discrete times. And that same stretch of river can convey dramatically different emotions to different people—the promise of fish to an angler, the lure of solitude to the introvert, the exhaustion of practice to the crew team member, the potential for danger to anyone during a storm.

The numerous and often conflicting natures of the Mississippi River inevitably lead one to a sense of humility about knowing the river. And for me, the limits to our knowledge about the river provide insight into spirituality. There is much to life that we can't know, and like river management, efforts to harness and constrain life's ebbs and flows often lead to more frustration than growth.

Like so many others, I first came to know the river as the backdrop for Huck Finn's adventures. I then came to know the river as a case study

for an environmental engineering graduate student. It wasn't until my twenties that I had the opportunity to physically know the river as a place to swim, fish, and boat. Now that I have been a Minneapolis resident for 19 years and at least visually encounter the river on a daily basis, it gives a sense of comfort. And it is a report card

on our progress toward sustainability. And a reminder of Minneapolis's intertwined history and wealth generated, social disparities exacerbated, and peoples displaced along the river. And an avenue for the natural and spiritual world to meander into my modern, urban life.

Mark Gorman

Policy Analyst, Northeast-Midwest Institute, Washington, DC

How did you come to know the Mississippi River?

As an ecologist, one would think that I would be well-practiced in how best to know my home (since that is what the word "ecology" literally means). And that may be true, but the fact remains that the Mississippi River valley has never truly been a place that I called home and began to know in the traditional sense of the word. Most of my life was lived far from the river's edge.

These days, I sit in Washington, DC most days, looking out from my vertical, digital, Beltway-branded world on to a largely horizontal, analog, Mississippi River landscape. Though I constantly find myself translating concepts, thoughts, and notions between those two distinct realms, I rarely see, touch, taste, breathe, or swim in the latter.

What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?

The closest I've come to knowing the river is exploring for 25 years or so many of the upper Allegheny River basin's waters that eventually fed the Mississippi. Perhaps, in that sense, I came to know the unformed Mississippi River prenatally—before it ever came to be. Taking my cue from

Hebrew scripture, maybe I came to know the Mississippi River—and it became acquainted with me—better than had we lived side-by-side all of these years: "Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (Psalm 139).

Patrick Hamilton

**Director, Global Change Initiatives, Science Learning Division,
Science Museum of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN**

How did you come to know the Mississippi River?

What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?

I arrived in Minneapolis in fall 1980 for graduate training in geography at the University of

Minnesota. Since the geography department was and still is located on the West Bank campus, I

searched for housing close by since I didn't have a car and so needed to rely on city buses, my bike, or my feet to get to and from campus. I found a 300-square-foot apartment appended to the back of a house in the nearby Phillips neighborhood; it was just big enough for me, my bike, a card table, two chairs, my boyhood bed and desk, and a menagerie of mice and squirrels.

Living in the inner city of Minneapolis was quite a departure from my previous residence in a spacious boardinghouse in leafy east Duluth with easy walking access to streams, forests, and the stunning, rugged shoreline of Lake Superior. As a child of the woods and lakes of west-central Minnesota, I soon felt the tensions of NDD (nature deficit disorder). Fortunately, I discovered

the Mississippi River gorge. Although the intensity of graduate school and the crowded central city lay just beyond the top of the bluff, the banks of the Mississippi River in many localities offered settings where the sights and sounds of human activity were relievedly few.

I spent many hours exploring the river banks and bluffs, attempting to be a photographer but achieving much more success finding fossils left behind by a very ancient sea. Although tightly hemmed in by the surrounding city, the Mississippi down below was a liquid, flowing reminder that a world of woods and wetlands, lakes and sloughs still existed, if one just followed the river in one's mind out of the city and north into the countryside.

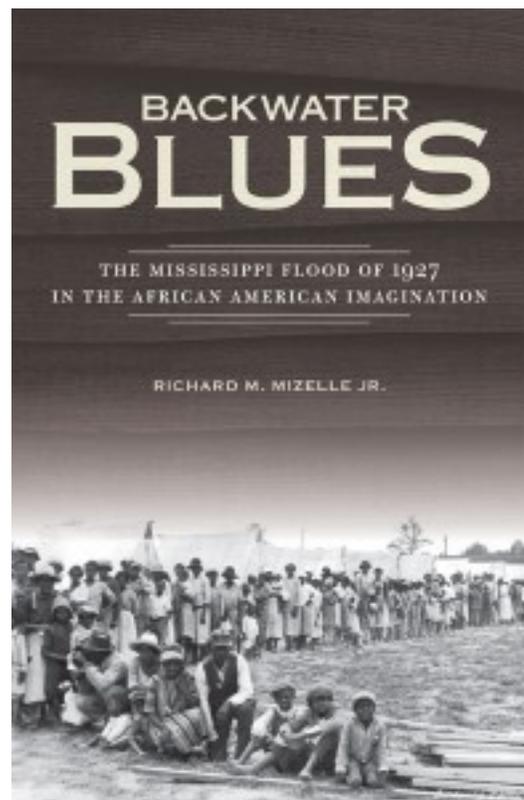
Richard M. Mizelle, Jr.

Associate Professor of History, University of Houston

How did you come to know the Mississippi River?

What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?

My first engagement with the Mississippi River was aboard a steamboat in New Orleans almost a year to the day before Hurricane Katrina. Like many people, I recall thinking that all the reading in the world cannot prepare you for experiencing the Mississippi River for the very first time. It was breathtaking, and seemed more like looking out into an ocean than a river. In the years after this first experience, I would think critically about all that the Mississippi River provided to people living along its banks, including food, sustenance, commerce, and for African Americans in particular, a potential escape route during slavery and the Jim Crow South via steamboats and the shadowy margins of the river. The river was also



Author of Backwater Blues The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination

temperamental, however, taking away as much as it provided, particularly when humans began constructing mountains of levees in an attempt at flood control by the late nineteenth century. Knowing the Mississippi River is about the richness of people, not monetarily, but of spirit and strength. Others will speak importantly about the complexity of the Mississippi River's ecological and hydraulic make-up among the world's rivers. The blues sound, born and conceptualized on the banks of the Mississippi River, also helps us understand the complexity of people. In particular, the movement of people, ideas, and music up and down the river helped spread the life stories of Mississippi River people all over the world and exposed people living in

the Mississippi Delta to the world. What does it mean to know the Mississippi River? My answer knows the resiliency of African American people who endured harsh treatment in Red Cross relief camps during the spring of 1927 without protection from the federal government or local officials. It is also about knowing the intelligence and fortitude that blues musicians from the Delta took with them while engaging with record companies in Los Angeles, Chicago, Memphis, and New York. The Mississippi is a mighty river that produced mighty people. My research is about movement, space, and relationships of power, and though I may not always talk explicitly about the Mississippi River it will always inform the ways in which I think about people.

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About the Authors

Mona Smith is a Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota multimedia artist, educator, owner of Allies:media/art, and artist lead for the Healing Place Collaborative. She is creator of the Bdote Memory Map (in partnership with the Minnesota Humanities Center), Cloudy Waters: Dakota Reflections on the River (exhibited at the Minnesota History Center and elsewhere), and other multimedia installations.

Mark Muller is director of the Mississippi River program at The McKnight Foundation. The program focuses on improving the water quality and resiliency of the Mississippi River. Prior to joining McKnight as a program officer, Mark worked at the nonprofit Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, taught high school science in New York City, volunteered for over a year in Honduras and Guatemala, and worked as an environmental engineer.

Mark Gorman is a policy analyst with the Northeast-Midwest Institute, focusing on water resource issues in the Mississippi River Basin. Prior to joining the Institute in 2009, he directed the Northwest Office of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council, working with partners in the upper Ohio River and Great Lakes basins to promote the sustainable use of built and natural landscapes, particularly by focusing on links between the environment, the economy and quality of life.

Patrick Hamilton is Director of Global Change Initiatives at the Science Museum of Minnesota, where he develops projects that investigate the challenges and opportunities of humanity as the dominant agent of global change. Away from the museum, Patrick and his wife J. like to kayak and grow organic, blue-ribbon-winning pears, peaches, and plums in St. Paul.

Richard M. Mizelle, Jr. is an associate professor of history at the University of Houston and author of *Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014) and co-editor of *Resilience and Opportunity: Lessons from the U.S. Gulf Coast after Katrina and Rita* (Brookings Institution Press, 2012). Trained as an historian of medicine, race, environment, and technology, Mizelle pushes the boundaries of these fields through his research and teaching.