

ISSUE 25 : WINTER 2024  
OPEN RIVERS :  
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

# RIVERS & BORDERS



<https://openrivers.umn.edu>

An interdisciplinary journal of public scholarship rethinking water, place & community  
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

ISSN 2471-190X

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*Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community* is produced by the [University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing Services](https://www.libraries.umn.edu/) and the [University of Minnesota Institute for Advanced Study](https://www.umn.edu/advanced-study/).

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ISSN 2471-190X

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# CONTENTS

## Introduction

Introduction to Issue 25 | Rivers & Borders  
By Laurie Moberg, Editor ..... 4

## Features (Peer Review)

Socio-Ecological System of Flooding in Bucksport, South Carolina  
By Geoffrey Habron and John Roper ..... 7

A Fluid Border: The River Tamar and Constructed Difference in Travel Writing of Cornwall  
By Tim Hannigan ..... 31

The Backbone of America: A New River with the Same Ol' Bones  
By Michael O. Johnston ..... 46

Not a Border, But a Path: Swimming Across the Rio Grande  
By Melinda J. Menzer ..... 58

## Geographies

When the Border is a River: A Journey Along the Salween River-Border  
By Zali Fung and Vanessa Lamb ..... 76

## In Review

*The Great Displacement: Climate Change and the Next American Migration* by Jake Bittle  
By Julia Oschwald Tilton ..... 87

## Perspectives

A Small but Ultimate Presence  
By Isaac Esposto ..... 94

## Primary Sources

How much is the world's most productive river worth?  
By Stefan Lovgren ..... 107

## Teaching and Practice

Creative Connections with Rivers: A Toolkit for Learning and Collaboration,  
Stephanie Januchowski-Hartley, Ioanna (Daphne) Giannoulatou, and Merryn Thomas ..... 115

FEATURE (PEER REVIEW)

# THE BACKBONE OF AMERICA: A NEW RIVER WITH THE SAME OL' BONES

By Michael O. Johnston

*Editor's note: This feature article has been peer reviewed.*

The Mississippi River, among many names, is known as “The Backbone of America,” and has played a major role in shaping the lives of the Indigenous people, European colonizers, and others throughout the rest of the nation and the world. The river flows approximately 2,340 miles beginning at its source at Lake Itasca in

Clearwater County, Minnesota through the center of the continental United States to 100 miles downstream of New Orleans, Louisiana in the Gulf of Mexico. Its tributaries (e.g., the Arkansas River, the Illinois River, the Missouri River, the Ohio River, and the Red River) reach from east and west across much of the United States of



*The Quad Cities in 2013 taken from an airplane as it took off from Quad City International Airport. In the foreground is Milan, Illinois, Rock Island, Illinois is in the center and Davenport, Iowa is in the back. Image by Farragutful via Wikimedia. (CC BY-SA 3.0 DEED)*

America. Prior to the emergence of trains in the late nineteenth century, the Mississippi River served as a major thoroughway to transport cargo and passengers destined for both domestic

destinations and for larger ships where captains would continue their voyage out to ocean and into ports located in other parts of the world.

## The Quad Cities of Iowa and Illinois: Bettendorf, Davenport, Moline, and Rock Island

The Quad Cities region in southeastern Iowa and northwestern Illinois began as a place where the confluence of rivers attracted Indigenous peoples who settled along the waterways and riverbanks for thousands of years. The Sauk and Fox Tribes of the Meskwaki Nation settled in the Quad Cities region of the Mississippi River and used it as their principal trading place (Meskwaki Nation, n.d.). Europeans later came to the region and saw it as an ideal place for boat travel and settlement. By World War I, the towns of Davenport, Rock Island, and Moline had begun to style

themselves as tri-cities. During the 1930s, the term “Quad Cities” came into vogue when Rock Island County began to see population growth that spread across the river to Bettendorf, Iowa. Between 1946 and 1951 the National Basketball Association had a franchise in Moline that was known as the “Tri-Cities Blackhawks.” The concept of tri-cities, however, never caught on and the region is still known as The Quad Cities today.

The residents of the Quad Cities saw the Mississippi River as a promising source to



*This map shows the Quad Cities and their relationships to each other. Image via Wikimedia.*

generate water-based power and as a place for transportation during the Industrial Revolution. In 1848, John Deere moved his plow business to Moline, Illinois. The business was incorporated in 1868 as Deere and Company (“John Deere,” 2024). The Quad Cities served as an attractive place for entrepreneurs like Deere and continues to appeal to many as a place for ongoing development.

During the postindustrial era, leisure and recreation became the dominant market for the Upper Mississippi River. This interest has led to a new vision for the Quad Cities’ region of the Mississippi River with a focus on tourism, a vision that appeals to the residents. This article explores two tourist attractions in the form of

interstate festivals: the Great River Tug Festival and Floatzilla. Offering a brief overview of industrial history of the river through the Quad Cities region, this article then focuses on how these interstate festivals were created and used to revitalize the economies of four cities along the Upper Mississippi River. The Great River Tug Festival is an annual event with a friendly competition of tug-of-war between LeClaire, Iowa and Port Byron, Illinois. Floatzilla is an annual canoeing and kayaking event where people use blueways (marked water trails) to cross the Upper Mississippi River at Davenport, Iowa and Rock Island, Illinois. These two festivals are also ways to unite people from both Iowa and Illinois in a positive activity.

## The Upper Mississippi River: More Than an Agricultural Freeway

During the 1800s, steamboats were particularly crucial for cities and towns along the Upper Mississippi River that were experiencing growth in both economy and population. Steamboats were used to transport people from the East Coast and immigrants from abroad who were often fleeing famine, political unrest, or other challenges. During the 1830s, the first regional cooperative tourist package was established, combining steamboats with trains, which allowed tourists to see historical sites by both water and rail (Tweet, 1975). By 1854, tourists could take to the rails from the East Coast to Rock Island, Illinois. The Grand Excursion was a rail and steamboat trip from Chicago to St. Paul (Roseman and Roseman 2004). The first leg of the trip traveled by rail from Chicago to Rock Island. The second leg of the trip was traveled by steamboat with passengers going north to Saint Paul, Minnesota Territory to complete the Grand Excursion.

The increase in tourism resulted in the modification of the social and physical development of cities and towns along the river (Gilbert and Hancock, 2006). The tourists who purchased

tickets for the spacious upper deck of steamboats began to outnumber the immigrants who were packed in the lower deck. The Mississippi River cruises included luxurious packages for parties and organizations, dances, and a venue for New Orleans jazz music. These cruises served as a major source of revenue for the boat companies and the local businesses in the cities where they made port. Most of the steamboats that traveled the Mississippi River have since been decommissioned and some of them have been placed in museums where they are now attractions that people pay to see.

The early 1900s were a bleak time for the Upper Mississippi River as a transportation route, and it had to become more than just a throughway to transport agricultural goods. Business remained uncertain as navigation interests pushed for better shipping lanes while the conservationists warned that the river was dying, its ecosystem nearing collapse (Anfinson, 2003). Trains also started to gain popularity as a means of transportation across the Upper Mississippi River. The 1920s and 1930s saw less than 10 percent of produce from the grain industry (e.g.,

wheat, corn, and soybeans) shipped along the Mississippi River. During the 1930s, the US Army Corps of Engineers attempted to revitalize the Upper Mississippi River as a means of transportation by developing a lock and dam system.

The 1940s saw a decidedly different Mississippi River due to the lock and dam system that had been created only a decade earlier. The physical and ecological character of the Upper Mississippi River was no longer that of a natural river; it was at the mercy of the people who controlled it. During this time, 2.4 million tons of goods were transported on the river; lumber mills were being

replaced with flour and grain mills and machine sheds and the river regained some of its prestige as a transportation corridor for produce. Other industries like pearl-button factories, fishing, ice production, and quarrying also expanded along the river. Steamboats no longer monopolized the Upper Mississippi River; instead, it became a place where people could see barges and towboats on the water. By 1958, the grain industry made up 14 percent of the annual commerce shipped on the Upper Mississippi River (Anfinson, 2003). The river as a transportation corridor started to slowly gain traction.

## The Rise of the Road and a Transitioning River

In 1966, the Interstate 80 bridge was completed, which made it easier for people to cross the Mississippi River at LeClaire, Iowa and Rapid City, Illinois by automobile in a fraction of the time that it once took ferrymen to pole their crafts across the river. The expansion of the interstate system also meant that goods could be manufactured and shipped more efficiently and moving products by interstate took less time than it did to transport goods by rail and water. Agricultural goods were no longer primarily shipped along the river, and this devastated the economies and populations of small towns dependent on that traffic along the river. The townspeople instead increasingly relied on the romantic images of having been company towns where the Upper Mississippi River was a working river; tourists could see old mills and shop at local boutiques in the towns' business districts.

In 1970, the grain industry hit its peak with a total of 54 million tons of grain shipped on the Upper Mississippi River. Between 1986 and 1995 that amount of grain declined by 42.9 million tons annually (Anfinson, 2003). During this same time, the Upper Mississippi River had an

average of 9.8 million tons of coal, 9.2 million tons of petroleum, 7.2 million tons of nonmetallic minerals, 3.8 million tons of metals, and 3.8 million tons of agricultural chemicals transported by barge (Anfinson, 2003). The primary crops that are transported along the Upper Mississippi River today are corn and soybeans, though in numbers far below the historic peak.

Economic conditions during the late 1970s caused major industrial restrictions and they disrupted the basis of the region's economy. There were major companies, including agricultural manufacturers, that were forced to cease or scale back operations in the Quad Cities region, leading to the closure of International Harvester (Navistar) in Rock Island and Case IH in Bettendorf. The Moline-based John Deere plant also cut its labor force by half. During the 1980s, Caterpillar Inc. closed their factories at Mount Joy and Bettendorf, Iowa. Since the 1990s, the Quad Cities' governments, businesses, nonprofits, and residents have worked together to redevelop the region. They came together to embrace the idea of becoming a place of culture, heritage, and tourism.

## Re-Emergence of Tourism

During the 1980s, the farm crisis resulted in this region, and the river at its center, being abandoned, beaten, and broken. The cities and towns along the Mississippi River needed help if townspeople wanted the river to remain a vital part of their heritage and identity. They were forced to respond by finding a new economy or risk becoming ghost towns. The Interstate Highway System had transformed large tracts of farmland and reshaped community waterfronts. Towns that were once separated by water were now connected by highways. The economy of the Upper Mississippi River, like the towns along its banks, also changed with the times. Some of the towns along the river turned toward the Mississippi and created recreational and leisure activities on their waterfront.

The 1990s saw a second emergence of leisure, mass consumption, and identity politics. During the late 1990s, some towns along the Upper Mississippi River saw an opportunity to rebrand

themselves by using heritage tourism as a centerpiece. The consumption of experiential and material culture became a way for people to shape their individual identities. The cities along the river were forced to detach themselves “from the visual and aural mores and norms of the industrial era when smokestacks, rail yards, refuse heaps, factory drainage, and open sewers were ‘naturalized’ as part of the working landscape” (Moline and Mahaffey, 2004, p. 208). A Mississippi River that was once lined with steamboat traffic during industrial times became a space used for recreational activities, and today the riverbanks are lined with boutiques where tourists go to buy products associated with the identity of the city in which they are sold. Places are created and recreated through the activities and experiences that consumers purchase. During the postindustrial era, public places along the river focus on the visual, the aesthetic, and the experiences that people have (Moline and Mahaffey, 2004).

## The River as a Border That Separates and Brings Together

The purpose of the Upper Mississippi River is continually constructed and reconstructed by the people who use it and is contested as a space known by many different constituents and used for many different things. These uses include the Upper Mississippi River as a natural barrier and political border that divides two states, creating a distinct political divide, an economic environment, and a cultural environment. Though the river has a complicated way of separating people, it is still the “Backbone of America” that has a vast and storied past that brings people together. The stories that residents and visitors share about the river are often contested, conflicted, and traumatic. Yet the river is inextricably a part of the stories that people share about their communities.

During the 1990s, there were several blocks of abandoned warehouses in the Quad Cities region that were converted to multi-use buildings and preserved for the use of museums, restaurants, and retail establishments. The warehouses were once industrial buildings located along the river to do work and transport goods and were places where recreational activities on the river would have been considered a hazard to people’s safety and thus forbidden. The abandoned warehouses were converted for new activities that attracted crowds of people, both residents and tourists. This redevelopment also created livelier downtowns in the Quad Cities region and helped them draw new residents. Both LeClaire and Port Byron used the river, its banks, and the historical buildings as part of their strategy to rebrand as



places for heritage tourism. During the summer months the banks of the river come alive as people hike, walk, and bicycle on the trails, fish along the riverbank, and enjoy the river itself in canoes, kayaks, boats, and jet skis.

## A Small-Town Tug-of-War

In 1987, Scott VerBeckmon of Port Byron, Illinois brought the idea of having a festival with a game of tug-of-war back to Port Byron after witnessing a similar event in a different place while he was on vacation. Officials in both Port Byron and LeClaire, Iowa across the river endorsed the idea of having a single day in which people have a tug-of-war across the Mississippi River and the Great River Tug Festival was born. Both towns now have their own festival surrounding the tug-of-war and each have designed a website for their festival.

*See the video Tug Fest on YouTube.*

The towns of LeClaire and Port Byron would no longer thrive without the positive memories and experiences they make for their communities and each other. The Great River Tug Festival is an event that furnishes attendees with a sense of community and connection to other people and helps residents and visitors become familiarized with the history and backdrop of LeClaire and Port Byron. Experiences of place socialize people to feel both part of a local community and the larger society.

Since the first Great River Tug Festival in 1987, the event has been held in these two communities every year. The Great River Tug Festival involves the use of a 2,700-foot-long rope that weighs 750 pounds and spans all the way across the river. This event is one of few that require the United States Coast Guard to shut down the river to commercial traffic for three consecutive hours. The tug-of-war now serves as a dynamic festival

The river towns now have celebrations and festivals, including Floatzilla and The Great River Tug Festival, where the townspeople share a common sense of emotional connection with each other and the Mississippi River that is filled with great affection, familiarity, and human warmth.

that is a vital piece of the culture and economy for both LeClaire and Port Byron.

*See the video TUG FEST - Tug of War across the Mississippi River.*

With 11 teams on each side of the river, the scene of Great River Tug Festival is reminiscent of a synchronized dance routine performed in tug pits located on the gritty, hard, and sandy banks of the Upper Mississippi River. Athletes must use a combination of strength, stamina, technique, and timing to negotiate their way through a grueling three-minute matchup. This activity is viewed by participants as an extreme sport and was also once held as an Olympic event (Olympic Games n.d.). Pulling a 750-pound rope against the flow of the Upper Mississippi River can result in serious injury. The teams must work together as a simple failure to stop the rope pull at the same time may result in athletes tumbling to the ground and potentially suffering injury. In one tug-of-war, three men failed to stop at the same time and the action was caught in a photo. This resulted in two men in the sand brushing off their battle wounds and another man hanging over the rope. The results of this incident could have been much worse. Thankfully, no one was sent to the hospital.

The river current has long served as a source of conflict in the festival. Prior to the 2023 Great River Tug Festival, residents of LeClaire proposed the idea that the teams switch sides after each match. The planners on the Port Byron side refused this proposal. A second proposal was made by residents of LeClaire to hold the 2023

Great River Tug Festival completely on dry land. The 2023 Great River Tug Festival was almost canceled due to this impasse, but the representatives of LeClaire and Port Byron eventually agreed upon having the rope lifted above water and hanging across a barge and crane before the start of the pull.

*See the video [Tugfest between Port Byron and LeClaire.](#)*

This conflict and the ensuing cooperation demonstrate the difficulty of organizing and preparing for the festival, which is increasing in size each year and requires staff to work more hours each year to organize. The effort is worth it as the meaning of this festival is embodied in the people who participate. The festival simultaneously serves as an entertaining experience and a message that communicates the core values of the communities of LeClaire and Port Byron (Gotham, 2005; Leal, 2016; Ritzer, 2003). The tourists who visit LeClaire and Port Byron for the festival are not simply onlookers but are active participants in making the event successful and meaningful. The festival provides a safe stage and a receptive audience for people to perform and

## Up a River Without a Paddle

*See the video [Destination Illinois: Floatzilla.](#)*

In 1983, three members of the Junior League in Davenport were tasked by the local government to organize a celebration for the Upper Mississippi River. They organized an event that is known today as Connected Rivers which ultimately led to the creation of [River Action, Incorporated](#). River Action's mission is to

reaffirm their individual and collective identities (Duffy and Waitt, 2011).

The core pursuit of Great River Tug Festival is one of leisure that is centered on meeting a natural test of human strength against gravity and the motion of water. The flow of the Upper Mississippi River and the design of the landscape are continuously changing. The reputation of the river is also continuously being reshaped by the narratives created by people who are invested in it. The role of the athlete is to “try to read, predict, and adapt to [nature] in order to successfully meet a challenge” while spectators watching the event are entertained (Davidson and Stebbins, 2011, p. 6). The talent among athletes who participate in the Great River Tug Festival ranges from newcomers to professional athletes. Those who dabble in tug-of-war at the Great River Tug Festival begin as newcomers who often become enthusiasts wanting to learn more about the game (Stebbins, 2015). The festival is also about the experiences the community members have while in attendance. The identity of community attendees relies on the meanings they produce through their experiences and exchanges with others.

improve the Mississippi River by making a more accessible riverfront, expanding the riverfront recreation trails, protecting endangered habitats, and cleaning up the river. In 2009, River Action held its inaugural floating event, [Floatzilla](#), in the region.

Floatzilla is an annual summertime event that involves paddlers coming together for a full day of

canoeing and kayaking on the Upper Mississippi River. Paddlers come together and launch from one of five sites across the region (mostly on the Iowa side) to paddle across the Mississippi River on one of five assigned blueways. A blueway is a marked route on navigable waterways that provides people access to recreation trails. The Upper Mississippi River blueways were established by paddlers who envisioned paths along the river that they could paddle with infrastructure built for them to launch and dock their boats. The different locations for launching and docking were then mapped along with other relevant details (e.g., portage tips, distances, outfitters, campgrounds, parking areas, and attractions) that canoers and kayakers may

want to know about while paddling the Upper Mississippi River. Celebrating these blueways, Floatzilla culminates with paddlers from several states assembling to create a colorful amoeba-like organism in the middle of Sunset Park's Lake Potter in Rock Island for a picture.

Since Floatzilla requires the United States Coast Guard to close the Upper Mississippi River to commercial barge traffic for three consecutive hours during the festival, the event may be considered a contestation of the river as its identity is being negotiated as either a place of industry, where productivity is key, or as a river used for entertainment, which can be temporarily closed for celebrations. This contestation is captured in



*Paddlers follow various blueways on the Mississippi River near the Quad Cities as part of Floatzilla. During Floatzilla, a stretch of the Upper Mississippi is closed to commercial barge traffic. Image courtesy of River Action. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.*

one critical example. The Coast Guard Auxiliary helps manage the river traffic for the event. Jack Tumbleson, a member of the Coast Guard Auxiliary team that works the Rock Island region of the Mississippi River and a longtime resident of the region, tells a story of a kayaker who

strayed from the channels designated for paddlers and repeatedly cut in front of a large yacht during Floatzilla. Tumbleson shared that this action was dangerous for all parties involved, but also demonstrates how participants sometimes contest the use of the Mississippi River.

## Conclusion

The Upper Mississippi River history as a working river began in the nineteenth century and continues to this day. Over time, however, the meaning and purpose of the river has been shaped and reshaped. Each year the river and the cities along its banks respond to environmental and social

changes, including recently in the 1980s and 1990s when the river communities embraced their changing river by creating celebrations and festivals such as the Great River Tug Festival and Floatzilla.



*To close Floatzilla each year, paddlers gather in an amoeba-like assembly for a photo at Sunset Park's Lake Potter in Rock Island, Illinois. Image courtesy of River Action. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.*

Vital to the vibrancy of the Upper Mississippi River has been the commitment of residents and visitors who live in and frequent communities along the banks of the river. Tourism is increasingly one of the most successful industries on the entire river and tourist organizations along the river have taken the lead on initiatives such as creating bicycle paths, river cleanups, and similar events. The future of the Upper Mississippi River is in the hands of the people and organizations like River Action, Incorporated who serve as stewards for the river as it changes and adapts with the flow of water, industry, and people.



*Rock Island Mayor Mike Thoms welcomes people to Floatzilla in August, 2023. Image courtesy of River Action. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.*

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## Recommended Citation

Johnston, Michael O. 2024. "The Backbone of America: A New River with the Same Ol' Bones." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 25. <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.10980>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.10980>

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