



PRAIRIE RIVERS NETWORK

Forty Years of Service

Always, there have been the rivers, hundreds and thousands of miles of them, a few narrow and swift, more of them broad and slow, all of them rich with life. Look at any map of natural Illinois, a map freed of human changes, and the rivers stand out, winding and curling endlessly and invitingly. They are our native lifelines, our given connectors. For millennia Native Americans lived along them. Early Europeans followed rivers into the region and fanned outward. Few settlements were built far from their banks.

Prairie Rivers Network stands at the front of our state's on-going effort to accord its rivers their due. For four decades we've spoken on behalf of waterways, and thus on behalf of the life they contain and sustain. Forty years of water and words. Forty years of deeds and life. Used well, rivers teem with vigor. Used poorly they take life away, with floods, droughts, and fish kills. The renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold termed it the "oldest task in human history"—the task of inhabiting landscapes in ways that can endure. And so it is, our task in perpetuity.





Committee on Allerton Park founder Bruce Hannon delivering petition opposing Oakley Dam project to Illinois Congressman William Springer.

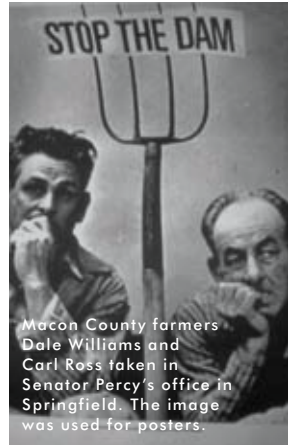


ONE RIVER, ONE DAM

In retrospect, the beginning was ordinary enough, as such beginnings go. There was a campfire one July night in the woods, an agitated woman, a pen and a petition, and an audience that listened. The scene was Allerton Park along the Sangamon, the woman Patricia Hannon, the year 1967.

Hannon's agitation arose because of what she had learned that afternoon, hiking along the river. The Army Corps of Engineers planned to build a reservoir on the Sangamon, flooding the scenic, biologically rich park. Rapidly growing Decatur, it was said, needed more water. Its current reservoir, Lake Decatur, was filling with silt and laced with farm chemicals. The solution obvious to government leaders was to move more dirt and cover up more river, creating another reservoir that would, in time, also fill with silt and pollutants.

Patricia Hannon sensed that something was wrong. So did the 200 people who listened that July night, nodding heads and signing her petition. Another solution would have to be found. Standing with Patricia Hannon was her husband, Bruce, who in a sharp-tongued letter published in the Champaign News-Gazette urged citizens to oppose the dam and speak out to lawmakers. Bruce soon realized, though, that a simple letter exposing the project was not nearly enough to derail it.



Macon County farmers Dale Williams and Carl Ross taken in Senator Percy's office in Springfield. The image was used for posters.



Sept., 1967

Committee on Allerton Park holds its first meeting at the Hannon home in Champaign, organizing to oppose the Oakley Dam project that would flood Allerton Park.

MANY EYES HAD TURNED TO A PATCH OF WOODS AND A HISTORY-LADEN RIVER IN THE MIDDLE OF ILLINOIS.



July, 1969

In an article in *Playboy Magazine*, Justice Douglas designates the Corps of Engineers “public Enemy No. 1” and uses Oakley Dam as a prime example of unneeded and environmentally destructive projects.

> John Marlin, first paid executive director of the Committee on Allerton Park.



May, 1969

Invited by the Committee, U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas leads hike through Allerton Park and speaks out against the dam.

AN ORGANIZATION IS BORN

Working with a fellow engineering graduate student, Bruce Hannon started a petition drive that brought in 20,000 signatures. The drive also identified other citizens who similarly cared about the Park. In September 1967 a group of them met at the Hannon home to form the Committee on Allerton Park, the predecessor of Prairie Rivers Network. Before the Committee could finally declare success years later, its leaders would get their hands dirty in politics, they’d become skilled in handling media, they’d find allies in unlikely places, and they’d learn the power of sound rhetoric.

As the drama unfolded, leaders of the new group drew assistance from local news outlets and gained support from John Gregg Allerton. Corps of Engineers officials were invited to debate local engineers about the project’s merits. Marches were organized; county governments passed resolutions. Among the signatories of a second petition drive was conservationist and Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas. In the spring of 1969 Douglas hiked the park with thousands of other opponents and local and national news media. In

an article in *Playboy Magazine*, Douglas criticized the Corps for its unneeded and environmentally destructive projects, citing Allerton as example. *Field and Stream* listed the proposed dam as one of the nation’s ten most unwanted projects. *Atlantic Monthly*, *Time*, and the *Christian Science Monitor* all carried stories. Many eyes had turned to a patch of woods and a history-laden river in the middle of Illinois.

By the mid-1970s the Allerton project was nearing its end. A federal report questioned its

economic benefits and water quality implications. Sensing defeat, project promoters tried to shift the reservoir to a small, nearby tributary of the Sangamon River, Friends Creek. But that project was no more sensible. It, too, soon disappeared in the face of citizen resistance.

Sept., 1970

Committee on Allerton-backed airplane flies over the Lake Shelbyville dedication, trailing “Dam the Corps” banner.

Spring, 1971



Committee publishes and distributes “Battle for the Sangamon,” outlining the history of the citizen effort to protect the Sangamon River and Allerton Park from the Oakley project.



> H.B. Farmer protesting proposed Corps Red River project in Kentucky.



ADDRESSING ROOT CAUSES

Perhaps the key lesson of the Allerton fight was how bad land-use decisions typically had systemic causes. True progress required activists to find the root causes and confront them. It had become clear, too, that considerable expertise was needed to mount a successful challenge to a construction project that promised economic growth. It was essential to study the project from all angles, to assess the science and engineering, to consider water-supply aspects, and to probe for less damaging alternatives. Few citizens groups possessed expertise of this type.

These insights prompted Committee leaders to reach out to citizens in Illinois and surrounding states to offer help in resisting other unwise reservoirs. University of Illinois student John Marlin, an early activist, incorporated many of the Allerton lessons into an edited volume, *Battle for the Sangamon*, published in 1971. Copies began to circulate widely. Citizens from near and far called for help. Allerton leaders soon made contact with people affected by similar Corps projects throughout the Midwest: a planned reservoir

on the Middle Fork of the Vermilion near Danville, Lincoln Reservoir near Charleston, Big Pine and Lafayette Dams in Indiana, Red River in Kentucky, the Big Darby in Ohio, and others. Many of the projects were linked by seemingly overstated benefits to commercial waterway transportation. Most disturbing was a \$229 million, gravely deficient development plan for Southern Illinois, involving numerous reservoirs and over 1000 miles of river “improvements.”

| Spring, 1972



Land acquisition for Middle Fork Reservoir halted; environmental impact statement required.

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In its effort to address root causes and capitalize upon its expertise, the Committee on Allerton Park broadened its mission and changed its name in early 1973. The new name was Coalition on American Rivers. John Marlin, the first paid executive director, began touring the Midwest, meeting with farmers, conservationists, taxpayers' associations, and others. The water development agencies were simply out of control, he realized. With Marlin in the lead, the Coalition on American Rivers helped citizen groups around the Midwest and offered constituent support to like-minded politicians, aided by hundreds of student volunteers. By the mid-1970s, the message had gotten through to most Americans. Water projects were not always sound. Water agencies were not always reliable. Environmental issues aside, many projects were simply wasteful as well as socially disruptive.

April, 1975



At the request of Illinois Senator Percy, U.S. Comptroller General releases a report that questions the economic benefits and water quality claims for the proposed Oakley Dam.

June, 1975

Lobbied by the Coalition on American Rivers, the Walker administration in Illinois refuses to provide local sponsorship for the Cross-Wabash Valley Barge Canal.



Nov., 1977

Marlin and seven other national conservation leaders meet with President Jimmy Carter at the White House to discuss water policy.

< "Cut the Pork" event held in conjunction with the White House visit.



OTHER OFFENDERS

The experience of the Coalition on American Rivers illustrated the benefits of a professional, well-orchestrated response to environmental challenges. Irate citizens were still needed to speak out about undesirable land uses. Real success, though, also required a sustained approach and the resources of a professional staff, savvy politically and able to maintain an even-keeled effort over the long run.

Successes in halting unwise reservoirs enabled the growing Coalition on American Rivers to turn its attention to other sources of waterway degradation. By the late 1970s the federal Clean Water Act was pushing industrial and municipal polluters to change their ways. Left largely unregulated were pollution flows coming from land-use practices, including run-off from agriculture, urban areas, and landfills.

Work on these pollution sources was a natural fit for the organization given that such work also required special skill in wading through massive technical documents, challenging economic calculations, and seeking out benign alternatives. Under the new, more generic name of Central States Resource Center, the organization

reached out to citizens throughout the Midwest to assist locally led efforts to halt or alter new landfills. Central States provided the technical expertise and offered political guidance, while leaders in the community spoke to the press, gathered signatures, and attended meetings. Staff members aided by technically trained

volunteers analyzed planned landfills and pointed to problems. In just over a decade, Central States assisted citizen groups in 84 communities, mostly rural and poor. In a full 70 percent of the cases, the proposed landfills were stopped.

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| Oct., 1978

In a victory for the Coalition and friends, Congress authorizes a new Lock and Dam 26 with only a single lock and mandates a Mississippi Master Plan Study.



> Central States Director John Thompson discusses a proposed landfill.



THE ORGANIZATION'S MODEL COMMUNITY PROGRAM ASSISTED MORE THAN 300 INDUSTRIES, RETAIL STORES, SCHOOLS, AND AGENCIES IN EARNING RECOGNITION AS MODELS FOR REDUCING WASTE.

As it resisted these pollution sources Central States also looked to reduce waste flows. By then John Marlin had moved on to the Illinois Pollution Control Board. Replacing him was John Thompson, who led a wide-ranging effort to get waste generators to cut

back. Between 1991 and 1996 the organization's Model Community Program assisted more than 300 industries, retail stores, schools, and agencies in earning recognition as models for reducing waste by 20 to 86 percent.

Mar., 1980

Central States publishes "Increased Truck Size and Weight: The Impact on Highways, Safety, and Energy."

Dec., 1981

Congress deauthorizes the Lincoln and Helm Reservoirs and Illinois River Duplicate Locks. President Reagan signs the bill.



Fall, 1989

Central States develops the Model Community program to help make waste reduction the norm in communities across the Midwest. Every "Model" reduces the waste it produces through waste prevention, elimination of toxins, utilization of materials with a recycled content, and recycling.

Dec., 1992

The Illinois Low-Level Radioactive Waste Disposal Facility Siting Commission, chaired by a former Illinois Supreme Court Justice, concludes that the proposed Martinsville site is not the place to dispose of low-level radioactive waste, ending Central States' longest, most time-consuming siting battle.

1995

Darke Co., Ohio, reports a 56 percent reduction of waste that must be landfilled and credits Central States Model Community program with significant contributions to the reduction.



IT SEEMED CLEAR THE ORGANIZATION COULD GROW ONLY IF IT EMBRACED A BROADER, POSITIVE MISSION.

A NEW MISSION

By 1997 the worst polluting landfills had been closed and new ones subjected to stricter pollution limits. Meanwhile other citizen groups were pushing for waste reduction.

As the organization's leaders took stock of success while looking ahead it seemed clear the organization could grow only if it embraced a broader, positive mission, one that went beyond attacking bad projects to offer a positive voice for natural features and ecological values. On the staff at the time was Rob Moore, trained in environmental science. Along with several Board members Moore was particularly enthusiastic about a positive focus directed at rivers and watersheds.

July, 1997

Staff discovers that the Illinois EPA, violating the anti-degradation provisions of federal law, is issuing permits that allow high levels of ammonia to be discharged into some waterways, threatening endangered species.





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Discussions with the national organization River Network soon led to the creation of a rivers program within Central States. By 1998 Moore had become executive director and the decision was made to change the organization's name to Prairie Rivers Network.

Under its new name the organization took on the ambitious task of promoting clean water and ecological health for all Illinois waters. Many polluters were not using the best available control technology. Many of the state's water quality standards were either lax or absent. And little had been done to reduce polluted run-off from agricultural and urban areas. Citizen groups, it seemed clear, could not rely on state government alone to clean up the state's rivers.



Oct., 1998

Prairie Rivers hosts first annual Salt Fork River Cleanup. Participation would grow to more than 200 volunteers within 10 years.

> American Lotus in backwaters of the Mississippi River.

Nov., 1998

Prairie Rivers hosts first annual Donor Dinner Celebration. Attendance and donations would rise markedly in coming years.

A RECORD OF SUCCESS

Looking back, Prairie Rivers Network under Rob Moore's leadership achieved swift and remarkable success in addressing clean water issues and challenging the state's lackluster record in pollution control.

Using sound science and law the organization pressed the state to tighten up countless pollution discharge permits. It identified systematic problems in water quality standards and permitting policies and pressed for state-wide policy changes. A push over several years brought improvements to the state's "effluent modified waters" designation. Loopholes were closed in the state's standards for ammonia discharges. An important success came when Illinois altered its "anti-degradation rules" from one of the most lax in the country to one of the most stringent. That change was particularly critical in improving protections for threatened and endangered aquatic species. Mean-



Spring, 2000

Legislation to protect forested areas along the state's largest rivers passes the General Assembly, culminating

while, the organization assembled information about the state's single-most serious source of water pollution, agriculture. Prairie Rivers published a fact-laden report, *Dirty Waters: Dirty Business*, which exposed the downside of America's agricultural bonanza and the sustained efforts of agribusiness to resist progress on farm-related water degradation. Meanwhile, aided by River Network and the Clean Water Network, PRN published *Permitting Pollution*, a step-by-step guide on how to identify polluters, to analyze discharge permits, and to use the Clean Water Act to protect rivers and lakes.

efforts by Representative Kurt Granberg, Prairie Rivers Network, and others.

April, 2001

Illinois Division of Izaak Walton League of America presents a "Special Conservation Award" to Prairie Rivers in recognition of the group's "tireless efforts to promote conservation by working to restore and protect Illinois streams, rivers and watersheds."



A BROAD BASE OF SUPPORT

Successes continued with the arrival in early 2003 of Jean Flemma as executive director. Flemma assembled an exceptionally talented staff as funding increased and programs expanded. Working closely with the Environmental Law and Policy Center the staff successfully pressed the state to adopt its first-ever limits on phosphorus discharges by municipal sewage facilities.

PRN fought off efforts to weaken existing standards on discharges of dissolved oxygen. The successful conclusion of a multi-party lawsuit brought against Dynegy/Midwest Generation resulted in tougher limits on mercury emissions and the permanent protection of 1100 acres of land along the Middle Fork of the Vermilion River. Meanwhile, the annual Salt Fork River Clean-Up, co-sponsored by PRN, was soon copied elsewhere.

Beginning in the late 1990s more pointed efforts were made to

strengthen the organization. One key move was to forge a valuable alliance with the National Wildlife Federation, then looking for a new state affiliate. In 1998 the organization began holding an annual dinner to honor the year's successes. The dinner quickly grew from 60 attendees to over 300, with a corresponding increase in private donations. The organization's extraordinary level of private giving was not lost on institutional donors. Hearing about the organization second hand, the Lumpkin Family Foundation of

Charleston, Illinois, arrived on the Prairie Rivers' doorstep and offered significant funding, starting a relationship that would flourish under Lumpkin director Bruce Karmazin. Exceptional funding also came from the McKnight Foundation, whose program officer, Gretchen Bonfert, was known to many from her years of environmental work in Springfield. Joining Lumpkin and McKnight have been other valued partners, including the Grand Victoria, Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley, and National Fish and Wildlife Foundations.

THE FRUITS OF VISION

Patricia Hannon was on to something in July of 1967 when she spoke out around the campfire. She knew that the waterways of Illinois could become cleaner, more full of life, and

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**FLEMMASSEMBLED
AN EXCEPTIONALLY
TALENTED STAFF AS
FUNDING INCREASED AND
PROGRAMS EXPANDED.**

—
more valuable, today and tomorrow. Nature is willing to cooperate, whenever engaged citizens are prepared to do their part.

| April, 2007

Illinois finally repeals the improper pollution discharge permit issued to New Lenox for its sewage treatment plant, four years after PRN first complained that the permit violated the Clean Water Act.

SPECIAL THANKS TO THE FOLLOWING FOR MAKING THIS HISTORY POSSIBLE:

Clark Bullard, Kim Erndt, Bruce Hannon, Dixie Jackson, John Marlin, Eric Freyfogle, Cecily Smith, and past and present staff, board members, and supporters who provided reminiscences and photographs.

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