

# PRAIRIE RIVERS NETWORK

In 1967, the proposed Oakley Reservoir on the Sangamon River was the catalyst for creating the organization that would later become Prairie Rivers Network. That year, Bruce and Patricia Hannon and others collected 20,000 signatures in a petition drive to stop the dam that would have put hundreds of acres of Allerton Park underwater. In September of that year, the Committee on Allerton Park held its first meeting at the Hannon home in Champaign, organizing to oppose the dam. Two years later, the Committee invited conservationist



and U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas to the park, and in the spring of 1969 he hiked the park with many dam opponents and local and national news media. *Playboy* Magazine, *Field and Stream*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Time*, and the *Christian Science Monitor* all carried stories about the "Battle for the Sangamon," the grassroots effort that ultimately stopped the dam in 1985.



In 1984, under the leadership of new executive director John Thompson, the Committee on Allerton Park was renamed Central States Education Center (CSEC) to reflect its attention to other sources of waterway degradation, including run-off from agriculture, urban areas, and landfills. CSEC staff provided



technical information and organizing assistance to grassroots groups, most in rural and economically depressed communities, working to prevent the siting of poorly designed landfills and halting the proposed low-level radioactive waste disposal site in Martinsville.

Illinois River

Chicago River



1970s

Realizing that locally focused efforts alone could not stop the Oakley Dam, the Committee formed a sister organization called the Coalition on American Rivers (COAR) to oppose similar Army Corps of Engineers projects throughout the Midwest. As a 501(c)4 organization, COAR was able to lobby in Washington and at the state level. Under the leadership of John Marlin, the first paid executive director, the two organizations united people across political and social boundaries to protect rivers from federal water resources projects. By the end of the decade, the message had gotten through to most Americans: water projects were not always sound and many were simply wasteful.

