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TAKE THREE: RIVERS

Lessons from a Garbled Stream

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In Colorado, where I grew up, rivers cascaded down the continental divide and pushed across the high plains. Rafters shot rapids while beer drinkers sipped from cans that promised a brew derived from pure Rocky Mountain streams. Rivers were thrilling, marketable, and intoxicating.

But it has been a long time since the Kankakee River quickened anyone's pulse. Sandwiched between Indiana and Illinois at the southern tip of Lake Michigan, the river looks like the shriveled corpse of a sunbaked worm on the hydrological map of the United States. A tributary of the Mississippi River, the Kankakee boasts neither a delta nor a port. The Indiana section of the river was straightened in the early twentieth century. Locals unlovingly call it "the big ditch." By almost any measure, the Kankakee does not amount to much, which is why we should pay attention to it.

A forgotten river, the Kankakee conceals the history of a region and its environmental transformation. It is a case study in the hidden costs of control and domination. More famous rivers have endured their share of manhandling, but the levees on the Mississippi or the dams on the Colorado grabbed as much attention as the liquids they pinned. In the heyday of Midwestern drainage between 1890 and 1920, the waters of the Kankakee spurred debates over economic progress and ecological preservation. Ardors cooled, however, as recollections of the old river faded. The Kankakee offers a lesson in the tangled phenomena of wetland destruction and memory loss. It shows what happens when aggressive improvement robs a river of its stories.

The waters of the Kankakee River used to gather west of South Bend, Indiana, and weave through the loose sediment left by Pleistocene glaciers. With an average drop of five inches per mile, the river luxuriated in an eighty-five-mile-wide valley, carving switchbacks, kicking up sand islands, closing oxbows, and pooling in sloughs, ponds, wet prairies, bayous, bogs, swamps, and marshes. By the time it joined the Des Plaines River near Joliet, Illinois, the Kankakee had traveled 250 miles to reach a destination ninety-five miles away. In 1873, Father Joseph A. Stephan, a Catholic priest moonlighting as the chief engineer for the Kankakee Valley Drainage Company, counted 2,000 bends in the upper section of the river between South Bend and the falls above the town of Momence at the Illinois state line.[1] All rivers ramble, but the Kankakee stood out for its "extremely flat character" and "extreme crookedness."[2] It was radically lazy water.

The river used to spill everywhere, generating 768,000 acres of permanent and semi-permanent wetlands brimming with pike, pickerel, ducks, wild rice, bullrushes, raccoons, sycamores, marsh

[1]John L. Campbell, *Report upon the Improvement of the Kankakee River and the Marginal Lands of Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1883), 7.

[2]United States, Congress, House, Committee on Rivers and Harbors, *Kankakee River, Ill. and Ind.* (Washington, DC, 1915), 64th Congress, 1st Session, House Report 931, 17; Campbell, *Report upon the Improvement*, 7.

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sedge, woodpeckers, oaks, wolves, red top grass, deer, maples, and muskrats. Animal furs from the marsh contributed to John Jacob Astor's nineteenth-century fortune, and the meat from Kankakee's ducks, frogs, and passenger pigeons fortified Chicago's growing population. Lew Wallace, the former territorial governor of New Mexico and author of the best-selling 1880 novel *Ben Hur*, vacationed in the swamp on a houseboat. Thousands of visitors recreated along the river in resorts that dotted the wetlands after the Civil War. By 1917, steam dredges had cut through the bends of the river in the Indiana section. The straightened and regraded channel siphoned water from hundreds of side ditches, and the marshes and wet prairies succumbed to progress.

The Kankakee and its many puddles composed a slow, magnificent engine of biodiversity. Observers as distinct as Potawatomi wild rice harvesters, French-Canadian muskrat trappers, and Anglo recreational duck hunters were stunned by the amount and the variety of life the slow river and its wetlands supported. If nothing else, the Kankakee's exuberance captured attentions and stamped memories. For a brief period after the Civil War, the Kankakee surfaced in the national press as a hunting paradise. Located conveniently near Chicago, outdoor authors could ride a train to a small town near the river and hire a guide to pole them into the marshes. A subgenre of books and articles appeared touting the beauty and fecundity of the marshes.[3] Alas, good publicity afforded no defense against reformers preaching a gospel of advancement. Reclamation imprisoned the river and dried up the wetlands. A fascinating and vivacious place turned into a monotonous and forgettable one.

Before the dredges and drains disciplined the waters of the Kankakee, sheets pooled over thousands of acres of low-slung earth. Water depths fluctuated with the seasons and with the undulations in the jetstream that produced alternating decades of high or low rainfall. Prairie and marsh grasses thrived in flat places while oak groves topped the sand islands piled up by the wind. Ever-changing flows and states of water animated a shifting mosaic of plant and animal life. The Kankakee's instability showed in the language Americans used to describe it.

In the early 1830s, American land surveyors invaded the valley. They came loaded with equipment: axes, shovels, telescopes, compasses, theodolites, and Gunter's chains. They should have packed a thesaurus. The Kankakee tested their water vocabulary. When the river strayed, the term "river" could no longer contain it, and the Kankakee spilled into dozens of toponyms. It became a swamp, a slough, a morass, a bog, a bayou, a marsh, a pond, a quag, a puddle, a pool, a pond, and a lake. Winter challenged definitions further. One surveyor, marching near the river in January of 1834, twisted his brain to describe the scene: "the greater part of what lies northwest of the river, though it was frozen when we were there, is a lake of stagnant water mostly deep, and the part of it [the lake] called river, for truly all is such."[4] A lake could be a river, and a river could be land: "Land nearly all river," announced another surveyor in his notes.[5]

Fluidity and murk defined the waters of the Kankakee, and the situation did not clarify as American settlement wore on. In 1916, Albert Andrews, a journalist and fish hatchery manager from Syracuse, Indiana, toured the Kankakee marshes at the same time as steam dredges channelized the river. After disembarking from the train and walking to a hotel perched on a sand hill surrounded on three sides by the river, Andrews contemplated the paradoxes of the Kankakee. "It is a most reckless stream," he wrote. "Deep and shallow, narrow and wide, swift without riffles, monotonous and interesting."[6] The owner of the hotel built the structure during a flood, and when the river "settled down from one of its overflows," the waterfront shifted from

[3]For instance, see Earl Howell Reed, *Tales of a Vanishing River* (New York, 1920); James Maurice Thompson, "An Archer on the Kankakee," *Atlantic Monthly* 85 (June 1900): 764–73; and Paul Tardel, "On the Kankakee Duck Marshes," *Forest and Stream* 54 (Apr. 1900): 266–7.

[4]Jeremy Smith, Deputy Surveyor, "General Remarks," Field Note for Public Land Survey Township Plats, 1789–1946, Record Group 49: Records of the Bureau of Land Management, 1685–2006, E-21, 76.

[5]Field Notes for Public Land Survey Township Plats, 1789–1946, Record Group 49: Records of the Bureau of Land Management, 1685–2006, E-20, 218–9.

[6]Albert E. Andrews, "A Park for Bill," *Outing* 68 (Apr.–Sep. 1916): 56.

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north to south. He accommodated the river's fickleness by moving the front porch to the back and turning the kitchen into a parlor.[7]

Andrews found the Kankakee's unpredictability charming, but the advocates of "progressive agriculture" pushed to maximize boredom.[8] The champions of wetland transformation included prosperous local farmers, absentee swampland speculators, lawyers, judges, and state politicians. They dug ditches, straightened streams, and installed drainage tiles under their fields to keep flood waters away from their crops. The drain tiles pinned flows underground, drying out the soil and lessening the difficulty of choosing the right words to suit the landscape. What was once vigorously sodden became predictably stolid. Drained and dredged, the Kankakee surrendered to the Corn Belt sometime in the 1920s. The Kankakee Valley and the American Midwest were made monotonous by farmers reacting to fluctuations in weather patterns, commodity prices, and real estate valuations. They dug trenches and installed tiles to manage the flow of water and wring as much predictability as they could out of the rambunctious flatland.

At its peak between 1890 and 1920, the drainage movement transfixed Midwesterners. They produced glossy pamphlets and gave speeches in hotel ballrooms to the attendees of clay-worker conventions and quarterly meetings of drain tile associations. They touted the science of underdrainage and crowed that "[in 1904] no one thing over which man has control has done so much for agriculture in the States of Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, and Iowa in the past twenty years as has tile drainage."[9] None of the tile enthusiasts anticipated a void on the other side of progress. However, as Roger Marsden, the Department of Agriculture's Special Agent for Drainage, noted in 1920, it was the nature of an improvement that operated beneath the surface without further expense or attention to be forgotten.[10] The farmlands in the Midwest were passed down through inheritance or were passed around in real estate deals. Each transaction distanced memories from the moment when ditchers, dredges, and tile machines altered the wetlands.

Over the twentieth century, drainage systems freed farmers from obsessing about water. At the same time, the economics of scale and mechanization freed most farmers from farming, cutting rural populations and disrupting communal memories. Decades passed, and fewer people knew what transpired in places like the Kankakee Valley. Residents worked to preserve the improvements previous generations made. Progress went from aggressive transformation to dutiful maintenance.

In their rush to reach progress, the advocates of reclamation dismissed the time moving in the waters they sought to banish. Far from frozen landscapes awaiting progress to kick them into action, wetlands kept their own time, creating dynamic habitats that engaged humans and other species. Ducks, flag grass, and people had to account for the wetlands' seasonal flows in order to navigate them and exploit their resources. Time as much as geography or precipitation defined the two major habitats in the Kankakee watershed: the wet marshes and the wet prairies. Water stood in wet marshes all the time whereas, in wet prairies, it stood only some of the time. The timing of the inundations determined where plant and animal species dispersed. The boundary separating wet marshes from wet prairies shifted seasonally and over longer swings in precipitation. Sometimes water filled wet prairies for years, altering their composition in favor of more water-tolerant species. Sometimes, the water retreated, drying spaces out and giving the tall grasses a place to thrive. The timing of advances and retreats brought dynamism to the marshes and prairies. This increased the variety of species in them. Far from chaos, the water clocks established a tempo for a diverse biota. The animals and plants that dipped their toes and tendrils in wet marshes and wet prairies paid attention to water and time as if their lives

[7]Ibid.

[8]For instance, see National Drain Tile, "Drain Tile," Sales Pamphlet, undated, Chicago.

[9]J. W. W. Billingsley, "Land Drainage," *The Clay-Worker* 43, no. 3 (Mar. 1905): 422.

[10]Roger D. Marsden, U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Irrigation and Drainage" *1920 Census of Agriculture* 7 (Washington, D.C., 1922): 350.

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depended on remembering and responding. Sometimes they did, and that is how wetlands and their inhabitants wove their existences into one another. These uncertain interactions provoked stories filled with frustration and ire—but also wonder and surprise. People never knew what they would find in the Kankakee. That is why they hated and loved it so much.

Rivers sift words nearly as well as they organize sediment. They rank among nature's best writing prompts. Rivers have beginnings and ends; they propel action and reveal surprises; they twist and bend, fall over cliffs, and hit snags. It is little wonder that artists have cast their work upon them. Rivers formed plots and built characters with such proficiency that it is easy to overestimate their coherence. Not every river told a lucid story, and paying attention to garbled streams opens new vistas on alternative histories, ones that center the messiness of waterways instead of their print-readiness. Americans found the chaos displayed by the Kankakee River hard to accept, and they deployed the power of their narratives and their state to force revisions. The Kankakee could not fight the dredges, but it stymied easy descriptions of progress or decline. Eliminating its many bends resulted in neither the arrival at a promised land nor a journey into a heart of darkness. Instead, we are confronted with silenced water, a chastened and reformed river that tells stories no one wants to hear but to which everyone should listen.

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