



Open Channels

Upon Their Shoulders

by Charles Camillo
Historian
Mississippi Valley Division

The military engineers of the Commission have taken upon their shoulders the job of making the Mississippi over again—a job transcended in size by only the original job of creating it.

—Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*

On a warm summer day in August 1879, seven men, each appointed by President Rutherford B. Hayes and confirmed by the U.S. Senate, gathered in Washington, D.C., to pour over surveys, examinations, and reports representing the best available hydraulic data on the Mississippi River.

Six of the men were prominent civil engineers, the seventh a lawyer, constitutional scholar, and future American President. Of the engineers, three graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point, the nation's preeminent engineering institution; two others from Harvard, the oldest and most prestigious university in the country.

The remaining engineer was undoubtedly the most accomplished of all—a self-educated man, but one of international repute and the designer and builder of the boldest and most innovative bridge to span the Mississippi River—a man who opened the mouth of that river to oceangoing vessels despite the opposition of a powerful and widely respected expert



The MRC onboard the Steamer Mississippi in 1939 included (l-r): Brig. Gen. Harley B. Ferguson, MRC President, Rear Admiral Leo O. Colbert, Albert L. Culbertson, Edward Flad, Col. Roger G. Powell, and Harry N. Pharr.

on hydraulic engineering, the Chief of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

These seven men represented the original members of the Mississippi River Commission, an executive body established by Congress on June 28, 1879. Upon their shoulders rested the task of remaking the Mississippi River into a dependable commercial artery to support a young and developing industrial nation, while protecting adjacent lands from overflow for what was still a largely agrarian-based society.

The job at hand was enormous—so enormous that no less an authority on the Mississippi River than Mark Twain believed the task was “transcended in size by only the original job of creating” the river.

One hundred twenty-five years later, the Mississippi River Commission has for the most part realized its ambitious assignment through the implementation of a comprehensive river management program.

Developed in the wake of the great Mississippi River Flood of 1927, this program, called the Mississippi River and Tributaries Project (MR&T), employs a variety of river engineering techniques, including an extensive levee system for containing high water, floodways for removing excess flows away from the main channel to the Gulf of Mexico, and riverbank protection and channel stabilization to facilitate navigation.

(see Shoulders, next page)



-Shoulders-

Since its initiation, the MR&T program has brought an unprecedented degree of flood protection to the lower Mississippi Valley while facilitating navigation and promoting commerce on the nation's most vital commercial artery. Waterborne commerce on the Mississippi River increased from 30 million tons in 1940 to nearly 500 million tons today, and the project's flood-control features have prevented nearly \$300 billion in flood damages, placing the MR&T Project among the most successful and cost-efficient public works projects in American history.

But success did not come easy. Throughout its early years, the Mississippi River Commission struggled to develop and implement a workable strategy for improving the navigability of the notoriously unruly Mississippi River while effectively controlling its floodwaters.

The history of the Mississippi River Commission through the advent of the modern MR&T Project in 1941, therefore, is best understood as an evolutionary process shaped by myriad social, economic, political, and engineering considerations.

Following several decades of political squabbles, engineering disputes, and regional bickering going back to the mid-nineteenth century, Congress recognized the importance of harmonizing river improvements through a central organization and, assisted by the efforts of a coalition of flood-control and navigational interests, established the Mississippi River Commission in 1879. In addition to its responsibilities for overseeing the

improvement of the Mississippi River, the newly established Commission gave Mississippi Valley interests—vested stakeholders in contemporary lexicon—a greater voice in shaping federal policy. In fact, it can be argued that the practice of addressing issues and concerns through the formal hearing process, so critical in the federal government's civil works mission today, began in the Mississippi Valley with the creation of the MRC.



Clearly, the establishment of the MRC represented only the next logical step in the process of improving the Mississippi River, and the following five decades marked an era of experimentation. Relying heavily on input from local partners and comparative information available on the upper Mississippi, the Missouri, the Danube, and other prominent European rivers, the MRC developed a general plan of improvement with its first annual report in 1880.

Implementing the plan proved to be more difficult. Cost considerations forced the Mississippi River Commission to abandon revetment as a bank stabilization method in 1886, just as technical advances were finally providing effective bank protection.

Additionally, constitutional concerns regarding the federalization of flood control stagnated the full development of a meaningful flood-control program by leading to legislation restricting the implementation of the Commission's policy. When the restrictions were finally lifted in 1890, the Mississippi River Commission, with the support of understandably impatient lower valley interests, retreated into the controversial position that an adequate levee system, void of costly adjuncts, could protect the valley from inundation. The First Flood Control Act of 1917 facilitated the final implementation of a doomed levees-only program.

Ten years later, the great Mississippi River flood of 1927 forced a wholesale reappraisal of the MRC's levee policy and galvanized legislative, engineering, and popular support for a comprehensive river improvement plan buttressed by large appropriations.

The ensuing 1928 Flood Control Act did not, however, signify the modern culmination of navigation and flood-control improvements on the Mississippi River, though the legislation did represent the most important milestone in the process.

Despite appropriations exceeding a then staggering \$300 million over 10 years, the Jadwin Plan quickly proved inadequate to the needs of the valley, both for engineering and non-engineering reasons.

(see Shoulders, next page)



-Shoulders-

Through face-to-face interaction with the Corps of Engineers, lower valley interests and elected officials, the Mississippi River Commission played a leading role in modifying the Jadwin Plan and fostering the development of a truly comprehensive project that included levees, bank revetment, cut-offs, outlets, and reservoirs. By 1941, the MR&T Project reflected a little of Charles Ellet and Andrew Humphreys, of James Eads and Cyrus Comstock, of John Freeman and John Ockerson, and of Edgar Jadwin and Harley Ferguson, while balancing the

often conflicting interests of the entire Mississippi Valley.

Wish to learn more? This summer look for *Upon Their Shoulders: A History of the Mississippi River Commission, Volume I: The Advent of the Modern Mississippi River and Tributaries Project*.

It is the story of the maturation of a young nation struggling to find its identity amid the internal contradictions

so consistent in a governmental system of checks and balances; the story of progress, fleeting at times, successful at others; the story of profound enlightenment and misguided entrenchment; and the story of culpability and redemption. Above all else, it is the story of a dynamic and scientific commission, established to serve as the voice of Mississippi Valley interests, but hampered by the reality that it could not base its policies on science alone.

Mississippi River Commission schedules “High-Water” Inspection Trip

The Mississippi River Commission (MRC) will conduct its annual “high-water” inspection trip on the Mississippi River, April 19-23, 2004.

Four public meetings have been scheduled aboard the Motor Vessel MISSISSIPPI in selected towns along the river so MRC members have the opportunity to meet with local residents and hear their concerns, ideas and issues during this 367th session of the MRC.

All meetings are open to the public. Local interests are invited to present their views and suggestions on matters affecting the water resources infrastructure needs in the valley, including flood control and the Mississippi River and Tributaries Project, environmental issues, recreation and navigation.

The President of the Commission will present a summary of national and regional issues affecting the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Commission programs and projects on the Mississippi River and its tributaries.



Motor Vessel MISSISSIPPI V

District Commanders will present an overview of current Mississippi River and Tributaries project issues in the respective district area.

Local organizations and members of the public will have an opportunity to make presentations or offer views or comments on any issue affecting programs or projects of the Commission and the Corps as noted above.

The MRC is composed of seven members, each nominated by the President of the United States and confirmed by the Senate. Three of the organization’s members are officers of the Corps of Engineers; one member is from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; and three members are civilians, two of whom are civil engineers.

(see Inspection, next page)



-Inspection-

Current members of the MRC include:

- ◆ Brig. Gen. Don T. Riley, President of the MRC and Commander of the Mississippi Valley Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Vicksburg, Miss.
- ◆ Brig. Gen. Steve Hawkins, Great Lakes and Ohio River Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Cincinnati, Ohio
- ◆ Brig. Gen. William T. Grisoli, Northwestern Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Portland, Ore.
- ◆ Rear Admiral Nick Prahl, Director, Marine Operations Center, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Norfolk, Va.
- ◆ Honorable Sam E. Angel, Lake Village, Ark.
- ◆ Honorable R.D. James, New Madrid, Mo.
- ◆ Honorable Clifford Smith, Houma, La.

General duties of the Commission include recommendation of policy and work programs, the study of and reporting upon the necessity for modifications or additions to the flood control and navigation project, recommendation upon any matters authorized by law, and making semi-annual inspection trips. The duties of the Commission, as established in 1879, included the entire length of the Mississippi River from its headwaters at Lake Itasca, Minn., to Head of Passes, La., where the Mississippi River empties into the Gulf of Mexico.

Since authorization of the extensive MR&T Project on the lower river, the primary focus of the Commission has been the alluvial valley of the Mississippi River from Cape Girardeau, Mo., to the Gulf of Mexico. The Commission inspects the lower river and holds public hearings twice each year, once in the spring

during high water, and in late summer or early fall during low water.

The purpose of the public meetings is to maintain a dialogue and encourage an exchange of viewpoints and ideas flowing between the public and the Corps. Presentations by the public are made orally, but a copy of the remarks should be presented to the Commission for the official record.

The public hearing process is unique to the Mississippi River Commission and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The benefits of hearing first hand the issues and concerns through the public hearing process are invaluable to the Commission and the Corps. Also, the interaction with congressional, federal and state interests, local boards and non-government organizations and the public is crucial to the decision making process of the Commission.



Notice of the Meetings of the Mississippi River Commission

Public meetings will be held by the Mississippi River Commission on board the Motor Vessel MISSISSIPPI as follows:

April 19th 9:00 a.m. Caruthersville, MO (City Front)	April 20th 9:00 a.m. Helena, AR (Helena Harbor Boat Ramp)	April 21st 10:00 a.m. Natchez, MS (Fulton Street Landing)	April 23rd 9:00 a.m. New Orleans, LA (Corps of Engineers' Dock at foot of Prytania Street)
---	--	--	---



Mississippi River Partnering Conference
“The Greatest Living and Working Watershed”
and

Mississippi River Commission
125th Anniversary Celebration

June 28-29, 2004

Memphis, TN

Hosted by the
U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS
Mississippi Valley Division



**US Army Corps
of Engineers**

OBJECTIVES

Build Effective Partnerships



Develop Common Guidelines for a Living, Working Watershed

Understanding USACE Transformation

MAJOR ACTIVITIES

**Congressional Speakers, Panel Discussions, Interactive Sessions,
Mississippi River Commission 125th Anniversary Dinner, Social Activities and more.**

MARK YOUR CALENDARS

Details about this conference and registration material will be mailed in early April 2004.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- ✓ The historic **Peabody Hotel (149 Union Ave, Memphis, TN)** has blocked rooms for the nights of June 27 and 28 at the rate of \$119 per night plus tax. Reservations can be made after March 15 by calling 1-800-Peabody or local (901) 529-4000. Rooms are blocked under the Corps of Engineers.
- ✓ See our Web site (www.mvd.usace.army.mil) for more information on the conference.

Questions

Call Karen Buehler at (601) 634-7729 or Esther Banks at (601) 634-5823.