“Life along the Mississippi” – *Time* Magazine  
*by Nancy Gibbs*

The Pulse of America/Life Along the River

Let us take you on a trip down America's great river, where we explore the troubles and triumphs of people trying to catch up with the new economy and all that goes with it, from charter schools to dotcom ventures. In a region once bogged down by history, the rising tempo of change is sparking dramatic stories of conflict and opportunity.

Unless you are driving across it or flying over it or floating down it, it is hard to see the actual Mississippi. Anyone who had anything to do with the river discovered long ago that it was too powerful to leave alone, this huge continental drainpipe, and so the great engineers engineered the levees and locks and dams that reduced the number of ships that sank and towns that vanished--but also had the effect of hiding the river behind its walls and leaving the rest to the imagination.

As luck would have it, since the great American writer wrote the great American novel about the river and where it goes and what it means, imagination may be the best guide for exploring it. Otherwise you need both a boat and a car, maybe a canoe and a bicycle too for the skinny inlets and alleys along the way, and a lot of time and patience. We could at best splash in it a little, to see what it felt like, and what we might learn--and unlearn--by stopping along the way. It was worth remembering Huck Finn's lesson: the river is the sanctuary; the shore is where you get into trouble.

This may be especially true in an election year, for all of us who have listened already to months of debate over how to help good schools and fix bad ones, and nurse the new economy, and save Social Security, and wondered whether, if we went out and talked to a bunch of voters, they would be concerned about the same things the candidates are talking about. In a country where travelers lament that every town looks the same--Where's Taco Bell? Where's Home Depot?--it's easy to assume that no region is really distinct anymore. We're all online now, and even in Baton Rouge, La., the local doyenne observes, the kids don't say y'all anymore. They say, "you guys," just like on TV.

Heading South
So we were surprised, everywhere we went. The more you explore the communities along the river, the farther south you travel down into the Mississippi Delta, the more apparent it becomes that this is still a land unto itself, defined by its colorful, bloody past and wrestling with a different experience of this present explosion of progress and prosperity. It is a land apart even from the region that cradles the early stretches of the river itself, the Midwestern states of Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa, which reinvented themselves three times in a half-century, moving from agriculture to industry to high technology. Wisconsin went from making milk to making Harley Davidsons to becoming headquarters for General Electric Medical Systems, the multibillion-dollar diagnostic imaging-equipment company.

But farther south is where the country's two wars were fought: the Civil War and, a century later, the battle for civil rights. "Of course the war is not over," says our 87-year-old guide in Vicksburg, Miss. Now there is a quieter conflict raging, not on the broad political stage but in the particulars of individual lives. Along the river, people hear about the new economy, but they don't have a ticket to get there. Information superhighway? Progress here is a back road, winding, scenic and personal, but slow by the standards of a country in a hurry into the future.

Thus everyone wants to talk about education, but many say the big problem is not more money or vouchers or class size; rather it is lazy or indifferent or overworked parents who can't meet with a teacher or help with homework. Progress on race comes in the most intimate gestures: Last December, as Elnora Littleton in Rosedale, Miss., tells it, she became the first black woman in those parts ever to preach at a white man's funeral. In this part of the country, she says, it is a milestone worth noting. "I made history," she says.

By New Orleans, the river bed is 170 ft. below sea level--which means the water down there has no reason to go anywhere. But the water on top does, which creates a tumbling, cascading effect that is hell on levees, and yet another in the laundry list of reasons New Orleans is slouching toward Venice, and the environmentalists and engineers are trying to figure out how to keep the city from submerging, if the termites don't finish it off first.

A Terrible Beauty
In the South, the river is the color of cafe au lait (coffee with milk). Down toward the mouth of the Mississippi, the land was formed of sedimentary deposits from farther upriver, rich topsoil blown from the hills of Wyoming into the Missouri,
acres of Kansas prairie swallowed by flooding and swept downstream. Mark Twain's characters claimed that a man who drank the water could grow corn in his stomach. You know all this, and yet you are unprepared for the Delta, otherworldly and flat, the best place to grow cotton on this earth, once a hellish jungle, cleared by the backbreaking labor of slaves and sharecroppers. It's a wet western Kansas, a beautiful, flat, fertile window box.

The difference, of course, is that when faced with the shrinking labor needs of modern farming, the good people of western Kansas simply moved away in search of better lives elsewhere. While this happened in the Delta as well, a large number chose to stay in one of the poorest regions in the U.S. The average family of four here has an income of $16,538, slightly more than half the national average. In Mississippi County, Ark., 35% of kids live in poverty, and 40% of adults don't have a high school diploma.

If the new economy has not yet flowed downstream, there are lots of people who will tell you no one is even looking for it here. Whether or not a town stays afloat has a lot to do with whether the local factory is still open--the fate of the town rests in the hands of Continental Concrete, Sparta Printing, the Mississippi Lime Co., Tower Rock Quarry, Ralston Purina, Pillsbury and AnheuserBusch. When one of these leaves, and the farms start to fail, an entire town can shrivel and die. Laid-off workers lose their livelihood. Retired workers lose their health insurance. "Benefits can be more important than pay," says a mayor. The biggest industry left in downstate Illinois is prisons.

**Town and Out?**

We were left asking the same question all these towns face as the ground shifts beneath their feet: What's it going to be? Change? Or die? Is there maybe another choice? The towns individually try to reinvent themselves, and the region as a whole tries to reinvent itself, in a great American tradition that just seems harder here. As you move farther south, many towns don't have the roads or infrastructure to recruit some big new car plant or distribution center. The idea of luring a nice little software company is years away. Ask Ingram Barge Co.'s assistant vice president for operations Steve Crowley whether he feels threatened by the roar of the information age, and he says, "You're not gonna get away from manufacturing. You can't eat information. You gotta make something." New technology in this case means using selective breeding to invent a better catfish, with a bigger body and a smaller head so less goes to waste.
Suppose you have lost your brickyard, and the tugs no longer stop at your town, and the interstate has drawn the megastores, and even the schools and churches move away, and the young people leave, and Main Street is on life support. The Chamber of Commerce gets together and daydreams: What would it take to bring life back to this town? Or do we just roll up the streets and move on?

In Natchez, Miss., the mayor lost a runoff election last month because he supports bringing in more tourists, while his opponent wants to attract more manufacturing plants, which tend to pay better wages. Just about every town has, or has had a fight about, gambling: Do you let the riverboats come, bearing tax revenues and tourists and crime and addiction? For those who believe in tourism as the answer to all prayers, the riverboats have not quite delivered. Tax revenues did rise, and a few cities, such as suburban Kenner outside New Orleans, saw big gains for public works. The tourist money, though, never rolled in: many gamblers are regulars from the surrounding area, and visiting high rollers tend to spend their money on the boats and get out. Local officials realize that. "Gamblers are not tourists," says the mayor of Grafton, Ill. Tunica County, Miss., now the third largest gambling municipality in the U.S., has not seen its sharecropper shacks disappear. Most of the workers come from Memphis, an hour north, and go home after work. The casino company makes most of the money.

The boats themselves aren't even real, a sort of bad joke on the scolds who didn't want sin tying up on their shores. Let them float out on the water, the reasoning went; don't actually build them here on the land, all those moral contaminants and temptations. But the river defied that idea--it was not really navigable for big paddleboats, and the Coast Guard agreed. So the rule that the boats had to cruise was dropped, and now they are just as anchored as any landlocked Las Vegas outfit. Most of the boats aren't even required to have engines anymore.

There are towns, of course, that would give anything to attract the boats other towns are swatting away. "We've tried to get a riverboat casino," recalls Jay Manus of the First National Bank of Cairo, Ill., "but it's a very political thing." Cairo had been a big gaming town a century ago, when it was a major trading crossroads, full of bars and brawls and whores and sharks. Eventually, says Manus, "the morality improved, but the economy declined."

So the fight plays out again and again: If we can't find some big new employer to bring the new economy to town, how about reverting to the old economy--the really old one, polished and pasteurized, in which Main Street is a theme park of
19th century life, with women wearing petticoats and shops selling candlesticks and lemon drops? Kimmswick, Mo., was almost dead after the lumberyard and the brickyard closed—until 7up heiress Luci Anna Ross began buying up collapsing buildings and renting them out as gift shops and bed-and-breakfasts. Now there is the Kimmswick Korner gift shop and lots of places to buy apple butter or have your horse reshod. The annual apple-butter festival gets 40,000 people. More than 100,000 come to Hannibal, Mo., for Tom Sawyer Days on the Fourth of July weekend. Disney even sent a representative to Hannibal to learn how to re-create Tom Sawyer for its theme parks. It is as though memory is the only virgin land left in America, and every town along the river is ready to light out for the territory. Having developed everyplace else, Americans are homesteading the past.

**Inventing History/Prettifying the Past**

But because it's for tourists, and you don't argue in front of the guests, it's an airbrushed souvenir postcard. You see little Toms and Beckys running all over the place, but no Jims. In Nauvoo, Ill., the Mormons celebrate their 19th century village life as they rebuild the town and its temple as a pilgrimage spot—but gloss over the bloody religious battles that led to their being pillaged and expelled in the first place. The hotel owner in Kimmswick says the town's latest scheme is re-enactments of the Civil War battle there. Was there ever really a Battle of Kimmswick? He concedes that it was, in his words, "just a skirmish that involved three Confederate soldiers hiding in a cave." Whatever.

This sort of thing is what social critics denounce as the Disneyfication of America, strip-mining history to market a version of the past that seems to have a special appeal as we race headlong into the future. This is not re-creating the past, they say, so much as distorting it: back when life in these towns was real, it wasn't always quaint—yet quaint is what sells now. Create a time that feels sweet and simple, and you don't have to smell the horses or die of cholera. That all sounds like an academic argument when you're standing in the middle of downtown Cairo.

**Cairo's “Main” Dilemma**

If you want to visit the most unusual theme park in America, try this Main Street. It is a water slide of desolation, one abandoned building after another, a law office where the books rot on collapsing shelves. Last year the building inspector did a complete inventory of the town's structures—and condemned 108 buildings. With 90% of the storefronts dark and boarded over, it seems like a sick joke when
one spots the Cairo Chamber of Commerce office. A bronze plaque set in rock in front of the library commemorates a visit by Bill and Hillary Clinton and Al Gore in August '96 as part of a bus tour. Clinton spoke to "more than 6,000" people, which would be at least 1,000 more than the town's current population.

If Cairo is a ghost town, it was the fight for justice that killed it. "It used to be called Little Chicago," says Deputy Mayor Judson Childs, walking a couple of visitors to the town center, where civil rights battles flared in the '60s. Little League baseball was ended to avoid integration, and in 1964 town authorities closed the new public pool rather than have blacks and whites swimming together. Blacks boycotted discriminating stores; whites retaliated with violence; federal authorities intervened. But something went horribly wrong. Most whites chose to shut down their stores and leave Cairo rather than integrate. Paducah, Ky., became the new center of shipping for the area. The hospital closed its doors.

And the streets of Cairo became empty. Now if you want gas, you have to get it before 8 at night. To shop or go to a movie means driving 30 or 40 miles into Kentucky or Missouri. The only black-owned business is a barbershop. A black woman in her late 20s, who just moved to Cairo a few years ago, sadly remarks, "This town is trapped in the past."

Maybe it was natural to try to market it, turn the 1872 customhouse into a museum, get a big grant to repave the center of town with cobblestones and fake streetcar lines, peddle the old glory days of the big river town and hope no one asks how it died. There is lots of history here, all fascinating but not pretty. So some residents aren't sure that the buses will ever come rolling in or the hotels ever reopen. "You ask the average person on the street what Cairo needs," says Mayor James Wilson, "and they'll say a McDonald's and a Wal-Mart."

**Home of the Blues**

"It's time for us to be movin' on," sings blues musician Keb'Mo', even as he preserves the art form that most perfectly captures the agony of the past and the promise of making something lasting out of the pain. The Delta town of Clarksdale, Miss., is trying to find its way by re-engineering its cash crop: the blues, with a new museum honoring such hometown heroes as Charley Patton, Son House, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker. The history of the music is the story of the people who invented it and the suffering that created it. Without black work gangs to clear the thickly wooded Delta plain and
sharecroppers to pick the cotton, there would have been no plantation economy; without African Americans to sing the work songs and field chants and slide their knife blades and bottlenecks across the strings of diddley bows and mail-order guitars, there would be no Delta blues. And without the blues, there would be no rock 'n' roll to conquer the world and help sell all those burgers and jeans and Fords and Chevys. The poorest, most oppressed people in America created its richest cultural legacy, and that, of course, yields all kinds of lessons for anyone willing to listen closely.

"Are you going to find anything good to write about?" people ask again and again, as though they are aware of how things must look to a bunch of outsiders and know that much of what is great and sweet and honorable in these places never makes headlines. The Cairo deputy fire chief will tell you how many people appear in an instant, out of nowhere, when a windstorm sweeps through town and smashes a block of homes. Anyplace you have good friends is a place worth staying. Here and elsewhere, there are big groups of people--ministers and teachers and store owners and bureaucrats--who are prepared to give all their time and muscle to putting things right, making a place better. To the outsider, it would seem so much easier just to pick up and move on. Trying to stay, and to change, is an act of faith.
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Reading/Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe the main idea of the article, “Life Along the Mississippi”?

2. If you were to summarize the article, what points do you think are essential or important to include?

3. Why don’t the people along the Mississippi have a “ticket” to get to the new economy?

4. What does it mean that Americans are “homesteading the past”?

5. What fight for justice killed Cairo, Illinois?

6. Why did the fight kill the town?

7. Why do some critics liken this part of the country’s recreation of the past to strip-mining?

8. Why do you think this article about a current situation is included in this unit about late 19th-century literature?