

HARD WORK AND THE RIGHT PEOPLE: The Making of a Refuge

The Great Flood of 1993 that inundated the Midwest was one of the worst in U.S. history, covering 30,000 square miles and causing an estimated \$15 billion in damage. More than 1,000 levees failed, leaving 15 million acres of cropland under water. But there was a silver lining.

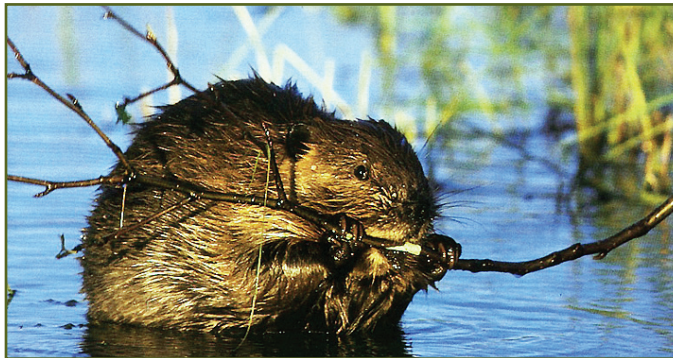


Photo: ALC

Outside the refuge building.

In the wake of the disaster, landowners near Chester, Illinois sold their flood-prone properties to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, creating the first pieces of what would eventually become the Middle Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge. How did a few scattered parcels of land become a new refuge?

“Originally all we had were fractured, isolated, public lands,” explains ALC Mississippi River Program director, Jenny Frazier. “The refuge staff was housed eighty miles away and was disconnected from the area. You just can’t create a good community resource under those circumstances. We needed to put meat on the bones.”



The refuge provides wetlands, bottomland forest and aquatic habitat for many mammals.

Beginning in 2000, that’s exactly what ALC did, first helping to pass authorization for the new refuge in Congress, and then completing a string of acquisitions that significantly increased the refuge footprint. ALC then channeled land sale proceeds back into the refuge which paid for the design and construction of a new, on-site headquarters building.

“If ALC weren’t involved, we would still be managed by one person sitting in a cubicle over in Carbondale,” explains Robert Cail, Refuge Director. “After ALC came on the scene the refuge doubled in size,

reaching half of our congressionally-approved acres in less than eight years and gaining a physical location to work from. That’s impressive. It just goes to show that with hard work and the right people things can come together.”

While the refuge is still evolving, Cail sees significant potential. “Currently, regional school kids go to St. Louis for science field trips. With more resources we

could have nature camps here, or create an outdoor lab linked to curriculum. There’s so much we can do.”

Cail also sees tremendous opportunity for nearby Chester to attract new visitors, while offering current tourists more reasons to stay in town. “We want to benefit local communities first

— Jackson, Chester, Perryville — and we can reach new people with birding or other outdoor opportunities.”

“This refuge can be a big part of Chester’s identity,” says Frazier. Cail agrees. “ALC’s vision for the refuge blends with ours,” he says, “it’s a vision that goes beyond just buying land. It considers the economic value of the refuge too.”

The raging waters of 1993 have subsided, but a force of nature is still very much at work in the region in the form of one highly motivated director. “I don’t want to make a splash,” explains Cail, speaking of the future of the refuge, “I want to make a typhoon.”

Beaver photo: David Westphalen/Painet Inc.