

Mississippi Delta: River Town Revitalization



Photo by ALC

Helena, Arkansas is a historic river town that typifies the lower Mississippi River Delta. Mark Twain said it best in *Life on the Mississippi*: “Helena occupies one of the prettiest situations on the River.” Located in northeastern Arkansas, Helena is known for its rich legacy of blues music, historic homes, and as the hometown of U.S. Senator Blanche Lincoln.

Helena’s history goes back centuries. Explorer Hernando DeSoto crossed the Mississippi near Helena in 1541 and observed a flourishing Native American civilization. During the Civil War, Confederates attacked the Union garrison at Helena hoping to lift siege of Vicksburg and break General Grant’s grip on the Mighty Mississippi. The Rebel attack failed and Vicksburg surrendered the next day.

During the “Roaring 20’s” and into the Depression, Helena emerged as a bustling river town of 15,000 people, boasting cafes, saloons and billiard halls with blues music in the air. During and following World War II, the region saw a major wave of migration

out of Helena and the Arkansas Delta to northern industrial cities. The trend towards mechanized agriculture reduced job availability in the area.

The economic situation continued largely unimproved for decades. In 1999, the median income for the predominantly African American community was \$18,000 in 1999 – less than half the median income for the United States as a whole. The town population dropped to just over 6,000 as working age residents left in search of employment elsewhere.

Today, the combined city of Helena-West Helena is striving to revitalize the community by promoting its rich heritage. With the city’s exceptional cultural and natural assets, attracting tourism is an important component of its economic development strategy. Once the home of blues legends Memphis Slim and Roosevelt Sykes, Helena hosts the Arkansas Blues and Heritage Festival (formerly known as the King Biscuit Blues Festival), an event held every year that draws an estimated crowd of 100,000 people from all over the world. It is also home to the Delta Cultural Center, a museum dedicated to the history of the Arkansas Delta. The downtown area’s historic Cherry Street is under restoration.

Despite the close presence of the Mississippi River, it remains an unexploited tourism resource. As with most towns along the Lower Mississippi, Helena is protected from the river by a large flood wall. If you look over the levee wall, you’ll see the beckoning woodlands and sandbars of the river’s floodplain and nearby Buck Island, but for most residents and visitors the river is hidden in plain sight.

The Mississippi River is a nationally renowned attraction that resonates with every child, young and old, that grew up reading Mark Twain’s unforgettable tales of adventure of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn.

By reintegrating the river and its many recreation opportunities back into the fabric of life in Helena, the town will appeal to the growing number of visitors seeking an authentic cultural experience and the chance to play outdoors – a winning combination.

Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation

Two grants awarded for wetlands conservation

Thanks to two generous grants from the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation (ICECF), ALC is conserving 374 acres of floodplain wetlands along the Mississippi River.

The first grant of \$400,860 enabled ALC to acquire a 231-acre property for the Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge in Southernmost Illinois in December 2006. The conservation of this property, known locally as Ice Grain, will connect a 30-mile publicly owned forested corridor along the Cache River to its confluence with the Mississippi River.

Known for its striking beauty and ancient cypress and tupelo swamps, the Cache River wetlands ecosystem is one of only 22 wetlands in the United States to be designated as internationally significant by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. ALC partnered with Shawnee Resource Conservation and Development to complete this important project.

A second grant of \$242,312, through Southwestern Illinois Resources Conservation and Development (SWI RC&D), supports the third phase of land acquisition on Rockwood Island, an island and side-channel complex that will become part of the Middle Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge. This grant will fund the conservation of 143 acres that are essential to the successful restoration of wetlands habitat at the center of the 2,506-acre project area.

ICECF has provided repeated and generous support for land acquisition on Rockwood Island. This joint project of ALC, Ducks Unlimited, SWI RC&D, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conserves floodplain forest while enhancing the Mississippi Flyway, migration corridor for 40 percent of North America’s waterfowl.

Based in Chicago, the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation is an independent, non-profit, grant-making institution that invests in clean energy development and land preservation efforts, working with communities and citizens to improve environmental quality in Illinois. To learn more, visit their website at www.icecf.org.



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