

SOUTHEAST MISSOURIAN

Conservation officials tour Mississippi River island near Cape Girardeau sold to state of Missouri

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Bill Cavins, of Sturgis, Ky., was the former owner of Windy Bar, an island on the Mississippi River. Windy Bar is now owned by the Missouri Department of Conservation. (ELIZABETH DODD ~ edodd@semissourian.com)

It is five miles long, half a mile wide and didn't exist before 1930.

Today, Windy Bar Island, five miles upstream from Cape Girardeau on the Mississippi River, is Missouri's newest conservation area. With a surface that has driftwood tangled among cottonwood, sycamore and willow trees, it is home to beavers, deer, wild turkeys and bald eagles. Waterfowl find refuge in its coves, and fish seek shelter in the Schenimann Chute that separates Windy Bar from the Missouri shore.

Once owned by Westvaco, the paper maker with a plant near Wyckliffe, Ky., the 705-acre island was acquired in 2005 by American Land Conservancy, an environmental group that targets land providing quality wildlife habitat. In June, the property was turned over to the Missouri

Department of Conservation, which paid about \$580,000 to reimburse the conservancy for its investment. The money was a combination of a federal grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state funds.

On Wednesday, representatives of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the conservation department, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the American Land Conservancy and others dedicated the new conservation area with a trip upstream from the Cape Girardeau riverfront. On the way, the audience heard history lessons, personal stories about Windy Bar and discussions of ways to improve the island as habitat and hunting grounds.

Part of the conservancy's Middle Mississippi River Project, Windy Bar represents the latest step in an effort to restore up to 200,000 acres of habitat adjacent to the river by putting islands and marginal land from willing sellers into public ownership.

Tom Schulte, district office manager for U.S. Sen. Kit Bond, said he remembers his father returning from hunting trips to Windy Bar. Schulte said his father described it as a barren sandbar. Now, he said, the creation of a conservation area on the island represents the success of joint action of public and private agencies.

"It is going to take a greater and greater effort for public and private agencies to work together," Schulte said.

The Middle Mississippi River Project recognizes that the Mississippi River is a highway of commerce, said Tim Richardson, director of government affairs for the land conservancy. The project is intended to bring back a little bit of the wild river.

Before bank stabilization, navigation structures and levees, the river was wild, Richardson said. "That wild, crazy, uncontrolled river was perfect for wildlife, but it was terrible for agriculture and terrible for navigation."

The river's floodplain is littered with the wrecks of steamboats, he noted. "We have channeled the river for flood control, agriculture and navigation," he said. "For very obvious and important reasons, we have to change the river."

The changes in the river, designed to restrict it to a safe navigation channel, eliminated almost all of the islands and side channels. But the placement of wood and rock dikes to direct the river's flow are also responsible for the sediment deposits that built Windy Bar. Aerial photos taken in 1932 show just a shadow of a sandbar behind the dikes, and just a small island across the river.

Three years later the beginnings of an island were visible, and by 1965, the island was almost fully formed, with a few locations where water divides the land. Those locations are now low spots where water flows across the island when water nears flood stage, and in low water they are coves where geese and ducks take refuge during their annual migrations.

That smaller island on the Illinois side also grew, and is now 2,741-acre Devil's Island, owned by the Illinois resource agency and another former Westvaco property.

Schenimann Chute, which runs behind the island, provides an opportunity for the Corps of Engineers to implement ideas for environmental improvement, said Brian Johnson of the St. Louis District office. The corps plans to dredge the lower end, put notches in the dikes and take other steps to make the chute more attractive to fish.

Jenny Frazier, Mississippi River program director for the land conservancy, said Windy Bar was an attractive site because it provides "a wide array of big river habitat in one location."

During his turn at the microphone, Dr. Frank Nickell of the Southeast Missouri State University Center for Regional History said Windy Bar can offer a glimpse into the past. The islands and the landings scattered along the river provide connections to the history of one of the most important features of the American landscape, he said.

"It is a place where our history can be told every day and in every way," Nickell said.

Windy Bar is open for hunters, trappers, anglers and outdoor enthusiasts of all kinds, said Bob Gillespie, manger of the conservation area. Standard hunting rules, applicable statewide, are in force on the island, he said.

Trapping on the island will require a permit, he said. Anglers must follow special rules governing the Mississippi River when they are fishing, he said.

The island is accessible only by boat. The conservation department is exploring possibilities for access without a boat, but that is a long-term goal and no firm plans are in place, Gillespie said.

"It gives a different type of hunting environment," Gillespie said. "It is a little harder to get up there by boat to hunt."

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Windy Bar, a 705-acre island in the Mississippi River, was recently turned over to the Missouri Department of Conservation by the American Land Conservancy. (ELIZABETH DODD ~ edodd@semissourian.com)



With Cape Girardeau on the horizon, state and federal officials return from a tour Wednesday to see Windy Bar, an island recently turned over to the Missouri Department of Conservation by the American Land Conservancy. (ELIZABETH DODD ~

Jenny Frazier, director of American Land Conservancy Mississippi River Program, led the recognition event of Windy Bar from a boat on the river Wednesday. (ELIZABETH DODD ~ edodd@semissourian.com)

