



The Great River Road

A personal journey down the mighty Mississippi

(Volume 1)

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PREFACE

My first encounter with the *Great River Road* came as I was returning from a family reunion in Illinois a few years ago. On my way to the St Louis airport I took a wrong turn on the approach to the bridge crossing the Mississippi River and ended up going north on Illinois State Highway 100 along the eastern shore of the river below sheer 300 foot bluffs of the Mississippi River Palisades. The beauty of the route persuaded me to continue driving north to Pere Marquette State Park, and along the way I began seeing a series of signs identifying Highway 100 as part of the "Great River Road". As soon as I returned home to California I did a search online and discovered that I had driven only a very small portion of the route that extended the entire length of the mighty river, some 2700 miles! It was then that I began to make plans to one day drive the route from northern Minnesota all the way to southern Louisiana.

Three years later I boarded the Coast Starlight train in Los Angeles for the two day trip to Seattle where I connected with the Empire Builder train that took me to Minneapolis, a journey of three days. There I rented a car, drove north to Lake Itasca State Park, and began my journey south down the *Great River Road*. Over the next twelve days I followed the familiar green signs marking the route, through large towns and small villages, past historic sites, beautiful natural wonders, and encounters with fascinating people, all the while the river was my constant companion.

This book is not meant to be a travel guide for the Great River Road – there are several excellent ones that I've listed at the end. Rather this book is a personal journey down the mighty river, and I hope you will enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed writing it.

Jim Henderson
May 2014

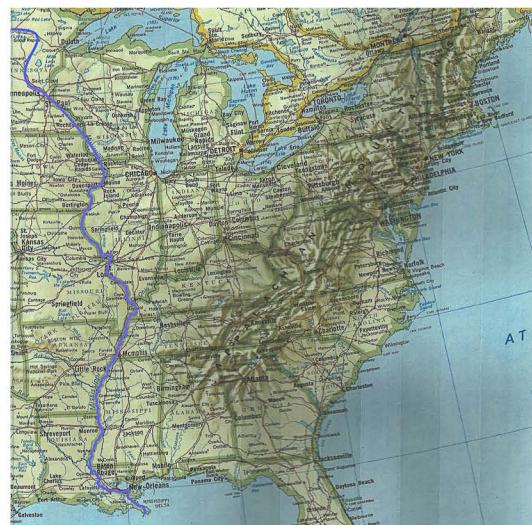
INTRODUCTION

In 1938, during the Franklin Roosevelt administration, the concept of a parkway along the Mississippi River was first conceived by governors of the ten states bordering the river. At first it was envisioned as a continuous byway, but economic realities at the time dictated a different story. There was no funding available to develop a single extended roadway, so as an alternative, a series of existing roads, some of which were unpaved, were mapped to form a network that would become today's Great River Road! Roads were selected on both sides of the river that would most closely follow the twisting course of the river. Today this network of federal, state, and local roads winds its way through quaint river towns, dense woodlands, majestic bluffs, big cities, rich farmlands and the vast Mississippi delta. A journey down the Great River Road offers a unique taste of culture and history, natural beauty, musical tradition, cuisine and hospitality. (1)

The Ojibway Indians of northern Minnesota called it "Messipi", meaning "Big River", and it was also known to early European explorers as the "Father of Waters". Native Americans of many different tribes living along its shores used the river in many ways, including transportation, hunting, and fishing, making it the center of their livelihood and culture. The mighty Mississippi is over 2,350 miles long and is the heart of the world's second largest watershed, covering over 1.2 million square miles including tributaries from 33 states and 2 Canadian provinces. On average more than 500 million tons of freight are shipped annually through a series of 29 locks and dams operated by the Corps of Engineers, enabling huge barges to ascend and descend over 800 feet of elevation between New Orleans and Minneapolis. (2)

Some of the most significant historical sites along the Great River Road include the following: Charles Lindbergh House and History Center (Little Falls, MN), Chief Blackhawk Memorial (La Crosse, WI), Effigy Mounds National Monument (Marquette, IA), National Mississippi River Museum (Dubuque, IA), Ulysses S. Grant's Home (Galena, IL), Mormon Settlement and Joseph Smith's gravesite (Nauvoo, IL), Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum (Hannibal, MO), Jefferson National Expansion Memorial/Gateway Arch (St Louis, MO), Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site (Collinsville, IL), Graceland (Memphis, TN), Delta Cultural Center (Helena, AR), Delta Blues Museum (Clarksdale, MS), Vicksburg National Military Park (Vicksburg, MS), Natchez Trace Parkway (Natchez, MS), Louisiana State Capitol (Baton Rouge, LA), Jackson Square/Bourbon Street (New Orleans, LA), Old Fort Jackson (Venice, LA)

Travelling the Great River Road is not only one of the most unique travel experiences one can find anywhere in the world, it also promises to be a "personal" journey for everyone – enjoy it!





Lake Itasca State Park to Stillwater, Minnesota



Camp Rabideaux - Blackduck, Minnesota



Lake Itasca, Minnesota - Headwaters of the Mississippi River

Early in the morning I arrived in Minneapolis / St Paul under clear sunny skies and I bid farewell to Amtrak and hello to Hertz as I took possession of my rental car which would be my mode of transportation for the next 12 days. My plan was to start my journey down the Mississippi River at its source, Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota, but before doing so I wanted to make a stop in the small mill town of Blackduck to see if I could find "Camp Rabideaux", an old CCC Camp where I spent a summer in 1965 doing forestry field work in the Chippewa National Forest. The Ranger Station in Blackduck had a map and a historical brochure about the camp which is in the process of being restored as a National Historic Site. As I walked around the old camp, many fond memories came back to me, like the nighttime "Snipe Hunt" in the swamp we organized for a guy from downtown Chicago. He sat in the middle of the swamp until well past midnight before he finally figured out it was a big joke! Most of the old buildings were still standing, including the barracks that was our home for 3 months and the mess hall where we not only took our meals but which also doubled as our classroom when we weren't out doing field work in the woods.

Later in the day I drove to Bemidji and then south to Lake Itasca State Park where I saw lots of young kids skipping across the headwaters of the Mississippi River at its source, Lake Itasca. Here the river was less than 10 feet wide and only a few inches deep, a stark contrast to what I would see many days later in southern Louisiana. The State Park boundary was the official start of my long journey down the Great River Road which follows the river for its entire length, some 2,350 miles. The route is a collection of many state highways and county roads that closely parallel the river, many times on both sides through 10 states. It is well marked everywhere and I had very little trouble staying on the route. That evening I discovered "Lobo's Cabins, Bar, & Grill" on the northern edge of Lake Itasca and spent the night in a beautiful cabin in the woods, very secluded and quiet. For dinner that night Lobo's served a delicious deep fried Walleye sandwich with a huge plate of onion rings, along with a cold pint of the local Summit Extra Pale Ale. Back at the cabin under a moonlit sky, the only sound I heard was the gentle whisper of the wind in the trees – very peaceful. That was until about 3:00am when I was suddenly awakened by a brilliant flash of lightning, immediately followed by the crash of thunder and the pounding of heavy rain on the roof. In the morning I awoke to a gentle rain falling softly on the forest and it would follow me for the next couple of days along the Great River Road.