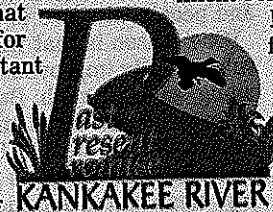


River once was sand-free, clear

By Bill Byrns
Journal writer

It seems appropriate that, as *The Daily Journal's* look at the *Kankakee River, Past, Present and Promise* winds down, news comes that the House has passed a bill for \$900,000 to fund two important river projects.

Action now needs only President Clinton's signature to provide \$600,000 to continue the Corps of Engineers' study and release



NEWS ANALYSIS

\$300,000 to determine the viability of sand removal near the state line.

When all is said and done, sand and sediment remain the river's gravest threats.

In 1908, on one of the state's very first scientific surveys, Charles W. Rolfe described his observations of the Kankakee:

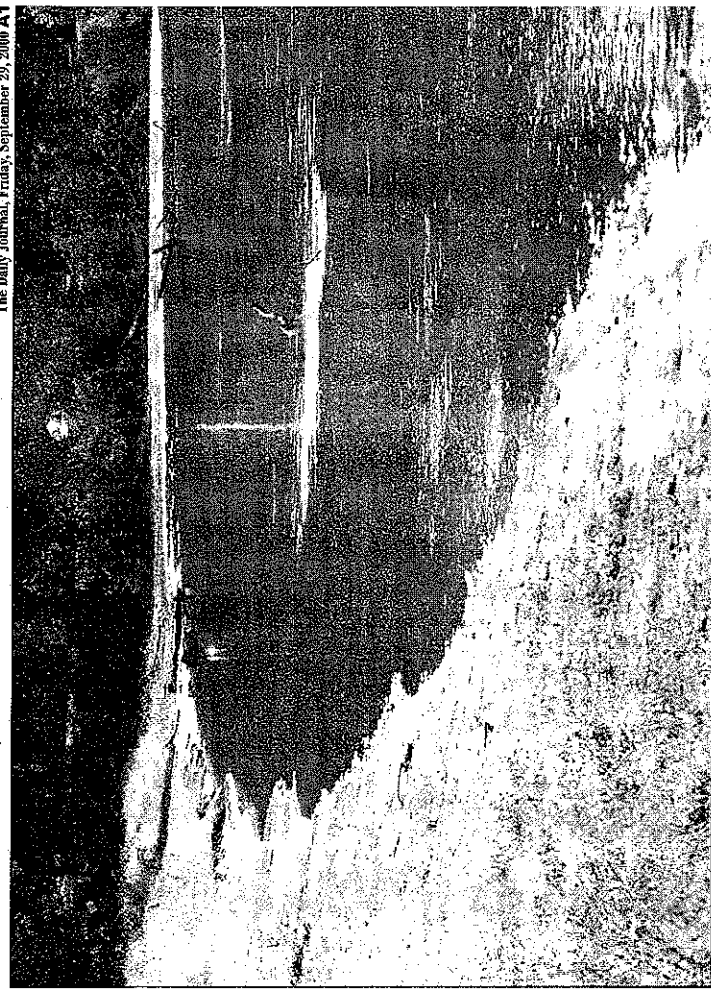
"In Indiana ... the bed of the river is composed mainly of sand and fine gravel, but at Mokence it begins to flow over limestone and from that point to its mouth, it has a rock bottom, affording good foundations for dams, for utilizing water power, and for purposes of navigation."

Rolfe, then head of the Geology Department of the University of Illinois, described a river no one living today has ever seen: a sand-free Kankakee with its bedrock bottom clearly visible.

This was no casual oversight. Rolfe was one of the state's top geologists. But nowhere in his published article or observational notes does he mention sandbars.

He does, however, refer to the sandy shoreline at Yellow Banks, east of Mokence, and at other spots along the river.

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Journal/Mike Vo

SAND IS PART of the natural make-up of the Kankakee River Basin. It is the heritage of a massive glacier or wash that occurred 100,000 years ago during a titanic flood that carved and shaped the river. But channelization of the river in Indiana and the loss of the Grand Marsh began the movement of sand westward creating the sediment problems of today.

If history is a guide, nature will likely pay dearly as the landscape changes once again

clies been brought to bear on this relatively tiny stream. Unfortunately, there remains an element of Babel among all this very good work. Like the biblical tower in Shinarump, the folks at work on this great project do not always make their message clearly understood by others.

Case in point, the refuge plan where information provided to sell the project was so vaguely presented that it actually created opposition. "Focus Areas" that were never intended to be boundaries were seen as refuge sites.

Mixed messages were also sent by FWS spokesmen to different constituent groups further muddling the picture.

Now, as a new project manager prepares to gain local involvement to actually plan and outline the refuge, the project faces greater suspicion than ever despite having overwhelming public support.

Perhaps the brightest spot in the Kankakee River tapestry is the successes won by the Kankakee River Basin Ecosystem Partnership under the leadership of J. R. Black of Kankakee.

The group, which has already won millions for work

New residential growth is sprouting at Manteno and Limestone. A potential new airport at Peotone looms, promising even more development if it ever becomes reality.

If history is a guide, nature will likely pay dearly as the landscape changes once again.

This series has also shown many positive signs that hold hope for the Kankakee Basin. Long ignored, the watershed now has captured the interests of state and federal agencies.

The Corps is seeking solutions to flooding and sedimentation.

The Fish & Wildlife Service plans to build a 30,000-acre Grand Kankakee Marsh National Wildlife Refuge to preserve and restore wetlands, protect rare black oak savannas and to guard habitat in the face of growing development.

Both Illinois and Indiana are also hard at work acquiring lands for conservation, to reduce sedimentation, and to control flooding. Each state has its own panel of local partners to help see that work is completed.

Never before has so much interest by so many different people, organizations and agen-

peared. And along the Kankakee, the river began to run deeper with sand and flood more frequently.

Today the Corps moves forward with a pilot plan to remove sand from a small section of the river and to re-establish streamside aquatic habitat.

The hope is that the trial will prove if sand removal can be done without resorting to the wholesale damage done by dredging.

Sand would be removed by a vacuum-like device from a small section of the river and temporarily store it on state-owned land 1,000 feet north. Wetland and aquatic habitat restoration is also part of the project. Planning and actual construction must be finished within three years and the total project has a \$5 million price cap.

The Corps' intentions are good, and clearly the result of their study will help determine one possible solution to sand removal.

But, as we've seen, good intentions without great caution, can lead to bad results.

One theme that has run through this series is understanding the balance between nature's ways and the needs of today's society. Those needs are changing again as they have in the past.

The Kankakee's swamps and prairies are now largely gone. Fields of corn and beans now sweep across the landscape, but another crop is also growing.

Good intentions were at work here. No one thought harm would come from swamp removal or better drainage. In fact, the federal government had actively encouraged swamp removal for decades all across the nation.

But as the nation's wetlands disappeared, local flooding ap-



Journal Outdoor Editor Bill Byrns has been active in environmental and river issues for the past 30 years. He has spoken on behalf of the Kankakee River at the prestigious Governor's Conference on the Illinois River and has been an elected delegate to the state's first three Conservation Congresses. Byrns served in an advisory capacity to the Illinois' short-lived Kankakee River Basin Commission. He also coordinated volunteer stream sampling data for the U.S. Geological Survey while a member of the Alliance to Restore the Kankakee River. He currently heads up the Kankakee River Project which monitors stream quality at eight locations along the river for the Illinois Ecowatch Network.

River

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The reason is simple. Channelization of 46 miles of the river in Indiana was not completed until 1918.

The Grand Marsh was already dying, but sand had not yet begun to move westward at the time of Rolfe's journey.

Rolfe's observations are important today as federal, state and local agencies ponder the future of the river.

Sand is part of the natural make-up of the Kankakee Basin. It is the heritage of a massive glacier outwash that occurred 100,000 years ago during a titanic flood that carved and shaped the river.

Sandy soils were clearly here when Rolfe studied the river.

Equally clear is that the river was more than able to carry its sandbed load without leaving behind the huge sandbars we know today.

Dredging the 500,000-acre Grand Marsh for agriculture and channelizing the river to improve drainage tipped the scales.

Development and urbanization along the stream added to the problem.

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We all can play a part shaping the future of this vit river resource. It's not an easy part — it will require work and study — but it will send the right messages where they are needed most.

We can attend public meetings involving the river. We can question legislators (what action they are taking and on what can be done. Hatched as it sounds, the challenge is simply to get involved. Washington, Springfield and Indianapolis take careful note of phone calls, e-mails and letters from constituents.

Don't believe for a moment that one person cannot make difference.

One person did just that (on behalf of the Kankakee River). The late Gordon Graves, pe

Haps the river's greatest champion, sweated blood to get this present project. He also inspired others to follow his footsteps and continue his fight.

Indiana, which has led Illinois in building sand traps slow sedimentation, in part took the idea from an ear Graves plan for the river.

One person, committed to cause, indeed made a difference. So can you.

cludes problem-solving as well as future management.

The Corps' study will hopefully provide a big piece of that plan by addressing sediment and flood issues. But there are other pieces to the Kankakee puzzle that require attention as well.

Federal and state funding are essential to continue and refine plans for the future. Equally important, however, both the Corps and FWS must become more responsive and open to local involvement and participation.

"No one trusts the federal government," admitted Charlie Hotebrook, the former FWS refuge plan manager here. "Heck, I work for the government and I don't always trust them!" he added with a grin.

For the river's sake, we need to be able to trust government. But it is a trust that state and federal agencies must constantly earn, and never take for granted.

projects in Kankakee and Illinois counties, has just received \$12,258 in the latest round of C2000 grants. (See related article in today's Outdoor Section, page C1.)

The partnership has brought together a working coalition of agriculture, business, labor and outdoor recreational interests and has become a model for Ecosystem Partnerships around the state.

Their ability to work in common cause, as exemplified by the ability of former foes to work effectively together, holds great hope for the future.

But there is a growing need for the partnership to improve communications with their counterpart in Indiana, the Kankakee River Basin Commission.

Fixing the Kankakee cannot be done piecemeal. Coordination and cooperation between the state's is essential.

Also essential is a basin-wide plan for the river. One that in-