Our "Father of Waters": A Story Of The Mississippi River, Then And Now

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OUR “FATHER OF WATERS”

A STORY OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER, THEN AND NOW

AN INTERACTIVE, WEB-BASED DOCUMENTARY

by

Steve Matzker

B.S., Southern Illinois University, 2014

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Science

Department of Mass Communication and Media Arts
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

OUR “FATHER OF WATERS”

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Steve Matzker

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science

in the field of Professional Media and Media Management Studies

Approved by:

Jan Thompson, M.G.S., Chair

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
May 10, 2017
AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

STEVE MATZKER, for the Master of Science degree in PROFESSIONAL MEDIA AND MEDIA MANAGEMENT, presented on MAY 10, 2017, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: OUR “FATHER OF WATERS”
A STORY OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER, THEN AND NOW
AN INTERACTIVE, WEB-BASED DOCUMENTARY

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Jan Thompson, M.G.S.

The story of the Mississippi River is rich and complex. As a visual storyteller, the goal of my final project is to provide a creative, yet informative, web-based documentary that provides an interactive component wherein users control the narrative. To achieve this, I used qualitative research in the form of interviews as well as qualitative research, including data collection and historical research to better understand the ways in which the river itself has changed, how it has informed us as individuals and as a society. This paper supplements the web-based interactive documentary:

“Our “Father of Waters”: A Story of the Mississippi River, Then and Now.”

This paper also outlines my approach and rationale for choosing this non-linear and non-traditional approach to digital documentary practices. Included is my methodology and concluding thoughts to this approach, why it contributes to the documentary form and why a story as compelling as the Mississippi River lends itself to this type of documentary mode. Included is a link to the project here:

ourfatherofwaters.org
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Jan Thompson, chair of my committee, for her continued support and mentorship throughout this project. Without her guidance and commitment to my success this project would not have been possible. I would like to thank Phil Greer, Cathy Lilley, Jean Rendleman Miner, Dr. Deborah Tudor, and Jack Young for their patience, wisdom and support as they helped me navigate my graduate studies. I would also like to thank Clara Mundia and Dr. John Remo, who provided initial resource support as I began laying the foundations for this project. In addition, I am thankful for the residents of Grand Tower who let me into their lives, especially Charles Burdick and Dan Qualls. I would also like to extend my sincere gratitude to Leah Weil, for whom without her design sensibilities and creative input this story could not be told. And finally, I would like to thank my parents who instilled in me an appreciation for the river and storytelling.
ARTIST STATEMENT

I am a product of flowing water. On a clear day, in the house where I was raised, high on a hill in a Missouri neighborhood I could glimpse a sliver of the Mississippi River. My grandparents lived even closer to the river where I would visit frequently. I remember exploring the banks of the river and the backwater sloughs with my dad, picking up driftwood and skipping rocks. From early on, and like all who encountered this river I’m sure, it has shaped my perspective. While in elementary school my mom encouraged me to read “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” by Mark Twain. This instilled in me a romantic vision of the river and dreams of adventure upon its waters. There is a sense of returning home every time I return to its banks. Once again I find myself living in the rivers proximity, and this time I want to tell a tale from its point of view. Much like the Mississippi does every spring as it breaks its banks, my goal with this project is to break away from traditional documentary forms and explore the river in its complexities. More than a photographer or videographer, I fancy myself a visual storyteller. This project is an ambitious attempt to move into that looser title and provide an additional voice to the larger canon of literature and data of our “Father of Waters”.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The story of the Mississippi River is constantly changing. Its natural history, its connection to its people of the past, and its influence on the development of a nation makes this river’s story rich and diverse. One must also consider our modern relationship to the Mississippi as well. So where does one start the story? The beginning seems most appropriate.

In epochal times, billions of years ago the various retreating glacial sheets of the Nebraskan, Kansan, Illinoisan and Wisconsin provided the water and sediment for the origins of the Mississippi River, carving sweeping valleys and leaving behind some of the most fertile soil in the world. (Curry and Baker, 2000) As the last retreating glacier heralded the beginning of the “Ice Age”, mega fauna like the wooly mammoth and giant sloth roamed the Mississippi River Valley. Following the migrations patterns of the early big game mammals, hunter-gatherers known as the Paleo-Indians emerged. Long before Hernando de Soto “discovered” it in 1541, the river held a revered position among the first peoples of North America. The Mississippi River, or Misi-ziibi, is Ojibwa (or Algonquin) for “great river” or “gathering of waters”, and can be translated as “Father of Waters”. (Shaffer and Tigges, 2000) Its importance to all cultures connected to the river has been immortalized through paintings, prose, poetry and song. (Fremling, 2005) This is evident in the many cave paintings found along the river’s bluffs.

Because of the fertile soil and abundant food sources, civilization began to establish itself along the river’s banks. Over time, European explorers, like Pere
Marquette searching for fur trades routes in the 17th century, paved the way for European settlements and the riches offered by the river became apparent. At the turn of the 18th century, forts, settlements and missionaries dotted the middle Mississippi River. Strategically carved on the banks of the river, Kaskaskia (1703), Prairie Du Rocher (1722), St. Genevieve (1735), and St. Louis (1763) emerged as strategic trading and defensive positions for the French. Understanding the military and economic advantages of controlling these waters, thereby controlling the continent, soon the Spaniards, British, and various Native American tribes were vying for control. From the Seven Years War 1763 to the end of the Civil War 1865, the Mississippi River was fought over between nations seeking dominance over a resource rich continent.

But the river’s potential, as economic catalyst, would not manifest itself until the years following the Civil War. This was the era of “river training”. Revetments in the form of willow mats preventing erosion or pile dikes influencing the rivers course, and levee construction altered the landscape of the Mississippi River forever. Later 20th century developments in engineering and technology allowed for lock and dam construction, allowing barges to “step” up and down the river. Prior to this ambitious effort to provide safe, continuous passage of vessels, large stretches of still water, pools, huge sand bars, boat-sinking snags, and treacherous rapids prevented pole barges, keelboats and the first steamboats from navigating the entire 2,350 miles of navigable waters. Continued river engineering revealed the river’s value for the United States economic growth, thus political will and large sums of money were expended to manipulate the river for ever efficient and safe transportation. (Anfinson, 2003)
The system of levees built within the last 100-hundred years, stretching nearly uninterrupted from New Orleans to St. Louis, has narrowed the river and made navigation more predictable. But it also created the unintended consequence of ever increasing “great” floods. Once, the wide swaths of flood plains on either side of the banks allowed space for floodwaters to settle. Like the pulse of a heart, the rivers ebb and flow of water was rhythmic with the seasons. Now hemmed in by levees increasing in height, the river has nowhere to go. And when it does find an outlet, usually a breach in a levee, towns and farmland are devastated. Today, the river is a bounded ribbon of water controlled for economic needs only. Now, in large part, the only time the river demands acknowledgement is in the springtime, when snow melt from the mountains and heavy spring rains swell the river over its banks and into peoples lives. Only as a symbol for loss does the river still inform our daily lives.

The river we know now is not the same river Lewis & Clark explored. Nor is it the same river Mark Twain romanticized and cursed in the late 19th century. Nor is it the river it was one hundred years ago. Greek philosopher Heraclitus said that no one steps in the same river twice. Meaning all life is in a state of flux. In some regards this is true, ecosystems have been altered, the river has been “tamed” to stay on course and people along the river have less daily interaction with it. However, there is something familiar about the Mississippi River of the ancient days, or the days of the Native American mound builders, or even my days as a youth growing up along its banks. To be sure, the river has changed at the hands of man, yet there is still a familiarity in the rhythm of the water lapping on the banks, in the way the waterfowl returns every year, and in the way tugboats hum up and down the river, pushing barges full of coal, corn and soybeans. The
river is indeed different, but it is also the same. This project is an attempt to explore the similarities between the past and the present, to highlight the importance of the river, and the ways it has been altered. By utilizing current technological capabilities, chiefly, the ability to create a non-linear story using web developing applications and multi-media elements, I aim to illustrate just how complex the story of the river is, the major characters involved, and the connections lost and the connections still present.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

My final project required variants of qualitative research, this included field research in the form of current subjects associated with the river, archival research for images and text that provide a historical anchor to the river, and data pulled from hydrological and geological studies that helped me visually and accurately represent the rivers changing courses and major flooding episodes. To begin, for practical purposes, I was first tasked with narrowing my area of research to a specific region of the Mississippi River. I chose the stretch between the confluence of the Missouri River and the Mississippi River, just north of St. Louis, Mo., and the confluence of the Ohio River and the Mississippi River at Cairo, Ill. This stretch is known collectively as the Middle Mississippi River. This choice was made based on several factors. One, there is much literature, text, visual or otherwise, that highlights the changes and contemporary issues facing the Upper and Lower Mississippi Rivers, yet there are few ‘coherent’ examples of visual documentation of the middle Mississippi River. Two, the location of this stretch of river makes repeated trips for field research highly accessible and feasible. Three, it provides a rich history to draw from, whether this be in fictional prose and poetry, history of flooding, history of indigenous cultures, and a rich texture of river towns for exploration. Four, in terms of engineering, it is the least manipulated stretch of the river, which offers a heightened rationale for documentation. And finally, it is the stretch of the Mississippi I grew up with, thus allowing for a personal narrative to be explored.
The field research took many forms. To provide current stories about our relationship with the river, I conducted interviews with residents along the river, primarily in Grand Tower, Ill. I chose Grand Tower as my point of entry for several reasons. One, distance and access to the town made this project more feasible. Two, the town has a rich documented history, thanks to Mr. Charles Burdick, from which I gained a historical perspective. Three, it has experienced, and is under constant threat of, major flooding. And four, there are older residents there still connected to the river while at the same time remembering how it was when they were young. This last fact provides anecdotal evidence to flesh out a better understanding of our modern relationship with the river. In addition, archival research was implemented in several ways. Archival images and texts were provided through various Illinois and Missouri libraries as well as through individuals gracious enough to share their family’s photographs. Finally, the data required to represent the rivers changing course in the past 200 years was provided through analysis of maps, input of data via GIS software (with the generous assistance from Clara Mundia) and data from Dr. John Remo of the Geography Department at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Major flood data was obtained through various media archives, aerial images and data from the Army Corps of Engineers, which allowed for visual representation of flooding that has occurred on the river.

The biggest challenge I faced in crafting this story was the structure. In traditional linear documentary storytelling, there is a format one could follow: the problem or tension begins the story, there is the climax, and then concludes with a resolution. This is less relevant in a non-linear interactive web-based narrative. After creating a storyboard I began to combine the various elements in Adobe Muse. I quickly
learned, however, that the same rules for this non-linear approach do not necessarily apply. For example, text components had to be pared down to their most basic syntax so that viewers could quickly read and follow along as images scrolled past. The images themselves had to be considered too. Given the speed of which the user scrolls through the story, images selected for each time period must tell as complete a story as possible.

The final challenge was to break from the mindset of traditional documentary practices. Initially, as I was building the structure of the story in Adobe Muse, I was locked into the notion of borders much like looking through a camera’s viewfinder or watching a documentary on television. This was no simple task. Yet once I realized my overall goal was to break from the traditional boundaries of the documentary form, the structuring took on a more creative, interactive, and non-traditional approach.
OUR FATHER OF WATERS

OUTLINE OF STORY

1. ORIGINS
   A. GLACIAL PERIODS
   B. PALEO INDIANS AND MEGA FAUNA
   C. WOODLAND INDIANS AND AGRICULTURE
   D. MOUND BUILDERS
   E. NATIVE AMERICANS

2. EXPLORERS
   A. FIRST EUROPEANS
   B. COLONIAL POWERS
   C. TRANSPORTATION
   D. RIVER ENGINEERING

3. PRESENT
   A. RESIDENTS OF GRAND TOWER

Figure 1: Outline of Major Periods in Story
Figure 2: Screen Shot of Ice Melting Time-lapse for Glaciation Section

Figure 3: Screen Shot of Water Drops for Glaciation Section
Figure 4: Visual Example #1 of Native American Section

Figure 5: Visual Example #2 of Paleo-Indian/Mega Fauna Section
During the Mississippian Period, a civilization known as the mound builders rose and fell.

Around 1,500 years ago, their civilization disappeared.

Figure 6: Visual Example #3 of Mound Builders Section

Figure 7: Visual Example #4 of Transportation Section
Figure 8: Visual Example #5 of Colonial Powers Section
Charles Burdick is a retired riverboat captain and de facto town historian for Grand Tower, Ill.

Marvin Lock, holding a blue channel catfish, has been fishing the Mississippi River for the last 20 years.

Will Nicholson as the “Easter Bunny”. About the river he said: “I’ve seen it come up, I’ve seen it come down.”

Figure 9: Visual Example #6 of Current Residents Section
CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

Though my final project has a cohesive feel connected through the theme of the river, during the initial research phase I divided my story into manageable research sections. There is the data research, which provided the structure for the overall navigation of the website as the user scrolls down to find various story components. The archival images, literature/folklore, historical and field research are the compelling components that flesh out the structure provided from the data.

The challenge was to synthesize all of these moving pieces and the richness of all my research into a cohesive narrative that emphasized the river then and now. It was a way to draw together not only observational and expository modes of documentaries but also provide for poetic and participatory modes as well. In this approach I feel an interactive, web based layout was most appropriate. It was within this framework that I drew inspiration from hollowdocumentary, a story that highlights the decline of a West Virginia county. Instead of a traditional linear approach in which the audience lacks control, my approach follows that of the above documentary, allowing the audience to control what they want to view and in which order. I feel it also best expresses the way one would personally explore the river if they were to visit in person. Some may feel nostalgia for a time past as they think of steamboats, or others may rest on the panorama view of the sun setting over the hills of Missouri, and others may enjoy foraging for objects carried downstream by the river. It was in this way I felt I could best tell the complex story of the river in a creative, interactive and non-traditional format.
This project is far from complete, and in many ways it may never find a coherent conclusion. Instead, I hope it’s a project I continue to explore and develop on my own and through contributions from others. In this spirit, it will truly become an interactive documentary.

Figure 10: Screen Shot of Sunset Time-lapse over the Mississippi River in Southern Illinois
REFERENCES


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