

# FRIENDS OF THE CHICAGO RIVER

# THE FIRST 1000 DAYS

By Robert Cassidy

It's hard to fathom that Friends of the Chicago River is about to enter its 37<sup>th</sup> year. In the late summer of 1979, when a small group of like-minded environmental advocates came together to start Friends, our most optimistic hope was that we might kick around for a year or two, get one or two modest objectives accomplished, and fade quietly into the sunset. The outcome was quite different.

## How did Friends get started?

People graciously point to an article I wrote in the August 1979 issue of *Chicago* magazine, entitled "Our Friendless River" (although, as we'll see, civic groups were already advocating for their sections of the river). The article chronicled a canoe trip I took down the North

active waterways, and the great outdoors.

He was also a dangerous person to have in the stern of your canoe. Ralph knew what he was doing with a paddle, but for a young man from Brooklyn who barely made Second Class in the Boy Scouts, a leisurely jaunt from the Skokie Lagoons to the North Avenue Turning Basin was hardly my idea of fun. I learned firsthand what "portage" meant as, time after time, we had to lift the canoe over branches and other debris. And the smell! There's nothing like a ripe sewer outflow to clear the nostrils. By late afternoon, every muscle and bone in my body was aching, and I couldn't wait for the torture to end. Ralph, God bless him, would gladly have paddled back upstream to Skokie.

In truth, the canoe trip was something of a ploy on my part. When Steven Gittleson, my editor at *Chicago*

which gave individual neighborhoods a significant role in developing their own local master plans. The book also borrowed from my work as editor of *Planning*, the magazine of the American Society of Planning Officials (now the American Planning Association)—the job that brought me to Chicago, in 1973.

My other condition for the article was that it had to present a realistic plan for the Chicago River: improving the water quality; enhancing the use of the waterway for commerce, housing, and, most important, recreation; and especially protecting the land and resources along the riverbank. Steve embraced the idea.

"Our Friendless River" opened with these words: "The Chicago River is the city's most neglected natural resource. It is overshadowed by Lake Michigan, disdained by environmentalists and outdoorsmen alike, neglected, fouled, and abused by industry and by all the rest of us. Nonetheless, it is the second-greatest gift that nature has bestowed on this city."

As promised, the article contained a skeletal three-point plan for the river: **1)** form an affinity group devoted solely to the Chicago River, **2)** stop immediate threats to public access to the river's edge from new developments, and **3)** develop a river protection ordinance and long-range plan for the river, with emphasis on public access.

This scheme was hardly original. As far back as 1973, downtown civic leaders had issued the Chicago 21 Plan, which

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Branch with Ralph Frese—outdoorsman, fourth-generation blacksmith, and founder of Chicagoland Canoe Base, in Portage Park. Ralph was a complete nut case about canoes. He built magnificent birch canoes by hand. He organized historic canoe "voyages" (usually in full voyageur costume), even one that reenacted Marquette and Joliet's adventures. For most of his 86 years (he died in 2012), Ralph was a hands-on advocate for canoeing,

magazine, suggested the idea, I agreed to do it on the condition that I be allowed to test some ideas from a book I had just finished. The book, *Livable Cities: Rebuilding Urban America*, described the efforts of citizens' groups across the country to improve their neighborhoods. *Livable Cities* was based in part on my experience as a young city planner in Arlington, Va. I was in charge of the county's pioneering Neighborhood Conservation Program,

called for continuous public access along the riverfront. A year later, the city issued its Riveredge Plan, which was followed in 1975 by the Land Management Study from the Metropolitan Sanitary District (now the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago.) In 1978, the architectural firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill prepared a “Chicago River Promenade” report for the Chicago Central Area Committee, a downtown civic group, which the CCAC released in 1979. In sum, there had been a lot of chatter about the Chicago River, but not much was getting done—except for it being dyed green on St. Patrick’s Day.

I didn’t expect much to happen in this case, either. I’ve been a journalist for 50 years, and I can tell you that rarely does anything concrete result from one’s hours at the keyboard. Almost always, the words simply evaporate into the ionosphere.

You can imagine my shock when, just days after “Our Friendless River” appeared, people started calling me. Influential people, like Commissioner Joanne Alter, of the Metropolitan Sanitary District; and Judith Stockdale, executive director of Open Lands Project (now Openlands); and Bill Frederickson, professor at North Park College (now North Park University) and founder of the North River Commission, a community organization on the city’s Northwest Side; and Joseph Cicero, NRC’s executive director. Their message: “We’ve got to do something about your plan for the river!”

We convened at a pre-Starbucks coffee shop in Albany Park, where we agreed to invite anyone who might be interested in forming an organization dedicated to improving the Chicago River to a meeting downtown. Judith got us a room at the IBM Building, and in October 1979—I wish I could remember the exact date—we held our first meeting. More than 100 people showed at noontime on a weekday—a strong indication that we were on to something.

Judith arranged for the newly inaugurated Friends of the Chicago River to come under wing of Openlands so that we could take in tax-free donations. Openlands also provided the services of our first part-time staff member, Mary Lou Marzuki, an environmental sparkplug from Park Forest. We established a Friends Steering Committee that included Judith Stockdale, Joanne Alter, and Bill Frederickson, along with several new people, notably Sheila Leahy and David Jones. I agreed to chair the committee—temporarily, I thought. The Joyce Foundation, God bless ’em, gave us our first big donation—I think it was \$15,000 or \$20,000. We started holding regular member meetings and reached out to civic groups like the North River Commission, where Executive Director Joe Cicero and Planning Coordinator Sheila Leahy were already making headway on river planning in the Albany Park neighborhood.

As 1980 rolled around, we had a name, a structure, a home base, staff, and a few bucks to work with. We were off and running. But where to go?

### PUTTING SOME WIND IN OUR SAILS

It was clear to the Steering Committee, and to our godparents at Openlands, that our prime directive was to start working with the city’s Planning Department on two fronts: first, to get an understanding from the city that further abuse of the riverbanks, such as the erection of fences and other obstructions or the construction of buildings or parking lots that blocked access to the riverbank, had to be stopped pending completion of our second goal: to develop a strong ordinance and plan to guide real estate development along the riverbanks, especially downtown.

We were fortunate in that Chicago’s political structure had recently undergone a tumultuous change. In early 1979, Jayne Byrne, who had been fired from her city job by Mayor Michael Bilandic (who succeeded Richard J. Daley), challenged Bilandic for the mayoralty post. She charged Bilandic with failing to clean up the 90-plus inches of snow that stymied the city that miserable winter. In a shocker, the maverick beat the Democratic machine in the February 27 primary and breezed to a win in the general election.

Under the leadership of Friends Board Member David Jones, a city planner, we

*Our prime directive: Put a stop to abuse of the riverfront, and get an ordinance passed.*

began to hold frequent meetings with Ivar Vilcins and Eric Yondorf of the city’s Planning Department. The guiding principle of the proposed Chicago River protection ordinance was to require development projects of one acre or more to go through a “planned unit development” process. This would allow for negotiations between the developer and the city—and interested parties like Friends—on issues like setbacks from the river and physical improvements—landscaping, walkways, etc.—for public access. After months of back-and-forth negotiation with the Planning Department and the Mayor’s Office, we had a document that was ready to go City Council’s Building & Zoning Committee (now Zoning, Landmarks & Building Standards).

At the time, the B&Z Committee was presided over by Edward Vrdolyak, the powerful alderman of the 10<sup>th</sup> Ward, on the city’s Southeast Side. Known as “Fast Eddie” for his backroom dealings, Vrdolyak, who had run Bilandic’s unsuccessful campaign, found himself out of favor with

the new mayor. The contentious politics of the time raised concerns about how it would go when the river ordinance came up for B&Z Committee approval.

At the hearing, the Planning Department presented the ordinance, and I followed up with a statement of support from Friends of the River. Under previous administrations, our proposal would have

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buzzed through by voice vote. Judging by the tone of his questions to the staff, however, it looked like Vrdolyak might be thinking of tabling the vote, effectively killing the ordinance. Something had to be done, and fast.

At the time, the alderman of my ward was Eugene Schuler, a young up-and-comer in the City Council. (He would serve “The Fightin’ 47th” as alderman for 36 years, before retiring in 2011.) In desperation, I signaled Schuler to meet me in the closed-off area behind the dais, where I pleaded with him to help push the ordinance through. Schuler held up his hands to shut me up. “I need a hook to sell it to the chairman,” he told me. I thought about this for a second, and then I said something so vacuous that I cringe when I recall it today: “Just tell him the ordinance is good for the environment.” Schuler nodded, then went back into the council chamber and whispered something in Vrdolyak’s ear. To the amazement of everyone in the chamber, Vrdolyak started extolling the environmental virtues of the proposed ordinance. Immediately, the chill in the chamber subsided, and the ordinance passed easily. Friends of the Chicago River had its first political victory.

In October 1982, Byrne, speak-

ing at the Openlands annual meeting, proposed an ordinance that would require future riverfront developments to receive approval from the Chicago Plan Commission. Today, this requirement is embodied in Title 17 of the Municipal Code of Chicago, whose Section 8-0912 requires a 30-foot setback for all planned developments along the river, as well as

the provision, where appropriate, of waterfront paths, plazas, overlooks, esplanades, and access points.

This is the provision that has guided many of the riverfront improvements over the last 30 or so years.

### ALL ABOARD THE ‘BETSY ANN’!

Meanwhile, Friends continued to reach out to the public. Our first event was “Chicago River Weekend,” August 22–24, 1980. Friday, August 22, was Venetian Night, when Chicagoans take their boats out onto Lake Michigan for a huge fireworks display. We rented the *Betsy Ann*, a small sternwheeler, for about 100 Friends members and supporters (donation: \$25 per person). George Jewell, who was just starting out in the catering business, charged us \$10 a head for a fantastic spread.

I never made it aboard *Betsy Ann*. Along with several loyal Friends volunteers, I spent that Friday night gathering sheets of plywood that we used to block the windows in the IBM Building, so that our slides would be visible the next morning when we hosted our first Friends conference. To this day, my wife reminds me that our daughter, Gwen, was only two weeks old, and what was I doing running around downtown at all hours of the night putting up sheets of plywood?

The all-day conference, “Revital-

izing Chicago’s River,” co-sponsored by Friends and the Mayor’s Office of Special Events, attracted more than 100 attendees (\$10 admission; seniors and students, \$7.50). Planning experts from Boston, Brooklyn, Minneapolis, and St. Louis led discussions and workshops on riverfront restoration projects in their cities.

A box lunch was served, as attendees watched a Women’s Invitation crew race, featuring several Olympians. (The event was organized by the remarkable Susan Urbas—women’s crew coach, freshwater legal advocate, future president of the Chicago River Rowing & Paddling Center, and the godmother of rowing in Chicago. Susan later secured the former coast guard facility in the harbor near Randolph Street for use by the Chicago River Aquatic Center.) On Sunday, Ralph Frese organized a canoe trip down the North Branch from Glenview to the North Avenue Turning Basin (\$7.50). I took a pass.

Our honored guest, Mayor Byrne, gave a short speech implicitly endorsing our advocacy efforts on behalf of the river: “The city that once defiantly changed the course of a river is embarked on a plan no less bold,” she said, as quoted in the *Tribune*. “That plan will restore and rejuvenate the lands that border Chicago’s more than 40 miles of waterway, and once again [demonstrate] this city’s determination to chart the course of the river.” The mayor concluded: “This is no idle promise. We must see that the Chicago River again becomes a thriving part of the local economy.” This marked the start of a positive relationship between Friends and the Mayor’s Office that has endured through the administrations of Harold Washington, Richard M. Daley, and Rahm Emanuel.

We held another big planning session May 15, 1982. Among the recommendations that came out of that program (a number of which have been fulfilled): a

tourist attraction on the river that would highlight the role of the river in the city's history (today's McCormick Bridgehouse & Chicago River Museum); launch sites for canoes and kayaks (Clark Park and Ping Tom Park boathouses); and new riverfront parks and recreation areas (of which the new stretch of the downtown Riverwalk is a shining example).

### THE WOLF POINT HELIPORT

Our fledgling organization was still in diapers when we had to wage our first public fight. In May 1980, by a 5–4 vote, the Chicago Plan Commission approved plans for a heliport at Wolf Point. The request came from the heirs of Joseph P. Kennedy, President Kennedy's father, whose family trust owned the Merchandise Mart and the Apparel Center.

We at Friends, along with other local environmental groups, saw the heliport as a blatant violation of a promise the Mart owners made in 1973, when they received Plan Commission zoning approval to build the Apparel Center. A key part of the deal was that the Mart would build a riverfront park, with public access, on the jut of land south of the Apparel Center. Seven years later, the property was still an unsightly heap of weeds and debris.

We raised a stink, but frankly, as a new player on the Chicago political scene, Friends had little clout of its own. Luckily, we had friends in high places.

The first to answer our call for help was the Illinois attorney general, Tyrone Fahner. Fahner issued a letter to the state aeronautics department, which stated that the heliport would produce noise and water pollution and create a public nuisance. (This information was discovered among Federal Aviation Administration files by Ted Fink, an Openlands staff member, who leaked the documents to Lois Wille, then at the *Sun-Times*. Wille blew the story wide open.) The AG's letter asked the aeronautics department to either deny

the heliport a license, or, at the very least, hold a public hearing on the matter.

The controversy kicked around for a few months while the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, at the request of Fahner and Openlands, investigated the environmental impact of the heliport. In January 1981, the EPA weighed in with a report that said noise from the helicopters could reach 85 decibels outdoors and 65 decibels indoors in areas along the air-

*The Deep Tunnel has dramatically improved water quality—just ask the 72 species of fish in the river.*

crafts' flight path. The noise would "cause serious speech and activity interference" to downtown residents and workers, the EPA said. Shortly thereafter, Fahner's office sued the FAA for allegedly violating its own safety rules in approving the heliport.

All this legal wrangling became moot when, in May 1981, the Mart and its partner, Executive Helicopter Inc., citing "unfavorable publicity," abandoned plans for the heliport. Fortunately, in later years, the Mart's owner, Merchandise Mart Properties Inc., became a strong supporter of Friends. Today, one of the city's most environmentally sensitive high-rise projects is under construction at Wolf Point.

### PASSING THE TORCH

Toward the end of 1982, I was starting to burn out as chair of Friends. It was time for fresh leadership. Olga Domchenko had joined the staff; two years later, she assumed full responsibility when the much-beloved Mary Lou Marzuki died. Jeff Green, a Friends board member, brought his business skills and acumen to the role of Friends chairman. Loyal Friends like Joanne Alter, Bill Fredrickson, David Jones, Sheila Leahy, Susan Urbas, and

Judith Stockdale smoothed the transition. Friends, now in toddler gear, was ready to embark on a new phase of life.

In the intervening three decades, Friends has become one of the most effective civic and environmental organizations in the Chicago region. Much of the credit for our success goes to the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District. There is no doubt in my mind that the Deep Tunnel has significantly improved the water quality

of the river and made it a much more attractive natural resource—just ask the 72 species of fish that now inhabit it. The city of Chicago also deserves praise for helping to open up public access to more than half of the river's 28 miles of shoreline.

The Friends staff, initially under Executive Directors Beth White, Laurene von Klan and, in the last 10 years, the incredible Margaret Frisbie, have done a marvelous job. Kudos as well to the many hard-working board members for their service and wise counsel. I would especially call out Grant Crowley, founder of Crowley's Yacht Yard, for his more than three decades of service to Friends.

The unsung heroes, in my estimation, are the thousands—it almost takes my breath away to say it—the *thousands* of volunteers who have flocked to the cause. Whether for river cleanup days, or to supervise raft races, or to conduct education programs, or to help out with any of the multitude of programs that Friends has sponsored over the last 30-plus years, our volunteers have put in untold hours of their personal time to make Friends of the Chicago River the vibrant civic entity that we could only dream of in 1979.