Our Friendless Chicago River

Decades of abuse and neglect have transformed the Chicago River from a great natural resource into an open sewer. A professional planner extols its potential virtues and tells us how it can be made vital once again.

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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.

The tremendous neglect and the great potential of this natural treasure were made plain to me one bright, sunny day last May when I canoed down a 12-mile stretch of the river's North Branch. My companions were experienced hands—Maurice Parkin, an Englishman and Boy Scout leader, and Ralph Frese, a fourth-generation blacksmith. Frese runs the Chicagoland Canoe Base, a canoe rental and manufacturing outlet, and his many exploits, which include the re-creation of the Joliet Marquette expedition, have earned him the nickname Mr. Canoe.

At 8:30 a.m., near the Lake Street bridge in Glenview, we launched our 17-foot canoe into the knee-deep water of the North Branch. Gliding beneath a canopy of trees that shielded us from the harsh glare of the sun, we knifed through splendid park land and forest preserves: Glenview Woods, Harms Woods, Linné Woods, St. Paul's Woods, Miami Woods—all the way through Morton Grove, we saw nothing but an occasional golf course and scenic vistas. We encountered some industrial development at Oakton Road in Niles, but soon after we entered the city at Howard Street, the park land and golf courses resumed. From there to our destination—the junction with the North Shore Channel near Foster Avenue—the river cut through pleasant residential neighborhoods, parks, and playgrounds.

For a river that most people believe to be dead, the Chicago is surprisingly alive with fauna and flora—muskrats, several varieties of squirrels, turtles, (mostly snappers, although we did come across a painted turtle), sandpipers, swallows, redwing blackbirds, American bitterns, red-headed and flicker woodpeckers, wood ducks, Canadian mallards, and fields of trillium, buttercup, wild iris, and anemones. And we even saw one woman gathering wild ginger and onions from the banks.

For me, the experience was eye-opening. Imagine the sight of a great blue heron with a six-foot wingspan rising majestically from the river bank, then disappearing into the willows and cottonwoods. It's fun steering through rapids, such as they are, or munching a granola bar as you watch the duffers ai the Edgebrook Golf Club. Or just floating gently with the one-knot current and letting nature and the river take their tranquil course. I never thought I could do such things in my own backyard.

That may be where the trouble lies: the city's showcase. In the midst of the river's natural splendors, you find the ugly hand of man. Just south of the Caldwell Street bridge in Niles, a Barnaby's restaurant sat cheek by jowl with the river, spitting its garbage down the bank. Farther along was a tall rusting steel fence, the handiwork of an inconsiderate landowner, and a residential development where almost all the trees had been bulldozed, causing silt to run off into the water.

But these stains are compared with the river's worst enemy, raw sewage. Whenever we passed one of the giant culverts built by the Metropolitan Sanitary District (MSD), the regional sewer agency, the smell reminded us of the river's main

function today—it's the city's biggest sewer. Chicago's Sewer system was designed more than a century ago to accommodate both sewage from our plumbing and run-off from our streets. About 100 times a year—almost every time it rains—the amount of water in the MSD pipes is too much for the system to handle, and instead of the raw sewage going to treatment facilities it overflows into the river. The result, says Donn Werling of the Evanston Environmental Association, is that the river is "grossly polluted"—so polluted that in some spots it actually bubbles up methane and ester gases produced by bacteria.

The present river system can be divided, for simplicity's sake, into two geographical areas. The portions farthest from the city proper are flanked by either park land or heavy industry. As we have seen, the North Branch from the Skokie Lagoons to its intersection with the North Shore Channel is one big field, interrupted occasionally by residential and industrial areas. The North Shore Channel, too, is a vast greenbelt, with numerous town parks and recreation areas built on land obtained from the MSD. On the South Side, the portion of the Main Channel west of Harlem Avenue all the way to Lockport is largely open space, and the stretch from Harlem Avenue east to Ashland is heavily industrialized. The Cal Sag Channel and the Calumet rivers are also largely open space, with some major industry.

The remaining sections of the river pose the greatest challenge for future development. Along the South Branch, from Harrison Street to Ashland Avenue, for example, are wide expanses of underused industrial land, much of it owned by railroads, utilities, and investors. On these parcels of 50 to 100 acres each, significant large-scale projects (including whole new towns, such as that proposed for the riverfront railroad lands in the South Loop) would be possible.

The portion of the North Branch south of the North Shore Channel is dominated by heavy industries—foundries, breweries, warehouses—but few of these are dependent on the river. Here, between North and Chicago avenues, is Chicago's only island. Goose Island is now used mostly for storage and warehousing, but 100 years ago it was a tough, two-fisted little "village" in the city.

Finally, the section of the river most familiar to Chicagoans, the downtown portion, continues to change rapidly, as it has throughout this century. Here are major commercial and residential projects, such as Marina City Towers, as well as riverside parks and plazas, including those at the IBM Plaza, the Equitable Plaza, and the SunTimes building. Although the drawbridges block pedestrian traffic from one plaza to the next, the plazas' popularity foreshadows the new wave of river-oriented development.

"Water is a magnet: It draws people to it," says architect Harry Weese, who himself is redeveloping the land across the river from Wolf Point into a residential and commercial complex. Says Roger Seitz, an architect with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, "This land is becoming attractive. There's now a market. There's a whole societal movement toward leisure, and there are enough people who want to live on the river."

But no major transformation can be expected until the river is cleaned up, and that effort already is well along. "There is no pollution from industry or from our treatment plants," says MSD commissioner Joanne Alter. The steel plants along the Calumet, for example, have spent millions since the 1960s building water-recycling systems that keep pollutants out of the river.

The overflow of raw sewage, however, continues to pollute the river. "The clarity of the water is minimal—you can see only about one foot deep in spots," says Evanston ecologist Donn Werling. "The only thing that can live below that level is anaerobic organisms, bacteria that don't need air." The lack of oxygen kills fish and other wildlife: According to Werling, in the summer of 1975, the MSD removed more than two tons of dead carp, alewives, and goldfish from a mile-long stretch of the North Shore Channel in Evanston.

The Sanitary District's answer to this problem is TARP—the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan, nicknamed the Deep Tunnel. Some call it the greatest engineering feat since pyramids; others say it is the biggest boondoggle since Teapot Dome.

TARP was designed to prevent the overflow of raw sewage into the river. Engineers are now boring 125 miles of tunnels 15 to 30 feet wide, using giant machines called Moles. These "deep tunnels," some 150 to 300 feet beneath the ground, will catch almost all overflow from the 5,000 miles of into the river. This phase, costing $1.9 billion according to the MSD,

will be paid by both the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (75 percent) and the MSD (25 percent). The funding for the $900-million second phase, which involves constructing massive reservoirs to hold the overflow from the most severe storms, is in doubt. That's considered flood control, which is under the jurisdiction U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and is funded by Congress. The Congressional Watchdog agency, the General Accounting Office, has already issued a report stating that the total project will cost far too much—between $2.8 and $11 billion, depending on whom you talk to.

Completing the first phase alone, however, should reduce the number of sewage overflows dramatically—to only three or a year. The improvement in water quality should be staggering. The muck that has be a problem, but the water quality should improve even if the river is not dredged. "The ecology of a river is very resilient," says ecologist Werling. "The river can be flushed out—that's the difference between a flowing body of water like a river and a static one like a lake."

Once the river's quality is improved, its potential as a recreational and residential resource will increase dramatically. Its popularity could rival Lake Michigan's. "The actual use of the lake is limited to people with big boats and lots of equipment," says Walker Johnson, an architect with Holabird & Root and a lifelong sailor. But the river, he says, is "on an entirely different scale. There are a lot of people who have canoes and small boats who could use the river."

Indeed, the river is a "blue-collar" waterway; it has long stood in the shadow of the Gold Coast image of the lakefront. Its gnarled fingers reach into the depths of the city's working-class neighborhoods, places like Bridgeport, Ravenswood, Portage Park, and Pilsen, which have no direct access to the lake. Roughly ten percent of the city's population lives within bicycling distance of the river.

Now that the Chicago River is on the brink of a new era, it deserves a detailed master plan—not some pie-in-the-sky scheme, but a realistic, feasible program of development that can be initiated now. The Chicago will never match the beauty of the Danube or the majesty of the Mississippi, but it can become, once again, a crucial resource in the growth and development of this city. The plan presented here is based on dozens of interviews with people closely associated with the fortunes of the river. It is workable and timely. Although we ourselves may not live to enjoy the full promise of this plan, surely now is the time to give it birth.