

The Wabash

Life on the Bright White River



From New Corydon in Northeast Indiana...to New Harmony in the southwest corner of the state...the Wabash is Indiana's river.

Born of events of the last Ice Age, its waters delivered us from the wilderness...and *connected* us with the rest of the world.

The Wabash has flowed for centuries and changed greatly over the last 200 years, but it has not been alone. From the Indians who named it to those working to preserve its beauty today, the river has always held an important place in the lives of those living near it.

It was bright white limestone, shining up through crystal clear water, that inspired Native Americans to name their sacred river "Waa-paah-siki" or the "Bright White." French fur traders shortened the name of this "Bright White River" from "Waa-paah-siki" to "Ouabache," and the early settlers changed it again, to "Wabash," the name we know today. It is the largest, longest, un-dammed river east of the Mississippi.

The Wabash is free-flowing after the dam at Huntington - 400 miles of naturally flowing water that allows for many life forms and habitats no longer found in heavily dammed rivers, such as the Ohio. And so those who will look may be able to see back in time, not the same river that the settlers first saw, but as near as one can get it in the Midwest.

Educators who love the river and understand the importance of its role work to pass those lessons down to school children. Sullivan County eighth graders raft the river with naturalists to learn about the broad waterway that borders their county. Archaeologist Cheryl Munson of Indiana University invites fourth graders from Mount Vernon to join her crew in the excavation of a prehistoric Indian village. Such long buried sites tell the tale of the Wabash as a travel artery for native peoples long before Europeans even knew it existed.

More current history comes from those who've lived their lives on the banks of the Wabash, those who fish it still and yet others who envision a modern commercial potential as yet unfulfilled. Wayne Couch is 95 years old, with the Wabash as part of his life from his own grandparents' days. At the cabin Wayne built on the banks of the Wabash more than 60 years ago, he carries on this rich tradition of Wabash River hospitality by feeding the multitudes, as often as possible, with fish from the river:

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While many can be found along the river in fair weather fishing for fun, John Farmer of Grayville, Illinois may in fact be the last commercial fisherman on the Wabash. A big man, John hauls as many as 31 heavy nets out of the river, a first hand witness to what it has to offer. It's a life he clearly loves, saying, "Oh, I been doin' it about 28 years, maybe. Been doin' pretty good really, considering!" And at Thursday noon and Friday evening John opens up the "Fish House," a concrete block, screened-in porch of a restaurant, and people come from miles around to partake of the Wabash's freshest catch.

Once upon a time, the river made men rich with pearls. Not typical oyster pearls, but natural freshwater pearls from Wabash River mussels. Legend has it that some of those very pearls may be found in the Crown Jewels of England. The mussel shells were valuable as well, drilled to make gleaming "pearl" buttons. Towns up and down the river had plants to cut "button blanks." Those are days of mere memory, as the mussels were nearly fished out of existence and plastic replaced shell buttons.



The Wabash served as a primary travel route for decades until railroads made cross-country travel faster and easier. And yet, since the days of the first settlers, some have held onto a vision that the waterway may yet have a role to play in Hoosier commerce. In the middle of the 19th Century, these dreams produced the Wabash and Erie Canal, a 468-mile long, man-made waterway, fed by the Wabash, but not affected by the river's twists and turns...or the rise and fall of its waters. In the mid-1890s a traveler could board at Delphi and travel by water all the way to New York Harbor. Today, outside Delphi, a mile long stretch of the canal has been restored. Dan McCain serves proudly as its guardian. "This canal now is something of treasure, because it's the only significant section of the Wabash and Erie Canal in Indiana where you can actually walk right along the watered portion."

Although advancing technology brought an early demise to the canal, the dream of a productive commercial use for the river has never died. In 1957, from its headquarters in Mt. Carmel, Illinois, The Wabash Valley Association embarked upon its mission to mobilize the citizens of Eastern Illinois and Western Indiana to persuade their government representatives to authorize the funds necessary to make the Wabash River a commercially navigable body of water. Still in action today, the Wabash Valley Association believes the damming, dredging, and redirection necessary to make the Wabash commercially navigable would be worth the big price tag. So far federal feasibility studies have failed to back up those hopes, but the association members have not yet given up their dream.

Along the Wabash in Lafayette, one group works to simply keep the river's banks from becoming a dumping ground. The Hoosier Environmental Council organizes such groups in an effort to keep the river clean, helping maintain the viability of many of Indiana's natural resources. Rae Schnapp is the HEC's Wabash River Keeper. "We made a commitment to be a spokesperson for the river, and really we see that as building a voice for the river because it's really much more than just one person. And we also had to make a commitment to monitor and patrol the river, which again we're doing with a lot of assistance from local groups, and the third commitment is to be willing to litigate...to sue polluters and enforce the law. Some people would see us as radical. Personally I think that what's radical is the idea that we can trash our environment and not face any consequences."

There is much worth saving. Innumerable animals make the banks of the Wabash their home, and at the Cane Ridge Wildlife Management Area, thousands of migrating birds create an impressive sight on their twice-yearly stopover. In Posey County, the Wabash provides life-giving waters to the Twin Swamps, a bit of Louisiana bayou country in southwest Indiana. While not directly connected, the overflow from the river into the swamps maintains the perfect environment for the unique flora and fauna.



Indians gave the Wabash its first name, and hundreds of years ago members of many different tribes called it home. Today, the native peoples are few and far between, but those like Steve McCullough have a feeling for the spirituality of the past and the future it may hold. "You see those spirits on the water, you see our ancestors in boats. You see 'em because what was is still with today. Our Indian people in the spirit world still travel this same river. They camp out on the same island today. They still come here...to harvest the food and the herbs, and the hunts. So everything that was, still co-exists today."

The future of the Wabash may hold more than mere co-existence. Leisure activities are enjoying a renaissance as more communities create welcoming river walks along its banks and the educators continue to spread the word of its natural wonders. This rare waterway provides a direct connection between our past and our present. Travel along its banks...get to know its people...and understand the influence the Wabash has had, on us as individuals, on us as a *state*, and on us *all*, as a nation.