

Thinking Like a

# MOUNTAIN

IDEAS AS BIG AS THE OUTDOORS



JIM SWEENEY (2); JEFF MANES (1)

## THE KANKAKEE RIVER AND ITS LOST MARSH

A tale of reclamation and  
restoration

BY JEFF MANES

*“Everywhere, we beheld the works of God and Nature. I have been in France and Germany. I was raised in England. But I haven’t seen anything in those countries that equaled the beauty of this western prairie.”*

– Pioneer Thomas Rogers Barker upon seeing the lands near the Kankakee River

I was born in Kankakee, Illinois, and raised just across the state line in northwest Indiana. It was and still is a rural area. Most of the kids I grew up with would show hogs or beef cattle in 4-H. But my father was a steel worker, not a farmer. I opted instead to spend my time on entomology, geology, and forestry. I was fascinated by creatures such as the stag beetle, dragonflies, and the praying mantis; the beauty of a cecropia moth or a tiger swallowtail.

My parent’s back yard literally abutted LaSalle Fish and Wildlife Area — more than 3,000 acres of forests, fields, marshes, and open water with the Kankakee River running through it. Some of my fondest childhood memories are of going fishing with Mom, Dad, and my brother at LaSalle’s Black Oak Bayou (pictured above). While it was still daylight, dad would fly fish — strictly top water. My brother and I would fish for blue gills using live bait. Once the sun began to set, Dad would fire up the Coleman lantern and we’d catch bullheads.

My brother and I spent a lot of time in the outdoors. We learned to swim in the Kankakee River. We caught blue racers and lizards in the sand. We climbed trees. We got dirty. We were never sick.

About a mile from the Kankakee, we used to catch a strange fish out of Beaver Ditch. They were a dark brown color and shaped somewhat like a bass, with red, pyramid-shaped bumps on the tops of their heads. Dad called them rock rollers. Little did I know that Beaver Ditch (pictured at right) had been used to drain the largest natural lake in Indiana: Beaver Lake. The high school I attended actually sits on what was the bed of the lake.

Beaver Lake was at the edge of one of the largest inland wetlands in North America, the million-acre Grand Kankakee Marsh. Sportsmen from throughout the Midwest traveled to the marsh to pursue fish, white-tails, and waterfowl. The marsh was called Chicago's "food pantry." That is, until the swamp was drained and the once-serpentine river straightened about 100 years ago to make room for fields and other development. Today, less than five percent of the marsh survives.

They didn't teach us about things like that in school. In fact, only a few years ago I discovered that my hometown of Lake Village got its name because folks from the surrounding areas would say, "Let's travel over to the village by the lake." You'd never guess that today.

It wasn't until I traveled the Momence Wetlands as an adult that I was able to comprehend what the Kankakee must have looked like before she was ravaged by dredges. The Momence Wetlands are located along an eight-mile stretch of the Kankakee River that begins at the Indiana-Illinois state line and ends at a limestone ledge just upstream of Momence, Illinois.

I was in awe of the natural, riparian beauty of the Momence Wetlands. Its 90-degree – even 120-degree – twists and turns. Its islands and bayous abounding with wildlife.

The plan had been to continue dredging the Kankakee River all the way to Momence. When the Hoosier dredgers arrived at the state line circa 1920, there were some folks from the Illinois



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side waiting for them – hunters and trappers, mostly. At gunpoint, the Illinoisans convinced the dredgers to turn back.

Since my initial tour of the Momence Wetlands, I have been up and down the Kankakee River from its source near South Bend, Indiana, to where it joins with the Des Plaines River to form the Illinois River near Wilmington, Illinois. For me, nothing beats that eight-mile stretch known as the Momence Wetlands.

After a 30-year hiatus, I went back to my roots and the river. Since February, I've lived in a 500-square-foot cabin on the south bank of the Kankakee in Jasper County, Indiana. I catch panfish, pike,

walleye, catfish, and bass 15 feet from my front porch. Most I return to the river – give some kid a chance on another day. I "release" the panfish into a greased pan.

The place is bird heaven. Not only do I feed them, I keep a count – and it's a thrill to identify a new species such as a red-breasted nuthatch. I recently spotted five river otters as the aquatic acrobats swam by my "quarter-acre Eden," which I have named Camp Aukiki (one of the Native American terms for the Kankakee River).

My love for this area led me to write the script for a documentary film entitled, "Everglades of the North: The Story of the Grand Kankakee Marsh." The film has been viewed across the country by millions of people. But more important to me, we created an educational component to accompany the DVD, which is provided directly to educators.

Unlike when I was a boy, kids along the Kankakee River will be taught in school about the rich history of the Grand Kankakee Marsh – what was lost and what can be restored. Who knows? Some of them might find their callings early and become entomologists, geologists, or biologists.

Maybe they'll simply become people who care about the restoration of a paradise lost. People like me.

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*Like his father before him, Jeff Manes (pictured below at age 10) became a steel worker. For the past 10 years, Manes has made his living as a freelance writer and self-syndicated human-interest columnist. "Everglades of the North: The Story of the Grand Kankakee Marsh" has won several film festivals and was nominated for a Chicago/Midwest Emmy.*

