

Art and Barb Straub Interview – Transcript for the Minnesota Historical Society

Voices of the River

by Anne Queenan

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Q: Can you tell me your names and where we are and a little bit about what you do?

A: This is Barbara Straub, I'm Art Straub, and we're probably, we invented the term river rats. We tend to resent the trend now. All kinds of people call themselves river rats, 'cause we are the original river rats. Where were you born Barbara?

B: I was born on the banks of the Rush River, which is close to LeSueur.

A: That's a huge booming town, is it not, on the river?

B: No, but at one time though, my parents did own the little grocery store at Rush River and then up until the Depression. And I have five older brothers and then when I was two, they lost the store because of the Depression and then we moved into LeSueur.

A: And I'm Art Straub and we're lucky enough, we're fortunate enough, we're blessed enough, to have property on the Minnesota River, in the Minnesota River. We've contributed a lot of soil to the Minnesota River between LeSueur and Henderson. Our property goes back 152 years this year, when the old settlers came across and settled here. So we've played and splashed and we have swum and fished, we have fished, fished, fished, and all of our relatives before us have fished in the Minnesota River. But there came a period in time where the folks along the riverbank, LeSueur and Henderson, weren't able to eat the fish any longer, particularly in summer. And they weren't able to swim in the river any longer. So we grew up the river no longer being the friend that our relatives found it to be. So spring of the year, the fish were good, the fish were quite edible, but there's a lot of slime in the river during the summertime because of the various materials that are put in, so we're the original river rats.

Q: Let's go back to your family ??? heritage and tell me a little bit more about your nationalities and how you ended up at your Rush River and ??? where I do believe you're from.

B: My nationality is mainly German, also Swiss, mother had some Polish in her. And they settled, my grandmother's people settled in St. Henry, which is a little bit east of LeSueur and the Idens, my dad's family settled in the LeSueur area.

A: Your people were part of the building of the City of LeSueur.

B: Right, my grandfather was a mason.

A: And one of your great uncles helped build the church. So you were the folks who built the understory kind of LeSueur, while our people were farmers. There were nine brothers and sisters in this family. When God said, "Go ye therefore and populate the earth," the Straubs and Idens took it very seriously. And so there are a lot of Idens around, there are a lot of Straubs around. But we grew up really poor, but always with enough to eat and really wealthy and not knowing that...

- B:we were poor.
- A: ...how really wealthy we were, because of the food that came off the land. So we like to bring it down to this point, where the nourishment from the plants and the Minnesota River Valley are part of our bodies and our bones and our minds and our ????. So we are part of the soil and will return to that soil.
- Q: Okay, so we are doing this oral history project and it's on the history of the modern movement to clean up the Minnesota River. We say it began in the late 1980's, surrounding the Minnesota River Assessment Project and the Citizens Advisory Committee that was convened by Greg Pulsey of the NPCA and their assessment of the river and then they came up with the recommendations. However, do you agree that that's when the movement began, and if it's not then, just tell me when you think it did begin?
- B: 1980's.
- A: Yes, okay, yes, because that takes us before the oil coming down the Minnesota River. I mean that takes us up to that time. Up until that time, we had very little recourse of anything we could do. And so, on a particular occasion, we saw the soybean oil moving on the Minnesota River and we could do nothing, we could do little but cry. And knowing that the river runs through us, not past us, the river runs through us, we could do nothing but cry. There was no one to cry to, there was nobody who would really get upset until after that point in time, people began to notice, notice the condition of the river and the slime in the summertime, and direct deposits of peas and corn juice and chemicals of all kinds. And so it was after that period of time. Now it just happens that a fellow by the name of Larry Granger was on that Citizens Advisory Committee, along with other folk, but he's the one then who came up with certain dreams, such as the building in which we are now. He's part of this dream. So, did we notice change? Yes. In particular after the Arne Carlson and Joanne Benson meeting at where the Blueth River and the Minnesota River came together. And the pledge that they made at that time, was we're going to make the Minnesota River swimmable and fishable and all kinds of neat things that we dreamed of and believed in. However, it did not come to pass immediately, but it began to get people stirred up.
- B: Right, and that's when we really became excited, I think too, that there was maybe some hope in cleaning up the river.
- A: So it was about that time that we started Nature Neighbors, because we discovered that kids didn't know the bugs and the beetles and the frogs in their backyards or the names of anything, that we'd become so civilized that we don't know what's going on around us anymore. So some 30 years ago is when we started our Nature Neighbor Program.
- B: Which is a summer program for the months of June and July.
- A: We didn't feel that enough was being done in environmental education at that time, and so we felt that if we did something in the summertime, maybe it would carry over into school curriculums after that time. So more and more people got on the bandwagon. A good example is St Olaf College. St. Olaf College, you could write a grant and you could get plants of certain

kinds to put at your schoolyard. They took people like ourselves, teachers, north to the environmental learning centers there and spent time with us. They came back and advised us and if we go to Hilltop Elementary School on top of the hill, today we can see the results of a beautiful park area that was set off by St. Olaf.

B: It was called the SNAP Program.

A: School Nature Area Project. They were big instigators.

B: So we began nature area at the school.

A: And all kinds of schools replicated that, did that around Southern Minnesota. Parental involvement, parents helping plant the trees, parents getting involved with the plants.

B: Kids helping to water and take care of the plants.

A: Ownership, that's where ownership of your area at schools came up.

B: Exactly. And then as we were teaching, then we would use that area, take our kids out in the area and use that during the school year then, too, as part of our science curriculum and environmental education.

Q: Can you let us know your history with teaching?

B: Okay, I started in Owatanna, teaching and taught first grade. And then from there went to Ferrbol, we taught in Ferrbol for about 18 years, and then we taught in LeSueur at the parochial school, St. Anne's School there for about 12 years. And then I taught at Park Elementary in LeSueur for one year and then I came over to Hilltop for about 12 years now and taught mainly kindergarten, 1st grade, ended up with a multi-age first and second grade here in Henderson

A: Barbara will you tell us some of the strange creatures that you had in your classroom please?

B: Yes, mainly we would have, we were raising sheep at the time and goats. And so we would have a lamb that needed, where the mother rejected it or whatever, so we'd bring it to school and bottle feed it.

A: In the classroom, right?

B: In the classroom. It got to the point where we would even, we were putting Pampers on the lamb and we'd take it outside when we had recess and the kids could watch it run and play.

A: Rumor had it that you raised chickens in your classroom.

B: Yes, we did that too. We even had a mother hen come in one time.

A: Rumor had it that you even had plants in your classroom.

B: Oh we did, it was wonderful, and we always had an incubator going too. And so we had all kinds of little critters that we hatched out, goslings and ducklings.

A: Doesn't sound very sterile to me.

B: It wasn't very sterile. Now we probably would not be allowed to do that, but you know what? That's what the kids remember too.

A: Forty, fifty years later, they'll still talk about the lambs and the Pampers and the chickens and that kind of thing and the little goats running down the hall kicking their heels.

B: We taught about 45 years on this.

A: Meanwhile, I got railroaded to the side and became an elementary administrator for 27 years, biggest mistake I ever made, except we were able to introduce environmental education into the classroom and that's when that movement came about, was in the 70's, 80's, somewhere in there. And so being an administrator, we were able to have an effect. I was principal of New Strand Elementary School for three years, the most wonderful three years in that segment of our lives because it was woods and it was deer and it was ??? teachers and kids, a rural area. So then when we were in Hilltop School, we were able to use the SNAP program to help the community, and that's what it's all about is, to help the community build a park-like area, which is still there in all its beauty today, ready for kids to learn.

Q: What park is that?

A: It's called the Art and Barb Straub Nature Park. There's a big sign up there.

B: At Hilltop School, embarrassing to us.

A: We must tell you one incident that occurred. A parent brought in a hollow log with wood duck eggs in the hollow log. So we had it in our classroom, waiting for, I don't know what we were waiting for. One night, during a school board meeting, the wood duck eggs exploded in the heat of the school board meeting and we had to evacuate the building. That was kind of a nature misstep or miss egg or rotten egg.

Q: This next question will help give the background of the impetus, if you could tell again the story of when you first started thinking about the Minnesota River, your earliest experiences.

Q: Tell us what lies at the heart of the issue for you when it comes to the effort to restore the Minnesota River?

A: There were a couple of pivotal moments that really angered and saddened us. The greatest was the day we were on the riverbank of a March/April. The ice had just passed and so all of the logs and debris from up river were flowing downstream. And at three o'clock of an afternoon, the sun was just right, it was shining on the river, and we saw a rainbow sheen. And the rainbow moved on down the river towards us and after it had passed, a muskrat crawled out of the river and died at our feet from hypothermia. It was spring migration time for the mallard ducks and other ducks, and so as that sheen of soybean oil went down the river, we felt

absolutely hopeless and helpless. There was no one to call at the time, there was no one to notify, there was nobody to complain to. It made us so angry. And then later, the sheen got to St. Paul and eventually Lake Peppin. And so lots of people became involved, lots of people became angry, but the pollution went on. Another pivotal movement—I do a lot of swimming in the Minnesota River, I love to swim the Minnesota River. You get up to your neck in the Minnesota River and the water goes by and you think, this water is coming from South Dakota, North Dakota, Iowa, 38 counties in Minnesota, and it just flows over you and you feel so free in the water. So I swim across the river to the mouth of Rush River and the Minnesota River and Rush River were at the same height. And this effluent from the Rush River was flowing into the Minnesota River and I swam through it. And it tore my soul because I was swimming through almost pure hog manure. And it just sucked away my very soul. And then I was screaming, “Something has to be done.” And that’s part of why we began working with kids is, something has to be done.

- B: Also, the erosion that has happened by our property; we’ve seen it. Our bank has just disappeared and disappeared and we have seen the misuse of the river by kids mainly, people that will come down and take their ATVs right on the sandbar, go right into the river with their ATVs and that just should not be. Or even motorized boats with these big, big motors that they’re using and you see the waves that are whipping the soil and everything, these banks.
- A: When we placed our cabin on the river, we were 100 feet from the Minnesota River with a border of trees. In 1993 the flood wiped out the border of trees. Today we’re three steps from the Minnesota River. The all-terrain vehicles have had an immense impact on Rush River and what’s happened there. Off the road trucks have had a tremendous impact. Fortunately, laws have been passed and it always comes to laws must be passed in order to bring people around. People still break those laws, but not in the incredible numbers that they did at that time. But it still goes on.
- Q: As far as you can remember, recount how the Minnesota River Movement emerged, how it grew and what your role was in it.
- B: Well it would have gone back again to Arne Carlson.
- A: After the Citizen Advisory Committee meeting, after Arne Carlson’s pledge, we have to pinpoint a couple of critical people and organizations that sprang up. And one was Scott Sparlin and his activity. Scott started small, going out to the schools, singing songs to get kids motivated. And his songs touched the hearts of folks, especially kids. Scott started then the cleanup of the gutters, Scott started painting the sewer covers yellow so that people would say, “Wait a minute, the water from this street is going down into the Minnesota River.” So the organization CURE, Clean Up the River Environment, sprang out of that. And so then many other people became organized. Our role, of all things, was a little Notre Dame nun in Mankato, Minnesota, by the name of Sister Gladys Schmidt, started the organization called the Sabbath Team. And so, such a natural thing because here is our Bible. Our Bible is filled with creation and nature and stories and poems about the beauty of the earth, but it’s not being preached from the pulpit, and the pulpit is not taking notice of it. So Sister Gladys and her team began reaching out to the various churches and asking them to get committed toward how can we improve our waters? How can we have prayer service? We had prayer services here in Henderson, Minnesota, where we blessed the waters of the river. And then various little teams sprang up.

We had a river Sabbath celebration at LeSueur, river celebration here at Henderson. And other church people picked up on it and began bringing into their church, their worship celebrations where it had not been before.

A: Hey, an aside though. We've got all these people running around talking about salvation and salvation, etc. if there's no earth left, what are you going to save? You can preach all you want about saving your soul, but if there's no earth left, what's there to save?

A: The other opportunity that we're blessed to have is we are called into churches of many denominations to be part of worshipping on a particular Sunday. And we're able to talk about, preach about, teach about, nature and God and how it's all interrelated. And I think that gives us the greatest satisfaction to be able to do that and tie it in directly to scripture. And so that's where we're at is, every opportunity we're able to have with adults to preach and teach, we do. So where do we fit in? That's one of the segments that we're blessed with.

B: We do piano and organ at all different churches too, so we do a lot of things with that too.

A: As the deer longs for running streams, so my soul longs for you my God.

B: We say we are Roaming Catholics.

Q: Can you tell us about a project, or some of the projects that you've been involved in related to river restoration?

A: The major project was the Hilltop Park Restoration. We're really proud of what happened up there. It was a labor, but it involved community, community is what it's all about. At the present time, let's go number two. Number two is our Nature Neighbor Program, which started in LeSueur, where we took the kids out into their neighborhoods and enlarged their knowledge of their immediate environments. Project number three was the, in our immediate classrooms, we were able to have science as a central study and you can teach kids how to read and do math using science. You don't have to just stick with the rudiments of reading and math. So that would be one of our impacts, would be to get kids turned on using nature stories and that kind of thing to reading. Here's the other part. We were given the opportunity for many years to write for the "Henderson Independent." And so we would take what was happening in the immediate environment in Henderson and they accepted it into the newspaper. So we were writing a weekly column about what's going on. Like what's the name of the fish that is not in the Minnesota River Barbara?

B: The piranha.

A: There are no piranhas in the Minnesota River, right?

B: Until one year when we were swimming the Minnesota River and a fisherman caught this fish that we did not recognize and discovered that there was a piranha in the Minnesota River.

A: Not only that, but that's some of the (inaudible), you will never believe that an armadillo was run over and killed in Henderson, Minnesota a number of years ago, and that was repeated again this year. We have the armadillo. But our nature project was our nature centers in the

schools, making people, adults, aware of what's in their environment. When we retired, we have brought those creatures, we've been invited to bring those creatures here to the J. R. Brown Center for people to see them on exhibit. And through the efforts of Mrs. Dolores Higgin, we now have a mini science museum on the main street of Henderson, Minnesota for anyone to visit during office hours any day. So what's our main focus? Our main focus is education, to the bees and the butterflies and everything that flies. We discovered an insect this past week that does not belong, it should not have hatched at this time of year, but ran into thousands of them last week and so we are constantly learning as well, and sharing that with folks that are interested.

B: We feel that our kids know more about the rain forest than what they know about their own backyard and what's happening there. And we feel if they don't know about things, they're not going to respect things. And so that's what our concern is, to get kids aware of what actually is in their backyard. And we live on the river, that they should know about the river and what's happening to the river. And so that's what we try to do too with our programs for our kids.

A: Major educational program, counted for the last ten years has been no child left behind. So when the author came along with no child left inside, we said, hey, that's a great slogan. But now, it's nature deficit disorder. We don't know who invented the term, but baby, that's where it's at, nature deficit disorder. Get them outside, get them away from the technological gadgets.

A: Through our nature programs, through our educational organization called "Feathers," we're able to take programs up and down the Minnesota River Valley. So this year we've been to Marshall, Blueth, Mapleton, Arlington, Green Isle, Henderson, Hutchinson, Jordan, Bloomington and Chaska. So we're able to open the eyes of teacher and youngsters with the materials we take to their schools, and it's all volunteer. There's no cost to the schools. So you asked about projects, that's a biggie.

B: And even to the elderly, we go to the nursing homes too, and they're very much interested too, and they help spread the word too.

Q: Is there anything you'd like to say about the various agencies and organizations that are involved in this work and your relationships to them?

A: I think we'll stay away from that question if that's okay, the reason being that we're members of those organizations.

B: Art took two classes now, Master Naturalist classes to keep him going.

A: The first one was at Rasmussen Park in Mankato. That one was called Big Woods and Big Rivers and that was a three-month, once-a-week program. This past spring, the same 40-hour course on Prairies and Potholes, and it's all part of the Minnesota Naturalist Program.

Q: What are you most proud of when you look back on your work on the Minnesota River?

B: We were asked to do a program in the cities at a golf club for a group that was being recognized for their environmental efforts in the classroom. And we got there and gave our little blip and

we were one of the recipients of the award, but they didn't tell us. So we made \$10,000 last October. We're still in shock over that.

Q: What are you most proud of when you think back on your work?

A: We can see former students.

B: Right, it's mainly because of the kids and like one of our Nature Neighbor kids is Emily Anderson.

A: We have a young lady who is now an environmental lawyer in Alaska. So we're really proud that she went from Nature Neighbors to be an environmental attorney. But a lot of young people who have retained and maintained and grown in their interest in nature and now are active themselves in replicating the programs that we have. But one of the things we're most proud of, there's a little charter school called Green Isle Charter School, and for three or four years we've given them nature programs. So this spring, they invited us back to be interviewed as elders. Now we always thought that elders were old people. Here we're interviewed by these young people and then they composed a full drama with music and articulation, a full program around our lives, our river lives. So numbed off on the little kids in Green Isle, Minnesota, interviewing the elders.

B: Elder Celebration.

A: Another thing we're really proud of is this room and what this interview is occurring in August. August 18th will be turned into a child's activity center where kids will have an opportunity to learn more about hummingbirds and Monarch butterflies and cowbirds and the river and the river and the river table over here. So this will turn into a children's paradise in a month-and-a-half.

B: During the Henderson Hummingbird Hurrah.

A: We'll be hurrahing here. Children's art contests, writing contests. At the moment, we are judging 300 drawings and stories, 300 entries in a writing and artistic, creative writing and creative artistic hummingbird contest, all part of this program that will go on up here called Hummingbird Hurrah. During that time, the adults will be down the street watching hummingbirds being banded, so they can be checked when they go back to Costa Rica. In addition there will be many, many speakers, including Jim Gilbert and others who will be here to talk about bird and nature interests. In mid-August, the place will come alive with nature programs.

Q: What has your biggest frustration?

B: Lack of funding, things can't be done. A lot of it because of a lack of funding.

A: Things, events, are not moving fast enough for us. We're elders and so our frustration is we thought the river cleanup movement would occur more quickly than it has. However, we're seeing so many wonderful changes. Today we could swim in the Minnesota River, here in Henderson, Minnesota, and not be afraid of the water. Today we could eat walleye out of the

Minnesota River and enjoy it. In fact, to tell you a secret, the walleyes are biting today under the bridge in LeSueur, Minnesota and we had two meals last week. We're not afraid to eat the fish, where once upon a time, we were. And it's because we're coming to the end of our lives and had hoped to see even more. But the communication that's going on and the gathering of people with CURE and other organizations, the focus on the river is much stronger. So for a bit we get a little depressed, and then we rejoice on what is occurring and what has happened and what is going to happen.

Q: What did you think when Arne Carlson, the Governor of Minnesota, announced the Minnesota River should be cleaned up in ten years, making it fishable and swimmable? In 1992 he made that pronouncement, what did you think?

B: We were so excited when we heard that 'cause we thought there is hope for the Minnesota River at that time.

A: Barbara is an optimist, Art's a pessimist and I thought, these are political words. However, we were surprised with the amount of action that did occur afterward.

Q: What do you know about the Minnesota River Board or the Minnesota River Watershed Alliance?

A: We would consider ourselves more as the worker ants and haven't become involved at that level.

B: But they are working, those organizations are working through and doing a lot, I think, trying to get things moving.

A: This brings us back thought to Scott Kadelka. Scott is part of the alliance, so here we are, the worker bees, and Scott is one of the people who is able to move and groove and get to know people and advise us and encourage us. Scott and Kim are the encouragers and so that much we know. And the amount of research that is being done is most encouraging, so that when certain groups say you haven't done enough research, they can no longer say that.

Q: What did you think of the Upstream/Downstream Friendship Tour process? Are you familiar with it?

A: No, we missed that segment.

Q: Are you familiar with the TMDL process Total Maximum Daily Load and the water quality standards developed by the Pollution Control Agency? What do you think about and what do you know about those? Any attitudes or beliefs?

A: I hate to say that but we have to go back to once again, we're at a different level than those organizations, so that's the most we can say.

Q: So where do you see things going from here? What do you think the next 25, 30 years holds for the Minnesota River?

- A: I wish that we had done our homework better because yesterday the Audubon Society came up with the announcement regarding the amount of money that's going to be spent in improving the Gulf of Mexico. And it's like 20 billion dollars, I believe, for restoring the damage that was done by the oil spill. And so the blurb just came out to us yesterday, we made copies of it, it's on the kitchen table right now to be more exact as to the figures, but that is tremendous encouragement, that they did do something about that oil spill and are doing something about that oil spill. We thought business would be as usual, but we see that's turned around.
- B: That's encouraging.
- A: And to be able to say to you today, I won't go down to the river and drink of the river today, will you?
- B: No.
- A: No, but we will water our flowers and vegetables with water from the Minnesota River today and due to the amount of focus by so many and the amount of cooperation that is occurring, we are encouraged. We can't die happy yet, but we can die without having our soul sucked from us by slime from hog manure and cow manure.
- B: And just the fact that more people are aware of what is happening to the river with the pollution and with the erosion. And I think they would like to do something about it and maybe if you keep encouraging.
- Q: Is there any relationship from your work with children right now and the future of the Minnesota River you'd like to talk about?
- A: Well maybe a good example might be taking the children to the river today, having them excited about what they discovered, making them aware of how we're connected with our history, with the animals, the shells, the mussels, becoming aware of that. We know some of those youngsters from the past have been very turned on and are activists now. So we'll never know what came out of today's visit to the sandbar. We're expecting big things of those kids.