

Interview with John Hickman  
Voices of the River - Oral History Project

by [Anne Queenan](#)

The project has been made possible by the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund through the vote of Minnesotans on November 4, 2008.

Administered by the Minnesota Historical Society.



It is also supported by matched donations made to Clean Up the River Environment (CURE).



Q. Can you tell me about your family ethnic heritage and how you came to MN?

A. My family ethnic heritage is mostly English. My ancestors on my mother's side came from Canada. And my father's family was in Ind and KY As a child, my father had a job that got him transferred . I was born in AL I lived in IL. I lived in CT. I lived in Montana. And I came to MN to go to college and never left.

Q. When was that?

A. I came here in 1970.

Q. This Oral History project is the history of the modern movement to clean up the MN River. We think it started in the 1980s when the Citizen Advisory Committee was started to take the River Assessment Project's work and research and make its recommendations; to review whatever findings came from the MPCA.

Do you agree that that's when the movement began, and if not, tell me when you think it began?

Q. I think the movement began in about 1974 when Ed Krozier of the US Fish and Wildlife Service had a job in Fort Snelling right across from where we're standing now and he lived in Burnsville and he had to drive across the river everyday. And his job was to identify spots in the country that would make for a good national wildlife refuge. And he thought the Minnesota Valley right here in the metro area would make for a good national wildlife refuge. And so he started that idea back then, 1974, or thereabouts.

Ed's job with the Fish and Wildlife Service was to identify places around the country that would be good candidates to become national wildlife refuges. Normally, he could just make those recommendations, they would go up the chain of command and eventually he probably would get his recommendations approved. In this case, he knew there was no way that the Fish and Wildlife Service would ever even consider establishing a national wildlife refuge that literally is within sight of a major international airport or the heart of this metropolitan area.

He figured the only possible way to make that happen would be through an act of Congress. And the only way you can get an Act

of Congress is when you get the Congress people's attention through widespread public support. So Ed hooked up with a couple of citizens from Bloomington – Elaine Mellott and Maryalice Seal. He got them involved as active partners with him working behind the scenes and they presented the public face of this effort to create a national wildlife refuge and darned if it didn't happen. These people were organized, they were committed and they had a good cause.

And they generated support up and down the river. They made public presentations to school groups and civic organizations and city councils and you name it. And they generated the public support that eventually got U.S. Senator Mondale and U.S. House of Representatives member James Oberstar to sponsor bills to establish the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge. And that happened in 1976.

And I think it was then that the public at large and various agencies had to take another look at the Minnesota River. They had to say, "What, the Minnesota River in the metropolitan area is a national wildlife refuge? I just thought it was a dump," everybody would be thinking back then. And so that's when attention first was focused, I believe, in recent history on the Minnesota River.

Q. Can you repeat exactly that part -- about the last two sentences --before that airplane flew over?

A. So, by going up and down the river and generating support from school groups, from civic organizations, from the local units of government, they were able to get the attention and eventually the support of a US Senator, Walter Mondale, and the member of the House of Representative, James Oberstar,

to sponsor the bills that created the Act of Congress to establish this National Wildlife Refuge. And that, I believe, is what caused people throughout the state, for really the first time, to Look at the MN River as a resource and not just as a storm sewer.

Q. Can you tell me when you first started thinking about the Minnesota River? What was the earliest experience?

A. (And I'll wait for that guy... yep I'll wait.) Those planes are going over the part of the refuge that's called the Old Cedar Avenue Bridge. It's a mile or two east of here. And it's the most popular birdwatching spot in the Twin Cities – and it's this fabulous, glorious area. And that was probably my first experience with the Minnesota River was by visiting that bird refuge.

All that airplane noise that we're hearing is directly over that. But it was actually through a tributary of the Minnesota River called 9 mile creek that really connected me to the Minnesota River.

My wife and I moved to Nine Mile Creek in Bloomington in 1989 because it's such a beautiful valley and also an excellent birdwatching spot.

Our house sits right on the lip of the bluff of the Nine Mile Creek valley. There's a public park just down the street from our house. And literally a week after we moved in, I was walking my dog down in the park and here was a guy who had survey equipment and I asked him what he was up to... And he said, "well, it's a big project, a big construction project," I said, "Well, who's doing it?" and he said, "Well, it's the 9 Mile Creek Watershed District" And I thought, "well, what's a watershed district?"

And because of my love for the valley and my concern that there's going to be a big construction project of some kind, I started investigating and I ended up spending about the next six months of my life learning "What is a watershed? What is a watershed district? What other units of government are involved ... the Board of Water Soil Resources, the Department of Natural Resources, the US Army Corps of Engineers." I learned that there is something called the environmental review process in MN that requires project undertakers to consider the environmental impacts of their work and I was actually able to successfully submit a request for a formal environmental review on the Nine Mile Creek project. And in the course of all of that, I made several presentations to the Bloomington City Council and one of the members of the council, Coral Heul, was also at that time President of Friends of the MN Valley. And I guess Coral liked my presentations enough that she asked me to join the Board of Directors of the Friends. And I did that in 1991, and here it is 2012 and I'm still on the board.

Friends of the MN Valley... that's the name of the group - a very friendly group.

Q. What are your thoughts with how things are going currently today with friends of the MN Valley?

A. Friends, you know, 20 years after its inception are still going strong. And after the initial 8 or 10 years in which our focus was almost exclusively in keeping the local MN congressional delegation informed and educating them about the value of the refuge and advocating for funds for acquisition. Even though the refuge was established in 1976, it only got a little bit of money for land acquisition. And so every year, the refuge had to go back to

Congress and ask for another appropriation so they could buy another few hundred acres from willing landowners.

And the next thing was that Friends focused on getting Congress to approve funding for this incredible visitor center. That happened in 1989 and so after that and about the time that I joined the organization, the Friends were embarking on a broader mission to make a positive impact not just within the boundaries of the refuge but in the lower MN River watershed as a whole. And that is of crucial importance because you can't just isolate the water that's in the river that's running through the refuge. All of that water comes from land up above in the watershed.

And so in order to have a healthy refuge, you need to have a healthy watershed. And so the Friends started a watershed initiative and have been doing several projects.

One of the big ones going on currently is up river away and away from the river and away in New Auburn, MN at High Island Lake. Our staff has been cultivating relationships with local residents there. And they have turned what was almost a dead lake into now what might be a world-class walleye fishery. And its all through generating local public support. Just as that's how the MN Valley Refuge was created by the citizens generating local public support, that's the same approach that we take now.

And our other major project that we started about 8 yrs ago is called The Community's Clean Up for Water Quality. And that entails encouraging citizens to get out in their own yards and their own neighborhoods and to make sure that lawn clippings and leaves and other debris gets picked up and taken to the compost facility before it gets into the storm sewer system. Because all of those organic materials contain phosphorous and when phosphorous gets into water, it promotes the growth of algae and

you end up with water you don't want. And this Community Clean Up Project has been wonderful because it can be as small-scale as one homeowner getting out and raking the leaves out from his street. And then the next year, and this is what happens repeatedly with our program, the next year that neighbor will convince the whole block to get involved and then the whole neighborhood. And we've had a couple of success stories now where the city government itself has gotten serious about street sweeping and has changed their regime and made much more effective cleaning operations and we're cleaning up the MN River in the process, one yard at a time.

Q. So, now, go deep within and tell me what is at the heart of it for you when it comes to cleaning up the Minnesota River.

A. I think everyone might have a similar answer, I don't know. For me, I believe the planet and everything on it is worthy of respect. And human life and all other life depends on clean water.

My film-making partner, Jon Carlson's been a very good friend of mine for 35 years. And I still remember something he told me just within a few weeks of having met him, which is, "Stay as busy as you can doing whatever it is you enjoy the most, and eventually, someone will pay you to do it." And I had a career as a writer, a technical and creative writer, for an educational software company and I did some wonderful things with them. But I think I spent as much time as a volunteer with Friends of the Minnesota Valley, and with the Minnesota River Citizen's Advisory Committee and many other projects.

I just think that we can have clean water if we decide that we will have it.

And, so now, after all of these years, I found myself getting paid to do what I enjoy the most which is to generate interest and commitment from people to join in the effort to get clean water.

Q. As far as you remember, can you recount how the MN movement emerged, how it grew and what your role has been in it?

A. There's reports going back to about the 1930s about studies that have been done and people decrying the poor condition of the MN River. And so there have been efforts ever since then to try to clean it up.

The effort to restore the MN River came with the establishment of the MN Valley National Wildlife Refuge through the way it happened - by citizens reaching out to other citizens, generating public support, generating such widespread public support that they got the attn of Congress - and an Act of Congress created this refuge. And since then, people have looked at the MN River in a different way.

And I suppose it depends on what each individual's own experiences are but to me the next big event was first the establishment in the late 1980s of the MN River Assessment Project. All of the state and local and federal agencies getting involved and doing a through and four year assessment of the condition of the MN River. And as that was drawing down and they were getting ready to reach their conclusions and make their recommendations, in 1992, Gov. Arne Carlson established the MN River Citizens Advisory Committee, of which I was a member. That committee's charge was to develop recommendations for the restoration of the river, to make it, in Arne Carlson's words, and in the words of the Clean Water Act, to make it fishable and swimmable.



And the Citizen's Advisory Committee, 30 people from all walks of life from throughout the MN River Basin, some citizens, a lot of agency people, farmers, people from the colleges and universities ... we took our job very seriously. And we thoroughly analyzed the information that the Assessment Project had produced. We had many speakers. And at the end of that period, by consensus, we determined ten things that we felt had to be done to restore the MN River. And we issued a final report, of which I was the author, called, "Working Together – A Plan to Restore the Minnesota River". And that report, I believe, was the next major development in the widespread effort to restore the MN River.

The report was well-received and at the very top, the first recommendation that I listed was to restore the MN River floodplain to its natural purpose – all 200,000 acres of it. And that's the item that got the newspaper coverage because, "What are you crazy? You want to get 200,000 acres taken out of crop production? Where are you going to get the money for that?" Well, it was a good idea! And we did get the money, at least half the money, we got 100,000 acres through the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, a joint program, about \$160 million from the fedl govt, another \$80 million from the state, and we restored 100,000 acres of the floodplain. And that by itself was a big attention getter. And it motivated people all up and down the river. People could see that we were doing something. And a few years after all of that CREP land was put in place, and the perennial vegetation had a chance to establish itself, you could look at the river and see that it was cleaner. In places where CREP land has been in place. If you measure the quality of the water downstream from those places, it is better.

And, we're doing similar things now throughout the entire basin, and slowly but surely, we're getting a cleaner MN River.

A. It's interesting bc I'm going to be talking – I've got to set up interviews now – part of this Prior Lake Spring Lake watershed district project we're doing, we need to explain what a watershed district is – and you can't do that without explaining what the BOWSER is. You can't do that without explaining county government agencies like the DNR, Pollution Control Agency, the Dept of Health. Cities have to develop their own water plans. It's, you know, units of government from the smallest township to the halls of Congress... there are individuals and agencies who are involved in water quality. And that I think is one of the biggest challenges that we face is helping see to it that all of these units of govt work together themselves and work together with citizens.

Q. Tell us about the project you've been working in.

A. So, the Citizen's Advisory Committee turned out to be pivotal in my life because I got to meet many of the leading experts and most active professionals from the various state agencies, from various nonprofit organizations, from people from the agricultural community all throughout the MN River Basin. And because I am a professional writer, or at least was at that time, I volunteered to write a report. And the report turned out very well.

And I think, obviously, it wouldn't have gone anywhere unless the recommendations were excellent and they were. But I also like to think that they read it because it was well-written and easy to read.

So, that experience and contribution kind of gave me entry to other opportunities as a volunteer. And even though I continued to work as a writer for the next 18 or 20 years, I stayed active as a volunteer with friends of the MN Valley and with the Audubon Center of the NorthWoods.

And it was only back in 2009 when I was at yet another meeting as a volunteer when someone suggested that “somebody ought to make a movie about the MN River. There’s a lot of beautiful places in the MN Basin, and there’s a lot of work being done that people just don’t know about.”

And that was a recommendation actually at a meeting of the Minnesota River Watershed Alliance, a volunteer organization that would take a vote on its priorities every year. And the idea to make a doc lost. It didn’t win. But I thought it was such a good idea. And it never would have occurred to me to make a film myself except for the fact that one of my very best friends is an emmy-award winning film-maker who also happens to be extremely knowledgeable about natural history and water quality. So I contacted my friend Jon Carlson and I said, “Hey, do you want to make a movie about the Minnesota River?” And he said “Yes”. And so then I set about trying to find money to make it happen and we eventually got support from a wide variety of organizations and agencies. And we spent the next year and a half or so making this film called River Revival – Working Together to Save the MN River. And again because my partner Jon Carlson put Ron Schara on the air for the very first time back in the 1970s, we had an easy introduction to him. And were able to persuade him to be the narrator, the host of the program. Ron is loved throughout the state by everyday common citizens and by state professionals alike. He is passionate about the MN River and so that gave our project a big boost and we were able to put River Revival in prime time on KARE 11 television where 85,000 people saw it. And we were able to get excerpts of the program on Ron Schara’s Minnesota Bound in the weeks leading up to the KARE 11 showing – 220,000 a week watch Minnesota Bound. So, I’ve become a strong advocate of the power of film and video

to communicate to a broad audience. We can reach literally tens of thousands of people with the information that we want to share.

Q. So, you've done a lot. What are you most proud of when you think about your work to help restore the Minnesota River?

A. For many years the accomplishment of which I was most proud personally was having written the recommendations for working together – A Plan to Restore the MN River, the final report of the MN River Citizens' Advisory Committee. So proud of it because first of all, the recommendations in there have stood the test of time. If you look through reports written just within the last few years by the Freshwater Society or by the University of Minnesota, if you look at the new guidelines of the McKnight Foundation, you'll find within all of those things elements of what we recommended in the Citizen's Advisory Report. I think I topped that, though, with the documentary River Revival – Working Together to Save the MN River because that reached a broad audience. We were able to put excerpts on Minnesota Bound, four weeks in a row, over 200,000 people got to see excerpts of the documentary. And when it was shown in prime time opposite 60 Minutes, it got just as many viewers as Sixty Minutes. I've run into many people - you know, the electrician that came to my house – people from all over when I mention that film, people have seen it.

What I'm most proud about is the reaction that we've gotten. The funding came from a wide variety of sources. We had the Fish and Wildlife Service. We had the Minnesota State University in Mankato. We had three different nonprofit groups. We had two different agribusiness groups, we had an engineering company. They all provided financial support and all of those agencies, all of those professions represented have had an extremely positive response to the documentary. So there was one night when there was two guys from the Citizen's Advisory Committee. One of

them was from the Pollution Control Agency and he told me that he thought the doc was wonderful. And the other one was a farmer who was not really supportive – one of the only people on the committee who did not endorse the final recommendations. And he told me that he liked the movie. And I hear that wherever I go and it just gives me such gratitude that I was able to produce something that is accurate and objective and entertaining.

Q. What's been your biggest frustration?

A. I tend not to get frustrated. But I guess if, uh, the word frustration it would be in the pace of change and the recognition by people outside of the MN River Basin that we in the MN River Basin are making progress. I think the River Revival doc went a long long way to help people see the progress that has been made and the commitment and the professionalism of the people who are working to solve the problems in the MN River Basin. I just wish we could go a little bit faster.

Another thing I find frustrating is how the farming community is often perceived. I learned early on in my work, especially with the Advisory Committee, that farmers want clean water just as much as everyone else. And the people who are probably doing more than anyone else on their own lands. They know that their soil and water have to be sustainable or their children are not going to be able to farm. And pressures from mostly the world of finance. You have the financial classes extracting profits from agriculture to the point that the farmer has to sometimes do things against his own beliefs just so he can make a living.

And I find it frustrating that some people put the blame on the farmer rather than blaming the system in which he has to operate.

Q. What did you think when Arne Carlson, the Governor of MN, announced that the MN River should be cleaned up in ten years – made to be fishable and swimmable – and in 1992, when he made that pronouncement, what did you think? Were you around? Did you hear it?

A. I watched it on tv. I watched Arne Carlson stand almost exactly where I'm standing right now and make that announcement. And I was excited about it. And it was only afterwards that I heard from Lynn Kolzey, the facilitator, the administrator with the Pollution Control Agency to invite me to join the Citizen's Advisory Committee, so I was already excited about it when I first heard him make that pledge from where we're standing right now.

Ten years seemed a bit ambitious, one might say. The Citizen's Advisory Committee took over 2 years meeting essentially as volunteers to develop our recommendations, to study all of the factors involved and develop solid suggestions and recommendations for how to clean up the river.

I liked it because it was similar to John F. Kennedy's challenge to the country to put a man on the moon in ten years. And we did that and it's because, you know, the necessary resources were devoted to it: people, time and money. And while we have made a tremendous amount of progress in the MN River Basin, I think we would have come a lot closer to reaching that ten year goal had the state of MN and its citizens taken Governor Carlson's challenge as seriously as the country took President Kennedy's challenge. Our first recommendation was to restore the MN River floodplain, all 200,000 acres of it. We got 100,000 acres. We're better off than we were but we only did half the job. So its unrealistic, I think, for people to complain that we haven't made fast enough progress when we haven't devoted the resources

necessary for it. You can't insist on having clean water and then cut the budget of the Pollution Control Agency by 40%. You can't expect to have worldclass fishing opportunities and cut the DNRs fishery specialists by half. If we're going to continue to make as much progress in the next ten years as we've made in the past 20 years, we need to stay focused on it, we need to prioritize it. We need to devote the resources to it. As Citizens, we can do little things like rake the leaves out of the street in front of our yard, or we can make movies, or we can bake cookies for a bake sale, everybody can do something but the main thing that everybody has to do is elect people who will represent their interest. If you want clean water, you can't vote for politicians who if they get into office are going to cut the funding for clean water.

Q. What do you know about the MN River Board or the MN River Watershed Alliance?

A. The MN River Board is composed of county commissioners from the counties on the MN River Basin. I believe there are 39 counties that are totally within, or partly within the MN River Basin and I think of those counties have opted to join the MN River Board. It's an organization that has had success and has made progress.

It is not, however, what the MN River Cit Advisory Committee recommended. We recommended that within the twelve major tributaries of the MN River Basin, that joint powers organizations be established. And you've had state of the art monitoring station at the mouth of that major tributary where it entered the MN River. And all of the orgs, counties, soil and water conservation districts, city govts, all of the govtmtnal organizations would be part of a single organization that would address the challenges within their major tributary. Instead, what we have, in the MN River Board, the same limitation that we have with county water plans and soil

and water conservation districts which is they are defined by the political boundaries of a county which have no direct relationship to the rules that govern how water moves. The watershed. Those geographic boundaries that determine where water flows. If we organized our institutions and our activities around watershed instead of political boundaries I think we'd make a lot more progress.

Q. What did you think of the upstream downstream Friendship Tour process that recently was embarked upon?

A. The Friendship Tour that brought together the upstreamers from the western and central mostly agricultural parts of the MN Basin and the downstreamers which includes some folks in the metro area and also the folks from the Mississippi River down to Lake Pepin. It's an appropriately named endeavor, The Friendship Tour, because it emphasized and demonstrated that if you just get people together and enjoy a social setting where there's good food and maybe a little beverage that when people are just talking to each other in an informal setting, they'll find out they have a lot of things in common. And they'll be more open to and appreciate one another's perspective. And I think especially from the perspective of the city folks, the downstreamers, the Lake Pepin folks, to have an opportunity to our farms in Western Minnesota and gain an appreciation of what farmers do for a living. That it has had a tremendous impact in giving people optimism and opening channels of communication. Where I think, I still see room for progress is in the downstreamers, and this would be people active in this Friendship Tour program, as well as the public at large. There tends to be exclusive focus on the Mississippi River and especially Lake Pepin. They think that as long as we can have a clean Lake Pepin, we'll be good. And what these downstreamers don't always recognize is there's plenty of pollution, there's plenty of damage done in the MN River Basin



before the water and the sediment and the pollutants ever get to Lake Pepin. And the people on the Minnesota River care just as much about clean water and enjoy their own natural resources just as much as the people in the Lake Pepin area do. And as much as we seek out the support and assistance from people outside the MN River Basin, we have to recognize that it's the people who live in the MN River Basin, and the people who work in the MN River Basin, they are the ones who are going to clean up the river. So, we need support and encouragement. As I like to mention, We need politicians. We need elected officials from around the state who prioritize clean water. So one of the best things that somebody from Red Wing can do is elect somebody down there who will be supportive of MN River Restoration efforts.

Q. Are you familiar with the TMDL....

A. I have some familiarity with the TMDL process. I know it sets benchmarks for Clean Water.

Total Maximum Daily Load, a term only a bureaucrat who doesn't have a window in his office would come up with. I wish they called it water quality standards because I think that's what they're talking about.

It's an excellent process that identifies the carrying capacity, if you will, the daily load that a particular body of water can handle, and still be considered clean. And those numbers can vary from one body of water to another. The MN River is always going to have a higher acceptable amount of sediment in it just because of the nature of those watersheds. The land surrounding the river and the MN River has a lot of sediment that easily is transported by water so there's going to be more there. There's not going to be as much in the St. Croix because it goes thru land that has much more, you know, uh, rock as a substrate and so it will have less

sediment but we still have to try to keep the sediment at an acceptable level.

It's good that these standards are set at a federal level requiring states to assess the quality of their waters. It's good that the state has been doing that through the Pollution Control Agency. And again, we probably would be making more progress if we properly funded these agencies that we want to do this important work. And it's good that there is opportunity for the public to participate. They have public comment periods, they have open houses, and if you pay attention and you're willing to show up at meetings every so often. That's what I did for many, many, many years and you get to understand the project a little better, you get to know the people who are doing the work and you become a contributor.

Q. I do have a question. So I did read every page of that Citizen's Advisory Committee Report and when you go through those top ten recommendations and you've already answered about flood plains... what about the other nine. Where are we on them?

A. Well, the CAC Report is titled WorkingTogether. It has two meanings. It means that people have to work together but it also means that those recommendations all have to work together. We're not going to get a clean MN River if we only pick out one or two or three of those things. We need to restore the flood plains and we've gotta have that job done but that in itself isn't a clean MN River. We need to restore wetlands to increase the number of wetlands and the percentage of acreage of wetlands and that's been just barely holding its own and not really increasing enough. We need to increase technical assistance to local and regional units of government and that hasn't happened because we haven't prioritized it in our budgets. And so the Water Resources Center at MN State University Mankato, the local regional facility – another one that doesn't get enough funding. But they did a

survey with all of the original members of the Cit Adv Committee they could find and asked for an assessment. I don't think any of the ten recommendations got more than four out of six or five out of six on the scale. We have a lot of work to do on some of the recommendations. And we have made enough progress on several of the recommendations that we can measure cleaner water in the MN River now.

So, we're making progress and we will continue to do that.

Q. What is your favorite spot on the MN River?

A. This is my favorite spot where I'm standing because of the tremendous view that we have of the National Wildlife Refuge literally a stone's throw away from the international airport. It is also where Governor Carlson stood and said we needed to clean up the MN River in ten years and where he formed the Citizen's Advisory Committee.