Interview with Scott Sparlin
Voices of the River - Oral History Project

by Anne Queenan

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Q: If you can just tell me about your family ethnic heritage and how you got to Minnesota.

A: I'm your quintessential Native American, mixed with several nationality blends. I'm German, I'm Scottish, my grandmother was Jewish; my grandfather was German on both sides. My grandfather was German and Scottish and my grandmother was Scottish-English and my other grandmother was Norwegian. So I'm a mutt. I'm a real mutt. I am a Native American, yes. I'm not an Indian, but I'm a Native American. I was born here; I know no other home, I'll die here. It makes me a Native American.

Q: We're doing this oral history project on the history of the modern movement to clean up the Minnesota River, which we say began in the late 1980's, surrounding the

Minnesota River Assessment Project and the Citizens Advisory Council that Lynn Kolze convened for the MPCA. Do you agree that's when the movement began, and if not, tell us what you think and when?

A: The Minnesota River Movement began precisely when -- The Minnesota River Assessment Project started in 1988. And the movement began in 1989, during the actual study, prior to the implementation phase of it, the beginning of the convening of the Citizens Advisory Committee. Prior to the convening of the Citizens Advisory Committee, there was activity actually. We started an organization here in New Ulm, which was an outgrowth of the New Ulm Area Sport Fishermen. I approached the Minnesota DNR and asked them a question about the appearance of the Minnesota River, because my son had asked me why the water looked like chocolate milk when we were fishing alongside of the river. And I went out to the DNR office, regional office here, and I asked "why does it look like that?" They said, "It's funny you should ask. There's a study going on right now, it's in the second year. It's a four-year study; it'll be done in 1992." And they explained some of the preliminary data that they had gleaned from the study that they had started and there were some things that were pretty obvious at the time. And I took that back to the fishing club, which I had created and was president of at the time and was for 25 years after that. Another life sentence. But at that time, the fishing club said "that's way too big for just us. We need a coalition". So I said okay, then we should start one because this is not right. What we're seeing is not right. This is something that the public needs to know about and we need to do something about. So we started trying to organize as many people up and down the Minnesota River as we could. We started with sportsmen type groups, conservation type groups, but wasn't really getting anywhere too quickly until about 1991. The Land Stewardship Project, I believe Audrey Arner, facilitated a meeting up there and Patrick Moore was in the audience, I remember. Went up to Montevideo asking for help and that's when I think that spurred that activity up there and got going and said we need a group in the upper part of the basin, we need a group in the middle part of the basin, and we need a group on the lower part of the basin. Just so happens that then after that, three groups kind of emerged - Clean Up the River Environment (CURE) there in the upper basin, the Coalition for Clean Minnesota River here in the middle part of the basin and then Friends of the Minnesota Valley, who had a stronghold at the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge. And I'm kind of fast-forwarding a little bit there, but that's the genesis of it. I mean it kind of started itself. It got going because other people heard about it, you know.

Q: So you went up to Montevideo?

A: I did. I went up to Montevideo to ask for help.

Q: How did you know who to talk to?

A: I didn't. I just stayed; I got a hold of, I'm struggling to remember. I remember Audrey Arner was facilitating the meeting and I know Patrick Moore was in the audience and a lot of the original people that eventually formed CURE were there. And it was at the Montevideo VFW, the Lac qui Parle Lake Association, the Land Stewardship Project, Montevideo Rod and Gun Club, and Pheasants Forever. Those four groups hosted the meeting and I went up and said, "Hey, we're trying to form a coalition here, trying to get something going on the Minnesota River. We need help," and spoke to the effect that this is what the data is showing us about the river and that we need to start doing something and that it needs to be citizen-driven. And so out of that then, I think things just started to simmer and simmer and we had our first river rally in New Ulm here in 1991, I think, and we invited all the state agencies and everybody that was involved here and we had a big shindig and were at the fairground. No actually, we went to Flanders State Park and we invited someone who was with the Hudson River Keeper, Bob Boyle, who at the time was the senior editor for Sports Illustrated Magazine. I invited him to come here and speak on what happened on the Hudson River and how they managed to make the progress that they did in the first 100 to 200 miles of the Hudson, because they had a movement going there. And he came here and gave a talk then and inspired a lot of people and got a lot of media coverage and it was a big splash and people started paying attention. So the movement kind of boiled out of that.

Q: So tell us when you first started thinking about the Minnesota River, your earliest experience.

A: Well it was when I first moved to New Ulm. I grew up on a river. I grew up on the other big Minnesota river, the Mississippi, and spent a lot of time on the Mississippi, swimming and fishing and so on. And when I got to New Ulm, I really liked it here because there was a river here and it reminded me of our river. So I really loved fishing, got out there fishing and now I'm fishing for something totally different than I was used to. Catfish and, I had never seen a carp. I had never seen a sheep head. A lot of the fish that are indigenous to this river we didn't have in the Mississippi. So I was just having a blast and ended up really liking it and those were my first, it was a great place to come and recreate at night. You were kind of bored, you don't have any money, you're in your 20's; let's just go fishing on the river, you know, that can't cost us a lot of money. It was a great time and you could sit out there, listen to the radio you know and listen to the ballgame. The ballgame goes off, you turn some music on and just toss a line out and catch fish all night long and stuff and go home at three o'clock, four o'clock in the morning and really have had a really good time just sitting out on the bank of the river and enjoying it. So that was my first introduction to the Minnesota River and it really stuck on me the minute I started appreciating all that it had.

Q: You have been at this for a long time and there's a lot of stories that we're still going to hear, but for you, Scott, what really is at the heart of the issue for you when it comes to restoring the Minnesota River?

A: I have to be detailed to the point of the complexity of it all. That is, that's at the hard of the issue. Complexity is the key word. Nothing is as simple as we make it out to be.

“If the farmers would just all do this, it would fix everything.” “If people in the city would do what they are supposed to do on their lawns, and we wouldn’t have all of this urban sprawl,” and you know, none of it is as simple as that. It’s a very complex issue. Water is complex and it’s going to be ongoing and the challenge is for us to stay flexible enough and willing to try things and at the heart of all of that is the guts enough to try something. A lot of times we want to study something until we know the exact answer before we spend one penny on anything. And we have to move beyond that. We have done some of that. We have spent money in good faith. We know for sure that if land in the floodplain is put back, it’s probably a good thing for the river. The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, to date, is the single most effective thing that we have done with the Minnesota River. It has helped to return a lot of the water quality we see in the spring of the year. It’s cut down sediment. It’s cut down phosphorous. It has slowed rate flows down. And if it were not for the restoration of that floodplain, we would be in a much worse state than we are today. So that was money well spent and there were in the beginning and even half way through that, a lot of naysayers - a lot of people who felt it was wrong to take that land out of permanent production. They didn’t understand that it was part of the river. That’s ok. It’s good to have dissent and it’s good to have discussion about all of the aspects. And that’s where we really need to get to. We need to be able to listen to anybody no matter what their view point is and take it for what it is. And when I say listen I mean get what they’re talking about. People are motivated by different things. A lot of what we do with our land is motivated by what we need to have to continue the lifestyles that we’ve become accustomed to in our modern day living. One thing is that we have a great food source. And we have fantastic agriculture. And they’ve done a great job at producing crops. And our cities have done a great job at providing people places to live. And you know, there’s bi - products of those two things that affect the Minnesota River. We unknowingly did a lot of them as time moved on. But now it’s time to move beyond saying it’s so and so’s fault. And I think we’re there. I think in the Minnesota Basin, the discussion has gotten so civil lately. There’s still people screaming on both sides of the issue. And that’s ok. For the most part, our public has become pretty knowledgeable about what’s going on with the Minnesota River and our watershed and how our surface water drains and what it does. And we need right now to get a handle on what is coming down the pike for our rain and our precipitation. We need to get a handle on how to manage our precipitation in the future. The climatologists are telling us it’s going to come in stronger and more violent storms. And it’s going to dump water faster and we’re going to have to plan for that. So water’s going to come down quicker, and it’s going to run off faster, so the more that that happens, we have to put in place the technology that’s going to handle that where we can mitigate the problems that arise from those types of storms. Because the days of those long, nice, light, easy rains are probably few and far between anymore. Those were the rains that were so beneficial and we just don’t see that anymore. We get downpours we get - it’s changing. For whatever reason. It doesn’t matter. Let the climatologists and those people who want to work on that part of it, let them work on it. But let’s do what we can here to mitigate that stuff. Technology got us to where we are today. I can’t see technology not having answers to fixing this problem. I am not putting all of my eggs in that basket. I think nature has the ability to heal itself if we give it half a chance. But that’s what we gotta do. We’ve gotta give it half a chance

to do that. So it comes down to drainage. It comes down to how we plan our drainage in the future and how we can mitigate what we do on the land and make it beneficial to the river as opposed to being a negative impact on the river.

Q: So we touched on this briefly, but I am going to ask this again. Can you recount how the Minnesota River movement emerged and how it grew and what your role has been?

A: The Minnesota River movement emerged from the late 1980s - I would say about 1988 and '89, when the state of MN called for a study, the MN River Assessment Project. When unbeknownst to myself, I went in and inquired as to what was going on with the Minnesota River and why it looked the way it looked. From that Assessment Project, they were seeing a lot of, data was telling us a lot of things. Myself, personally, I felt it was at the time something that needed to be shared with the general public. State agencies were not ready to share those findings at the time because the study was not complete but I wasn't satisfied with that. I was seeing what data was showing and I thought it was time to let the general public in on what was going on. And just tell them that there was a study going on and this is what it looks like right now at this point. So the contention started then and the movement started out of that.

Q: What was it that you were finding that you felt the public needed to know?

A: Well, there was too much phosphorous. Too much nitrogen. Too much water at the wrong times of the year. We were experiencing flooding in July when we're not supposed to. Killing Maple trees. You know, they're not supposed to die in July from floods. Flooding is in March and April. It's not supposed to be in July, but we were getting them. And yea, they weren't 100-year events but they were 25- and 50-year events on a regular basis at the time prior to the 1993 flood which really was a wake-up call. And we were seeing then the data was starting to show that we were losing our specific species that were sensitive to that. Our clam population went from 38 down to 16 clams in the river which is a sign of too much sediment. Light penetration wasn't real good so we weren't getting emergent vegetation in the water. Oxygen levels had dropped dramatically in the lower end of the river. Oxygen levels were, even during the summer time, we were experiencing oxygen die-off. We had fish kills even, and stressed fish that were being assessed on low oxygen because of the condition of the river and alga blooms that we were having. So we had high alga blooms. So showed a lot of things that were at the time pretty alarming.

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Q: Do you want to say anything more about how the movement grew and what your role was in it?

A: Let's just suffice it to say that I stumped like a politician from one end of the river to the other asking people for their vote. I went up and down this river bank hollering and hollering and talking to anybody I could at any place I could at any time I could for about

a year and a half to anybody who would let me come in and talk and listen. And you know, some people didn't agree with me and some people did. I that was a big part of getting people wound up. I guess I'm an expert at stirring the pot. Always have been and always will be. I guess I can't change, a leopard can't change his spots. So there you go.
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Q: I'd like to hear a little bit more about the projects you've been involved in. If you could give us some background on what you've been doing.

A: Well, first of all, the projects that I've personally been involved in run the gammit from reclaiming floodplains, reforesting floodplains. We were involved in Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, pushing for that, wanting that to actually come to fruition, that was a big undertaking in and of itself. When we were given a chance to say "What do you think the river really needs after listening to four years of studies?". We were given some opportunities to kind of shoot for the moon and one of them was the bizarre idea of taking all of the production agriculture that was in the floodplain and getting it out of the floodplain because that's not floodplain, that belongs to the river. And so that was kind of a crazy notion at the time. I mean it really, it was a big project that I was personally involved in and flew to Washington to advocate for with some others in the beginning part of the movement. And we were successful in getting those that federal attention and the federal dollars secured to come back here to Minnesota. Then what followed was Minnesota's part of it. I was involved in that as well, as were some other groups, most specifically, Friends of the Minnesota Valley who hired a fulltime staff person to work at the Capitol to make sure that the state came up with the matching dollars that it took to get the entire project implemented. We originally wanted 200,000 acres of land for the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. What they said was if you can get 100,000 acres enrolled, we will consider giving you the other 100,000 acres. So that happened and it happened fairly quickly.

Q: Who is we?

A: Everyone working in the movement at the time. Everyone. State agencies... they told us, there were four of us who flew to Washington, and that came right from the head of agencies. They said "If you can see that this is going to go and it's going to go, we'll entertain looking at another 100,000 acres because originally you asked for 200,000" and this 100,000 was the gage for what was going to tell them whether it was a popular type of program or not. And at the time, it was. It was implemented in a matter of a couple of years. Board of Water and Soil Resources and the local entities that were involved - all of the SWCDs and counties and others that got the agriculture off the ground and actually implemented it and got the agriculture production for permanent easement in that floodplain. They did it in a fairly short time and it was very popular. So we went back to ask for the next 100,000 acres and it was already, the country, according to most of the elected officials, was in "crisis" and we couldn't be spending any more money on that right now. So, I guess we had our one time shot and that was it. But we're pretty pleased with that.

And that was one of the projects that I was involved with at least in the beginning of it. I didn't personally help to implement any CREP. That was all done by government agencies and Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR).

(audio interference)

Q: If you could reintroduce the idea that you went back to ask for the next 100,000 and then they were told the country was in crisis, when was that and what was going on?

A: Yes, that was in the late 1990's when the country was experiencing the beginnings of some of our financial shortage comes which, I guess actually is like every year. But for at least as long as most of us can remember, we're always in financial crisis and there's never enough money and especially not enough money for conservation. But we went back and asked what's the possibility of us getting another 100,000 acres, and we were told pretty flat out that there wasn't enough money, to really kind of forget that whole thing, even as successful as this was here, which was disappointing, because we have a lot more acreage that could be taken out and put in permanent easement that is part of the flood plain. We're working on that with some other programs that Minnesota has, the RIM Program and others. So it's not like it's dead in the water, it's going on, but not to the degree that it did for that big project.

Q: What's the difference between the CREP and CRP?

A: The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) differs from the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)in that it is an enhancement. So, in other words, it's a marriage between the federal dollars and the state dollars and that way it takes in more amount of land and it can be a larger project in and of itself. So it was an enhancement of the permanent easement. Now the Conservation Reserve Program, for the most part, doesn't have a permanent part of it. It's renewable every so many years and you sign a contract for so many years and then you can go back and revisit that. But the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program had a permanent part of it and almost everyone took the permanent part of it because it was more lucrative to do that than it was to do a 50-year easement.

Q: Moving on to your other projects.

A: We talked about the flood plain project, the reclamation that we've done. We were involved in the first point, non-point pollution trade in the United States regarding water. It happened right here in New Ulm and it happened largely because one of the people in the Rahr Malting Company, Bob Micheletti, who ran, was vice president at xxx Malting at the time, saw me on a special with Ron Shera and we were talking about wanting to clean up the Minnesota River and do some things to improve the conditions and the watershed and Bob got a hold of me and said, "We want to expand our plant operations

and we want to be able to utilize our bi-product and have our own energy source so we can cut costs. And part of that is going to involve discharging some effluent into the Minnesota River." Well at the time, the lower 25 miles of the Minnesota River had a dissolved oxygen total maximum daily load (TMDL) allocation on it where no one could ever put another pipe or discharge anything new into the Minnesota River in that lower 25 miles. And this was kind of a unique thing that came up. Well maybe if we go up into the watershed and we do some projects that will mitigate the potential dissolved oxygen that we would be putting into the river here and at the same time, we want to build our own plant and we will put into the river a water that will be seven times cleaner than what the Seneca and Blue Lake plants were putting in at the time. So I was totally onboard with that after it was explained to me, what this company in Shakopee, which is the third, at the time they were second or third largest malting operation in the world. We don't want to drive business out and we want to make sure that everyone can continue to stay here. And they were very conscious of the river and they've been very conservation advocate minded and working in that area for years and years and years. So having said that, it was devised that we could do under federal law, we could do a pollution trade and this trade involved coming up into the watershed and doing projects that would cut phosphorous loads, cut sediment loads and actually I was part of getting some of those project implemented. One was the flood plain restoration, actually 105 acres of flood plain restoration happened here. We had a cattle farm that was a little too close to one of the waterways, we got those guys a little farther back from the waterways and worked with the Southern Minnesota Sugar Beet Cooperative to get in some cover crops and do some things up there that would lessen overall pollution in the Minnesota River. And what it amounted to was we were going to do this to the scale of seven to one and it would be, there was also a three to one factor involved in the pollution reduction part of it from their plant. So like I said before, they were putting in cleaner water than our sewage treatment plants were, and they were coming up here and reducing seven times the amount of pollution that they would potentially put in. so that was a lot of safety and a lot of area there that was improved. And boy, you should see it today. The land is just gorgeous. The stuff that was put in is now full of turkeys and deer and it has trees on it, it's a reforested flood plain. We have berry trees down there; there is wildlife like you would not believe and it's all part of the river, it's part of the flood plain. One of the sites had lost close to five feet of topsoil over the course of the last hundred years, and that was all put aside now and is not eroding anymore. And that was on the Cottonwood River, which joins right here at New Ulm and then the other one is on the Minnesota River itself. So that was another big project that we were involved in.

Q: Can you explain one more time the 7-1, 3-1 trade? How does that work? And what company is this?

A: Rahr Malting Company. We were involved in the first point to non-point source pollution trade in the United States. Now it happened right here in New Ulm. And what that is, is you're taking from a point source and you're improving water at that point source, above and beyond what we potentially are putting in. So in other words, had Rahr Malting continued to send their effluent to the sewage treatment plant, it would

have been at one level. Their plant, which they proposed, would make that water three times cleaner. So their plant would be three times more efficient than the existing plant that they would send water to. And then we came up into the watershed and said, you know, we're going go up here and we're going to reduce pollution upstream from Shakopee, where they do business, to the rate of seven to one. So we will take out what they put in, potentially would put in, we will take out seven times more upstream. So that will allow them then to put a pipe, run their effluent into the river, which is now three times cleaner than the pipe that's coming from our municipal plants, and we've gone up into the watershed and reduced pollution to the seven times greater. So it was a very successful project and it set the example. I flew out to Idaho and gave talks out there to the Western Environmental Protection Agency at a big deal out there and we talked to those folks and said here's what happened in Minnesota. I've been in numerous conversations and in publications, lots of publications, regarding that particular trade all over the United States. And it's registered as, but it's a real unique thing. And it got started here and at some point, I think we're going to see an increase in this type of thing because it's an opportunity. When we talk about trade, people have to think of the stock market. We're not trading anything really, other than those amounts of pollution. It's not like we're letting one guy pollute in a certain area and then just paying money to somebody to, no, that's not what it's about. We want to set up credits and set up a stock market type exchange, where companies can come in and they can buy those credits. And if it becomes too demanding and not cost-effective to reduce pollution to the level which is demanded at that particular time, they can buy these credits, buy time, and eventually get to that. I point to the one milligram per liter, we're at two milligrams per liter and now the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency wants us to get down to one milligram per liter of phosphorous. That might not be doable for quite a few communities, and in that instance, maybe what they can do is go into the watershed, do projects, do things to reduce pollution to a greater extent than what they're putting in right now. And they can do that until they can either a) afford to do the upgrade that they need to do, or they can b) continue to do more projects, or they can come up with some other alternatives. So it gives them an opportunity and it's not allowing pollution by any shape or form. It's just an opportunity to work with municipalities and businesses and so on.

Q: And so this type of project would apply mostly to urban environments?

A: Well you see it involved in the rural environment because they came up here and did projects to mitigate for what they wanted to do in an urban area. So therein lies the trade.

Q: And moving forward, if this is a possible model, what will they call it? How will they reference this?

A: That's a good question. There'll have to be some serious thought given to what they call it in the future, because I think most people really did get the wrong impression of what it was in the beginning. You know they talk about cap and trade now; a lot of people have a negative view of that, some people do. And some people think it's anti-

business.And that's mostly to do with air pollution. But this is somewhat similar, but it's not similar because we have point to point trades, we have point to non-point source trades, and those point to non-point source trades are the ones that I think in the future have capability to do some real positive changes to the basin.

Q: Other projects, things that you want to go into the history books.

A: I would have to say the most important thing, and I think I stated this earlier, the most important thing that the grass roots movement has been involved in, is engaging the citizens of the basin and calling attention to the general public to let them know what the condition of the river is, what the conditions of our tributaries are, why they are the way they are, and what it is we can do to change that. And to actually have people get excited about a resource that's right in their backyard, a resource that is probably what I would call the Boundary waters of Southern Minnesota. It's our best business partner that goes through our towns. This river and the people that created this movement, have created now a new paradigm where people are starting to become endeared to the river, they have made the river something higher on a human scale. And so looking at it on those terms, I think that was our biggest accomplishment through the years, is getting people to say, "We're proud of where we live; we don't want to live in a polluted environment, we want to do something to make it better. Yeah, it might take us a hundred years, but we're going to be a work in progress. Come with us, let's see all the things that are connected to it, let's get excited about the future of what could be on the land, how good economically we can be, how stable we can be, how people from throughout the world would come to this world class resource. See vineyards, see corn, see soybeans, see everything that we have to offer the world here. Our agriculture is fantastic and our infrastructure is the best there is around, let's get onboard with all of this and make it the best place we can make it for our kids and their kids." That's the most important. That is what I'm most proud of. We changed the paradigm. We actually accomplished, which was the hardest part, getting people beyond denial and into a new sense of awareness of what their surroundings are.

Q: The next question would be about frustration along this journey. What has been your biggest frustration?

A: My biggest frustration is the lack of understanding by some people. We always have a certain segment of the population that is cynical and skeptical and hard to convince. And one day I just woke up and I said, there's an old term, lead, follow or get out of the way. And I'm kind of in that camp. If you don't want to help, that's okay. We're okay with that. And if you want to be combative towards what we're trying to accomplish, I'm okay with that too, but let's have some good reasoning behind it. Let's not make things up; let's try to stick to the science. And I think it's there; I think the science is there. It tells us on both sides. It makes the argument for some of the naysayers sometimes too, but there's still a lot of people in denial and still a lot of people that really don't want to see the status quo change. They're afraid of change and I guess that's my number one irritation, is that inability for people to change. They're rigid in their thoughts, rigid in their

views, and it's hard to listen to both sides and I'm saying that from both a conservationist environmentalist side and from someone that is heavily involved in not that, that would be very anti-environmentalist. There's both sides, polarized. But, the good news is that's changing too. We're building bridges right now and so I'm hopeful. Even though it was a big frustration, I think we've really crossed into a new land and I think in a new area. So that's all kind of behind us now and that's a good thing. And if it does rear its head from time to time, I think we know how to deal with it and to move on and to continue with the people that want to be there, our great society that we have here in the basin. There's none better across the whole United States. They're solid in every way, we've all got our problems and all that, but I mean for the most part, this is just a fantastic place to be and live and go about our business, yeah.

Q: What did you think when Arne Carlson, the governor of Minnesota, announced the Minnesota River should be cleaned up in ten years, made to be fishable, swimmable? What did you think? Were you around?

A: I was there that day, obviously, and very excited to see Governor Carlson to get onboard. I had been canoeing with him the week before he made that announcement and said well what should we do about it? And I said, "Why don't you come down to the basin and make an announcement and do a road trip and you and Rod Sandow and others, get out there and tell people that this is what they've got to look forward to. We're going to have to do something about this.Leadership starts at the top. People follow good leaders, you're a good leader, a solid governor," you look back on the time now, and I think there's a lot of people that would love to have Arne Carlson back as our governor right about now. Not anything against our present governor; he's doing just fine, but I think he did a yeoman's job and the next week after we were canoeing with him, that's exactly what he did. He came down and he came to Mankato, he got together the 37 counties, the commissioners, and they had a big ceremony there and they talked in the Twin Cities about it, and moved out to the parts of the basin, and went around on their little road trip and that was good. Fishable, swimmable, that was great. Of course, it was funny how people said, "Well I fish in the river and I swim in the river, it's good to go."

Q: So you suggested this road trip?

A: I did. That's exactly what I told them. It was the governor's canoe trip, the governor's yearly canoe outing, and I drove all the way up to the north shore to the South Kawishiwi River, just to get an audience with Arne Carlson to tell him what he should be doing.

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

A: The Minnesota River Board was established when Arne Carlson came down that time to Mankato, and before we go any farther, I want to bring up a little story. I was just at a thing in Mankato and it was a little irritating. They have a guy there who, they actually have a couple of people at the University of Minnesota, where their positions are paid for, at least half their chair is paid for by the National Corn Growers Association and you can take it for what you want, but they have an agricultural bend. And it is an agricultural school and I understand it's a land grant college and we want to do everything we can to support agriculture and do whatever, but we have some people at the university that want to continue to research sometimes for research sake. And they also will have contentiously and consistently brought people forward to dispel good science and use anecdotal things to do so, to influence people. I'd like to add my little anecdotal thing that I had, which could work maybe to the counter of some of those findings. I was at a thing recently where they brought up Lewis and Clarke's Expedition and how often they referenced the muddiness of the river.
I would like to add my anecdotal remembrance of a 92-year-old woman whom I interviewed who grew up on a farm, at the confluence of the Minnesota and Blue Earth Rivers in Mankato. She was at the top of the hill. And her recollections to me were, "Scott, when I was a girl of about 14 years old," which would probably put her at about five feet tall, "I could stand at the confluence ofthe Blue Earth and Minnesota Rivers in July, swimming; we swam there all the time, and I could see my toes. I was standing in the water chest high and I could see my toes." This is from a white Anglo-Saxon woman of 92 years old in her recollections swimming in the Minnesota River, in July. It's July right now. We should get a nice shot of how green and alga-bloomed the water is and compare our July to that July. We have anecdotal other recollections from Lewis and Clarke and others that said the river was muddy. We also have anecdotal recollections from George Featherstone and Joseph Nicollet, who said that they drank the water of the Redwood and the Cottonwood, it was refreshing and crystal clear. And the term that Featherstone used was translucent. So that's my little, there, I'm done. I just want to get that little dig in there because that's what they're dragging up now is Lewis and Clarke and how muddy it was and how they had to leave certain banks at that time of the year because there was some banks sloughing in and they were camped on the banks and I don't doubt that. That has a lot to do with the time of the year that they were doing it and the rainfall and all that. And it's probably true, but there's also other anecdotal things. But there's a lot of them that just want to say, "It was always like this and we want to walk away from it. We're done spending money on it, we're done doing this." And there's a couple of them at the University of Minnesota that really need to get a grip on that. I don't think they're onboard.

The Minnesota River Watershed Alliance started out as a very unique idea. A bunch of us got together and said this is going to be the anti-organization. We're going to come up with one thing that we want to do every year, and all of us are going to pledge to work on that one particular thing and advance that one notion. And if we all put our resources into this one thing, if we can look back on the year and say we only really accomplished that one thing, how great would that be? In 20 years you would have accomplished 20 things. So that was the whole notion behind the watershed alliance and why we organized it. And it has morphed into some other things more than that, but

it's held its own and hung in there. We don't have a lot of funding; in fact, we don't have any now, but the alliance I think will survive and move on and will be a good thing for the future if we kind of get back to our roots and look at that one thing that we can all do and agree upon to do, I think we'd have a great time doing that. And as far as the Minnesota River Board goes, I was there the day that they signed the declaration to put it into place. I was part of the debate in the beginning of the whole process and I had introduced legislation to create the Minnesota River Commission, which was a little different approach. And after all the debate and all of the rankling and political things that go on at the capitol, we ended up with the Minnesota River Board, a 37-county commissioner body that had one representative from each county in the basin, and they were going to coordinate the future movement, if you will, the future of cleaning up the Minnesota River. And I've been through thick and thin with those guys and I think the world of them. I've had a good relationship with most all of them through the years, and we've become good friends and I think it has a future and I hope it can morph into something even more than it is and we can expand the horizons for the river board to include more of us at the voting table. Because I think if we can really get all the nonprofits, all of the government agencies we need to have, the tribal communities, the faith communities, and get representation that's across the board, we can really make the Minnesota River Board into a living, breathing machine that could help to guide a lot of our decision making at the capitol level, at the state evel and at the federal level. So we would have incredible clout if everybody would recognize the power of working together.

Q: What did you think of the upstream/downstream friendship tour process that just recently was embarked on?

A: I think it's a fantastic idea. There is nothing better, right now, at this point in time than building good, solid relationships between agricultural producers and the general public. And those that live upstream and downstream, both ag communities and people that use the river for all kinds of different things. Our strength is in our diversity and our strength is in our abilities to understand each other. And creating understanding is what these events and sessions are all about-creating understanding. Once you understand someone else's viewpoint, you're more apt to listen, you're more apt to be open to new ideas. The aha moment will come from all of those types of things, so I can't see a better future than to keep talking and have these friendship tours. I think they're great and I love the idea of not having the media there.

The recent friendship tours that have taken place in the Minnesota Basin and the Mississippi Basin are an example of how we can move forward on the Minnesota River and the Mississippi River and Lake Pepin as well.

Q: Are you familiar with the Minnesota River TMDL process and the water quality standards developed by the Pollution Control Agency and what do you think about them or know about them?

A: I believe in the 1972 Clean Water Act, which started the implementation process of the Total Maximum Daily Load allocation process, TMDLs. I've sat in on several TMDLs that have been written. I was part of helping to write some of the TMDLs on the Minnesota. Proud of those times that I spent doing that. I think it was a good process. I think the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency has started a new way to deal with the TMDL process. I think they've done some new and innovative things and those are good. They're making IT a little more friendly process these days, less intimidating. Yeah, I think the TMDL process is okay; maybe it needs to be called something else at some point. I'm not sure what that would be called. And actually for the agency, you could still call it that, but maybe we could call it...implementation of the Clean Water Act. I think clean water and Clean Water Act. Let's capture what people want. People want clean water. They voted for clean water. That was the first sentence in the Legacy Amendment. Clean water was it and that's what they voted for. So yeah, people are for that. More people voted for that than voted for anything in the State of Minnesota in the last presidential election. It's clear that we're very concerned about our surface water and groundwater resources.

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

A: I'm very confident that the Minnesota River will continue to improve at a slow scale. It's not going to be fast. We seem to take one step forward and a couple steps back sometimes. I'm hoping it reverses itself in that way, that we may still have to stress the river just to do what we're continuing to do. But we're learning new ways and I think if we give Mother Nature half a chance, she'll fix herself, but we've got to give her that chance. And that's going to mean some changes. We can make those changes. Technology is there, the science is there, things can get better. We just have to continue, as they say, keepin' on, keepin' on. And this isn't something that we'll ever someday, I don't see us 30 years from now getting up and walking away from this. This is something that's kind of like a lifestyle change, it's like these are all going to come incrementally and we'll wake up one day and we'll see that we've changed and things have gotten better, but we need to stay on that path. We can't go back to doing things the way we did them before. And I think our ancestors knew the same thing. They fished fish till they were gone. They hunted ducks till there wasn't any; they took and took and took and they found out, hey, we have to start conserving some of this stuff or we're going to be without any of it. And we're in that transitional time right now. So the next 30 years I see as kind of a transitional period, where society is going to have to continue to change over and over again. And we'll do that, we're going to do that. I think we have the will to do that. And I think our people that have access to good analytical and innovative and technical minds, we need to spur them on and inspire them and say that we've got people behind you that are for this. It's just like when people began to fly. It took a lot of different people to figure out how we were going to make an airplane. And it's the same thing with us. It's going to take time; it's going to take continual effort. So I see us in the next 30 years as really improving the river somewhat, but it's going to take a long time and we'll know, we'll know that this is something that's ongoing, we always have to be on guard. And that's okay. We just need to raise it on our priority level of

things that we need to do, that's all. Because the river is the end example of how we treat our land and our resources and we're stewards and we've got to buck it up. We have a calling. Every great religion has a calling in that as well. So this is a spiritual thing as much as it is anything. I feel very strongly that we'll be judged on how we treated this stuff. And someday, it might not be real good if we don't continue to work at it. But that's what I'm hopeful for. Most people are hopeful; most people are not negative; most people are positive. What is more spiritual than this? Better to be in the boat fishing, thinking of God, than to be in church thinking of fishing.

Q: Is there anything you want to say about any of the floods, '65, '97, 2002? Any change in hydrology of the river?

A: We have changed the hydrology of the Minnesota River, there's no question about that. What used to be groundwater now is surface water in a lot of instances. We used to have eight locked watersheds in the Minnesota River Basin. Now each one of those locked watersheds is connected to the Minnesota River and they were substantial in size. So that becomes instead of groundwater, surface water. Of course, worldwide, most rivers are about 50 percent groundwater, but we have changed quite a bit of that here in the basin. And when you intercept water and put it in place, you want to make sure that you're putting back in a place where it can potentially get back to the groundwater. So I think wetland reclamation, wetland creation, lake reclamation, those are all important parts of our future. We're certainly dominated by 92 percent land mass is dominated by agriculture, and that's what we've got and we can make that work. We can make the existing things that we have better and get that groundwater recharge going again. It's going to take some time and effort, but we can do it. We have the ways to do that. But our hydrology in the Minnesota River Basin, from the '93 flood, the '97 flood, I was here for both of them, they were very spooky, very scary. It has the ability to destroy a lot of infrastructure, costs millions and millions of dollars, and we need to keep a close watch on that in the future and try to do the things that will reverse some of the hydrologic changes we've made. That's what we're in the process of doing right now, that's some of the work that I'm involved in right now, today, is trying to reverse some of the hydrological changes that we've made in the Minnesota River and its tributaries 'Cause that probably looms as the most important thing for the future. Our smaller tributaries are experiencing rainfall events that are longer and more intense in proportion, and we have to plan and making our changes with that in mind, with weather in mind. Because if this is what we're going to have for the future, which we don't know for sure, but things are telling us the hundred-year floods are coming more frequently and fifty-year floods are coming more frequently. So those are all things that we need to have on the table as we're talking about how we're going to improve conditions, because 95 percent of the water leaves Minnesota and we want to send a nice product down to wherever we're sending it to.

Q: For clarity, can you help me understand what you mean when you say locked watershed and how that's changed.

A: A locked watershed is an area that did not have an outlet to anything. It was a lake much like Swan Lake here by Nicollet in Nicollet County. It was a locked watershed, it didn't have an outlet. High Island Lake in Sibley County did not have an outlet. These were all man-made outlets, so that that water would drain down and it wouldn't experience the big prairie pothole swings that were happening with the lakes. The lakes would expand and you couldn't farm around them and do those things, so they would put in an outlet and then drain that watershed down and then put a structure in it to hold the water at the level that they wanted to keep it for most of the time. So they'd always have the lake, but they could keep the lake at a certain level and it wouldn't totally drain out and it wouldn't totally take the surrounding area and increase the size of the lake by a third.

Q: And how has that come to bear on our situation with the Minnesota River?

A: Well that water now gets delivered to the surface, to the tributaries and to the Minnesota River, so it's water that wouldn't have been delivered except for, it would have passed through groundwater and gone laterally and moved through the soil profile, became groundwater, and then would have surfaced in a different way. So that's how we've changed all that from the locked watersheds.

Q: And that's through some of the drainage practices that are going on?

A:Those were all done back in the early 1900's.

Q: Can you tell me more about the program that you did with your guitar and children in schools a while back, what it was called, what you would do, who was in your audience, and what was it about?

A: Well I'm a musician by trade. I have my own musical orchestra, it's a band. But I'm a musician by trade and I'm a singer/songwriter. What did in the beginning because of the passion I had for the movement was start to write music based on the river and the general, just nature in general and the Minnesota River and all its tributaries. And I called the program, I Love the Minnesota River. And I would talk to people about all kinds of different things to get people to be endeared to the river and all of the fun things about it. And then point out some of the problems that the river has, challenges I should say, not problems. And then we'd sing about it and we'd get people to sing along. And kids love music and they sang along, you tell them about things and I've been doing this since 1991, '92, starting doing that and performed, I performed probably over four to 500 presentations in the last 25 years to all ages of people. I've done garden clubs and I've done churches. I just did a church here a couple weeks ago and right during the Sunday service and just, here's what it is, here's like it is, and let's sing about it and let's be inspired. And so every year, I love to do the Children's Water Festival up in St. Paul, that's a golden opportunity to reach kids in the metropolitan area who don't always a lot of times get the opportunity to think about the great outdoors until they leave the concrete jungle. And it's great to get those kids, but it's also great to talk to rural kids

about rural issues too. We talk about farming and draining, drainage ditches and we talk about what people can do in town. I started a program called Community Cleanups for Water Quality, which has just taken off. We won a governor's award for that program, it gets people energized in the cities to understand that what goes down that storm drain ends up in their local waterway. And it's not real nice to think about all the things that gets put on our roadways and every street is a tributary to one of our lakes or rivers. And the program gets people to understand that and gets people out and doing something positive and it empowers them to say, "Hey, I can control some of this water." And we get them to take the organic debris off the streets in February and March, when it's very susceptible to phosphorous introduction and movement into the waterways, and we get them out there early and we get them doing it and they're having great success up around Como Lake in St. Paul, here in xxx, in Mankato, and all up and down the river. We've got over 40 communities that have participated. We have a green card that we send out through the local newspapers that gets people to do this on their own and then they take it to the compost and it becomes soil that they can use for their gardens and it keeps it out of our waters. And it gets people in town to say we're doing our part, what are you doing? So that's a great program.

Q: Is that program the one that Art and Barb Straub were talking about where you were painting the sewers?

A: That's storm drain stenciling; we did that too. We did that in the beginning, years ago, and it's still goes on a little bit today, making people aware, putting it right on the curb, so when it rains they can see, "Drains to Minnesota River."

Q: So you've gone through all this change and this movement and here we are today and I feel like you've said a lot. What has the movement done to you as a person? What has it done to Scott Sparlin?

A: Well, it's brought me to the realization that this was probably what I was put here to do, and to accept it and to not become discouraged or cynical or defeated in any way, and to suck it up and move on and to be tough and that's what it's done for me. It's toughened me up and it's made me realize that it's about people. The term ecosystems management, I hear that once in a while and I go the best term would be egosystems management. But it has taught me quite a bit. I guess it's dominated my life for the last 25 years and it's like everything that I was doing prior to getting involved in the movement was to be ultimately destined to be part of what I'm doing now. So all of the things that I did growing up, getting to that point in about 1990, were a testing ground, proving ground for what I would be doing for the next 25 years. And I truly believe that. I was tested in a lot of ways. I had to do a lot of different things, I've done a lot of different things in my life, and I don't think you can get an understanding about the general way of things in society in general unless you have that empathy and that thought process towards what other people are going through. And so I just didn't get out of school and decide to go to work for a nonprofit and get involved in a river movement. That was nothing that I even remotely thought of doing. But I was always very aware and I come

from a family that's very environmentally sensitive and very close to the land and such, but it wasn't something that I had planned on.