

Big Island e w s

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A newsletter dedicated to the preservation of Big Island, Illinois



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Putting Sweat Equity Into Big Island

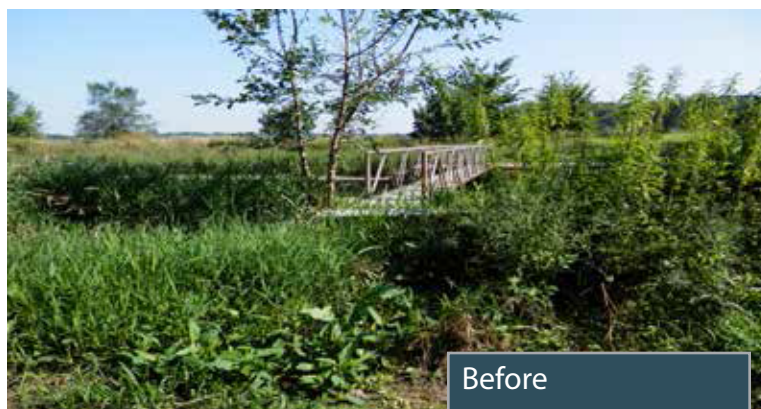
Volunteers Trail Blaze to Confluence of the Mississippi and Rock Rivers

by Sarah Wright

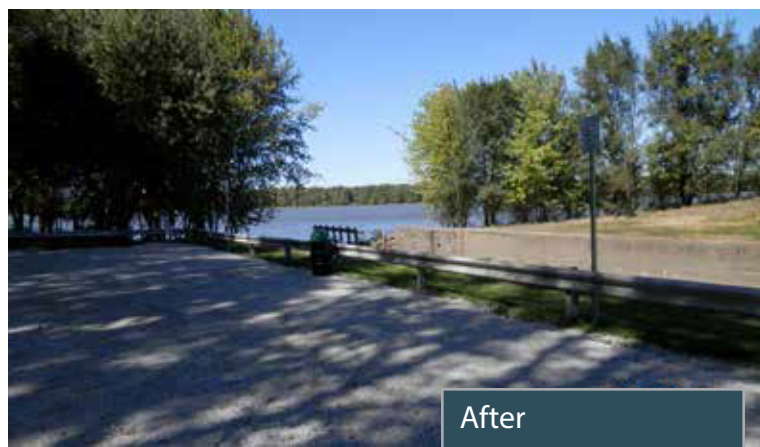
Volunteers of Big Island Soil & Water Preservation Association have a new appreciation for the Hennepin Canal, a historic hand dug canal that runs from Bureau County, west to the confluence of the Rock and Mississippi Rivers. New technologies and building materials used to build the canal were tested and perfected while building the Hennepin, then brought to scale later for the construction of the Panama Canal. The toil of the men who brought forth the Hennepin, were honored by dedicated volunteers who laboriously cleared a ten foot wide, one and a half mile path to the confluence.

To volunteer Barb Wlaskolich, the last leg of the Hennepin to the confluence was a diamond-in-the-rough. Says Barb, "The last leg is a hidden gem, but it was overgrown with saplings and brush so no one could enjoy it as it should." Nor could anyone appreciate the historic Hennepin in its totality, a vast 82 miles of trails flanked by farmland, trees and water-features was halted by overgrowth just one and a half miles from the ultimate water-feature enjoyed by Midwesterners, the mighty Mississippi. That is, with the exception of a handful of volunteers led by Barb Wlaskolich and Dean Mathias, who have a renewed appreciation for the Hennepin. Their labors and others have restored the historic aspects of the canal, and have made available the

unspoiled natural area adjacent to the confluence of the Rock and Mississippi Rivers. There is no better view of the river," says Dean Mathias, project volunteer.



Before



After

The before & after pictures above illustrate improvements at Lock 32.

The trail makes available the last stretch of the Hennepin Canal Parkway to anglers, walkers, joggers, hikers, bicyclists, birders and photographers. But if that list of enthusiasts doesn't fit your persuasion, a quick drive to the confluence will be accommodated with new parking facilities at Lock 32, thanks to the Blackhawk Township Road District. There visitors are greeted with ample signage and a new 300-ton gravel parking lot. Additionally, the trail connects with the Rock River Initiative whose mission is to enhance opportunities for tourism along the Rock River.

Improvements made to the trail and parking lot at Lock 32 have brought

considerable new use of the area. Quad City residents and tourists alike are rediscovering the green gem of the Hennepin Canal Parkway. Big Island volunteers do not care how visitors come to appreciate this natural and historic landmark, they know that all who come will leave as passionate and invigorated as they are.

Students Generate Ideas for Growth and Improvements

In August, Dr. Carla Santos and Dr. Laura Payne, Professors from the University of Illinois met with representatives from the Big Island Soil & Water Preservation Association (BISAWPA) and others at the Whistle Stop Java Shop in Milan to discuss Big Island, Hennepin Canal, and tourism in general. After breakfast the group headed out to Big Island to visit Lock 31 and Lock 32 so professors could get a feel for the area and understand why it is such an important natural and recreational area. Dr. Santos and Dr. Payne, leaders in the fields of tourism research and recreational development, focused on the area from the Mississippi River, along the Hennepin Canal, to the Hennepin Canal State Park in Sheffield, IL. They want to understand the physical features of the area and get to know the tourism officials and groups that promote the area. This was a fact finding mission which later led to Dr. Laura Payne teaching a class of 47 students this semester on the Hennepin Canal.

As part of the class, fourteen students and three faculty members (Dr. Laura Payne, Dr. Chris Green, Josh McCann and Chungsup Lee) conducted field research September 25th on the Hennepin Canal Trail/State Park (Milan Locks 31 & 32), Geneseo, Sheffield and Wyanet. They were treated to a lunch donated by BISAWPA members at the Lock 31 picnic shelter. From the visit, students devised a questionnaire to better understand resident opinions of the Hennepin Canal Trail/State Parkway and surveyed 334 participants. On December 4th Randy & Barb Wlaskolich, Dean Mathias and Tina Kost traveled to Champaign to view the student presentations.

A big "thank you" goes to Steve Kane at the Whistle Stop Java Shop for hosting this group on his nickel. Steve provided the meeting area and breakfast for all.



Geo-Tourism Project

BISAWPA will be participating in the Mississippi River Corridor Geo-Tourism project developed by the National Geographic Society in which communities along the Mississippi River are encouraged to submit attractions, unique businesses, festivals, recreational and natural areas for inclusion into a website that will host information from Minnesota to Louisiana. "Geo-tourism is defined as tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place - its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage and the well being of its residents." "Geo-tourism incorporates the concept of sustainable tourism - that destinations should remain unspoiled for future generations - while allowing for ways to protect a place's character." (www.travel.nationalgeographic.com). A local photographer, Stan Bousson, is videoing scenes of Big Island for the Mississippi River Corridor Geo-Tourism Project site.

Lock 31 Bike/Walk Access Ramps Coming

BISAWPA plans are underway to connect the Picnic Shelter at Lock 31 with the Bike/Walk Path at the top of the levee this spring. The finished project will be ADA accessible and feature an asphalt surface. This project will provide recreational users safer access to Hennepin Canal Parkway amenities. Additionally, it will provide access for flood protection operations and address a maintenance issue for the Big Island River Conservancy District - soil erosion and wear and tear of the levee embankment.