

The Mississippi River is One of America's Greatest Treasures

Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District

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<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/mississippi-travel-st.louis-s5.jpg>



Gayle Harper traveled the entire length of the Great River Road after reading that it takes 90 days for a raindrop that falls at the Mississippi River headwaters to travel to the Gulf of Mexico. She spent time with people along the river and celebrates the peoples, the land and America's greatest river in her new book, Roadtrip with a Raindrop.

LA CROSSE, WI - "A single drop of water falling into the headwaters of the Mississippi in Minnesota would travel the river for 90 days to reach the Gulf of Mexico." Gayle Harper, author/photographer, read this detail on the National Park Service website.

"Every cell in my body felt the impact of that and came to full attention. It felt as if someone had hit the 'pause' button on the world."

She was captivated. How would it be to voyage the entire length of America's Greatest River for 90 days with an imaginary raindrop?

This moment of inspiration conceived a project that resulted in a story of the peoples, land and waters of the Mississippi River – one of America's Greatest Treasures. Gayle Harper traveled the Great River Road along with a fictitious raindrop she named "Serendipity."

Gayle presented her work at the national conference of the Mississippi River Parkway Commission in La Crosse. I serve as a Parkway Commissioner. The Wisconsin Commissioners hosted the national organization charged with protecting the Great River Road. America's longest and oldest National Scenic Byway stretches 3,000 miles through 10 states.

Through an assignment for Country Magazine Gayle was inspired to learn more about the river and its people. She sat down with a map of the Great River Road and divided her journey into 90 segments. Each day she would travel about 27 miles.

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With no money to support her project, Gayle wrote letters to Chambers of Commerce and other groups asking if they would be interested in helping. She ended up with “more invitations than nights available!”

Local people “chose unique and historic places – a fisherman’s cabin, a trendy downtown loft, a tugboat converted to a bed and breakfast, a share croppers cabin, a plantation mansion, and was given keys to the 30 room mansion,” said Gayle. “‘Just leave the keys in the box,’ I was told.”

“I did the research, but I didn’t have any planned interviews. I decided to leave it to Serendipity. I met amazing people everywhere. People invited me into their homes. They took me to meet Aunt Betsy. I went to a little girl’s birthday party. I went to dances, barbeques, barges, festivals, whatever was going on.”

The talented author described the spirit of the river: “River-lovers know – it’s in us. It flows through our hearts. It never leaves us.”

“The soul of the river is its people. They teach us to be innocent and to live in every moment. Life is a series of fleeting moments never to be repeated.”

Just like the single raindrop.

Gayle described the “mysterious nature of creativity that we can receive but never claim.” She got back home with “thousands of photographs and impressions”. She was a little overwhelmed about how the project would come together. But beauty and order emerged. “Life has taught me that it works best if I just stay out of its way.”

The result of her work is Roadtrip with a Raindrop, a 240-page book of “200 compelling full-color photographs and 55 beguiling tales from the road.”

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The book, published just over a year ago, has won three major book awards.

Gayle was quick to share her accolades with others. "The work you are doing touches hearts," she told the Commissioners. The Mississippi River Parkway Commission created the map that inspired her journey.

Commissioners asked Gayle about her next project. She hedged a bit and described the creative process "like a baby growing before ultrasound. It's brewing but you can't say too much about it."

I asked Gayle about the "mysterious nature of creativity" that can seem squashed by modern life.

"Funny you should ask," she said. "My new project is about the creative spirit. Creativity is equally available to all of us at all times... If you feel the creative spirit is squashed, the spirit hasn't gone away. You need to open the channels."

Gayle finished with a challenge for all of us. "It's tempting, if you watch the news, to think that fear, isolation, and mistrust are rampant. And that is just not the case. All these people [the river people] taught me the world is filled with wonderful people."

Indeed it is.