

The river's future may be its past

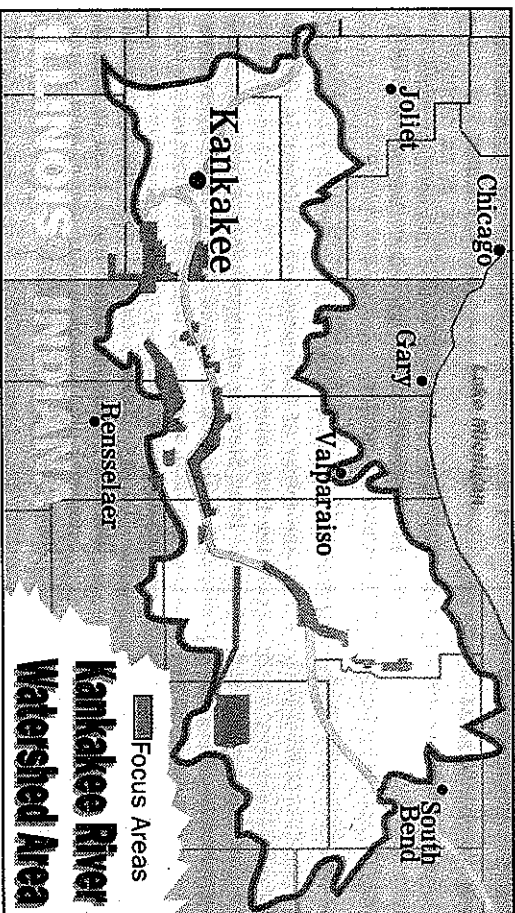
By Bill Byrns, Journal writer

In a curious way, the Grand Kankakee Marsh National Wildlife Refuge proposal brings all who live within the river basin face to face with their past and possibly their future.

The Potawatomi who first settled here named the river and its vast array of game *Ti-yar-ack-namh*, "the Wonderful Land."

Early French explorers found the river trip from present day South Bend, a harsh westward journey as it wound through a 250-mile maze of marshy river meanders, oxbow lakes and sloughs. Today the river has been reduced in length to roughly 150 miles, and much of the original 400,000 acre "Grand Marsh" is little more than memory.

The Grand Marsh, also called "Beaver Lake Country" in Indiana, was a mix of marsh prairie, wild rice sloughs and slies filled with wild geese and ducks. Winding



through this marshland was a narrow belt of riverine forest teeming with fish, deer and beaver. The rich array of waterfowl and game attracted hunters and even visiting European royalty.

The earliest settlers found great groves of trees and the lush marshlands to the east in what now is Kankakee County. Away from the river and the marsh grew isolated groves of black oaks, cotton-

■ Today's Spectrum (pages A11-12) takes a look at the Grand Marsh National Wildlife Refuge proposal, the concerns it has raised and outline what the next likely steps are in the refuge review process.

woods, maples and elms. West of Momence the river became a stream lost amid a sea of high waving tallgrass prairies and barrens.

Settlers and prairie farmers changed that landscape. The wild lands and swamps were seen as "worthless places" where diseases could breed in the dark still waters and ruffians and bandits could find shelter. In their eyes — spurred by a national mandate to turn swamps into tillable lands — the marshlands were seen as a nuisance and a barrier than must be

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removed. And so the Kankakee's marshes and wet prairies were transformed into the rich, agricultural lands that dominate the landscape today.

The transformed lands yield vast fields of corn, beans and grains. But it comes at a price. Sediments now find their way far into Illinois through the now-straightened and river and feeder streams streams.

Flooding, once a natural cycle in the marshlands, also takes its toll in crop and property losses.

Now, society is coming full circle. A passion for prairie is beginning to transform the Army's old Joliet arsenal property near Wilmingtion what is envisioned as the largest tallgrass prairie park in the country. Open space for recreation is becoming a priority for changing lifestyles, and saving the environment has approached near religious status.

But is there yet room for nature and development, for agriculture and wet-

lands, for people and wildlife?

More than three-fourths of the Kankakee watershed is now cropland. Another nearly 16 percent is agrarian grasslands: pastures, hayfields, idle land, remnant prairies and grassy strips along roadsides and railroad tracks. Forested areas, just over three percent of the land, and non-forested wetlands, a mere half a percent, are largely the last bastions for wildlife.

Only about 56 acres of native prairie survives in the Kankakee region according to the state's Critical Trends Assessment. Approximately

10,000 acres of floodplain forest survives, the largest tract being the 1,600 acres of sloughs and swamps known as the Momence Wetlands. Nine state nature preserves and another 33 designated natural areas protect rare savannas, dunes, sandy uplands and bottomland forests.

The state estimates that 96 percent of the pre-settlement wetlands are now gone with only about 236 acres surviving away from the forest cover of area streams. Two-thirds of the state's only surviving high quality savanna, a total of 827 acres, is still found in the Kankakee Valley.