A Short History of the Kankakee River
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A supplement booklet to
“KANKAKEE: THE RIVER THAT CONNECTS US,”
Kankakee River Watershed Conference
February 10, 2017
Olivet Nazarene University
Bourbonnais, Illinois.
Many names and beliefs have been attributed to the upper Kankakee River and its surrounding marshes and lakes . . .

There were people who saw the upper Kankakee as “the land god forgot to finish.”

There were writers who called Beaver Lake the “Land of Enchantment.”

Outdoors men swore all of it was “a hunter’s paradise.”

And still others declared it “a hideout for cutthroats, counterfeiters and horse thrives.”

It was all of those and much more.

It was the “river of two thousand bends.”

It was the “River of the Wolf.”

It was the Grand Marias, the “Grand Marsh of the Kankakee.”

It was Beaver Lake, the Black Marsh, and the quaking islands south of English Lake.

And in Indian lore, “the home of the horned fish or water panther called the “Keginzori.””
River Theakiki and Grand Marsh
Explored by La Salle, December 1679

This map of the upper Kankakee River Valley, from the Illinois-Indiana state line on the left to the Kankakee-St. Joseph Portage on the right, shows a generalized outline of what the French called the Grand Marshes. In all, a series of marshes covered some half-million acres. If it existed today the marsh would rival the Okfenekee and Everglades as one of this country’s national treasures. Beaver Lake and its adjoining marsh was a separate ecosphere that drained to the south into Beaver Creek. Beaver Creek emptied into the Iroquois River. This great fresh water marsh, in its upper regions covered 150 square miles.

This map is based on the work of George A. Baker, Alfred H. Meyer, the United States Geological Survey, the Indiana Geological Survey, and maps in the Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Indiana, 1876.

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Rivers are epic poems never written but of endless telling. A land without a river is a desolation; find a sweet flowing river and find Elysium. In its time the Kankakee River ran as sweet and gentle as any, and it wound tranquilly through a wildlife paradise.

BORN IN THE LATE STAGES of the last continental glaciation, among the recessional moraines of the Lake Michigan ice lobe, the River Kankakee matured into a sprawling watershed of splendid variation. To the east, in the upper part of the valley, lay a half-million acres of incomparable freshwater marshes. It was a breeding ground for many species of waterfowl. The river channel coiled endlessly through reed prairies, timbered swampland and shifting sand ridges. Thus the river was known as “The Fabulous River of 2,000 bends.” This sobriquet was coined by Fay Folsom Nichols in The Kankakee: Chronicle of an Indiana River and Its Fabled Marshes.

Another chronicler of the river and marsh was Charles Bartlett, born in South Bend, Indiana, in 1853. A graduate of the first South Bend High School class in 1872, he returned after graduating from Wabash Collage to serve as the school’s principal. Bartlett published Tales of Kankakee Land in 1907.
The illustration on the left shows the advancement through time (about 70,000 years), bottom to top, of the last continental glaciation. The blue rectangles are periods of meltwater floods in northeast and north central Illinois. The trace on the right follows the progression of regional climate change and the effect on the natural habitat.

The limestone bedrock bottom of the Kankakee River, west of the island at Wilmington, and below the dam was exposed for about a mile downstream, at the time another dam on a bypass canal, to the east side of the island, gave way. Seen on the right is a curious feature in the bedrock. It is not clear what these holes represent.
The upland in the distance is Mount Langham. It is a remnant of the last continental glaciation. Geologists call it a “kame.” It was formed from clay, sand and gravel debris imbedded in the melting ice.

Right: Typical Kankakee County prairie that developed on level ground deposit of glacial proto-soils.

In the time period following the retreat of the glacier, and drying up of the meltwater lakes, wind borne sand from the lake beds formed a series of eastward traveling sand dunes. Eventually they were anchored by vegetation. One of the largest dunes in Kankakee County is in Pembroke Township.

Another gift of the last glaciation is Rock Creek in Kankakee River State Park and its falls. About 10,000 years ago the falls were perched at the creek’s mouth on the Kankakee River. Over time the falls eroded back a half-mile up stream.
Shown at right is the movement of Indian nations between the time of European contact and American pioneer settlement in the Kankakee River valley.

Dislocations were caused by traditional rivalry among Indian nations, competition for hunting grounds, war with and among European and English colonies for territorial, cultural and economic dominance.
Bartlett knew the old Kankakee (Theakiki) in Indiana before the river was channelized and the marshes drained. His eloquent description of this lost natural treasure gives us a hint of what was one of the finest fresh water wetlands in the country.

Here is a view from Bartlett’s *Tales of Kankakee Land*. He wrote of the marsh:

More than a million acres of swaying reeds, fluttering flags [iris], clumps of wild rice, thick-crowding lily-pads, soft beds of cool green mosses, shimmering ponds and black mire and trembling bogs—such is Kankakee Land. These wonderful fens, or marshes, together with their wide reaching lateral extensions, spread themselves over an area far greater than the Dismal Swamp of Virginia and North Carolina. Their vastness, their silence, their misty haze, and their miry depths make them the very realm of forgetfulness and oblivion. In the remote glacial times, however, all this spacious plain was the scene of the mightiest activities, for it was swept by deep swirling currents and torn and scarred by moving mountains of ice and rock. But within the historic period the river has been a mere thread of silver meandering through the sloughs, the lily beds and the rice; now trending over to the ancient bank on the right, and now wandering far off to the left; here creeping around and between the members of a group of islands, and then quite losing itself in ten thousand acres of rushes and reeds.

Uria Briggs, an early land surveyor gave the following description of the timber swampland that lined the river banks:

[The river] is a sluggish stream, its banks very low and lined on each side with a heavy growth of timber, mostly ash, some elm, maple, oak, and birch, which grows very tall, and is under grown with swamp alder and wild rose, etc., making an interminable forest.
Five years before the dredging of the upper Kankakee, an Indiana Commissioner of Fish and Game wrote:

The river courses through a forest of great elms, and trees such as grow on wet ground, and the branches of these hang near, or touch the water. Some of the trees are beautifully hung with vines, and all in all the scenery is altogether unlike that of any other river in Indiana. . . Beautiful birds flush at every turn, kingfishers, green herons, great blue herons, wood ducks, mallards, hawks, owls, occasionally a great eagle, many red heads, flickers, red wings, divers, mud hens — all these and others are in plenty. . . Fish disturb the water. . . Some of them are carp, but not all; many are catfish up to 15 pounds, walleyed pike of like weight, ordinary pike, or pickerel of weight sometimes nearly twice as great, and bass, large and small mouthed, up to 5-6 pounds.

SOME NINETY MILES from its source (240 miles by river channel), below a broad limestone ledge in its bed, the river’s character changed dramatically. The sluggish meanders were left behind; the stream flowed straight and broad through prairies of tall grasses, flanked by timbered uplands.

Scattered along the banks of the Kankakee, from its mouth to the boggy lowlands of its beginning, stand effigy and burial mounds that remain mysterious relics of ancient Indian rituals, their histories mutilated, fragmented, forever lost.

There can be little doubt, however, that the portage between the St. Joseph River and the Kankakee, near South Bend, had been used for thousands of years by Native Americans as an avenue of trade and migration. (La Salle’s Mohegan guide knew it well. And there are those who believe Father Marquette may have used the portage as early as 1675.) This portage crossed the divide between waters flowing into Lake Michigan and waters flowing to the Mississippi and Gulf of Mexico.
Kankakee River Country

This map of the upper Kankakee River valley, from the state line to the St. Joseph-Kankakee portage, shows a generalized outline of the marsh area. In all, the marshes extended over some half-million acres. If those marshes existed today the “Grand Marais” of the Theakiki would rival the Okefenokee and Everglades as one of this country’s national treasures.

Rémi-Rober Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle and his men came down the Theakiki in December 1679. Many adventurous souls followed but only a few left a written record of their voyage. Amasa C. Washburn traveled the Kankakee in the spring of 1831. His diary tells of that journey through what the pioneer settlers of Indiana called “the land God forgot to finish.”

Alfred H. Meyer wrote in a study of Kankakee’s marshes: “Rank sedges and grasses, fields of wild hay and wild rice dominated the marsh landscape interrupted now by a swamp-timber oulier of pin oak and its tree associates, now by a pond or lake of lily pads, cattails and flags (wild iris).” There were patches of cranberries, and blueberry bushes. Small, remnant tamarack swamps spoke of an earlier time associated with the end of the last Ice Age.

Note: The text in red is from the diary of Amasa C. Washburn, 1831.
La Salle’s Gateway to the Illinois Country

THE FIRST WRITTEN RECORD of the portage and the Kankakee River appears in Father Louis Hennepin’s account of his journey with Rene-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle’s exploration party during the winter of 1679-1680. Published in 1683 in France, Hennepin’s book reported that La Salle honored the river used on his historic voyage into Illinois country with the name “Seignelay.” The Marquis de Seignelay held the office of Marine and Colonial Minister of France.

For the Kankakee it was but a fleeting honor. A map drawn by Bernou and Peronel in the same year as Hennepin’s book was published, shows the meandering Kankakee labeled “R. Teafiki.” The name of the esteemed Seignelay now graced the river Illinois.

ON A GRAY DECEMBER MORNING in 1679, La Salle’s party of thirty-three men launched their eight canoes on a “sluggish streamlet, looking at a little distance, like men who sailed on land. Fed by an unceasing tribute of spongy soil, it quickly widened to a river; and they floated on their way through a voiceless, lifeless solitude of dreary oak barrens, or boundless marshes overgrown with reeds.”

Thus the Kankakee River is engraved unalterably in history’s tablet as La Salle’s first gateway into the Illinois country, into what would become the Royal Colony of Louisiana.

River of the Wolf

EXCEPT FOR A FEW ERRANT MAPS that show the Kankakee as the River of the Miamis (a name early on applied to the St. Joseph), or the Huakiki, Macopin, Teafiki, Teatiki, Theakiki continued to be used by map makers until the early 1800s, at which time the name became “Quinquiqui,” “Kankiki,” and finally “Kankakee.” Although many efforts have been made to trace the origin of the word “Kankakee,” and to determine its meaning, no final answer
has been agreed on. It may be that Kankakee is a synthesis of two Indian words, later modified by French, English and Yankee spelling and pronunciation.

Jacob Piatt Dunn, an Indiana historian, suggests the two root words for Kankakee were “Ma-whah-ke-ki,” a Miami word meaning “wolf country,” and the Potawatomi word “Teh-yok-ke-ki,” meaning “low, swampy land.” (John Tipton, 1821, said the Potawatomi word was “Tioakakee.”) Gurdon S. Hubbard, who was employee of the American Fur Company in the early 1800s and was quite familiar with language and customs of the Potawatomi Indians, stated that “Tyarakee” and “Tyarnunk” were descriptions of the river and for the land in Illinois through which it flowed: the first word is interpreted as “Wonderful River,” and the second word as “Wonderful Country.” In this instance the words were assumed by many to be proper names. The same is true of early French labels on maps that became names “Grand Marias,” simply described a large marsh; “Grand Bois,” marked a large woods.

River of History

FOLLOWING LA SALLE came a cavalcade of missionary priests, traders, hunters, trappers, adventurers, banditti, and pioneer settlers coursing the Kankakee in dugout and bark canoes, rafts, Mackinaw boats, and skiffs. In 1739, Captain Pierre Joseph de Celoron gathered an army of French soldiers and Iroquois Indians at Fort Michilimackinac and took them south over a route that included the Kankakee River to Mississippi, and on to Alabama where they fought in the last campaign of the Chickasaw Wars. A Spanish raiding party from St. Louis ascended the Kankakee to attack the British at Fort St. Joseph, on the St. Joseph River, during the American Revolution.

In 1680, the Seneca, one of five Iroquois nations living in what is now New York state, pushed westward in a quest to disrupt
In 1739 Captain Pierre Joseph de Celoron brought French troops from Michilimackinac to the French colony of Louisiana. They would participate in the Chickasaw Wars. They traveled south (possibly in wooden bateaux and birch bark canoe) by way of Lake Michigan, the St. Joseph-Kankakee river portage, and the Illinois and Mississippi rivers.

Priests of the Quebec Seminary of Foreign Missions establish the Mission of the Holy Family at Cahokia in 1699. It is the first permanent settlement in what was called “the Country of the Illinois.”

Father Pierre Marquette and Louis Joliet and explored the Mississippi as far as the mouth of the Arkansas River in 1673. They returned to Canada by way of the Illinois and Kankakee rivers, and Lake Michigan.

In 1641, the Potawatomi nation — that later populated the Kankakee River valley — were driven into Wisconsin by the Iroquois Confederacy, and became through the fur trade economically dependent on French merchants in Montreal.

The French crown made New France (Canada) a crown colony in 1663. Its population of about two thousand, mostly young males. Many became engaged in the fur trade throughout the Great Lakes region.
the French trade and to secure furs for their British clients. The Kankakee River valley gave these Seneca foragers an entry from the east into the Illinois country.

It's possible the original word for Theakiki (T'aukiki, perhaps. A French pronunciation would lack the “H” sound) or Wolf River as applied to the Kankakee by Father Charlevoix in 1721 may have been a corruption of the Iroquoian word for wolf, “(o)tha-yq-nih.” In giving the meaning of Theakiki, said Charlevoix, “Theak meant wolf, kiki meant river.” The French, Charlevoix explained, then further changed the pronunciation to Kin-ki-ki.

When the Seneca came west to destroy Illiniwek villages and drive out the French traders, a band of expatriate Mahicans from the Hudson River valley (displaced by the encroachment on tribal land by the British) were living with the Miami near the St. Joseph-Kankakee portage.

T. J. Brasser wrote in an essay on the Mahican in which he said that they had been exploring the Midwest since about 1669. The Munsee (a Delaware band in Indiana), called the Mahicans “Wolves” because, said the Munsee, the name “Mahican” resembled the Algonquian word for wolf (maw-in-gwan).

In the 1830s we find a few accounts of the Kankakee being used by Anglo-Americans such as George W. Beckwith (1839) and Amasa C. Washburn (1831) as a means of traveling from the eastern states into Illinois. They were following in the wake of Native Americans, traders, missionaries and armies that had journeyed down the same river generations earlier.

LONG BEFORE THE FOUNDING of the city of Kankakee, plans were made by ambitious men that would play a part in deciding the city’s location. The rock-bedded Kankakee River seemed like a touch of home to New Englanders. It spoke to them of canals and milldams, of water-driven machinery and an opportunity for inexpensively powered milling, weaving and manufacturing. The
first intent was to build a canal. When finished, the canal would connect the Wabash and Erie Canal in northeast Indiana, by way of the upper Wabash and Maumee rivers, to the Iroquois River and the Kankakee, and thereby complete a canal system from Lake Erie to the Illinois River. This would open a transcontinental waterway from the eastern port of the Erie Canal at Albany, New York, to the Gulf of Mexico. An 1820’s Albany to the Gulf inland waterway as envisioned was never accomplished. The idea was revived during the summer of 1862 by A. B. Condit, an engineer from Newton County, Indiana, but wasn’t implemented because of the Civil War.

UP IN NORTHWEST INDIANA, first settlers disparaged the magnificent Grand Marais as a fever swamp, a “land God forgot to finish,” and as good Christians set out to finish God’s work by draining the marshes and unbending the fabulous river of two thousand bends, until all that was left was dogleg ditch.

IN THE 1830s we find a few accounts of the Kankakee being used by Anglo-Americans such as Washburn and Beckwith as a means of traveling from the eastern states into Illinois. They were following in the wake of Native Americans, traders, missionaries and armies that had journeyed down the same river generations earlier.

Alexis Coquillar, an earlier settler at South Bend, Indiana, owned land on both sides of the St. Joseph River during the 1830. In his lifetime he would build three mills. The first attempt was a saw and flour mill known as the Kankakee Customs Mill near the foot of Marion Street on the river’s west bank. Alexis intended to power the mill with water diverted from the Kankakee Marsh.

Following a period of lawlessness that began in the early 1830s and lasting until mid-century, market hunters and sportsmen were drawn to the dwindling “hunter’s paradise” on the upper Kankakee. Wild game was taken out by the wagon load. The venerable stand of swamp timber became sawmill lumber.
French and British fur traders were the first to tap the rich bounty of wild game on the upper Kankakee. In the late 1800s, market hunters and sportsmen killed off most of the wildlife in the marshes and on the river.

The Union Club steamboat was owned by the Woosters, Levi Haslett, Slocum Wilbur and the Chapmans.

One of the 1890s hunting camps on the upper Kankakee. Permanent hunting lodges also existed.

Brown’s cider mill on the river in Momence.

Credit photographs Momence historical society, Momence, Ill.
By the last half of the nineteenth century, steamboats named *Dewdrop, Margaret, Domino, Union Chief, Red Bird, Minnie Lillie and Morning Star* carried freight and passengers up and down the Kankakee. For a short time a few steamboats plied the river between Aroma Park, Momence and the bridge at Thayer, and between Kankakee and Aroma Park. And for a short time a few steamboats plied the river between Momence and the bridge at Thayer, Kankakee and Aroma Park. Farther down river, from Warner’s landing and Wilmington, steamers hauled grain barges to Canal Port using the Kankakee Feeder as a connection to the I & M Canal. Excursion boats loaded with holiday crowds cruised upriver to Gouger’s Grove just below Aroma Park. Summer vacationers set up camps along the river’s shore in the 1880s. An article in the August 4, 1887, *Kankakee Gazette* said:

Four camps have been established up the river this week — Camp ‘Sivadnamrehs,” Camp” Breckenridge,” Camp “Gaiety” and Camp “Bloomington. ”The first-named, in the rear of the Ohio house, is probably the most elaborate of any ever staked out on the Kankakee river. The view of Camp “Sivadnamrehs” (translated “Big Eater”) from the river on Tuesday evening was entrancing. A long line of torches and Chinese lanterns marked its location from the moment the bend was rounded two miles below and twinkled a brilliant greeting to the boat loads of pleasure-seekers continually passing by. A large wall tent, containing six rooms, affords shelter to the denizens of this tempting retreat; another bunting-bedecked canopy constitutes the dining hall, and a third canvas enclosure is the domain of the caterer. The hospitable people who hang out a cordial welcome to friends at this camp are Mr. and Mrs. S. M. Davis, Mrs. R. S. Coolbaugh, Mrs. D. K. Walker and Mrs. Aaron Warner, of Chicago . . . This is a Presbyterian camp.

At Gouger’s [Grove ] a hearty welcome awaits the friends of Mr. and Mrs. W. R. Breckenridge, Dr. and Mrs. Scobey,
It was not long after the first settlers arrived in northwest Indian that they began to think about draining the 500,000 or so acres of the “Grand Marsh” and Beaver Lake. Because the Kankakee River’s wandering course, the oxbows, the side channels were impediments to navigation. Settlers petitioned to have the river changed into a “ditch” (now called the “Marble-Powers Ditch”). The river’s course would become a fairly straight line across Indiana to the Illinois border. Its 240 mile length in Indiana would be reduced to about 90 miles. A good part of the land recovered from the marsh and Beaver Lake eventually became cropland and pastures.

Credit photographs U.S. Corps of engineers, Rock Island, Ill.

The 50-ton Auston Template excavator and drainage channel cutter operated in the Kankakee Marsh. It was steam powered, and moved overland on a track. Below: A steam powered, floating excavator was used to straighten the Kankakee River channel.
the Friths and Burchards. One end of the pavilion is curtained off and affords a comfortable place for the ladies, while two tents outside accommodate the male element.

Kankakee businessman William T. Gougar bought the 74-foot long sidewheel steamboat, the *Minnie Lillie* (originally named “*Starry Queen*”), from James Lillie in April 1884. The *Minnie Lillie* could carry up to 300 passengers. To establish a port of call, Gougar rented the Methodist camp grounds on the river just below Aroma Park. On summer weekends and holidays trainloads of Chicagoans, work-a-day urban folk flocked aboard excursion trains at the Illinois Central Twelfth Street and Sixty-Third Street stations and began the first leg of their journey. From the Kankakee depot the crowd would make its way on foot or by carriage to Shekey’s Landing at the foot of South Schuyler Avenue, where the Minnie Lillie awaited them.

**Taming the River**

IN 1889, INDIANA BEGAN AN AGGRESSIVE ASSAULT on the “Fabulous River of 2,000 Bends.” Steam dredges were used to straighten the winding course from South Bend to the state line. A subject of much controversy between Illinois and Indiana in the 1890s was a limestone “bar” or outcrop, a little over two miles in length, in the bed of the Kankakee River. The outcrop was described in an 1885 report to the Chief of Engineers, United States Army, by Major Jared A. Smith.

The highest point of the formation in the river bed is directly opposite the upper end of the upper dam at Momence [wrote Smith].

The altitude of the stone at this point is 4.5 feet higher than where it first appears, 4,800 feet up stream, and is 9.5 feet
Elmore Barce was born December 5, 1872. He grew up on a farm and attended rural schools in Benton County, Indiana. Barce taught school for six years, studied law at Valparaiso University, and was admitted to the bar in 1897.

In 1938 Barce’s acquaintance with a son of one of Fulton County’s pioneers inspired him to write a book about one of northwest Indiana’s most intriguing natural wonders, Beaver Lake country. The lake no longer existed, but Barce’s prose and the quoted reminiscences of Alexander Liner Barker in Beaver Lake—Land of Enchantment gave it a new life in the imagination of Barce’s readers. He wrote:

In the days of old and before the passing of the waters there was a certain element of mystery about Beaver Lake, a touch of the supernatural and the occult, which awakened a corresponding impulse in the breast of man which he could not control. Whether this air of the mysterious came from the vast solitudes of the unknown, the swamps and morasses - the cries of the wild things round and about - the strange rumblings and bubblings of the water, the phosphorescent and ghostly lights that sometimes moved in the darkness over the bog-- or from the combined force and effect of all these impalpable influences upon the innermost spirit of man, may not certainly be resolved. Certain it is, however, that one passing the last frontiers of civilization and entering upon these doleful regions, felt himself translated from the visible and the known to the primitive and the unnatural.
higher than where it is again covered, at a distance of 7,600 feet downstream.

The outcrop obstructed the river’s current. Indiana wanted this so-called “ledge,” which had provided a shallow-water ford at the Upper Crossing and another at the Lower Crossing, lowered to allow greater river discharge.

A report published by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1885 gave a reason for lowering the outcrop. Wrote James C. Post, Captain of Engineers:

It is estimated in the report of Mr. John L. Campbell, chief engineer, made to the governor of the State of Indiana in 1882, that about 400,000 acres of exceedingly rich land could be reclaimed from the marshes along the Kankakee River and its tributaries by judicious drainage. The removal of the bar would undoubtedly aid in draining these marshes and thus help materially the agricultural development of the locality.

The Kankakee River was divided by an outcrop into two distinctly different rivers. Above the Upper Crossing the Kankakee’s average slope is 0.83 feet per mile; below the outcrop, the average slope is 2.47 feet per mile. From its source near South Bend to the Upper Crossing outcrop, a crow’s flight distance of 80 miles, the river in its original course (before Indiana diverted it into a series of straight channels) meandered and doubled back on itself for 250 miles, having at least 2,000 bends. Below the outcrop the Kankakee ran much as it does today in a fairly direct 49 miles to its confluence with the Des Plaines River.

Indiana Governor Joseph A. Wright, in 1851, recommended that the State Legislature pass a bill to reclaim extensive marshlands in northern Indiana. Land speculators were encouraged by the Drainage Act of 1852 to convert thousands of acres of marsh to farmland.
Locks, Dams and Canals
Kankakee Waterway, 1870

A. Kankakee Town Plat 1837
B. Wilmington

State Lock and Dam

Lock and Dam No. 1

Lock and Dam No. 2

Dam No. 3

Lock and Dam No. 4

This map is partly based on information supplied by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Rock Island District. It shows the Kankakee Feeder Canal and improvements made to the Kankakee River from the State Dam to above the City of Wilmington. In 1860, the Kankakee company’s chief engineer estimated the cost of dams, locks and the Wilmington Canal at approximately $343,000. Tolls charged at that time were: “10 cents per 1,000 pounds upon all grains from Hanford’s Landing to the Illinois and Michigan Canal, and 4 cents per 1,000 pounds from Wilmington to the canal (I&M); 30 cents per 1,000 feet (board measure) on all lumber to Hanford’s Landing, and 12 cents per 1,000 feet to Wilmington.” On general merchandise, the tolls were the same as on grain. The Kankakee Company gave up control of the river in 1882. At that time, their “slack water” navigation system reached 21 miles down river from Warner’s Landing to the State Dam.
Soon an effort was made to drain Beaver Lake. It was Indiana’s largest body of water. Covering 25 square miles, Beaver Lake lay between Lake Village and Morocco. Its only outlet was to the Iroquois River by way of Beaver Creek. In 1853, Austin M. Puett dug a six-mile channel through a low sandy ridge from the lake to the Kankakee River. During the next 30 years the lake and its surrounding marshes slowly drained away leaving little trace of their Ice Age origins.

Indiana legislators appropriated $65,000 for a project to lower the limestone outcrop, even though it was in Illinois.

In 1893 a 300-foot-wide-by-8,649-foot-long cut was made in the outcrop at Momence to a depth of 2.5 feet. The project ran out of money before a large area of “boulders,” the so-called “riffles,” could be cleared upstream. This obstruction appeared to be remains of a glacial moraine. In 1927 the Yellowhead Drainage District would remove the riffles at a cost of $5,000.

Ditching the marshes, straightening of the Kankakee’s channel and lowering of the outcrop did increase flow of water out of Indiana, but it emptied a natural reservoir. Those marshes had slowly released water into the Kankakee. Ditching caused quick run-off of great volume, loaded with sediment. Rapid spring discharge led to low water in the Kankakee during summer and fall. A build up of sediment and sand bars in eddies and in slack water behind the dams became evident. The marshes had filtered the sediment, held it in place, and acted as a stabilizing control of water flow. Without the marshes the lower Kankakee became subject to distressing swings in water levels.

At times, when the river was unusually shallow, citizens of Momence and Kankakee began to refer to the Kankakee as “the stolen river.”

By 1917 the length of the Kankakee River in Indiana would be reduced to 86 miles at a cost of $1,200,000. By 1919, an astounding 17,500 miles of drainage ditches would be dug and 8,200 miles of
The first railroad bridge across the Kankakee River was built in 1855 by Illinois Central Railroad company. This type bridge had been invented in 1851 by Wendle Bollman and is known as a Bollman truss bridge. The bridge had two decks. Trains crossed on the upper deck. To cross on the lower deck people and horse drawn carriages and wagon had to pay a toll.

Looking east: The second Illinois Central railroad bridge replaced the Bollman bridge in the 1880s. The first wooden dam spans the Kankakee River. The stone mill building is on the left. This river location became Kankakee’s first industrial area. In 1867 the stone addition to the mill was added on the west side of old McGrew mill building on the Kankakee River at the end of South West Avenue. A tunnel dug under the adjacent River Street accommodated two iron shafts connected to the mill’s water wheel. Through a series of belts and pulleys the shafts ran the machinery in a woolen factory, a flax mill, a wagon shop, a machine shop, and two woodworking shops. The flour mill burned down in 1890. The Kankakee Electric Light and Power Co. was relocated to the stone building in 1897, and hydro-electric equipment installed.

Looking south: A paper mill stood at the end of the dam. In later years a concrete dam replaced the wooden one. The Public Service Company later built an electric generation plant on the mill site.

Looking west: The iron Illinois Central bridge is shown crossing the Kankakee River. On the right is a wooden shed built after the flour mill.
In 1904 the old wooden “rafter dam” was replaced by a cement dam. It is nine feet high and 510 feet long. On the old paper mill site in 1910, the Public Service company built a steam generating station. Two years later an adjoined hydro station was completed.

A concrete Washington Ave. bridge replaced the original iron bridge over the Kankakee River. The new bridge was dedicated in 1909.
drainage tile would be laid! Only six percent of original marshland would remain.

DOWN RIVER in the , below Warner Bridge, Frank Warner and Frank Z. Hanford operated the tow boat King Bros. and two grain barges, Atlantic and J. Menard. The Hiawatha, Sea Gull and Mohawk Bell handled freight out of Wilmington. These steamboats plied the waters of the Kankakee Feeder to the Illinois & Michigan Canal, and on to the grain markets of Chicago. The King Bros. and barges also were used on holidays for public excursions between Hanford’s Landing and Wilmington.

Lamentably, the Kankakee River never had a Mark Twain to say as Twain did of the Mississippi that it “was not a commonplace river, but on the contrary is in all ways remarkable.” Truly the Kankakee and its history is noteworthy from its creation during the last continental glaciation through the romantic glory days of the steamboat era.

ON SUMMER HOLIDAYS in the last decade of the 19th century, train loads of Chicagoans, looking forward to spending a pleasant afternoon on the river, flocked to Kankakee, Illinois.

“The Chicago picnic at Gougar’s, Sunday,” reported the September 1, 1892, Kankakee Gazette, “brought down 35 loaded coaches.”

Upon leaving the Illinois Central depot, bustled ladies in puffed-sleeve dresses, wearing hats trimmed with artificial birds and flowers; shiny faced kids, hanging onto the hands of men in derbies and black broadcloth suits, made their way on foot, or by carriage to Shekey’s landing. There a steam-powered side-wheeler, the Minnie Lillie, awaited.

A 20-minute cruise up the Kankakee with fork-bearded Captain Billy Gougar at the ship’s wheel, delivered the Chicagoans to Gougar’s picnic grounds, a 22-acre grove of timber on the river’s north bank.
A photograph similar to this one illustrated an article about the Kankakee River in 1908. The *Margaret*, Captain Gougar's steamboat along with several “launches” are viewed from Riverview (Cobb) Park across from the Illinois Eastern hospital.

An overnight stay at the grove could be arranged by renting a tent from the enterprising Gougar.

Often the holiday crowd outnumbered the *Minnie Lillie’s* carrying capacity, so a barge bearing the surplus merrymakers attended the chugging side wheeler.

Gougar would launch a new steamboat the *Margaret* in 1898; and Cobb’s marvelous Electric Park (Beckman Park) with its dancing pavilion and 600-seat canvas-roofed theater would prove popular; the *Margaret* (later, *Marguerite*), was 80 feet long with a stern wheel. The flamboyant Gougar frequently used the *Margaret*, to ferry holiday revelers up river from Kankakee to his resort at Gougar’s Grove (known to some as “Hell’s Half Acre”) in presently “parched” Aroma Township. Not to worry, said the local newspaper, Gougar’s elevation to township supervisor had already “vindicated” him and he would continue to provide “Sunday beer and gambling up the river.”
IN 1679 LA SALLE chose the Kankakee River as his gateway into the Illinois Country, to the Mississippi River and on to the Gulf of Mexico, where he claimed all the land drained by the Mississippi for France. This claim prevented England from expanding the east coast colonies beyond the Appalachians, at least for a period of time. The American spirit of independence grew to where we rejected, by revolution, any claim to any part of our country by the British Crown. We need to recognize the Kankakee River as part of this larger historical context and not simply think of it as “local history.”

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Note: Much of this material appeared in various “up to now” columns I wrote for the Kankakee Sunday Journal between 1991 and 2002. There is some writing taken from three unpublished manuscripts: Tales of the Old Theakiki, A History of a Stolen River, and La Salle and the River of the Wolf.
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