Why rivers matter

08/05/2006 10:11:34

I still remember the first time I saw the Mississippi River.

Now you'll know what a real river looks like, a friend had promised when I told him I' d be driving cross country. This was a friend from the East who guffawed at our rivers here in the West, especially the dry rivers, a term he thought oxymoronic.

I supposed I believed all the hype, most of it anyway. The Mighty Mississippi . The Great River . Ol' Man River . Huckleberry Finn. Our geographic identity took root in whether we were east of the Mississippi or west.

And then I missed it the first time. I was driving out of St. Louis on Interstate 70, on a bridge I was told much later was best avoided by people not familiar with the area. It was a jumble of freeway ramps and flyovers flying off in every direction and somehow, I was in Illinois , speeding east, the Mighty Mississip receding.

Eventually, I exited the freeway and, after getting lost a couple of times, found my way to a warehouse district that afforded me not just a view of the river but the closest thing to a parking lot I could find. I walked as close to the edge as I could, still quite a ways from a real river bank, and I stood there for a while.

And I was a little under whelmed. Oh, it was big, all right, no question. And, people later told me, I picked a crummy place for a first impression, the view occluded by barges and cranes and that blasted I-70 bridge. On the return trip, I found another vantage point downstream, in Memphis , and it was there that I found a greater appreciation for this river that had defined a nation.

But I didn't get from the Mississippi what I get from our Western rivers. I'm not sure how to explain it – a lot of you probably understand from your own experiences – but there's something about a river hardy enough to survive in the dry country, a river so fragile it retreats into the ground in a dry spell yet so powerful it can carve through a mesa or a plateau, creating canyons that seem forged by artisans.

Maybe it's the scale. Out here, you can walk up to a river or a creek, walk across it if the water's low enough. When we traced the Colorado to its headwaters two years ago, I couldn't get over the idea that the little creek in the alpine valley would, a few hundred miles downstream, swell into the West's workhorse.

Edward Abbey, the great naturalist and author, said a river is the soul of the desert and he hit that one out of the park. Sit for a while by the edge of a creek gurgling through a stand of aspens or perch on a rock and watch a river bustle past a gallery of cottonwoods and willows, and see how long before you hear the voice of the river, of the trees, of the mesas and bluffs, of the desert.

ÒWhen you put your hand in the flowing stream, you touch the last that has gone before and the first of what is still to come.Ó Leonardo da Vinci said that and who am I to argue with Leonardo? Water is such a powerful force in the dry country, both as a shaper of the land and something that tugs at our own souls.

People want to be near water. That's always been true. Homesteads and villages and cities spring up beside rivers. With few exceptions, Arizona 's settlers planted themselves by the water. Phoenix sprouted from the Salt, Tucson from the Santa Cruz , Yuma from the Colorado . People who have lived here for a certain time still remember picnics by the Salt River , when it still flowed a short distance into the Valley.

So we set out to explore Arizona ’s rivers, those waterways that tie us together as a state. Our report, Ruined Rivers, begins today and continues through Saturday in The Arizona Republic and online at river.azcentral.com .

What we found wasn’t always pretty: It’s easy to lose faith along reaches of the San Pedro, easier still on the Santa Cruz , which disappears into the desert, its channel lost before it can find its link to the Gila.

But we also found parts of Arizona ’s soul. It was in the high pines of the White Mountains , where the Little Colorado gathers itself. It was in the harsh, low ridges that surround the Bill Williams, a hidden gem in the state’s outback. We found life along the San Pedro, in a beaver dam, in the songs of the yellow-billed cuckoo, on a ranch in northern Mexico .

Mostly we found life in the people who love our rivers, who are committed to preserving some part of them, to protecting this intrinsic piece of ourselves. Those people were ranchers like Wink Crigler and Sam Udall, sportsmen like Kip Pollay, scientists like Holly Richter, activists like Robin Silver and Michelle Harrington, bird watchers like Tice Supplee, and a band of youngsters in San L‡zaro, Sonora who have adopted a dying river and made themselves its local authority.

There’s just something about a river.

ÒSometimes if you stand on the bottom rail of a bridge and lean over to watch the river slipping slowly away beneath you, you will suddenly know everything there is to be known.Ó

Writer AA Milne said that through his character of Winnie the Pooh. And who am I to argue?