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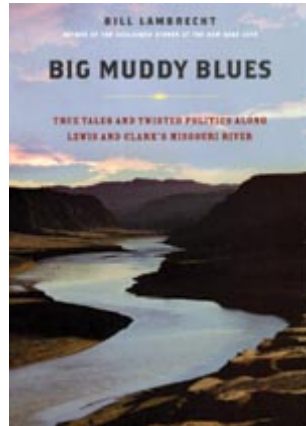
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River of Broken Dreams

In excerpts from his new book, journalist Bill Lambrecht '72 explores the lives affected by political feuding over how best to manage the Missouri River.



Excerpts by Bill Lambrecht '72 Introduction by Tim Obermiller

The path of an investigative journalist in eager pursuit of a story is not unlike that of an explorer searching for a river's source. Both track their leads and weigh the evidence at hand to propel them toward the ultimate answers they seek.

Bill Lambrecht '72 played roles of both journalist and explorer to write his new book *Big Muddy Blues: True Tales and Twisted Politics Along Lewis & Clark's Missouri River*. In his journeys up and down the Missouri, he spoke with dozens of people whose lives had been affected by government river policies. Many of those stories appeared under Lambrecht's byline in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, where he has worked as a Washington, D.C., correspondent since 1984. *Big Muddy Blues* weaves those stories into a wider analysis of how the "twisted politics" referred to in the book's subtitle have led to outdated policies and personal tragedies.

In his four years of research for *Big Muddy Blues*, published in April by St. Martin's Press, Lambrecht traveled along the Missouri "by tugboat, canoe, kayak, johnboat, towboat, fly-fishing tub, (and) pontoon boat. ..." The jumping-off point of those travels occurred in 2000, when he reported on a Save Our River Rally outside Kansas City. Paid for by barge executives and agribusiness leaders, the boat trip down the Missouri was organized to counter growing pressures to change federal river regulations in ways that might adversely affect their businesses. While listening to their arguments, Lambrecht was struck by the lifelessness of the river that his hosts claimed they were trying to "save."

"As we shove off," Lambrecht writes in the book's introduction, "I notice beer bottles strewn on the banks alongside plastic grocery bags tangled in the weeds. The odor of sewage hangs in the air. Abandoned barges bleed rust along the shoreline dotted with scrub trees. ...On the fabled Missouri River, the highway of the American empire, I see no other boats or human beings during the entire trip."

It's doubtful Thomas Jefferson could have envisioned this outcome when he wrote his 1803 instructions to Meriwether Lewis and William Clark instructing them to explore the Missouri to determine its value "for the purposes of commerce." Their expedition's success two centuries ago launched America's westward expansion. Soon the river nicknamed the Big Muddy because of the

thick sediment it held became a busy waterway for barges and steamboats to move people and goods.

Those vessels “were challenged by swift currents, eddies, and ... limbs or even whole uprooted trees that assaulted in raging currents or replanted themselves in mounds of shifting bottom sands to snare and puncture passing vessels,” writes Lambrecht. In the 1830s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers — established by Congress in to oversee both military and civil construction — began “combating those damn snags, setting in motion a river control operation that would be comprehensive, expensive, and destructive. Eventually six main dams and countless dikes shaped the channel and stabilized the banks,” Lambrecht writes, adding, “The engineers went about taming the river as if they were fighting a war.”

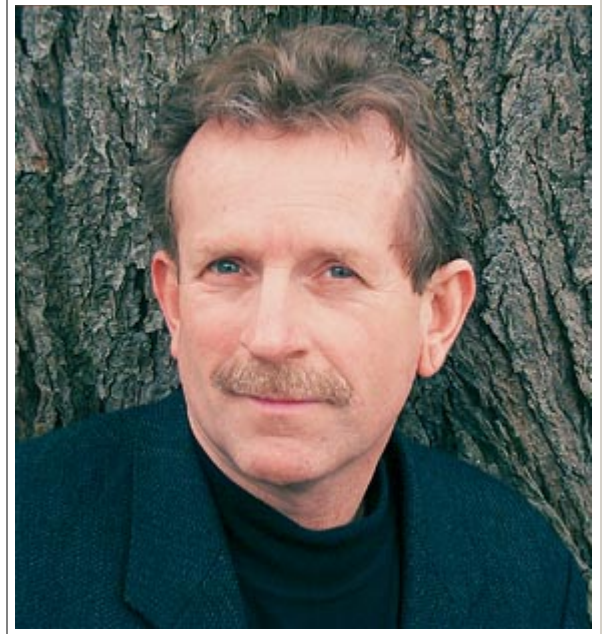
Prior to the building of dams, the river was “no sharply defined highway but a bed of watercouses and wetlands, the lands cycling from floods to marsh to fields. ... In the floodplain where the cottonwoods stood, the backwaters and oxbows nurtured birds and fish. Now the floodplains are dried up and filled in, sprouting corn and beans on farms planted right up to the riverbanks. Gone, in consequence, is most of the wildlife that made Missouri country the American Serengeti.” As Lambrecht reports, 82 species of fish, plants, reptiles, birds, mammals, insects, and mussels in the river or along the banks are now rare, threatened, or endangered.

Today’s Missouri “is a study in subjugation,” he observes. Its range, speed, and flow are carefully controlled under guidelines spelled in the Army Engineers’ Master Manuel that have “barely changed over four decades.” While many scientific groups, private individuals, and even the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have proposed revising this manual — even challenging its validity in court — their efforts have been “about as controversial as rewriting the Bible.”

Among those on the side of keeping the river under tight control are farmers, barge operators, and land developers — especially in the state of Missouri, where 4,200 acres have been developed on floodplains in the past decade. Not surprisingly, conservationists have led the charge to loosen the “straightjacket” that Lambrecht says has turned the river into a glorified barge ditch. But, as the author discovered in his travels along the river, many others are unhappy with Army Engineer practices that, in many cases, have led to economic hardship, health concerns, and even life-threatening danger.

Whatever the outcome, Lambrecht suggests that the battle over the fate of America’s longest river has important implications for the nation as a whole. He writes: “Decisions about the Missouri’s flow and the creatures along its banks will, like Lewis and Clark’s fateful journey, shape the future of our nation’s precious resources.”

Of the three excerpts from *Big Muddy Blues* that follow, the first two reflect the personal impact of those decisions, while the third offers an example of how a simple openness to change may be the key to restoring “an enslaved river impatient to be free.”



As a correspondent for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Bill Lambrecht (above) has won numerous journalism prizes, including the Sigma Delta Chi Award and three Raymond Clapper awards. *Big Muddy Blues* is his second book; he is also the author of *Dinner at the New Gene Café* (2001), a look at the debate over genetically modified foods.

“We sat on the hill and cried. These are the stories we tell about the river.”

Despite all the adversity that European settlers inflicted on American Indian tribes — disease, deceit, and forced relocations — Lambrecht argues that “the flooding of tribal lands along the Missouri River in the middle of the 20th century ranks among the profound, systematic, and least remembered violations of indigenous people.” The construction of dams in the 1950s inundated hundreds of thousands of acres of tribal lands, forcibly uprooting thousands of families. Ladonna Brave Bull Allard was among the Native Americans to whom Lambrecht spoke to “gather details of The Flood and the disconnection after the waters were made to rise.”

“We gathered up the kids and sat up on the hill. We had no time to get our chickens and no time to get our horses out of the corral. The water came in and smacked against the corral and broke the horses’ legs. They drowned, and the chickens drowned. We sat on the hill and we cried. These are the stories we tell about the river,” said Brave Bull Allard. The granddaughter of Chief Brave Bull, she told her story at a Missouri River symposium in Bismarck, North Dakota, in the fall of 2003.

Before The Flood, her Standing Rock Sioux Tribe lived in a Garden of Eden, where nature provided all their needs. “In the summer we would plant huge gardens because the land was fertile,” she recalled. “We had all our potatoes and squash. We canned all the berries that grew along the river. Now we don’t have the plants and the medicine they used to make.”

Her tribe’s customs stretched back centuries; their ways were already old when Lewis and Clark documented them in the winter of 1804-05. Among those old ways was the winter hunt for mice beans. “We would go down to the river and dig there to find mouse holes, where the mice had gathered the sweetest beans,” Allard recalled of the then-unbroken continuity of culture. “Of course, we would put corn and beans in the holes because we wouldn’t take the beans without leaving something.”

The Flood washed that culture away. “Now, we have no more mice,” Allard continued. “We have no more beans. I always thought, ‘Who gave them the right to kill all the mice?’ They fed our people. And huge cottonwoods stood on the shore. There is not one tree left. I tell the Corps of Engineers, ‘You owe us two million trees. We miss our trees. How much our lives have changed since we lost the river.’”

More than a lament, Allard has a vision for the future. “I keep thinking, do something, do something,” she exhorted. “Save this river because it is our lives. It is everybody’s responsibility to save the river. It has a life of its own. Maybe one day, it will take revenge on us for what we have done to it. Nature is stronger than us, greater than us, and we can never control it.”

“That Master Manual they follow? I think it’s a Big Chief Notebook written with a bunch of crayons.”

On the long list of people who are unhappy with current Army Corp policies are residents living “upstream” in Montana and North and South Dakota who feel those policies favor the more populated downstream states. As more Americans populate areas where water resources are tentative or scarce, Lambrecht predicts that an increasing number of “civil wars” will erupt, pitting “state against state and brother against sister.” Among the many feeling aggrieved is Bob Shadwell.

When I first visited Bob Shadwell, in the summer 2002, he was e-mailing his Monday morning messages to the White House with an alluring offer: free lodging at Point of View Resort and a guided fishing trip for lunker walleyes. He hadn’t heard back, and that’s probably just as well. The president professes to be a sporting man, but sport is hard to find along Lake Oahe. Touring Shadwell’s sixty-acre property along Ritter Bay, I noted that

the water was so low and had receded so far from land that the cove in front of Point of View was roughly a half-mile from water. ... This was no way to run a fishing lodge, I could see right away, especially a fragile, year-old business in the hands of a family chasing a dream.



Above, a typical view along the more populated lower Missouri River near Kansas City, where piles of junk provide a visual metaphor for the way “many people have grown disconnected from America’s river west,” says Lambrecht. (Photo by Bill Lambrecht)

There were plenty of Bob Shadwells in the Dakotas, people whose Missouri River recreation businesses desperately needed water from federally managed dams. The drought that engulfed the region in the first years of the new century was the immediate cause for distress. In August 1999, the elevation on Lake Oahe calculated in feet above sea level was 1,617. When I visited there in August 2002, it had dropped by 29 feet to 1,588. Water was also low at Fort Peck and Garrison. Together with Oahe, lakes at those dams hold 85 percent of the storage in the Missouri River system.

This was a punishing drought. But rain or not, the problem along the Missouri River is chronic. Routinely, there is insufficient water in a system that gives priority to navigation. The Army Corps of Engineers interprets its Master Manual to say there must be sufficient water in the 732-mile stretch of lower river to maintain a nine-foot channel for navigation. Congress and the courts have refused to stipulate otherwise, so somebody has to suffer. Right now, that somebody is Bob Shadwell.

I talked to Shadwell many times over the next two years, as the water continued to drop. He felt more desperate all the time, like a fish flopping in a boat and gasping for air, and I could see that his dream was on life support. Abandonment can take over in a hurry in a remote land. The Point of View is situated near South Dakota’s border with North Dakota, where the earth is an exotic blend of camelbacks, swales, and hillocks, some perfectly round, that fellows hereabouts have named after parts of the female anatomy. Otherwise, you see nothing but a few cows on the five-mile gravel road back to Shadwell’s lodge.

“It seems like the country really doesn’t know our plight out here. It seems that regardless of the situation, downstream barge traffic takes precedence,” Shadwell

says over beers at his empty bar.

“It baffles me. The Corps says, ‘We feel for you, but there’s nothing we can do to help.’ That Master Manual they follow? I think it’s a Big Chief Notebook written with a bunch of crayons. The government sits by doing nothing and my business has shut off like a spigot because they have all the water down there. We can’t get enough to let us keep going, and no matter what happens to us up here, downstream barge traffic always takes precedence. And the worst part is, you never know if there’s going to be light at the end of the tunnel. You’d think people down there would want to slow the flow and improve recreation and the fishery. But they just want to continue stealing the water.”

“If we delay in restoring the river, we eventually will pay a high price.”

Near his book’s conclusion, in a chapter entitled “At the Headwaters: Choosing a New Fork,” Lambrecht writes about individuals who have changed their minds and are now investing in a “living river” — among them fishing legend Waymen “Bud” Lilly.

No one knows these species [of the Upper Missouri River] more intimately than the fellow at Three Forks I had come to see: Waymen “Bud” Lilly, fly-fishing guru, fourth-generation Montanan, and a principal architect of a western fly-fishing industry that beckons anglers from around the world to the Upper Missouri and the idyllic rivers of Montana. ...

On pilgrimages a year apart, I sat with my host, a former redhead now gray, just beyond the sun's reach on a bench outside Bud Lilly's Angler's Retreat, which was built in Three Forks in 1908 as the last in a string of railroad hotels along the old Milwaukee line. Except for vast hanging pots of bright petunias, the Angler's Retreat puts on few airs. We're perched just a few hundred yards away from a cottonwood grove along the Missouri River where Sacajawea, then a Shoshone girl of nine or ten years, was snatched by the Minatarees and propelled on her odyssey.

Bud Lilly dresses in soft, deerskin shoes and, mornings before the summer heat sets in, corduroys. The professional fishing guide spurns the color white because it reflects the sun and spooks trout. At any time of the day, he might want to uncase a rod at a trout ranch down the road where he lives with his wife, Esther, and where Bud and his partners are creating a fly-fishing community on restored streams nourished with native trout.

Starting with his cratered, sun-scarred face, everything about Bud Lilly is worn but fine. His movements remain fluid, with a deceptive, insouciant precision like fly line arcing from a bamboo rod. He is tall and athletic, and he might have become a professional baseball player rather than a fishing pro had World War II not interfered.

...

Lilly sits erect and speaks in a measured voice, delivering his stories with the same control as he presents a woolly bugger.

"The Missouri is like an artery system that carries the blood of the entire nation, and if we delay in restoring it, we eventually will pay a high price," he says.

That is Bud's conservationist side talking, and his own transformation needs some explaining. His father, Waymen "Bud" Sr., taught him the fishing arts, but with a rule: Every fish caught had to be eaten. Nothing was to be wasted, a dictate that served America in the depression years just as it did in its pioneer days. By his ninth or tenth year, young Bud was a proficient angler. Back when the fly-fishers of the region could be counted on one hand, he learned how to handle a fly rod. But catching fish was his ultimate aim, and he deployed baits ranging from sucker meat to elegant flies. ...

To live up to Bud Senior's never-bending rule, young Bud had to either eat all his fish or give them away before he could wet his line anew. It got so that his well-stocked neighbors no longer answered their doors when Bud, bearing filets, came calling.

As long ago as the mid-1950s, while he was developing a flourishing fly-fishing business in his tackle store in West Yellowstone, Lilly concluded that his father's rule was flawed. Fish populations were declining in the Upper Missouri River basin. The solution becoming too acceptable to suit Lilly and a few other progressive thinkers was hatchery-raised fish. Lilly knew that the release of all these alien fry threatened the native species, western-slope cutthroats.

The loss of natives had begun much earlier. In the late nineteenth century, settlers started hauling in brook, rainbow, and German brown trout by the barrel and stocking them in any water that moved. Unaware, they were beginning the threat to the wild trout in the Missouri and its tributaries. Nearly a hundred years later, Lilly measured the consequences and resolved to correct them. He vowed to return to the waters every trout he and his parties caught. His solution, catch-and-release fishing, did not meet ready acceptance in this land peopled by the ancestors of self-reliant pioneers who



Professional fly fishermen Bud Lilly (left) and his son, Greg, on the porch of Lilly's Angler's Retreat, built near the Missouri River in Three Forks, Montana. Both men are heavily involved in river conservation projects. (Photo by Bill Lambrecht)

sheltered, fed, and clothed themselves from nature's storehouse.

"We grew up thinking it was going to last forever," Lilly said. It didn't, but old ways change hard. ...

Bud Lilly (has become) a leading advocate in the West for the formerly radical ethos of catch-and-release fishing. He worked to spread his conservation vision as he guided Japanese bankers, Idaho potato magnates, and New York entrepreneurs on behalf of the state of Montana.

In his words, "Since Lewis and Clark's day, the Missouri River has evolved into a major trout fishery, attracting people from all over the world."

Before long, fly-fishers would not have found fishing on the entire 2,400 miles of Missouri River to match what they discovered on the stretch they visited with Bud Lilly. He persuaded not by fuzzy environmental aphorism or by preaching morals. Rather, he argued the economics of the equation. "That trout has more value in the river than out of the river. Put it back in the river and you can keep catching it," he would say.

To this day, Bud Lilly witnesses for catch-and-release. One of America's best-known trout fishermen hasn't eaten a trout in more than thirty years.