

The Secret History of American River People

An Anthro-Historical Research Journey Through the History of a River

Lead artist: *Wes Modes*

Secret History is an ongoing research effort to discover, present, and connect the lost narratives of working class river communities from the deck of a recreated shantyboat that serves as both the vehicle for this journey and the project library and archive.

Using audio, video, and digital media, Secret History archives and presents oral histories of major American rivers, including the lost stories of river people, river communities, and the river itself, as well as the personal chronicle of my research journey. It will use digital and social media to present and connect river people and their stories to those far from the river.

The first stage of the project seeks to gather and present the narratives of lost river communities on an archetypal American journey along the upper Mississippi River from St. Paul, Minnesota to St. Louis, Missouri.



Sylvia Benson on the Willamette River, near Corvallis

The river. The forgotten waterways that flow through most towns, often culverted, hidden behind levies, shoved underground or behind the grubbiest neighborhood. The former arteries of America, the way goods and services and people got around, long before coast to coast railroads and highways. Rivers and bays and estuaries, formerly so important they get special attention in the constitution of many U.S. states and commonwealths.

For a century, shantyboat communities sprung up in poor areas in the rural bottomlands and the industrial towns, places for itinerant workers, miners, fishermen, shipbuilders, displaced farmers. Minneapolis, Knoxville, Cincinnati, Louisville, Chicago, Portland, and numerous towns. On the Mississippi River, the Illinois, the Ohio, the Tennessee, the Willamette, rivers and lakes and waterways all over the continent.

Working-class and impoverished people were responsible for much of the wealth and history of river valleys and waterways: the people who brought the fish, the people who built the ships, the people who picked the crops. Now for the most part, these communities are either abandoned or displaced.

Until the early 20th century, every city in America turned its eager face to their rivers. With the railroads and finally highways, American towns turned their backs on the river. Now these waterways, river people, long-gone shantyboat communities, and their stories are all but forgotten.

For those cities facing ecological and economic crisis and attempting to reestablish a connection to their rivers, the impulse is to create a shiny, clean and sanitized parkland – a kind of mall with a river running through it – rather than a wild and natural waterway. Cities create concrete abutments, river walks, riverside parks, aggressive policing, and regularly remove shrubs and foliage from the floodplain to discourage unauthorized use, such as squatting.



Raft flotilla on Willamette R., 2007

Secret History seeks to examine both the historical context of lost river communities and the forces that displaced them. The project looks at the economic and social situation of still-existing river communities that have been largely abandoned by their populations. And it looks at modern efforts to gentrify and lock out underprivileged people from river corridors today.

Secret History intends to be a people's history of the river, inspired by postmodern historians such as Howard Zinn who wrote in *Declarations of Independence*:

All written history is partial in two senses. It is partial in that it is only a tiny part of what really happened. That is a limitation that can never be overcome. And it is partial in that it inevitably takes sides, by what it includes or omits, what it emphasizes or deemphasizes. It may do this openly or deceptively, consciously or subconsciously.

And in *A People's History of the United States*:

Thus, in that inevitable taking of sides which comes from selection and emphasis in history, I prefer to try to tell the story of the discovery of America from the viewpoint of the Arawaks, of the Constitution from the standpoint of the slaves... And so on, to the limited extent that any one person, however he or she strains, can "see" history from the standpoint of others.

In *Secret History*, I hope to reexamine the history of the river and the role that underprivileged people have played in the development of river communities, particularly the invisible stories of working people, women, native people, and people of color.

Background

Secret History brings together several threads of my work: Public space and people's use of it, connecting diverse populations, digital and new media work, an interest and background in personal narrative and documentary production, and DIY adventure.

From 2001 to 2007, I produced *Night Ride*, a weekly radio show on Santa Cruz public radio station KUSP that focused on the narrative voice. As in the weekly intro, "Written as in literature, or spoken as in oral history. Human beings traffic in stories. Let me tell you about my day, my life, or something that happened to me once upon a time. Stories are dreamy. They take you to other places, other times, other lives." *Night Ride* makes up an aural collage of story and music, the mood and tone of an intimate conversation with a friend on a late night long-distance drive. Each week, *Night Ride* explored a different theme. Of the 120 volume, 250 hour archive of *Night Ride*, many can currently be heard at Archive.org.

In 2005, I set out on a punk rafting journey, driving cross-country to Omaha, Nebraska, building a raft out of found and scavenged materials and floating for a week, Huck Finn-style, on one of the largest fastest rivers on the continent, the Missouri River. We barely lived to tell the tale, and so year after year, we took longer and longer adventures, floating many major American rivers on completely ridiculous homemade rafts. After that first single raft trip, we invited others, launching with whole punk raft flotillas.

It changed the way we saw the world, opening us up to new possibilities.



Wes Modes and Jennifer Bushard on homemade raft on Sacramento River, 2006

We were doing something extraordinary not just for our unusual crafts, but for our use of the river itself. The towns had turned away from the river, sometimes creeping miles from their origins. For those places where the river still cut through the center of town, access to these rivers was often cordoned and restricted, or at the very least unseen and inaccessible. These overlooked waterways, so forgotten that the people who lived in the towns from which we launched often argued with us about where the river went, where it came from, whether it was navigable or safe, and even what direction it flowed.

In spring 2012, I began building a homemade shantyboat — that is, a rustic houseboat — from scratch, recording every step in the build process with digital photography and narrative, presenting the chronicle in a [Shantyboat build blog](#).



Wes Modes' homemade shantyboat, 2014

Because of my Shantyboat Blog, in 2013 I was approached by a New York production company in pre-production for a reality television show centered around people living and adventuring in homemade boats. They were interested in the possibility of mine being one of the principle stories that they developed on the show. (One working title I overheard was clearly going for the rugged manly demographic: I assured them that “Shantyboat Men” was likely to turn off at least half their potential audience including my talented and tough female associates who were better boats-persons than myself).

This DIY voyage, filled with meaningful and honest stories is my answer to the entertainment worlds of New York and Los Angeles.

Forms and Materials

Research Journey

In the first phase of the project, I plan to launch above Minneapolis, Minnesota just above the Falls of St. Anthony on the Mississippi River. I'll be stopping in small and large towns along the way to interview strangers and people with whom I've made connections prior to the trip. I'll also be taking the opportunity to research local resources and meet knowledgeable people along the way. I plan to take out near St. Louis before the confluence with the Missouri.

I'll be camping in the shantyboat, moored along the banks, on islands within the river, and at local marinas. I can resupply as necessary at towns along the route.

The crew is expected to include the Lead Artist, a film and documentary artist, and a research ecologist.

Documentation

Documentation is key to this research expedition. I plan to record my journey, interviews and research with photos, audio and/or video, posting regular updates via blog and Twitter. I will be inviting a film and documentary artist on as crew.

The plan is to compile a substantial oral history of the lost stories of the river and its communities by recording every interview, with strangers and with known contacts, in either audio or video format or both.

Digital and Social Media

During the journey, I seek to connect a geographically dispersed audience to the stories, the individuals, and communities along the river through social and digital media. Short-term products of this project include blog and Twitter updates in realtime along the journey. This includes short video and audio excerpts of interviews, photographs of places and interviewees, updates about the trip's progress, and links to historical, social, and ecological resources.

Longer-term digital products of the project may include a short video documentary, audio documentary, comprehensive website, academic papers, or if the material is very fruitful, a book detailing the results of the research and the stories that emerged.

Library and Archive

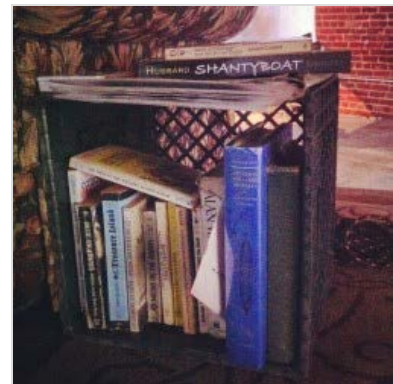
A recreated shantyboat will serve as the long-term library and archive for the project. For the last two years, I have been building a shantyboat from scratch and documenting my progress online in a [Shantyboat Build Blog](#). The hull is a flat-bottom barge designed by Glen L. Witt who adapted plans now almost 70 years old. The cabin is a gabled corrugated tin roof shanty with a small kitchen, a woodstove, and a sleeping loft.

A substantial non-fiction library of houseboat and river history has already been compiled for the archive. The archive will allow access to the stories and research compiled on this journey.

After the journey, the shantyboat serves as a central piece around which the project is focused, a sculptural form, an installation, and an archive, which can be sited outside or inside of a gallery space.

Collaboration

There are many great organizations and institutions along the Mississippi River doing work to preserve the cultural and ecological resources of the Upper Mississippi River Valley. I am in contact with various cross-disciplinary organizations, such as the National Park Service and the Institute on the Environment's River Life program at the University of Minnesota, making introductions, sharing contacts, and getting pointers to interesting resources and people.



While research on the cultural and ecological resources of the river informs my journey, I am principally interested in personal narrative. Therefore, rather than serving as a source of suggested bibliographic material, these contacts themselves potentially serve as a source of personal reflections on lost and existing river communities, experiences on the river, anecdotes and second hand stories, and the health of the river.

Context

A shantyboat is a small crude houseboat (also called a flatboat, broadhorn, barge, scow, or ark). There is a long forgotten history in America of people living in homemade shantyboats, a reasonable and cost-free solution for displaced people in rural areas and workers in urban areas.



Harlan Hubbard on deck of his shantyboat, 1948. Courtesy of Kentucky Historical Society

During the 19th century into the 1930s, itinerant workers lived in shantyboats along the canals and rivers of industrial American towns. Now, not only the shantyboats are gone, but the wild river banks, the river-based industry, and even the towns and neighborhoods adjacent to the river.

In the fallout from the U.S. economic collapse in 1893, thousands of families left their homes in the upper Mississippi Valley in home-built shantyboats to look for work along the more industrialized lower Mississippi River and Ohio River Valleys. Dozens of published chronicles of these family sojourns are still available.



Family on front porch of houseboat on river in Charleston, West Virginia, 1938

During the 1960s and 70s, a water-based analogue of the Back To The Land movement blossomed in leftover houseboat communities. People looked to the relative freedom of rivers, lakes, and seas, especially in floating communities in Sausalito, California, Seattle, Washington, and Portland, Oregon. Largely class-based conflicts between these houseboat communities and land-based home owners decimated these communities, and still flare up occasionally in the remnants of these communities today.

More recently, young middle-class men and women, principally from punk and anarchist communities, have taken to the river in homemade houseboats to float the Mississippi, the Ohio, the Missouri and other rivers. I have connections to many of these self-described “boat punks,” whose stories I hope to gather as well.

Invisible Histories

I read Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* when I was a grade schooler, so I’ve been aware of the connection between the history of African-Americans and the Mississippi River most of my life. However, when I toured Hannibal, Missouri on a roadtrip with my grandparents as a child and went to the “Tom and Becky Museum” and “Injun Joe’s Cave,” the tours failed to mention that Hannibal, Missouri hosted a major slave market. Even the new interpretive museum I visited in the early 2000’s failed to mention this. And of course, like the rest of America, the tours and museums politely skipped over any mention of the native people pushed aside by European guns and disease. I’m interested in the less visible histories of women, native people, and non-European Americans and their connections to the river.



Watching the sternwheel steamboat pass, 1900. From the Tennessee State Library & Archives

The history of African American slavery is tied to the history of the entire Mississippi River and even includes accounts of slaves held in the upper Mississippi River Valley from the Revolutionary War to the end of the Civil War. There were also significant abolitionist efforts documented in the upper Mississippi River Valley.

African slaves played an early part in the formation of the modern Mississippi River. In the early 19th century African slaves built the first levies on the lower Mississippi. A 100 years later, a half century after slavery was abolished, African American plantation workers were forced to work in hazardous conditions to shore up levies in the Great Flood of 1927, but at the waters rose, were left stranded for days without provisions while white women and children were hauled to safety.



Water Queen Showboat with Actors and Musicians, 1901

In another example of interwoven histories, African American's working on or near the Mississippi helped connect otherwise isolated communities. "Riverside African Americans joined with mobile workers to establish a variety of social networks that defied the isolation and commodification of the

slave market” (Buchanan, 2004). And black steamboat workers held an important source of income to both slave and free African American communities.



Two African-American women and baby on porch of river dwelling, 1900. From the Tennessee State Library & Archives

While much has been written about the immigrant experience in rural America, where there were women in the West, their services remained invisible and their stories remain in the shadow of their male companions. There are the inevitable firsts, women notable for doing things men had been doing for some time, but few available stories of women forging their own paths or reflecting on their unique experiences in their occupations. Women served as wives, childcare workers, servants, sex workers, and likely in small numbers in every conceivable occupation, but these stories about women’s contributions to river communities are well hidden. It will take extra effort to unearth these stories.

Environmental Context

The effects of dams and hydroelectric projects built steadily from the 1910s to the present continue to have a devastating effect on the health of major and minor American rivers. Originally built for water diversion, agriculture, and outflow, many of these dams are no longer useful and are fingered in the extinction of many fish species. The mighty Mississippi is no exception and has *forty-five* dams or locks above Minneapolis. This ecologically damaging trend has seen reversal recently with two significant dams removed in the 1990s, and 8 more in the last ten years.



Glines Canyon Dam, Elhwa River in Olympic National Park

The engineering of river beds has changed the character of most major rivers. Since the early to mid 20th Century, the Army Corps of Engineers in order to maintain navigable channels and help with flood control has maintained a program of river engineering . This includes channelization, that is dumping rock and concrete along the banks of rivers to prevent it from eroding its banks and changing course, constructing levees and wing dams to direct the river's flow into a straight, narrow channel and prevent sedimentation.

From an earlier point of view, this engineering provided more reliably navigable waterways, reduced flooding (at least in the short term), turned marshland into productive farmland, protected private property, and tamed wild rivers. However, after 100 years of hydro-engineering it has become clear that these practices dramatically change the character of rivers, destroy critical wetlands, endanger aquatic, riparian, and avian species, and lock the river into a fixed path, ironically increasing the total damage in times of great floods.

River engineering too is currently being rethought with some curtailment of channelization, and even some rehabilitation and reversal of previous policies.

In the early 70s, the Federal Water Pollution Control Amendments significantly accelerating the long process of clean up of America's desperately polluted waterways. 40 years later, formerly toxic rivers are cleaner than they've been in over a 100 years, even if a poor reputation remains.

Timeline

Here is an approximate timeline for the project:

May 2014	Secure funding; acquire documentation equipment; secure commitment from crew; develop methodologies
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June 2014	Complete building of shantyboat; outfit boat; test boat and motor; arrange contacts, interviews; plan route
July 2014	Transport shantyboat to Minneapolis, Minnesota; launch shantyboat on Mississippi River; interviews along route, planned and unplanned; arrive in St. Louis, Missouri; retrieve truck and trailer; transport shantyboat back to California

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