Where The River Is Still Wild

By Scott Stoel and Billie James

In 1916 the Missouri River flood waters nearly engulfed the road between Vermillion and Meckling.

In 1881, the Missouri made one of its biggest real estate deals — it took away a piece of Nebraska and handed it to South Dakota. Today, this area is known as the Island.

The danger of flooding is gone, but the channel can still change daily. The edge of the river is still dotted with eddies and whirlpools. The muddy water conceals stumps and boulders that can shear off the bottom of a boat. Several varieties of strange, monster-like fish lurk below the surface. Here the river is still a mystery.

This stretch is where the floodplain widened and offered a flat, fertile landscape to farm. But it also held the yearly threat of having it all washed down-
Above — This picture, taken from the bluff in 1890, shows Kidder Island in the middle of the Missouri. Across the river is the peninsula which was cut off from Nebraska when the river changed its course during the flood of 1881.

Below — High water was not the only danger from Missouri River floods. Steamboats docked for the winter were in danger of being crushed by huge chunks of ice carried by flood waters.

BEFORE 1881 the Island was a peninsula of Dixon County, Nebraska, formed by an 18 mile loop in the river called the Great Bend. The peninsula, a half-mile wide at the neck, was the home of several farmers and hosted the largest source of wood for miles.

The winter of 1880 came early to the Island, making the corn harvest difficult. The season lived up to its harsh arrival and piled up over 10 feet of snow. In the spring everyone expected a flood, but few could foresee when it would come or how severe it would be. When it arrived, it hit the peninsula and the surrounding areas hard. Great walls of ice mowed down groves of cottonwoods like they were grass. Houses were crushed. The worst of the flood came April 6 when rising waters raged through the town ripping buildings from their foundations and smashing them against ice jammed down river.

During the flood, the river ate away at the east side of the neck of the peninsula. When it was a short distance from the bluff, pressure over-whelmed the weakened bank and the river burst through with a roar that could be heard for miles. The blast of water demolished all the buildings on the farm located near the neck, except the farmhouse which was left untouched on the south bank.

One house, belonging to Hans Hanson, was torn from its foundation and floated down the river with Hans and his brother Ole still inside. Hans became known from then on as "the first skipper to sail the new channel."

After the flood waters receded and the land dried, the view from the bluff was dramatically transformed. Instead of looking down the hill and seeing the wide Missouri flowing by, the Vermillion River, puny in comparison, meandered through the vacated river bed. Where Kidder Island once stood in the middle of the river, it was now connected to a large slice of Nebraska cut off by the flood. The new river channel lay miles off beyond the cottonwoods of the former peninsula.

Although the piece of land was firmly connected to South Dakota, the area became known as the Island. The area became disputed territory where residents did not know if they were Nebrascaans or Dakotans. And it wasn’t long before people took advantage of this lack of knowledge.

Many acres of timber and farmland were now located on the north side of the river, and some families farming the Island refused to pay taxes to Nebraska. Squatters took over parts of the old river bed and planted crops. A Nebraska boundary commission, noting the trouble the situation created for law enforcement, stated in a resolution: "There is a considerable territory to the north side of the channel of said river occupied by persons who claim not to owe obedience to the laws of Nebraska ... By reason thereof lawlessness does in fact to some extent prevail."

In 1885 the Dakota Territory passed a law that made it illegal to sell intoxicating beverages within three miles of Dakota University, today the University of South Dakota. The law pushed all the taverns and pubs out of town. Many found refuge in the disputed lands of the Island.

The Island became a haven for gambling, bootlegging and prostitution. Most of the saloons were shoddy shanties built on a sandbar covered with
willows which stood in the widest part of the old river channel. Although the border was still technically the channel of the old river, it was difficult to determine exactly where the boundary was. The area became known as “Asymptote,” a corruption of a French word meaning “not falling together.”

Dixon County officials, legally responsible for law enforcement for the Island, would raid the illicit businesses only to have the proprietor claim that he belonged to South Dakota. When Clay County officials would attempt to shut down one of the dives, the owner would claim to owe allegiance to Nebraska.

Because this nest of depravity was a distance from town, Harry Bridner, a Vermillion resident, became a sort of precursor to today’s designated driver ferrying customers on his squeaky wagon to Asymptote.

Some people who should have taken advantage of Bridner’s Bus paid for over imbibing. One Meckling man bought a jug of whiskey in Asymptote and set out for home. After overindulging, he relied on his team of horses to find the way. The horses got on the railroad track and the train came along, killing the horses and severely injuring their owner.

In 1889, when South Dakota was admitted to the union, it was admitted as a dry state. The saloon keepers of Asymptote simply continued their game, claiming to be Nebraskans and not subject to the new state’s prohibition. But local temperance societies were determined to see prohibition enforced. The South Dakota Enforcement League, a non-partisan organization, was formed in Pierre for the purpose of coordinating prohibition enforcement efforts. A Vermillion auxiliary was soon formed, and they began to hold monthly meetings.

The forces of temperance made several arrests and confiscated supplies, but the saloons continued to flourish until 1895 when temperance crusader Horace Tilton secured the title to the land the saloons were on.

The Dakota Republican wrote the epitaph for Asymptote in its July 12, 1895 edition: “Asymptote is a thing of the past. Loafman is out of business. The last saloon is closed. Days may come and days may go, but Tote has tuned its

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September / October 1994 • 37
last toot."

While the citizens of Vermillion were dancing on Asymptote's grave, the rest of the state was beginning to realize that prohibition was a failure. In a 1896 state election, prohibition was removed from the books by a majority vote.

In Vermillion, there was a particularly large turnout against repealing the temperance measure. Church bells rang on the hour while the polls were open, calling the faithful to pray "that the scourge of intemperance might be stayed."

Legally, the residents of the Island were Nebraskans until 1897 when the boundary line was officially changed. In 1898, a formal petition was filed asking Vermillion township to annex the Island. A vote of the entire county was held and the annexation was approved 1,006 to 25.

Even after the Island was assigned its new Clay County identity, it continued to be a site for all kinds of illicit practices, mainly bootlegging.

When prohibition was enacted nation wide in 1920, the Island became a favorite site for brewing illegal liquor. Howard Morse, a longtime resident of the island, was out hunting one time in an area where people were known to make beer. As Morse approached a still site, he was confronted by a woman with a gun who informed him that he was in the wrong place. A man who was working with her recognized Morse and invited him to sample some of their product — hot whiskey, fresh from the still.

WILE THE ISLAND was famous as a host of the booze market, it was also well-known for a huge whirlpool nearby. During a flood, it was said buildings, boats and even boxcars would disappear down into the watery vortex. One story claims a church was sucked into the whirlpool, its bell still ringing.

According to Howard Morse, when he was young the whirlpool went dry leaving it full of large carp.

"We caught them with our hands, and the carp were three or four pounds each," he said. "We took them out to where the airport is now and we buried a carp in each melon hill for fertilizer.

After about three days, those carp began to get slippery and stinky as we were putting them in those melon hills."

While using carp from the river may have helped the melons grow, that didn't guarantee they would be harvested. Marlo Stensdahl, a farmer on the Island, lost a watermelon field to the river. "We stood and watched 30 acres of our melons that we were ready to harvest in and go bobbing down the river," Stensdahl said.

If the river didn't cause real estate disputes, men found a way to argue about land. In 1936 clothing store owner A.O. Kirby made a sort of land grab on the Island, paying nominal fees for quit-claim deeds to property owners. The matter ended up in court and Kirby lost.

Kirby did not take the ruling well. He set out on a rampage of revenge, intending to kill everyone involved in the case. He walked down Main Street with a 20 gauge shotgun toward the law offices of Payne and Olson.

Kirby walked up the stairs to the firm and shot and killed Peter Olson at his desk. Olson's law partner Jason Payne

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entered the room and Kirby leveled the shotgun at him. Phillips Crew, an associate of the law firm, attempted to wrest the gun from Kirby and the pair fell down the stairs and spilled onto the sidewalk. The police arrived and arrested Kirby. Kirby was tried, found guilty and served seven years of a ten year sentence.

Bizarre tales from the Island were not limited just to land disputes.

As with any area that has some sort of mystery, the Island has its own legend.

Little was left of downtown Vermillion after the flood. Most businesses chose to move to the bluff to escape the yearly threat of floods.

There are even tales of a headless horseman who haunted the bottom lands of the Missouri. According to the tale, a man who got his head shot off could be seen riding his horse through the country side below the bluffs. One family was so disturbed by the headless apparition they hired a man to tend to the farm and moved into the city.

With the construction of the dams, a degree of stability has come to the Island. The Missouri still eats away its banks, but it doesn’t take the voracious bites it used to. It still is the home for groves of trees and farmers, but the bootleggers have long since left.

The Island now juts out from South Dakota to Nebraska. It isn’t a peninsula as it was before the flood of 1881, but from the air it could look like the Missouri, which took the Island away from Nebraska over a century ago, may be secretly working to return it.

George Fitch, a man familiar with the Missouri, was quoted as saying, “There is only one river that goes traveling sideways, that interferes in politics, rearranges geography and dabbles in real estate; a river that plays hide and seek with you today, and tomorrow follows you around like a pet dog with a dynamite cracker tied to his tail. That river is the Missouri.”

No one knows that better than those who lived at the Island.