

# This Storied River: Legend & Lore of the Upper Mississippi

Patrick Nunnally  
*University of Minnesota*

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2017 State Historical Society of Iowa . This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

---

## Recommended Citation

Nunnally, Patrick. "This Storied River: Legend & Lore of the Upper Mississippi." *The Annals of Iowa* 76 (2017), 443-444.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12434>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Most of the essays focus on the Confederate side, but a few do concern the behavior of Union soldiers and Union irregulars. The Union's treatment of Southern women during its occupation of the South and how that treatment crossed the line of acceptable behavior is the topic of Lisa Frank's "The Union War on Women." In "Challenging the Union Citizen-Soldier Ideal," Andrew Lang examines how the activities of Confederate guerrillas changed the behavior and ideals of Union soldiers. The Lieber Code may have technically governed their activities, but they were forced (not always unwillingly) to adapt to the different ways the war was being fought in different areas. The concept of hard war ultimately meant that in some areas there were no rules, and it became all but impossible to differentiate between regular and irregular soldiers.

The broadest essay is Earl Hess's "Civil War Guerrillas in a Global, Comparative Context," which largely discusses Spanish guerrillas in the Napoleonic Wars and their Confederate counterparts along with a discussion of guerrilla warfare since the Civil War. His overview along with Daniel Sutherland's afterword and the selected bibliography provide excellent ways to put Civil War guerrillas into a larger context and suggest avenues for further study.

The work would have been strengthened by a clearer organization, but overall the essays represent a wealth of topics for scholars interested in any aspect of Civil War military history and make a strong case for including the study of guerrilla warfare in more mainstream Civil War military history.

*This Storied River: Legend & Lore of the Upper Mississippi*, by Dennis McCann. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2017. 192 pp. Map, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$20.00 paperback.

Reviewer Patrick Nunnally is coordinator of the River Life Program, part of the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota. His Ph.D. dissertation (University of Iowa, 1990) was "Visions of Sustainable Place: Voice, Land, and Culture in Rural America."

There are many books about the history as well as the "legend and lore" of the Mississippi River, so it's fair to ask why another one is needed. Dennis McCann's slim volume holds its own, for the most part, in this literature. Although he does not offer new insights or a sharply distinctive perspective on the events, places, and people he describes, he does reliably point his readers in the direction of further information. As befits a retired travel writer, McCann also liberally suggests places to visit to learn more about the river's history and points the way to websites and other sources.

McCann's stretch of the Mississippi lies between Dubuque, Iowa, and Saint Paul, Minnesota. This is neither the much-storied Delta nor the middle stretch of the river around Hannibal and Saint Louis, Missouri, that can justly claim to be "Mark Twain's Mississippi." Nevertheless, this less well-known stretch is replete with stories of regional and national significance, most of which McCann tells well in graceful, accessible prose. Relying on published sources and the versions of history told at the historic sites themselves, McCann sticks fairly closely to well-established themes and events in the region.

As McCann details, this stretch of the Mississippi is deeply historical. Well-known stories, such as the incursion of colonial settlers and the eradication of native people, have important chapters that play out here. That icon of the Mississippi, the steamboat, makes its appearance, tragically through the *Sea Wing* disaster and as part of a discussion of regional transportation, through an account of how the Diamond Jo line got its name (or didn't—the stories are unclear). By focusing on specific spots such as Guttenberg, Iowa, location of Corps of Engineers Lock #10, McCann illustrates how the very river itself has been altered over time, becoming as much a historical artifact of its times as any of the communities that line its banks.

Ultimately, though, McCann's coverage of the sites and themes he discusses is distressingly uneven. There's plenty of good stuff here, such as the account of the Battle of Bad Axe, a massacre that ended the Black Hawk War. Here McCann offers insights and perspectives beyond the "celebration history" of roadside markers and makes necessary observations about the painful aspects of the region's history.

But there are also unfortunate lapses. It would not have been hard to learn that *Winona* is a Dakota term for "first-born female child" and is not generically "Indian," or to dig a little deeper for a more nuanced account of fur trading among multiple nations at Prairie du Chien. The many images in the book really should be cited better for readers who want to explore further. These lapses matter, because it is important to learn the complexity of our history, not just the triumphalist view that the past is merely a "natural" prologue to our present or the too-familiar "critique" that focuses exclusively on "correcting the story."

For readers who want to understand how the past of the Mississippi has created opportunities and dilemmas facing the river and its communities, McCann's book is a start, but only a start. His citations and references are potentially important "next steps" as would be an in-depth discussion with any of the staff at the historic sites he points us to. As Faulkner wrote, "The past isn't even past." That is true in the upper Mississippi valley, and McCann opens the door to more rich exploration.