

By Maril Crabtree

The Blue! O, the Blue!
A River Retrospective

“The summer scenes are passing,
Sweetly, calm and true;
Let us then all greet them
By the restful, gentle Blue.”

R. J. Lewis (published by the Kansas City &
Westport Railway, 1897, further stanzas
below)

In July, 1897, a Kansas City Star article reported, men in straw hats and women with parasols crowded the banks of the Blue River along 15th Street to watch members of the Kansas City Yacht Club maneuver their crafts through the water. Canoes, skiffs, and sailboats dotted the river in colorful disarray, lining up for the day’s Regatta. Kansas City Yacht Club members jostled for position with the rival Paddle and Canoe Club crowd, with a flotilla that included everything from houseboats to rowboats.

Further upstream, past 59th Street, fishing competed with canoeing. Crappie, bluegill, bullhead, and largemouth bass flourished. “Just the Place for Picnics. No Better Camping Grounds. The Best Fishing Place Around K.C.,” boasts an 1897 ad for the Blue River, created for the Kansas City & Westport Railway. The train left every hour, starting in Westport at Mill Street, and treated riders to eleven miles of “the finest scenery” along the banks of the Blue’s clear waters. Riders saw

Bethany Falls limestone cliff ledges ten to twenty feet thick, topped by dense stands of cottonwood, willow, and mulberry trees. They often caught a glimpse of the abundant wildlife among the trees. The train made stops at “Armour, Forest Hill, Waldo, Boone, South Holmes, South Troost, Hale’s Farm, Woodland, Blue Park, Dodson, and all points South. . . .”

The Blue River’s source lies a hundred miles west of Kansas City, in Kansas. But the last 26 miles of river meanders through the Missouri side of Kansas City, crossing the state line at 122nd Street, flowing north and east through Swope Park and ultimately emptying into the Missouri River. Archival records describe the first transfer of land surrounding the river to the United States from the Kansa Indians in 1825 as “36 sections of good lands, on the Big Blue River.” By 1855 all of the lands along the Big Blue belonged to the U. S.

“We'll see the varied landscape
Where the Blue's bright waters glide,
Where in life and beauty
Flows the silvery tide.”

Less than three decades later, according to Jackson County Historical Society records, the Big Blue hosted a different scene. All along the northern parts of the river down to its mouth, pollution from Kansas City Nut & Bolt (later known as Armco Steel), Weber Engine Works, Butler Manufacturing, Ford Motor Assembly, and a dozen other factories darkened the Blue's "silvery tide" with industrial slime and sludge.

The boomtowns of Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield, and Centropolis transformed the Blue River into a sluggish, stinking mess. From 63rd street north to the Missouri River thousands of acres became heavy industrial and manufacturing areas, and their waste, dumped into the river, took its toll. A news article written in 1916 condemns the Blue as “nothing more than a big septic tank.” Periodic floods, always a problem due to the river's shallow channel, contributed to the

danger of disease from toxic sewage. Belatedly, the city installed a sewer system along the west bank; the first flood control measures took another eight years to materialize.

“We read of distant rivers,
The Avon and the Rhine:
But few have brighter waters
Than Blue! O Blue, than thine.”

By 1927, news articles reported a strong public outcry to restore the Blue to its former sparkling glory. With the Guinotte Dam in place across 13th Street and a second dam planned south of Brush Creek, the Park Board proposed an ambitious plan for the beautification of the Blue. Plans called for building a network of trafficways and "pleasure drives" along both banks, linking northern industrial areas with Swope Park and Meyer Boulevard. The result, said city father William Scarritt, would be a drive "which for beauty, variety of scenery, shade and picturesque views will be unsurpassed by any municipal drive in America, if not in the world."

The river itself would be cleaned out and its banks planted with blue grass. In Scarritt's opinion the river would then "excel in beauty and utility, and possibly in fame, the celebrated Thames in the vicinity of Oxford." Unfortunately, the city never funded the plan and pollution continued to be the river's plight.

“The soft, sweet breath of summer,
The cool, the welcome rain,
Has refreshed all the valley,
And cheered the thirsty plain.”

The Blue River's condition grew worse over the next fifty years as pollution and dumping grew along with Kansas City's population. William Scarritt's grandiose vision for the Blue's beautification lay abandoned and forgotten until The Friends of Lakeside Nature Center took on the

challenge of beautifying one six-mile stretch that runs through Swope Park. In April, 1992 one hundred and fifty volunteers in jeans, T-shirts and rubber boots gathered on a rainy Saturday to collect debris tossed into the river over the past six decades. They formed the first Stream Team, an annual effort to clean up the rubbish that finds its way into the Blue's waters. Although the work is muddy and hard, the mood is one of a giant Easter egg hunt. By the end of the day, the Team dug up, hauled out, and landfilled more than 12 tons of long-buried treasure. Among the day's finds: an iron washtub, a football helmet, old license plates, and, literally, a kitchen sink.

A smaller group of Stream Team volunteers gather once a month. They collect, sort, and recycle junk that ranges from cars and rusty bedsprings to the usual collection of plastic, aluminum, and tires. These dedicated volunteers also monitor water quality and plant willow cuttings along the cleared banks to help prevent soil from washing downstream.

The Blue's once-bright waters look better these days. Now called Project Blue River Rescue, the annual Stream Team effort covers 26 miles of the winding river and is the largest one-day stream clean-up in the state of Missouri. In April, 2005, more than 750 volunteers collected 1,200 tires, cleaned more than 100 tons of trash from 22 worksites, and planted more than 500 trees along the banks. Through the years, volunteers have removed at least a thousand tons of trash. More significantly, each year a growing number of people participate in the Blue River's continuing care and restoration.

Will the Big Blue ever again present a pastoral scene of pleasure boating and fishing? In today's river, the presence of chlordane and other pollutants has eliminated many fish. People still dump junk along the banks, or into the river itself. Yet, volunteers and water restoration experts see signs that the damage is being reversed, and they share the hope that the Blue can recapture its image as a beautiful, sparkling Kansas City waterway.

As William Scarritt pointed out in 1927, "it took the good Lord something like fifteen million years to create the Blue Valley, with its beauty and endlessly flowing stream.... And now shall we, His children, within a few years, through ignorance and lack of faith and lack of vision, permit that stream and that Valley to be contaminated... and posterity deprived of a splendid heritage merely that we may have misplaced railroad yards and industries and use that river channel as a place for dumping the refuse of factories?"

Nearly seventy-five years later, we can finally answer that question in the negative.

“We’ll view the fertile landscape,
Those as fair and bright are few,
And gently, sweetly, wander,
By the bright, meandering Blue.”