

## **The Great River Road and the Mississippi River Parkway Commission in Missouri**

### **The National Mississippi River Parkway Commission**

The Great River Road (GRR) has its roots here in Missouri, dating from 1936 when Governor Stark asked the Missouri State Planning Board to consider a parkway along the Mississippi River. The concept grew to include the other nine Mississippi River states and even Ontario and Manitoba, Canada with the formation of the National Mississippi River Parkway Commission (MRPC) in 1938.

The Mississippi River Parkway Commission (MRPC) is a multi-state organization which works collectively to preserve, promote, and enhance the scenic, historic, and recreational resources of the Mississippi River, to foster economic growth in the corridor, and to develop the national, scenic and historic parkway known as the Great River Road.

The ten states that comprise the MRPC include Arkansas, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, **Missouri**, Tennessee, and Wisconsin. The MRPC is the only organization which ties together all of the Mississippi River states. Each state has its own separate parkway commission. In Missouri, state statute created its parkway commission (Missouri Revised Statutes, Section 226.445). Membership consists of five governor's appointees, two state representatives and two state senators. Technical members from state agencies and others assist the Mississippi River Parkway Commission of Missouri (MoMRPC) fulfill its objectives related to the Great River Road. Ontario and Manitoba have faded from the national commission although the Great River Road is still marked in each province.

The National MRPC is the umbrella organization that coordinates multi-state programs on behalf of the member states. The National MRPC Board of Directors includes the chairs of the individual state commissions. The chair of the MoMRPC is Dr. Frank Nickell of Cape Girardeau. The National MRPC chair is known as "The Pilot" and is elected by the general membership each year. The current Pilot is Mr. Andy Golfis of Minnesota.

The MRPC coordinates efforts on federal, state, and local levels to leverage dollars for highway improvements, recreation trails, bikeways, scenic overlooks, and historic preservation. The MRPC also coordinates both domestic and international ("Mississippi River Country, U.S.A.") marketing, and facilitates efforts to enhance economic development and resource awareness in the Mississippi River valley. Recent accomplishments of the national commission include a consumer web site, a 10-state GRR Interpretive Plan & Toolkit, and ongoing domestic and international promotion.

## **The Great River Road**

Over the years the concept of a parkway within a specific park (like the Blue Ridge Parkway in NC and VA) along the river was modified to accommodate existing routes affording a scenic, cultural and historical experience associated with the Mississippi River. The GRR extends nearly 3,000 miles from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. Through Missouri, the GRR extends along the Mississippi River from Iowa to Arkansas. Although the concept germinated in the 1930s, detailed GRR reports from 1957 and 1965 specified the GRR route. After that, Missouri had only marked the “National Route” (i.e., the route eligible for federal highway funds whenever GRR categorical highway funds were available in the 1970s and early 1980s). That signing is the logo with the distinctive steamboat pilot’s wheel encircling a steamboat on the Mississippi River with the words “Great River Road – Canada to Gulf.” That logo is evident on the highway signs within Missouri marking its 408-mile Great River Road.

## **Missouri’s Great River Road**

Originally, the “National Route” entered Missouri on US Route 36 in Hannibal and continued south on Missouri Route 79 to I-70 in St. Charles County. It proceeded east on I-70 into downtown St. Louis where it changed to I-55 near the Arch. It continued south out of St. Louis on I-55 to Exit No. 170 near Crystal City. It continued south on US Route 61 to Perryville where it changed to Missouri Route 51 continuing north to Chester, Illinois. Up and down the river beyond Missouri, the “National Route” criss-crossed the Mississippi to include all 10 states.

After the “National Route” was specified, all states marked a “State GRR” where the “National Route” did not exist. Since the GRR lost specific federal highway funds dedicated to it in the 1970s/1980s, the “National Route” and the “State GRR” are no longer distinguished separately by the MRPC. In 1998, the MoMRPC confirmed Missouri’s “State GRR” north of Hannibal and south of Perryville. The Missouri GRR is visible on the National GRR map and the Missouri Official Highway Map.

From Iowa south into Missouri, the GRR continues from Keokuk, Iowa on US Route 61 and into Alexandria. It continues south on US Route 61 through Clark and Lewis Counties. North of Canton, it shifts to US Business Route 61 (old US Route 61) and into Canton where it continues south on Missouri Route B (old US Route 61). In La Grange, it continues south on US Business Route 61 (old US Route 61) which rejoins US Route 61 at Wakonda State Park. It continues south on US Route 61 to its junction with Missouri Route 168 north of Palmyra. The Great River Road is on Route 168 to its interchange with US Route 61 north of Hannibal. It shifts to US Route 36 at the US 61/US 36 interchange west of downtown Hannibal, continuing east toward the Mississippi River to Missouri Route 79. The Great River Road (following the former “National Route”) is on Missouri Route 79 until its junction with I-70 in St. Charles County; this includes the designated state and national scenic byway named “The Little

Dixie Highway of the Great River Road” on 26 miles of Route 79 between the Ralls/Pike County line and Clarksville. The Missouri Great River Road continues through St. Louis and south to Perryville upon the former “National Route.”

Linking to the “National Route”, US Route 61 is identified as the Missouri GRR south of Perryville. Continuing on US Route 61 into Cape Girardeau County at Appleton (Old Appleton), the GRR meets I-55 at the Fruitland exit (No. 105). The GRR continues south on I-55 to Exit No. 99 (US Route 61). It continues south on US Route 61 through the city of Cape Girardeau joining with I-55 at Exit No. 93. From there to Exit No. 89, US Route 61 (and the GRR) and I-55 are marked on the same highway. The GRR follows US Route 61 off of I-55 at Exit No. 89 in Scott City and continues south into Scott County through the cities of Benton and Sikeston on US Route 61. South of Sikeston and into New Madrid County, it continues to follow US Route 61 to the city of New Madrid. Further south, at Portageville, US Route 61 (and the GRR) is marked on I-55 from Exit No. 32 into Pemiscot County to Exit No. 8 at the city of Steele. From that exit, the GRR continues south on US Route 61 to State Line, Missouri where it crosses under the concrete arch there into Arkansas, meeting Arkansas’ Great River Road (US Route 61).

Since 1938, the MRPC has overseen the investment of more than \$1 billion in federal, state and local funds for Great River Road highway, recreation and amenity projects in the 10 Mississippi River states. Within Missouri, that includes highway projects, including amenities such as scenic overlooks and picnic areas, on the Great River Road as well as tourism information centers in Clarksville and Ste. Genevieve.

MoDOT has invested about \$500 million on the GRR since 1954. The 408-mile Great River Road through Missouri is marked in its entirety from Iowa to Arkansas.

### **The Missouri Mississippi River Parkway Commission**

Since it was re-invigorated in December 1997, the MoMRPC has met at many locations in Missouri, keying on sites along the Mississippi River. Locations include the following: Hannibal, Clarksville, St. Charles, Chesterfield, St. Louis, Pacific/Eureka, Imperial, Ste. Genevieve, Cape Girardeau, Sikeston, and Caruthersville, as well as Jefferson City.

The MoMRPC’s last formal work plan focused on five (5) areas: 1. GRR routing considerations [completed]; 2. creating a GRR Birding Trail [completed]; 3. conducting GRR Road Tours with the parkway commissioners and technical members to assess routing, establish local contacts, educate local governments and the public about the MRPC and the GRR, and define focus areas for the efforts of the MoMRPC [half completed]; 4. promoting the federal highway act(s) and its Transportation Enhancement program for the betterment of the Missouri communities along the GRR [underway; the current federal highway act is titled the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users or “SAFETEA-LU”]; and 5. working to fulfill the National MRPC goal of designating the entire GRR from Canada to the Gulf of

Mexico as a national byway. [The GRR in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois and Arkansas already are designated as state and national byways. Louisiana and Mississippi are aggressively working on that objective.]

The GRR Road Tours by the MoMRPC parkway commissioners and technical members have covered at least 203 miles along the Missouri GRR, 50% of Missouri's GRR. The tours have been very beneficial, offering opportunities for promotion of the GRR, amenity considerations and routing confirmation. The tours also have confirmed the scenic, historical and recreational opportunities along the route selected as the GRR in Missouri.

The MoMRPC continues to receive excellent support from the following Missouri state agencies: Department of Transportation, Department of Conservation, Department of Natural Resources (Division of State Parks), and the Department of Economic Development (Division of Tourism). The Department of Agriculture also has been involved. Officials of these agencies are ex-officio members of the MoMRPC.

The MoMRPC is positioned for continued progress on and promotion of Missouri's (and the national) GRR in upcoming years. Local Convention and Visitors Bureaus, Chambers of Commerce, and other organization, based on their position along the Mississippi River and the Great River Road, are important keys for drawing tourists, their economic benefits and other opportunities to the river communities. For several years prior to 1997, the MoMRPC was not actively engaged in promoting the GRR. With a strong commission, the MoMRPC has been renewing contacts with the businesses, organizations and the citizens along the river. The MoMRPC wants the Mississippi River valley and the Great River Road to become a desired destination for vacationers and also for economic development sensitive to the qualities of the river and its communities.

The MoMRPC and the National MRPC have designated eight (8) GRR interpretive centers along the river within Missouri. These are as follows: 1. Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum (Hannibal), 2. Clarksville River Heritage Center and GRR Interpretive Center (Clarksville), 3. Columbia Bottom Visitors' Center (St. Louis), 4. Jefferson National Expansion Memorial (the Arch, St. Louis), 5. GRR Interpretive Center (Ste. Genevieve), 6. Trail of Tears State Park (east of Jackson), 7. Cape Girardeau Conservation Campus Nature Center (Cape Girardeau), and 8. New Madrid Historical Museum (New Madrid). Each center has received this special designation because of its important interpretation of significant historical, cultural, and environmental aspects of the Mississippi River. In the 10 Mississippi River states there are over 50 centers designated from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico.

The MoMRPC intends to be more proactive in advising organizations of future parkway commission meetings in local areas. Other MoMRPC states have had a tremendous effort, especially locally, in promoting the Great River Road. Our commission wishes to make sure that knowledge about Missouri's GRR is extensive to benefit residents and travelers alike.

### *MoMRPC Emphases*

The MoMRPC identifies two (2) primary elements in its mission: GRR infrastructure and GRR promotion. MoDOT is the key agency for the development and maintenance of the Missouri GRR infrastructure. MoDOT also administers the U.S. Department of Transportation “Transportation Enhancement Program” and the Scenic Byways Program for Missouri. Promotion of the Missouri GRR and Mississippi River is primarily by the Missouri Division of Tourism. The other MoMRPC state agencies also have key roles in promoting attractions they administer along the Mississippi and the GRR. The MoMRPC fosters an integrated approach linking infrastructure and promotion and providing key ties to grassroots efforts within communities along the Missouri GRR.

The Missouri Great River Road is an historical icon and a national treasure. The parkway concept of Missouri’s Governor Stark spawned the National GRR, which then became the foundation for the national scenic byway program across the entire United States. The 408-mile Missouri GRR extends through 15 Missouri counties, St. Louis City, and dozens of communities from Iowa to Arkansas. Its cultural, historic, recreational and scenic attributes are treasured not only by Missourians but by people throughout the United States and abroad.

The effort to designate the Missouri GRR as a state and national byway is important for several reasons. One is that the entire GRR from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico has been identified prominently and nationally for over 40 years (and the concept originated in Missouri 71 years ago). Another reason is that with designation as a byway, the opportunity for byway grants is opened. The *National Scenic Byways Grants Detailed Report for 1992-2006* dated September 19, 2006 identifies the grants for designated byways made to states. For the Great River Road states that have identified or are identifying the GRR as a byway, the GRR grants through June 2006 are as follows: Arkansas: \$302,828 for six projects; Iowa: \$1,425,434 for 13 projects; Illinois: \$5,064,776 for 41 projects; Louisiana: \$24,000 for one project; Minnesota: \$5,076,531 for 47 projects; Mississippi: \$25,000 for one project; Tennessee: \$79,179 for one project; and Wisconsin: \$3,845,912 for 17 projects. Within Missouri, a 26-mile segment of the GRR (Ralls/Pike County line to Clarksville) has been designated a national byway through local initiative; that scenic byway (the “Little Dixie Highway of the Great River Road”) has received \$995,625 for 11 projects through June 2006. The local proponents indicated that through December 2004, over \$500,000 in grants that had come to that 26-mile national byway had yielded over \$1 million in economic development for the area. Designation of the entire Missouri GRR would open those other communities along it and the state to a tremendous funding source that has generated about \$17 million in GRR byway grants alone between 1992 and 2006 for nine GRR states.

Hence, designation of more of the Missouri GRR as a state and national byway is a key objective of the MoMRPC. It will become a key step to help Missouri garner more federal money. Because of the national byway designation of the Minnesota Great River Road, in 2004 the Minnesota MRPC indicated it had received \$162,250 in FHWA Scenic Byway grant seed dollars during FY01 – FY04 to further its commission's priorities, including the Minnesota Great River Road consumer web site, which averaged 22,000 hits per month in 2004, generating map and in-state travel information requests. In addition, all communities, attractions and amenities along the Great River Road are also eligible for these byways grants because of the national designation of the byway.

With national statistics showing that byway visitation produces an average of \$32,500 per mile of effectively developed and marketed byway, annually, in direct tourism revenue, it is clear that the Great River Road is an outstanding revenue opportunity for the state of Missouri. Its 408 miles could produce an estimated \$13,260,000 in tourism revenue yearly, above the revenue possibility afforded by scenic byway grants. It is imperative that opportunities for the Missouri GRR be guided by a comprehensive, state- and community-based organization—the MoMRPC.

From the Missouri Division of Tourism's 2004 Economic Impact Study from the University of Missouri, we have these statistics:

- \* Per person per day expenditures averaged a record \$55.60 during FY2004
- \* Per person per trip expenditures increased to \$163.34 during FY2004
- \* Domestic Travel parties averaged \$299 per trip in FY2004

With the security issues that face today's travelers, the driving vacation market has more revenue potential than ever before. "Scenic touring" is a popular reason for travelers to vacation in Missouri. With 408 miles of scenic drive potential, the Great River Road in Missouri needs a strong organization keeping watch over it... partnering with river communities, state agencies and the Federal Highway Administration to actively seek byway designation and funding... promoting, planning and managing community and statewide projects that will continue to balance its development and preservation for today's byway travelers, and for generations to come. The MoMRPC is developing its own website. Once that is operating that will be linked to the Division of Tourism's website to promote the Missouri Great River Road. The intent also is to link with all local community websites along the byway. The Mississippi River Parkway Commission of Missouri wishes to make sure that knowledge about Missouri's GRR is extensive to benefit residents and travelers alike. Members of the MoMRPC bring a wealth of professional knowledge and the depth of river community experience to the Commission that is vital to the continued attention to and success of the Missouri Great River Road.