



Tim Mason: Defending the Bluffs, Romancing the River

Guest editorial by *Trudy Balcom*

I met Tim Mason in the middle of a fight. I didn't know it then, but that wasn't unusual.

When in 2004 I first drove back to the old farmhouse where Tim lived near McGregor, Iowa, I was working on a story for *Big River* about a controversy that had erupted in that small town regarding a proposal by a California developer to build a multi-million dollar project on a nearby bluff.

River Bluff Resort was to include a waterpark resort, a championship golf course and upscale homes around the golf course. Many people in the little river towns of Marquette and McGregor, hungry for jobs and prosperity, welcomed the project. The state and county had dedicated funding and tax credits to assist the developers.

Tim Mason didn't see the project as economic development.

In Iowa, two-thirds of the state is planted to only two species — corn and soybeans — and less than three percent of the land is protected as parkland of some sort. It's arguably the most bio-

logically altered state in the nation. Tim understood this and wanted people to recognize that what had been done to the land in Iowa was radical.

He didn't want to see one more

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undeveloped landscape on the wooded bluffs overlooking the Mississippi destroyed for something he considered akin to a theme park. Plus, he thought he smelled a rat.

With a little digging, he uncovered a number of projects in Wisconsin involving the same developer that had been left uncompleted or had gone belly-up, leaving communities to clean up the mess.

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Tim organized the Concerned Citizens of Clayton County to fight the development. The Concerned Citizens were just a handful of locals who braved an often hostile community to fight River Bluffs, which eventually ran out of steam before anything was built, in part because of Tim.

River Bluffs wasn't Tim's first fight. In the 1980s, Tim and others had also fought a project to re-align Highway 18 near the mouth of Bloody Run Creek in Marquette. The project destroyed the wetlands of the creek he

(Riverbank continues on page 47)

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(Riverbank continued from page 3)

had known since his boyhood in the tiny town, but Tim's efforts helped mediate some of the damage.

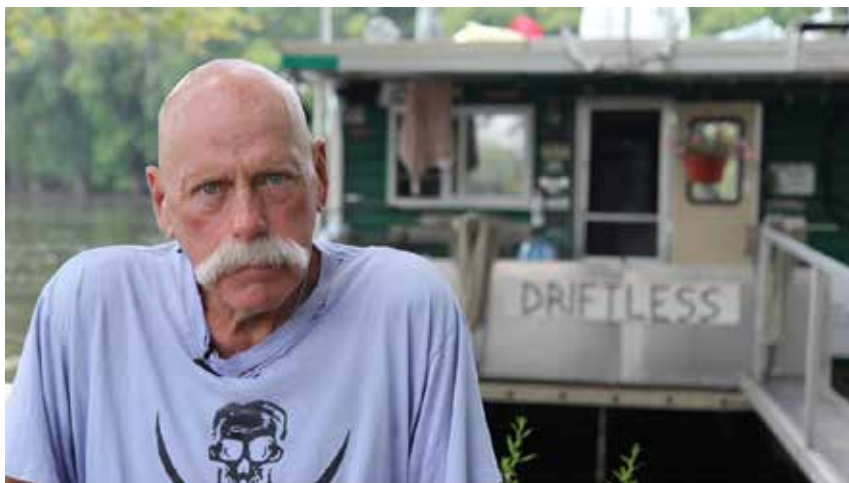
Before that, in college in the 1970s, Tim participated in a Vietnam War protest group at the University of Iowa. His actions drew the attention of the Nixon-era FBI, and Tim's name appeared on an FBI watch list, something of which he was very proud.

Tim's most important fight, however, was with the National Park Service, after he helped to bring to light illegal activities that damaged Indian burial sites at Effigy Mounds National Monument, starting in 2010.

Tim spent 19 years as a seasonal employee at the park and was horrified to discover that trails and other development at the park during the tenure of Phyllis Ewing, a former superintendent, damaged resources that the park was created to protect.

The National Park Service tried to deny the problem at first, but as a result of Tim's efforts two people lost their jobs and others quit, and a new era of park management focused on clearing up the park's problems. The scandal sent ripples through the entire Park Service that have changed some aspects of how it does business.

Tim saw how all of the landscapes he loved connected with the Mississippi River that he adored. He loved



spending time on his "shanty boat," the *Driftless*, best of all with his wife Sara, friends, family and grandkids aboard. Summers were spent camping on islands, fishing or launching a kayak to slip into a slough.

They left the *Driftless* behind in the winter, and he and Sara would travel south along the river to visit more of the places and people touched by the river. Tim collected river songs and read every book about the river and river lore he could get his hands on.

In every fight, Tim was dogged, resourceful and unwavering, but not without humor. He waged war with a twinkle in his eye, and steel in his spine. He loved to send emails to bureaucrats, playfully baiting them with pointed barbs. And he worked to keep federal agencies accountable to

citizens, with frequent Freedom of Information Act requests for documents. No matter how much time and work it took, he got the job done. He didn't care whose toes he had to step on in order to address what he saw as an injustice. He did all this while taking care of his family, holding down a job and mowing the lawn, like the rest of us.

Tim Mason passed away in September at age 67, leaving a legacy of public service as deep as the Main Channel. He will long be remembered in his Iowa communities by those who knew and respected him, be they friend or foe. 🌊

Trudy Balcom is editor of the White Mountain Independent (Show Low, Ariz.) and a former staff member of Big River.

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