



# Tom Kelley: The River Belongs to Everybody

By Reggie McLeod

Tom Kelley, 79, can look out the window of his apartment and watch eagles soaring over the Mississippi River gorge near the Ford Bridge in St. Paul. Actually, he's been keeping an eye on the river for several decades from many perspectives. His concern and work have helped bring the eagles and the people back to the river in the Twin Cities.

After college the St. Paul native worked as a reporter in Chicago and Washington, D.C., before returning to Minnesota and then to a post at WCCO television in the Twin Cities. Then a turn on Hubert Humphrey's senate campaign led him to shift his career to government, where he worked for the state, Ramsey County and St. Paul, where he served under Mayor George Latimer as the city's first city administrator.

After winning election to the Ramsey County Auditor post in 1966 he saw an opportunity.

"It's the smallest county in the state and was pretty fully devel-

oped," Kelly recalled. "I saw the river as a great recreational resource running right through the middle of town and not getting the proper attention."

He helped convince the state legislature to allow the county to raise \$16 million to buy and make improvements on land for recreation, much of it along the river. Purchases included former industrial land and flood prone land without much commercial value, but with potential value for wildlife and recreation.

The county bought land and swapped land to piece together contiguous strips of riverfront. Purchases included land in Lilydale and what is now the Bruce Vento Sanctuary. Now parks and recreational trails line much of St. Paul's riverfront.

Kelley also served on various committees and commissions, where he got to know David Durenberger before he was elected to the U.S. Senate.

Since 1984 he has lived within sight of the river, with the exception of three years when he lived on a sailboat, mostly around the Bahamas and

Above: Tom Kelley's houseboat, the *Turtle*, had wheels in the pontoons and a yoke on the bow, so that it could be towed without a trailer.

Below: Kelley strolls Harriet Island.

Florida. He's lived on Dayton's Bluff, downtown St. Paul and on the gorge. For five or six years he spent the warm months in his houseboat, the *Archie L.*, on Harriet Island.

"It was great to get up in the morning and walk across the bridge and be at work."

When he retired in 1984, the city named Kelley's Landing in his honor.

"Naming a place after someone is a big deal in St. Paul," explained George Latimer, who served as mayor of St. Paul from 1976 to 1990.

Latimer first got involved in politics working on Kelley's campaign for county auditor in the 1960s. He remembers Kelley's interest in providing a corridor of public land

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along the river.

“Kelley was talking to me about this 40 years ago,” he recalled.

Mike Galvin, Jr., an attorney with Briggs and Morgan, in St. Paul, often worked with the county or the St. Paul Port Authority on land acquisitions along the river, such as Lilydale and Pickerel Lake, across the river and upstream from downtown St. Paul.

“Tom led the charge,” Galvin said. “He was one of the earliest if not the earliest of the pioneers focusing on the river.”

He remembers that Kelley had a houseboat built with wheels on it so that it could be towed without a trailer.

“I had an old pontoon boat on the river, so on weekends we’d bump into one another,” he said.

Before the state gave local governments authority to raise money for recreational land, a group of St. Paul businessmen used to buy up parcels and hold them until the state could come up with the funds for them. Some of the land along the east bank of the river below Lock and Dam 1 became park land through this

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process. Galvin’s boss, Sam Morgan was part of that group and later helped found the nonprofit Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota, which now does similar work.

When Peter Gove chaired the newly formed Mississippi River Corridor Commission in the early 1980s, Tom Kelly was one of the more active commissioners. The commission’s work led to the creation of the Mississippi River National River and Recreation Area in 1988.

“He [Kelley] was one of the key people who led to the creation of the Mississippi River National River and Recreation Area,” Gove said.

They worked closely with Congressman Bruce Vento and Senator Dave Durenberger to convince Congress to approve the designation.

MNRRA includes a 72-mile long segment of the river, from Dayton to Hastings, Minn., with the Twin Cities in the middle. It’s administered by the National Park Service.

Gove also founded Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR), a nonprofit advocacy group concerned with the stretch of the river in MNRRA and is

currently on the its board. He recently retired from his job as vice president of corporate relations for St. Jude Medical, Inc., in St. Paul. A long-time river activist, he headed the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency in the 1970s.

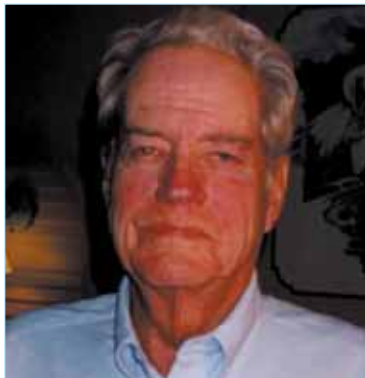
These days Kelley and his partner Kathy Stack have time to enjoy the parks and trails along the river. They live near the Mississippi River Boulevard Trail and Hidden Falls Park, where they often go for picnics. Stack also helped build the park system in St. Paul; one of several jobs she held for the city was heading up the Community Services Department, which oversees the parks. They are both members of FMR, and Kelley was a speaker at the organization’s annual fundraiser last fall.

Kelley loves the gorge and the urban river, but he also likes the stretch from Winona, Minn., to Prairie du Chien, Wis., where he used to spend time exploring on his houseboat.

“I was never much of a fisherman. I just enjoyed cruising,” he said. “I would keep going until it got dark and just anchor.”

“It’s one river. It belongs to everybody.” 🌊

**Photos courtesy of Tom Kelley.**



Tom Kelley