

2015-2016 Annual Report

Mississippi River Parkway Commission

Our Mission: ***“The purpose of the Mississippi River Parkway Commission of Arkansas is to preserve, promote and enhance the scenic, historic and recreational resources along the Mississippi River; to foster economic growth and tourism development in the River Corridor; and to develop the national, scenic, historic and recreation parkway known as the Great River Road.”***

The Arkansas Mississippi River Parkway Commission is happy to present this special annual report that outlines the many projects and activities taking place along the state’s 362-mile stretch of the Great River Road this year. As the reader will see, there has been a great deal of exciting new activity throughout the 10 county area that borders the great river. Even new Governor Asa Hutchinson, who paid a special day-long visit to the lower Delta region of Arkansas in August, acknowledged that “with its rich history and culture, the Delta is the new frontier in Arkansas tourism.” The upswing in both domestic and international travelers along Arkansas’ portion of the Great River Road is a clear indication that he is correct. New visitor who have traveled our national scenic byways are discovering a rich treasure of regional music, notable cuisine, fascinating history, educational interpretive centers and diverse recreational fun like no other place in the state.

The following summary of recent highlights will give a good overview of all that is taking place as we strive to accomplish our stated mission.

***Getting The Word Out –***

*Geo-Tourism—*

Arkansas, along with the other nine member states of the National Mississippi River Parkway Commission, is participating this year in the National Geographic Geo-tourism Partnership Project. This is an ambitious undertaking to create a detailed tourism oriented website (interactive destination guides) highlighting all the many attractions, activities, parks, historic sites, etc. along the Great River Road. Jim Dion, coordinator of the project for National Geographic, visiting Arkansas in July and held a series of “community meetings” over three days to explain the program to interested individuals as well as teach local people how to submit nominations for inclusion in the website. All of the meetings in Arkansas – from Paragould in the northeast to West Memphis in the middle and Lake Village in the south - were well attended and enthusiastically received. The nomination process continues through November with plans for the website to be launched sometime in early summer of 2016.

*Media Coverage* –

Print and social media coverage of the Great River Road area this year, both in newspapers, magazines and blogs has been excellent. The Johnny Cash Boyhood Home at Dyess, Arkansas, continued to receive a lion’s share of media attention, but many other attractions and festivals were highlighted as well. Two Arkansas Delta Barbecue places made Garden and Gun Magazine’s “Bucket List” of not-to-be-missed places to eat. The 30th Anniversary of the King Biscuit Blues Festival in Helena also received a fair amount of coverage along with good coverage for the Wilson, Arkansas (Mississippi County) “renaissance.”

For a random selection of media clippings highlighting various aspects of activities along the Great River Road, see Section 3 of this report.

***Governor Visits Delta –***

In early August, the lower Arkansas Delta received a special visit from Governor Asa Hutchinson. He held a community meeting in the Desha County town of Arkansas City that was well attended by many area business and civic leaders as well as tourism and transportation officials and interested individual residents of the area. He learned a great deal about the tourism potential of the area and the need to complete the Delta Heritage Trail State Park. The project converts an abandoned Missouri Pacific rail line and part of the levee road into a biking and walking trail. When complete, the entire trail will roughly follow the Mississippi River from West Memphis to the Louisiana border.

The Governor had lunch in Arkansas City and later in the afternoon traveled to nearby Delta Resort to see that operation and to do some trap shooting.

Following his return to the Capitol, Governor Hutchinson wrote a newspaper article about this trip saying that “the project will have a positive economic impact in the poorest corner of our state.” He also said that, when complete, “the trail will attract visitors from across the country and across the world, and the increased tourism dollars will mean jobs for Arkansas.” The Governor called the Arkansas Delta the “new frontier” in Arkansas tourism and pledged to do all he can to help promote the trail. Additionally, he expressed his support for heritage tourism projects in the region, stressing that developing those opportunities is also critical to the economic growth of the area, particularly in rural communities that lake infrastructure for traditional industry.

***Attraction Updates –***

Johnny Cash Boyhood Home – The boyhood home of country music legend Johnny Cash and the historic Dyess Colony (Mississippi County) in which it is located continues to be a big tourism and media draw for the area. The latest news from there is that plans are progressing for the re-creation of the historic theatre on the property. It will serve as a visitor’s center for the Colony and the Cash home. Contractors anticipate having it ready for occupancy before the end of this year. It will also include a gift shop, additional exhibits, and a multi-purpose space for showing films, conducting classes, or hosting special events.

Sultana Disaster Museum – Our last report said that plans are taking shape for a permanent Sultana Disaster Museum in Marion (Crittenden County). The Mississippi River near Marion was the site of the greatest maritime disaster in the history of the country when the steamboat sultana exploded on April 27, 1865 killing almost 1,800 people. As an update, organizers of the museum report that they have now finalized the contract with their consultants who are working on both the architectural design for the building as well as interpretive exhibits.

U.S. Highway 79 Bridge in Clarendon -- An effort is underway in Clarendon and Little Rock to save the historic old Highway 79 Bridge over the White River (Monroe County). It is scheduled to be demolished after the completion of a new bridge just downriver. The old bridge was opened to traffic in 1931. It was a double span warren truss structure allowing travelers to cross the White River without a ferry. U.S. Highway 79 was known as the “Military Road” and was the first “all weather” road between Little Rock and Memphis. It was an impressive engineering project for its time and became a vital contribution to the growth of much of east Arkansas. Since 1984 it has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Although some issues with the National Wildlife Refuge on the west side of the bridge have to be resolved, it is hoped that the bridge can be saved and converted into a pedestrian and bicycling bridge that can be linked to other biking/hiking trails under construction between Little Rock and Memphis. Since the City of Clarendon can’t afford to maintain the bridge, a fundraising effort is underway to establish and endowment for the bridge. Many people in the area are interested in this development so we hope to have more positive news to report on their progress next year.

***Festival Fun --***

King Biscuit Blues Festival -- As this report is presented, the 30th Annual King Biscuit Blue Festival is underway in Helena (Phillips County), October 7-10. It is the granddaddy of all Arkansas delta festivals! Organizers are expecting upwards to 80,000 people to attend the four-day event in this historic Delta river town. They also say they have put together one of the best line ups of musical talent in the festival’s history. The influx of tourism dollars for this event is crucial to the local economy. In addition to the main attraction – music – there are other activities such as a barbeque contests, 5K and 10K races, a blues symposium, arts and crafts, etc.

And speaking of fun….Helena was also the scene on June 12th of a 20th anniversary celebration for the Mississippi River steamboat “American Queen.” The Queen pulled into Helena Harbor to a festive reception and celebration by members of the local Chamber of Commerce, city and civic leaders and owners of the riverboat company. The event marked 20 years that The Queen has been docking at Helena on a regular basis and off-loading passengers to spend the day touring the many historic sites of the old Delta river town. The economic impact of these regular visits by the steamboat and its passengers provides a welcome boost to the area.

***Music, Music, Music…--***

Americana Music Triangle -- And speaking of Helena once again…..the historic city was the scene in May of an event announcing the establishment of the Arkansas portion of the five-state “Americana Music Triangle.” Led by Nashville, Tennessee preservations Aubrey Preston, the Triangle stretches from Nashville to Memphis to New Orleans and back to Nashville. A good portion of the triangle takes in the Delta area of east Arkansas. Nine of America’s most well-known music genres were developed within the Triangle: blues, jazz, country, rock-n-roll, gospel, southern gospel, zydeco, soul/rhythm and blues and bluegrass.

Preston’s goal is to encourage music lovers to plan road trips to the Triangle using a flashy website (guide) pinpointing destinations and describing points of interest in more than 30 communities in the five state region. “We’re giving an anchor, a cloud of information that’s easily accessible and connects places, stories, people and music to information that people can get from any place in the world,” Preston said.

***Miscellaneous Stuff –***

Maps - Arkansas MRPC recently received 5,000 Great River Road maps from the national office. All were distributed to Welcome Centers, Interpretive Centers, area attractions, historic sites, hotels, restaurants and the occasional juke joint. The maps have proven to be a great resource to get visitors traveling from one place to the other up and down the river.

Commissioners reappointed – Governor Asa Hutchinson recently reappointed to five year terms two Arkansas MRPC members, Pat Audirsch of Mariana (Lee County) and Dr. Terri McCullough of Eudora (Chicot County). Dr. McCullough also is national MRPC secretary.