



## **2016 Annual Report Arkansas 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 recreational parkway known as the Great River Road.*

Life on the Mississippi, at least in the 10 counties of Arkansas that border the Great River, continues to amaze and entertain! As you will see in this annual report, the MRPC commissioners and staff are striving to provide new and updated amenities and tourism options along the Great River Road that appeal to both domestic and international travelers. The year 2016 has been a good one. Working with local entrepreneurs and various government entities, the development of new Delta enterprises are bringing out the rich musical and artistic heritage of the region, recreational opportunities, native culinary delights, historical and natural resources. All of these efforts add to the emerging economic prosperity of the region and, through vigorous marketing plans, attract more and more people to travel the destination we call Arkansas' Great River Road!

### **HIGHLIGHTS –**

#### **Trails and Bridges**

With the importance of recreational opportunities to tourism in the Arkansas Delta, an ambitious plan is underway to develop a major trail system from West Memphis all the way to the Arkansas border with Louisiana. Utilizing river levees or abandoned railroad

rights-of-way, some of the trail system is complete, some is under construction and some is in development or proposed for development.

One of the major highlights of 2016 is the near completion of the Harahan Bridge project and Big River Crossing between West Memphis, Arkansas and the City of Memphis. Work has taken place the last couple of years to refit the 100 year old train bridge so that, at nearly a mile in length, it will be the country's longest active rail/bicycle/pedestrian bridge. It serves as the connection point of a 10-mile multi-modal corridor that also features the Delta Regional River Park and the Big River Trail, creating ties to attractions between both cities. A major Grand Opening celebration is being planned for Saturday, October 22 on both sides of the river with governors from both states in attendance. The impact on tourism in Arkansas will be tremendous as bikers and hikers come to area for its recreational benefits. The Big River Crossing will eventually be connected with the Mississippi River Levee Trail system that is partially complete. That trail system will eventually run along or near the Great River Road to Marianna and on to downtown Helena. Eventually, that trail will connect with the Delta Heritage Trail that is under construction and runs through the heart of the Arkansas Delta. More on all that next:

### **Trail System Update**

The 70 mile levee top trail is complete from the town of Marion (just north of West Memphis) all the way to Marianna in Lee County. That part of the trail system will have a grand opening next spring after the West Memphis city park trail system is complete. It is just beginning construction and is the connecting part of the trail coming off the Harahan Bridge. The entire trail system will become known as the Big River Trail. Credit for the trail system should go to the St. Francis Levee District. The Levee Board has installed all pass-through gates and pledged to handle all maintenance related to the trail. The Board realizes how important this project is because of the economic benefits it brings to the area.

As for the rest of the trail, the 16 mile section from Mariana to Helena-West Helena is still under development. The Levee Board is working toward a plan to upgrade the dirt road surface in a way that will better accommodate bike traffic. This is the portion of the trail that will connect with the Delta Heritage Trail near Helena-West Helena.

The Delta Heritage Trail (DHT) to the south is a rail-to-trail conversion of an abandoned Missouri Pacific Railway line. The State, through efforts by the Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism (ADPT) and Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department (AHTD), acquired the abandoned right-of-way corridor in 1992 through a land donation from the Union Pacific Corporation. Known as the Delta Heritage Trail State Park (DHT), the trail begins one mile south of Lexa, AR (also known as Helena Junction, approximately six miles west of Helena, AR) and continues south for 73.2 miles to Cypress Bend, AR (approximately five miles northeast of McGehee, AR). The acquisition of this railroad provides a corridor for development of a major hiking and bicycling recreation facility in the East Arkansas Delta. To date, approximately 22 miles

of trail corridor have been developed from Helena Junction to Elaine, all in the northern one-third of the corridor.

In the southern one-third of the trail, which at this points starts at the historic Delta town of Arkansas City, funding for the construction of a trailhead has been authorized and design approved. The facility will include day-use improvements and a combination building with covered pavilion space, restrooms, showers and a future staff office. The project is scheduled for completion in June, 2017. From there, Phase I of the trail from Arkansas City to Bungee was completed in 2015. It is a shared asphalt roadway for 7.1 miles. The second phase to complete the trail to Rohwer (site of Japanese-American internment camp during World War II) is 7.3 miles of asphalt roadway and is under construction. Design of an additional 9.5 miles of rail-to-trail conversion is underway for the section from Rohwer to Watson, a farming community near the Arkansas River.

To connect the Delta Heritage Trail from Watson to Elaine, an estimated 36.3 miles, is the largest and most costly challenge because it will require the refitting of two old railroad bridges – the Yancopin Bridge over the Arkansas River and the Benzal Bridge over the White River. It will take an estimated \$36 million to complete this middle third of the trail. Developers are working to identify potential sources of funding for this section. There is also additional proposed trail development leading south from Arkansas City to Lake Chicot State Park in Lake Village (Chicot County), about 20.3 miles.

### **DeSoto's Cross**

In April 2016, Archaeologists with the Arkansas Archeological Survey announced that they believe they have found the remains of a Christian cross erected at the Indian Village of Casqui in 1541 by the Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto. The Parkin Archaeological State Park in Cross County, an official Interpretive Center of the Mississippi River Parkway Commission, is the presumed site of Casqui. The cross the explorers erected at Casqui, reported in all four of de Soto's chronicles, had been the subject of speculation among archaeologists since the 1960s. Digging in the largest mound at the site recently lead to the discovery of what is believed to be the location of the base post of the large cross. It appeared to be a large bald cypress log that had been burned. The preserved segment measured 18 inches in diameter and about 12 inches deep. It was removed to the park's laboratory where it was prepared for transport to the University of Arkansas. Experts there will try to obtain a date from growth rings of the tree. If it comes out to 1541, the link to de Soto will be confirmed, following carbon-14 dating.

Archeologists working at the site are thrilled about this exciting development. The combination of the wooden post segment and the undisturbed large post hold both point to a strong presumption that this is de Soto's cross. When confirmed, the discovery should increase the interest in heritage tourism to the area.

### **Cash Visitor's Center Opens**

Exciting news came from the Johnny Cash Boyhood Home project at Historic Dyess Colony in Mississippi County. On May 21, 2016, the Grand Opening of the Visitors Center was held with great fanfare. The large restored building in the heart of Dyess served at one time as the moving theatre. The facility now has meeting space and offices as well as visitor information. The opening of the center represents the completion the second phase of restoration activities at the historic colony. New signage on Interstate 55 (part of the Great River Road) now more easily helps identify the location of the colony for tourists.

During the Grand Opening, the family of Johnny Cash announced plans for the annual Johnny Cash Heritage Festival. This three-day event will be held each year in Dyess and will include an academic conference, regional music and a major concert with world-class entertainers in the open field adjacent to the restored Cash home. The first festival will be October 19-21, 2017.

### **National Geographic GeoTourism Website Introduction**

One of the more exciting events that the Arkansas MRPC and its partners have been working on for the past two years is the roll-out of the new National Geographic Geo-Tourism website: [www.mississippiriver.natgeotourism.com](http://www.mississippiriver.natgeotourism.com) The official announcement of the website's "going live" will take place at the national meeting of the MRPC in Natchez, Mississippi in mid-September. Many tourism officials and others in the state have nominated Arkansas Delta attractions, museums, fairs, festivals, parks, unique places to eat and stay for inclusion in the website listings. The website will be a one-stop shopping place for potential tourist planning a trip along the river and the Great River Road.

### **Delta Byways Partnership Thriving**

The Arkansas Delta Byways Regional Tourism Association serves as an important MRPC partner by promoting tourism throughout the Arkansas Delta's 15 counties, with 10 of those counties containing portions of the Great River Road. One person appointed by the Governor from each of those 10 counties also serves on the Mississippi River Parkway Commission.

The 2016 Delta Byways Regional Guide, which is the primary brochure for potential visitors inquiring about travel within those 15 counties, continues to be an important marketing tool for the Crowley's Ridge Scenic Byway and the Great River Road Scenic Byway. The regional tourist association is represented with members from all counties who take active roles in promoting places, events and things to do up and down the Great River Road. This group also recognizes excellence in tourism promotion for the area with an annual awards banquet in the winter.

## **MRPC COMMISSIONER NEWS –**

The Arkansas MRPC welcomed three new commissioners this year who were appointed by Governor Asa Hutchinson. The new appointees are Jim Craig from Arkansas County who replaces Melanie Baden, Sarah Dunklin from Desha County who replaces Bob Ware and Kem Merrell from St. Francis County who replaces Richard Benson. We welcome the new commissioners and look forward to working with them on future projects.

The Commission has had three of the four regular quarterly meetings for 2016. The February meeting was held at Forrest City in St. Francis County and the May meeting was held in McGehee in Desha County. The most recent August meeting was held in Monticello in Drew County. Minutes from the last two meetings are included with this report. At the August meeting, it was decided that the November meeting would be held in the state capital city of Little Rock. Also at that meeting, Great River Road Executive Director Ron Maxwell announced that he would be retiring from the Department of Parks and Tourism on October 1, 2016. At this time, it is not known when his replacement will be hired to take over the MRPC Executive Director's job.