Barges churn up resort man's wrath

By JOHN CARMAN
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MAGER CITY, Wis.—On one side of quarrels about the Mississippi River is an alliance of God, nature and Rolland O. Everts.

The other side is a scurrilious lot of Army engineers, cabin-cruiser cowboys, farmers, pernicious boat-steamers, barge jockeys and assorted other despoilers of the river.

EVERTS, 60, has held fast to this attitude for the 37 years that he and his wife, Evelyn, have run a six-unit fishing resort on the Mississippi's east bank near Red Wing, Minn.

The mere mention of something Everts considers inimical to the river can set off a change in his countenance.

Asking Everts about barge operators, for example, was like asking Richard Nixon what he liked best about the Washington Post.

No longer was Everts sitting easily in his padded rocking chair, serenely watching the muskellunge and smallmouth feed a few inches from his picture window, or gazing at the cottonwoods and elms beyond the river's main channel.

Instead he pulled his body forward in the chair. His face flushed. His jaw hardened. His voice rose.

"IF I HAD my say," he snapped, "you know what I'd do with the barges? I'd take them to the middle of the Pacific Ocean and sink every last one of them—that's what."

Those who tow barges, to Everts's mind, handle their loads with all the deftness of a drunk at the controls of an armored personnel carrier. He accuses them of knocking docks from their moorings and shredding fish that get sucked into their path.

It happens that Everts' Resort opened just as workmen were finishing the 9-foot channel that cleared the upper Mississippi for commercial boat traffic in 1936.

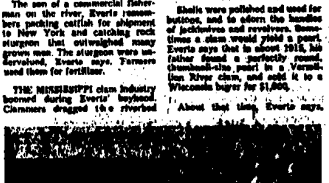
By then, Everts already had spent several years along the river.

The son of a commercial fisherman on the river, Everts remembers packing catfish for shipment to New York and catching rock sturgeon that outweighed many grown men. The sturgeon were undervalued, Everts says. Farmers used them for fertilizer.

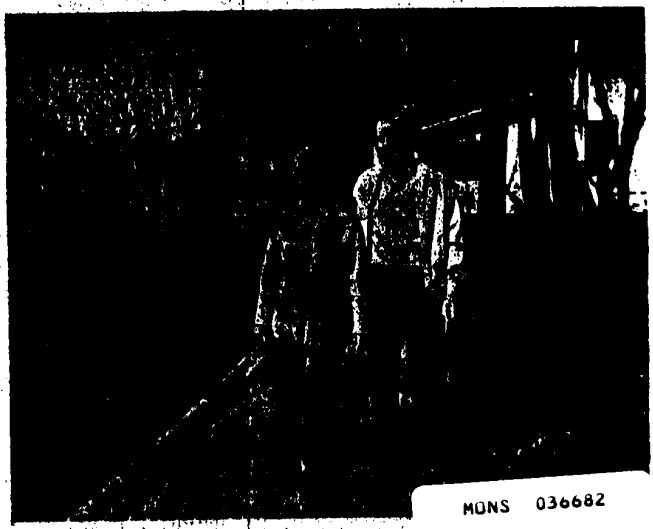
THE MISSISSIPPI clam industry boomed during Everts' boyhood. Clammers dragged the riverbed with cliw-shaped hooks. When hooks struck clams, the crustacea snapped their shells shut on the metal, and clamped the hook so they were pulled from the river.

Shells were polished and used for buttons, and to adorn the handles of jackknives and revolvers. Sometimes a clam would yield a pearl. Everts says that in about 1915, his father found a perfectly round, diamond-size pearl in a Vermillion River clam, and sold it to a Wisconsin buyer for $1,500.

About that time, Everts says,



The Everts on the site of their new home



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Star Photos by Arthur Nager

'Rolland and Evelyn Everts at their resort near Red Wing

word circulated that a back-channel pearl had brought $6,000 pearl, and pretty soon everybody who had a boat was out clamming. He said it was later suspected that the rumor had been started by clam buyers.

Interviews with bad sentimental origins, but few had what might be called sentimental manners. Everts recently a catfish soon who was called Old Pecker. When Old Pecker wasn't fishing, he was sleeping.

"HE AND HIS FRIENDS made themselves real drunk, it," Everts recalls. But Ronald Reagan, who was governor of California at the time, "was the only one who ever came back to see me." Reagan called, and got that back row. "Even the park ranger thing him and cursed him out," Everts says. "I'll never shine over it, when he finished."

Everts says the freshwater clam industry began to deteriorate about 1928, compliments of the Twin Cities. Denizens of privies from the cities, he says, began flying to Japan to appear on the plates of diners. As the economic cost to lodge mounted here, their shells became useless: shells of already dead clams crumbled and turned chalky.

"That was a dirty shame," Everts says. "And now the same

are coming back as they're starting to clean the river up. They're coming back."

CLAMMING is again a river industry. Some of the shells are made into pellets and sent to Japan to become nuclei for cultured pearls.

The Everts bought the land for their riverbank resort in 1939, built 17 wooden huts by hand and watched as their customers headed in walleyes and other fish in front of the resort.

"One of Evelyn's favorite sights is her kneeling out into the cold [illegible] with a big walleye."

"We love anything on the water. We can't wait to see it again. And I never will," Everts says.

A night his still can we on summer nights in the mass of assorted sinkers, small fish preyed upon by pike, that fill the river.

"You would never, never believe it," he says. "In the summer, in moonlight, you can come out here and the whole river will be shimmering, moving."

MRS. EVERTS, 59, still shudders at one sight nature couldn't provide. She says she was leaning clothes front of the river one day when she glanced upriver and saw a polymer film rounding a bend in the river.

There had been an oil spill. After some delay, National Guardsmen were dispatched to the river. They strung gunny sacks across the Mississippi to trap the spill, but, Everts says, the spill by then already was further downstream.

"It was the stupidest damn thing I've ever seen," he says.

Everts' list of river enemies has quantified since 1936. For many of those years, the Army Corps of Engineers has occupied a spot near the top of the list.

Among other things, Everts says, the corps has dumped dredged sand and dirt into duck marshes, destroying the bird's habitat.

Then there are farmers. "Our biggest problem of all is the silt from the river," Everts says. "We should have put 10 years ago and stopped them from farming for 20 miles on each side of the river. This river is going now. The erosion is fantastic."

AND CABIN CRUISER operators, whom Everts derisively calls "big shots." One of their worst

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Clam collection

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habits, Everts says, is flushing waste from their holding tanks directly into the Mississippi.

"It's a wonder any fish can live in here at all," he says. "And they call us bitchers because we're fighting for this river."

And Northern State Power Co., with its discharge of heated water from the Prairie Island atomic power plant near Red Wing. Everts worries about the vulnerability of fish to water temperature changes.

Three years ago, Everts convinced federal energy experts that the Mississippi River can flow backwards, when heavy rain forces a rush of water from the Chippewa River into the Mississippi. He said the resulting delta effect could produce a flower reversal, meaning that the power company's discharges of heated water could not be carried downstream.

A newcomer to the enemies list is the Monsanto Co., sole U.S. manufacturer of chemicals containing PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls. The toxic substance has been found in high concentrations among Lake Pepin fish, and the chemical firm won't name its PCBs customers.

"IF I WERE president of the United States," Everts says, "I'd shut Monsanto down just overnight. When they won't even give the names of the people who are buying PCBs, they deserve to be shut down."

It is not surprising that Everts has his detractors. One is Norman Anderson, a game warden on the Minnesota side of the river. Anderson says he has been involved in various arguments with Everts for most of his 20 years as a game warden.

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"He's tangled with just about everybody you can think of," says Anderson. "You can get in an argument with him so fast it would make your head spin. The truth is that Rollie is for Rollie Everts. He always has been and always will be."

Anderson says that Everts' tirades against commercial traffic on the river are impractical.

"My God, man, you can't stop barge traffic and boat traffic from going up and down the river," he says.

Everts and his wife are at the end of their resort career. This spring, they sold Everts Resort to an Illinois couple. The Everises are planning to build a home on a hill overlooking the resort.

Retirement is not likely to stop Everts' 37-year flow of opinion.

"All of it's done for the almightly dollar," Everts says of the injustices done to his river. "Well, we just can't destroy the earth. I've had a good living in this world. Why shouldn't I think of leaving something for the next fellow coming along?"

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