FINDING THE LOST RIVER

A New Search for Place

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ABSTRACT

When first inhabiting a place, the initial view is physical and visual. You see what is before you as almost two-dimensional. You only know what you can abruptly see. If your surroundings awaken your senses, the perception of place increases. You hear the physical environment weaving with the cultural. You smell, taste, and touch the new space, while still existing in a 2-D frame. The third dimension is found through movement across the aboveground landscape. Interactions with community allow you to gain perception and extent of the place, but what about the vertical depths of the built environment? What constitutes your “place” may not rely on depth initially, but without that aspect, your view is only superficial.

In this view of the Lost River, “aboveground archeology” is excavated through stories by and about the river. On a course to discovering essential clues to understanding how the river has formed and been informed by people and place, an array of physical and emotional impressions are exposed. By making one see the cultural landscape as questions in a living language, the Lost River will be exhumed.
Special Thanks

I would like to send a special “thank you” to the many people who aided me in my discovery of the Lost River. Without their help, my journey would not have been possible.

Pamela Harwood

Robert Armstrong

The Lost River Conservation Association
Contacts: Barb & Val

Shellie Hoffman

Donna Ferguson

Jamie Miles

Mark Caravello

My family and friends

Residents of the Lost River area
ODE TO LOST RIVER

Beautiful mysterious river, lost to sight,
But rolling on beneath the ground,

Thy waters once gleamed ever bright,
Now wrapped in darkness most profound.

Thy beauty now no one beholds,
Thy charms no one can see,
God made the beautiful of old,
And sent thee half hidden to the sea.

The sweetest music of the hidden shoals,
Keep singing on, and on unheard;
While onward thy rushing waters roll,
Unchanged, forever undisturbed.

Free in thy own mysterious caves,
Guarded by rocks on every hand,
Blind fishes play in thy waves,
And beauty all about thee stands.

from “The Wonders of Lost River” by A.J. Rhodes, 1905
I can tell you a story that my mom and dad always told, and they are not tall tale people. We had cattle and [Mom] was missin’ a cow, and they searched the whole farm... searched every day, couldn’t figure out what happened to her. Went down there in the Gulf and there was all those dry beds. Of course, when Lost River floods, when it gets up, those holes... some of them will open and then they’ll close, then there’s new ones. You never know where there’s gonna be a sinkhole in those dry beds or when one was gonna open, so when we were little, we always ran over those real quick. So anyway, they were missin’ this cow and like three days later they found her. She came walking up to the barn. She’s completely covered in mud. And the only thing they can figure out that she was sucked down into a sinkhole, but then she got out somehow. But there was enough air down in there that she could breathe. She was just completely covered in mud.  
- Daughter of a former Wesley Chapel Gulf farmer

As I entered the sporting goods store in the Orleans town square, I was greeted with a warm welcome and an inviting smile from the middle-aged lady behind the counter. When she asked if I needed some help with something, I could tell she was not inviting me to look at the basketball equipment. She and I both knew I was not from the Orleans area. So with enthusiasm and optimism, I explained to her my mission. “I am looking for any information that you might have on the Lost River,” I continued, “…any ‘stories’ you have heard or experienced while living in this area? I really just want to know what you know about the Lost River.” A confused but thoughtful look crossed her face and then came the all-too-common response, “Well, I don’t really know that much about the Lost River, but I do know someone that you might be able to talk to.” And from there, the journey began.

The lady from the sporting goods store told me that the best place to get information from local folks on the Lost River was at the hardware store. She said that a group of people meet there every afternoon to hang out and talk. Although I did not envision a hardware store as being the best place in which to get accurate information, it was worth a shot.
Upon entering the store, I immediately ran into a group of people sitting on benches and chairs facing one another. I again became the subject of interest, since I obviously was not a native resident. This realization caused all conversation to cease. After explaining my purpose for being in town, there was a reassuringly welcome response. A man sitting in front of me began talking about what he said were the four rises of the Lost River. Rise is a term used to describe the area where water emerges or springs from below ground level.

There's one [rise] down below where I used to live, one at Orangeville, then there's two [more]...a big one at Bromer's and one a little farther past. That's four of 'em. The one down there at Bromer's, man, that's scary looking. That thing's like probably four times bigger than the one at Orangeville, and that water actually boils out. Ya know, it's got that force to where it boils out!

- From conversation in Orleans hardware store

After hearing this, the elderly man to my right cut the younger man off arguing that there was only one rise to the river, which he referred to as the “true rise” of Lost River. He went on to say it was “a half mile below Orangeville.” With the addition of a short blonde-haired lady and a hardware store employee to the conversation, the discrepancies began piling up. It seems most people say they know nothing about the Lost River area, and then there are those who sagely know it all.

In actuality, the real rise of the Lost River is still undetermined. There are several different locations that are good candidates for the “true” rise, where the water seems to appear from nothing. Although dye tests have been performed to determine its exact route, the rivers path and purpose have yet to be completely uncovered, thus the rise is continually disputed.

The only woman in the group of talkers actually used to live on a farm along the Lost River as a child. When she could get a word in edgewise, she told the story of the missing cow. Apparently, the cow was unharmed but a bit shaken from being stuck in that sinkhole in the Gulf for so many days. In a landscape of over 1,000 sinkholes per square mile, it is not unusual for a variety of things to disappear along the way.

In the Lost River Basin, the karst topography or hydrology is visually apparent not only through the layers of sandstone, shale, and limestone along the river, but it also can be seen with the sporadic springs, caves, sinkholes, and swallowholes that transform the landscape. Sinkholes are defined as “depressions on the surface of the land caused by water moving downward into cracks and passages in the limestone below.” Similar to sinkholes, swallowholes are openings in limestone through which
visible surface water flows. It seems both features have a tendency to develop overnight and then disappear without a trace. These puzzling formations devalue most land while potentially causing damage to any built structures in and around them; however, not everyone thinks of sinkholes and swallowholes as harmful.

When the water get up, you could walk right back where [my friend] owns that farm and those big sinkholes. That thing fill up with fish. I mean, it's prolly twenty feet. We used to go down there when we lived there, and we'd get a sack full of fish out. It was always dry until the rivers got up from the flood.
– Orleans hardware store worker

My first glimpse of the Lost River itself was not exactly what I had expected. The little information I had accumulated beforehand about the area made me curious and eager to reach the famed river of mystery, and I could not wait to actually see what my “place” looked like. While driving south on highway 37 between Orleans and Paoli, my advisor and I approached a small concrete bridge and saw a sign labeled “LOST RIVER.” We immediately pulled the car to the roadside and parked in excitement. A local farmer looked on as we got out and walked toward the identified bridge, despite our car partially blocking his driveway. I peered over the side of the structure and was disappointed to see what looked like a small, dried-up ditch. It was then that I realized that this research was going to be more difficult than I had imagined. How do you study something that is not there? As my perception of the Lost River became murky, its name became all too clear.

The Lost River is what is known as a sinking stream. The water dives into and out of sinkholes to create a magnificent geological labyrinth. The tributaries branch off in opposing directions, only to emerge as one common channel downstream. Even though the river resides in a total of five counties in Indiana, including portions of the Hoosier National Forest, it mainly travels about Washington, Orange, and Martin counties.
Originally, I came from Eckerty, Indiana. I was ten years old when my parents moved, 1945, out there on Lost River. We had to cross Lost River to go to school, to get the bus every morning. When we first moved [to Livonia], [Dad] had big rocks put out there that we could cross. Water got up real high one time and the school bus come in, and so Mom met us over there. She'd got a big washtub in the mail that day she'd ordered from Sears & Roebuck. We wasn't very big, and she took us across that Lost River. 'Course back then it looked huge 'cause we's little, but it's not that big now. She put us one at a time in that tub and took us across. Then Dad built a big footbridge across the river, and boy, I've crossed that when the water's been hittin' it; if we 'd had fell off, we'd drowned. Just all of us took. There were some nice holes of water there.

– Paoli jewelry store owner

Born among the Indiana landscape, the Lost River was similar to any other aquatic body. It was free flowing with an uninterrupted aboveground lifestyle. Eventually, geographical land shifts and acidic surface water production caused all of that to change. As the water pH lowered, the limestone beds allowed for expansion of cracks and crevices to open up into large cavernous regions. These areas became the underground flow zone of the Lost River.

There are three separate sites on the Lost River that have been recognized as physical national landmarks by the National Natural Landmark Association and the National Park Service. The Rise at Orangeville, the Wesley Chapel Gulf, and the Tolliver Swallowhole each contribute a large amount to the personality and intrigue that make up the Lost River. Although these three areas are exceptional in their own right, the river itself is not yet a registered "landmark."

The first acknowledged attraction to the Lost River is the Rise at Orangeville. Known as Indiana’s second largest natural spring, the Orangeville Rise is over 100 feet across and is approximately 160 feet deep. Owned by the Indiana Karst Conservancy, the Rise is also one of the best sites in which to witness the river emerging from under the land surface. Once the water percolates from the limestone wall into the conduit below, it proceeds in a serpentine pattern around the rural countryside. Although this rise looks as harmless as any southern Indiana stream, there are strict warnings to avoid swimming, caving, or diving in the area.

There's a lady that committed suicide at the rise in Orangeville. That's been about five or six years ago. It was [a friend's] wife. She just drove down there, parked, got out, and just walked into it. Drowned. She was having mental problems and just committed suicide.

– Paoli Jeweler

Fig. 6 Photograph of graffiti on bridge by Pamela Harwood
West of the Rise at Orangeville is the second noted landmark branded the Wesley Chapel Gulf. A gulf is a local name for a very large sinkhole that has a stream flowing beneath it. What many people proclaim as the largest sinkhole in the state, the Wesley Chapel Gulf is one of the most multifaceted areas of the entire Lost River Basin. In this single massive abyss, multiple smaller sinkholes exist in harmony with cyclone-shaped hallows, stacked mineral layers and even cave entryways. The presence of animal-life is confirmed by tracks in the sand and mud deposits and by the state of the vegetation in the Gulf. Although this land cannot be used agriculturally, it is still an important resource for much of the wildlife in the area.

[The Gulf] used to be used for various social gatherings. When the water was low, people would gather for weddings, parties, and church functions. They could bring food and drinks and stay all day under the canopy of trees. Swimming kept the children busy, and the scenery was appealing to all.

— Lost River tour participant

The last nationally acknowledged region on the Lost River is the Tolliver Swallowhole. As with multiple areas on the river, the Tolliver Swallowhole is an illustration of one of the river’s “sinking” segments. Although it has been deemed a United States landmark, this particular swallowhole is currently on private property and is inaccessible to the public. As the land slopes downward forty feet from the river bed, the swallowhole vividly reveals the water as it surges under the earth.

The river goes underground about three miles from [Orleans] on the farm where I used to live. I was walking one day on the upper end of the farm and ran into a hole that was about eight to ten inches wide. When I bent down and looked into the opening, I could see that there was a cavern underneath the land. It was large enough to hear an echo.

— Retired Orleans farmer

Above the 22 miles of subterranean groundwater flow, the hidden waters are visible through a façade of vacant dry beds. At first glance, many of these beds may not be recognized as significant features; but once the secrets underneath are exhumed, interest in the unknown surfaces. During a heavy rainfall, these beds fill with water and begin a short-lived aboveground course.

There’s a dry bed [to the Lost River], and when it rains real hard that water comes up. Sometimes it even comes over the road, and, I mean, it’s great big wide like a creek bed and I’m guessing it’s probably anywhere from thirteen to eighteen feet deep. It covers a
large area, but it just rises out of nowhere and comes across. It floods and then the rain quits. Just a little bit after that, it just goes away... It's just strange.

– Paoli antique store employee

The flooding of Lost River is nothing new to the inhabitants of south-central Indiana. In fact, the debates on how to solve this “problem” are always continual, lengthy, and can get heated. When the proposal of the Lost River Watershed project, a plan to dam up ten portions of Lost River, came about in the late 1960s, it was met with a great deal of opposition.

While the damming of the river was to aid in flood control, recreational areas were also to be created for the public and for local Boy Scout troops. The pooled water would have also been available for the town of Paoli, which was using resources from Lick Creek. The United States Soil Conservation Service (SCS) was to fund most of the money for the project with only ten percent of the cost pushed back to private landowners.

You know, about twenty-some years ago, they decided they were gonna put lakes in between [Mitchell] and French Lick to stop it from flooding. Well, our neighbor was one of the engineers, and he worked on it for ten years... surveying and all of that. The project ended up falling through. A couple of people got it stopped to save the blind fish.

– Livonia resident

In the process of “developing the country’s natural resources for the use of the growing population,” as SCS chief James Acres put it, and creating multiple new lakes via the Lost River dams, the proposed idea would have also ruined a geological landmark according to many area residents. Adversaries of the Watershed project feared that many of the underground passages on the river would flood and inevitably cause some of the ground level beds to flood, including the Orangeville Rise. Another worry was the fate of the rare fauna found in and around the Lost River.

Due to severe protest, the Lost River Watershed project never succeeded in getting fully approved. The possible detriment to the natural environment was considered too significant to risk, and the added land tax request did not go over well with the majority of the population. Since then all plans to prevent flooding along the Lost River and its tributaries have also failed.

Fig. 8 Lost River Watershed proposal map from “Two kinds of conservationists dispute river’s fate” by Wes Kendall, from Stevens Memorial Museum

Fig. 9 SR 145 Extension options from “Mitchell to French Lick Highway,” by Keith Dunlap from Lost River Conservation Association guidebook
In the early 1990s, another endeavor approved by Indiana was met with extreme criticism. The Indiana Department of Transportation, in search of a better connecting route between Mitchell and French Lick, recommended five passages dubbed the State Road 145 Extension. There were several environmental concerns with all of the requests, including the welfare of the Lost River. Several cavers were worried that the new road would affect the underground regions where the added lanes crossed the river. This proposal also never materialized.

There's a cave over in there that these guys, college students, a lot of them from Bloomington, [are] always coming down and exploring, and they get trapped in there. They have take two or three days to get 'em out, and one drowned not too awful long ago 'cause a sudden storm came up. They couldn't get out.

– Paoli Jewelry store employee

The regions of caves and passageways that lay beneath the superior terrain are known collectively as the Lost River Subterranean Karst Complex and are an anonymity all their own. As the Lost River weaves under the earth, a new world unfolds and becomes the home to at least two dozen different animal species. Most of the fauna are rare, endangered, and threatened according to state and national laws, including the blind albino cave fish, the blind crawfish and many types of cave beetles. Of the five species of cave-dwelling animals exclusive to the Lost River Complex, three are unique to science as well. Previously unknown, these species survive solely in this buried environment.

Today, the Lost River is valuable to a variety of people, including geologists, naturalists, tourists, and even students. For years, this exceptional example of nature's beauty and development has been shared with visitors and community members through guided tours of the river. The Lost River Conservation Association has provided outsiders with educational trips to many outstanding points on the river itself. The tours are free, however, donations are always welcome.

An enigma to most, the Lost River is an irreplaceable majestic force that cannot be fully expected or explained. The river pulses through the people and places that it surrounds, leaving behind tangible and personal memories. Even though this river of mystery still has many secrets, everyone who discovers the water comes away with their own individual Lost River story.
While researching the Lost River, I developed my own sense of place among the landscape. Through the narratives of the people, I expanded my perception of the ambiguous river. I can see not only the physical impacts but also the memories it has left on the surrounding communities. From recollections of my advisor's three-year-old son yelling, 'Look, I see da water there,' or 'Hey, da water is gone. Where it go?' to reflections of getting lost trying to find the river altogether, my story of the Lost River can never fully be explained with words.

– Honors student Emily Hackett
NOTES

1 “Ozark Underground Laboratory,” INDOT Corridor (from Lost River Conservation Association guidebook, July 2003).


5 “Rise of Lost River Proposed For US Landmark Registry” (from Paoli Public Library, May 2003).


7 Maxwell King, “Two kinds of conservationists dispute river’s fate” (from Stevens Memorial Museum, May 2003).


BIBLIOGRAPHY


