



Changing Currents: Valmeyer and Pinhook Reclaim Community After Flooding

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CHICAGO - Illinois Humanities is pleased to announce an upcoming discussion of the efforts small communities to rebuild after flooding from the Mississippi. This free event, presented in partnership with the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities at Lewis and Clark Community College, will take place on Friday, Oct. 2 at 6 p.m. at the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center in East Alton.

For many communities in America's heartland, the Mississippi River is a double-edged sword in liquid form, providing the very basis for their existence while constantly endangering it.

“Changing Currents: Valmeyer and Pinhook Reclaim Community After Flooding” will feature the stories of two rural towns whose spirits have proven stronger than the Mississippi floodwaters that devastated them.

Doors will open at 6 p.m. The program itself will begin at 6:30. Those who arrive early will submit observations and questions that may be shared during the program, and enjoy light refreshments.

“Changing Currents” will be a part of the 2015 Greater St. Louis Humanities Festival, which will feature a variety of programs on the theme of “Community Viability and Vitality” throughout the area between Sept. 28 and Oct. 4, coordinated by the Missouri Humanities Council. The program will also align with the Smithsonian Institution’s national initiative, Water Matters, which examines the significance of water in human experience from many different perspectives.

Valmeyer, Illinois, located just south of the St. Louis area, was largely destroyed during the flood of 1993. With funding from various sources, including a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) buyout, the community reestablished itself on higher ground a short distance east of its original location.

The southeast Missouri community of Pinhook was inundated when the Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway was activated in 2011. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers intentionally breached a levee on the Missouri side of the Mississippi River just below Cairo, Illinois, to alleviate pressure on levees protecting more densely populated areas along the Mississippi and Ohio rivers in Illinois, Missouri and Kentucky.

The residents of Pinhook, many of whom still live nearby, wish to reestablish their town beyond the flood plain, much as Valmeyer did. They have been promised FEMA buyout funding and are working to acquire suitable land for relocation.

Although there are significant differences between the two communities – Pinhook has fewer than 50 residents, most of whom are African American, while Valmeyer has more than 1,200, most of them white – they also have much in common, according to Matt Meacham, a program coordinator with Illinois Humanities.

“Both Pinhook and Valmeyer have rich cultural histories,” Meacham commented. “Each town has demonstrated remarkable perseverance and maintained a strong sense of community identity despite the painfully difficult circumstances. I find their love of home and their determination to maintain it inspiring.”

“Changing Currents” will feature Debra Tarver, chairperson of Pinhook, Missouri, and Dennis Knobloch, former mayor of Valmeyer, Illinois, in conversation with Meacham. It will also incorporate screenings of segments from two films, “Taking Pinhook” and “Valmeyer, Illinois: The Documentary,” as well as opportunities for the audience to participate in the discussion.

The program will address various aspects of the stories of Pinhook and Valmeyer, but will focus especially on two central questions:

- What can we learn from the experiences of Valmeyer and Pinhook about the responsibilities of local, state, and federal agencies in ensuring that rural communities can remain viable when disasters strike?
- How have both Pinhook and Valmeyer drawn upon their cultural strengths in order to maintain their vitality in the face of adversity?

“We’re honored to participate in the Greater St. Louis Humanities Festival,” Meacham said. “When we learned that the festival will explore ‘Community Viability and Vitality,’ we immediately thought of Valmeyer and Pinhook, whose experiences resonate with that theme in compelling ways. We also thought of Lewis and Clark Community College’s new Mannie Jackson Center, which fosters public discussion of cultural issues that are important to the region.”

“The Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities strives to engage students, faculty and the community in collaborative offerings that promote inclusiveness, diversity, service, kindness, leadership, change, and the overall meaning of community,” said Jill Lane, dean of Transfer Programs at Lewis and Clark Community College. “This program fits well into that mission. We are happy to partner with Illinois Humanities to explore the important stories of the people of Valmeyer and Pinhook.”

“Changing Currents” also relates to the Smithsonian Institution’s Water Matters initiative, which encompasses a wide variety of programs and projects addressing the role of water in human life.

As part of that initiative, the Museum on Main Street program, a partnership between the Smithsonian and state humanities councils, is developing an exhibit entitled Water/Ways. Under the auspices of Illinois Humanities, that exhibit will visit six Illinois communities, including Valmeyer, in 2016-2017. The Valmeyer Community Heritage Society will host Water/Ways from Oct. 22 to Dec. 4, 2016.

For more information about “Changing Currents,” contact Matt Meacham, of Illinois Humanities, at matt.meacham@ilhumanities.org or (312) 422-5589.

About Lewis and Clark Community College

Lewis and Clark Community College is a two-year higher education institution with multiple campuses, a river research center, a humanities center, Community Education Centers and training centers located throughout the 220,439-person college district, which reaches into seven counties. Learn more about the college by visiting www.lc.edu.

About the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities

The Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities, a division of Lewis and Clark Community College, aims to conduct activities that promote mutual understanding and respect among people of different cultures, races, ethnicities, religions and other distinctions; influence positive social change by transforming attitudes and perceptions towards greater acceptance, tolerance and interaction among these groups; and ultimately remove barriers that hinder individuals and groups from realizing their aspirations and full potential. Learn more at www.lc.edu/manniejackson.

About Illinois Humanities Illinois

Humanities is an independent, nonprofit state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, with a mission to strengthen society by fueling inquiry and conversation about the ideas and works that shape our culture. Illinois Humanities engages communities across Illinois in conversation in a variety of humanities programs that focus on Public Policy, Media & Journalism, Business, and Art. Illinois Humanities lowers barriers to participation and offers access to programs, events, and grants to all Illinoisans, regardless of their economic resources, cultural background, or geographic location. Illinois Humanities is supported by state, federal, and private funds. For more, visit www.ILhumanities.org.