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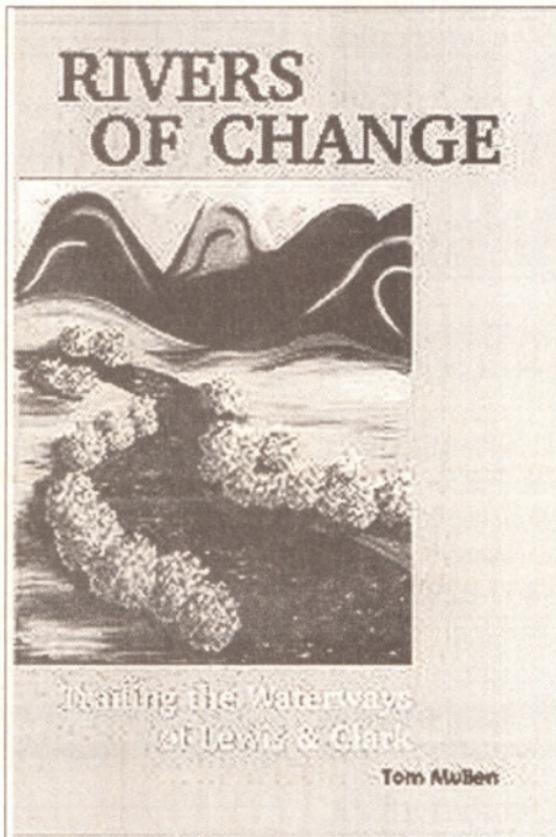
Adapting to change; learning from rivers

By Pam Linn

"Rivers of Change—
Trailing the Waterways
of Lewis & Clark," by
Tom Mullen
*Roundwood Press, 360
pages*

If there's a perfect book to read this year in honor of Earth Day, it has to be Malibu author Tom Mullen's chronicle of his five-month road trip along the Missouri, Yellowstone and Columbia rivers.

Unlike the Lewis & Clark diaries, "Rivers of Change" follows "Muddy Moe" as it is today after a century of change wrought by the dam building frenzy of the 1930s and the often mistaken notion that the river's unruly ways could be tamed.



After a decade of working overseas as a water resources consultant, Mullen decided to make the journey as a way to reconnect with this country. Heading out from St. Louis almost 10 years after the Great Flood of the Midwest, he searched for the real stories of how changing a river's course affects the people who live along its banks, the impact on its wildlife and how rivers and attitudes shape each other.

He bought a pickup and small camper shell, complete with ice-box, sink with running water from a 12-gallon tank, a mattress and shelves. "Six Pac" would be his home for five months, while meandering along riverbanks through 11 U.S. states and one Canadian province.

Mullen pulls history from local newspaper archives and interviews with librarians, hydraulic engineers and biologists, each with their own perspective on events that shaped the course of the rivers and the towns that had grown up along the routes of the barge pilots. What happens when a river changes course? There's no longer a port for a town to serve. The boundary of an Indian reservation moves 10 miles, forcing a court battle over territory.

The text is enlivened all along the way by a cast of characters artfully drawn in prose and confirmed in black and white photos. Wolf River Bob, born in White Cloud, Kansas, in '26, left for California in '44 to work as a missile technician. Fired because of his long hair and beard, he became a stunt man in Westerns, then returned home and bought his grandparents' home. He remembered the '93 flood as "a monster," and earlier when the frozen river thawed and chunks of ice the size of automobiles roared downstream shearing off mature cottonwood trees. The resulting ice jams forced the river to flood its banks, then receding water left holes full of fish, which locals scooped out with buckets

and skinned. Bob worries about pollution from farmland chemicals, nitrates in all the wells, but knows he can't stop it. He bought an abandoned railway station to display the antiques he retrieved from flooded fields and big black and white photos.

Mullen and a friend paddled a 50-mile stretch of wild and scenic river below Gavin's Point Dam. They find a sandbar encircled by a red nylon rope and a sign protecting tern and plover eggs. That's my island, said Marlin, who rented them the canoe and made camp for them on the shoreline of his unkempt acres. At 40, the one-time farmer had resisted offers to buy his land. "I'm trying to make it a park—give it to the state," he said, "cause you can't take it with you when you die, and what you can't take with you, you can't control." Mullen would hear these same words many times.

At the Reservoir Control Office of the Army Corps of Engineers in Omaha, Bob Keating explained how they control discharges from six mainstream dams on the upper river basin, the largest system of storage reservoirs in the country. Their mission is to juggle flows for adequate hydro-power, barge traffic, water skiers and fishermen, as well as to take on potential floodwaters. Keating has another mission: to protect the sandbars where endangered plovers and terns nest, fine tuning the flow to keep chicks and clutches of eggs from being swept away.

The Columbia River sits deep in a green valley north of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, which now houses two-thirds of the nation's nuclear waste. Weapons-grade plutonium was manufactured there until the late '80s. More than 50 million

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gallons of radioactive slurry are stored there, and hundreds of thousands of gallons have already seeped away from their tanks, percolating through subsurface soils toward the Columbia River. Mullen learns firsthand from "nuclear pioneers" who worked on the Manhattan Project the land is now thoroughly contaminated. Rebecca Webster said, "They did a good job of inventin' the bomb but didn't do a good job cleaning up afterward."

Discovery of an "erratic" boulder in the Columbia River sends Mullen to read up on accepted geological theories about biblical-grade floods that scoured the Columbia River gorge, and the geologist, J. Harlen Bretz, who unraveled their mystery.

In Oregon's Hood River Valley, the allocation of water resources is critical. There, Mullen meets Jerry Bryan and his "band of blatant radicals" at the Irrigation District pushing water conservation to farmers along tributaries of the Columbia River. Their success in changing attitudes averted devastating crop losses during last year's unprecedented drought.

Mullen's journey was a revelation, that rivers exist for

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function, not form, and that they mirror our own values and culture. "To mistreat their flow is to abuse our collective integrity," he writes. "We have to be wary of how we manage their flow. Fixing a river to one course is like asking Pegasus to file a flight plan. A channeled river is like a mythical horse stripped of magic."

If books like "Rivers of Change" were used as texts for history, geography and science students, a new generation of future planners and engineers might bring to the task a better sense of community and appreciation for habitat preservation and the economy of ecology.