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German journalists are recreating Huck Finn voyage

By GARY SCHNEIDER
of the Press-Record

When Huckleberry Finn and his friend, Jim, floated the Mississippi River a century ago, Granite City was still about a decade away from being platted by German brothers, the Niedringhaus.

Now, 100 years after Mark Twain penned Huckleberry Finn, two Germans are again floating the Mississippi River and finding everything exciting, including Granite City.

THE TWO ARE journalists for Stern (translates into Star in English) magazine and are working

on a cultural feature for the magazine, which sells about 1.6 million issues a week throughout Europe. Hans Conrad Zander, originally from Sweden, the writer, describes Stern as "the most important weekly in Germany."

Zander is accompanied by Cornelius Meffert, a German photographer who is one of Stern's chief contributors. Their main theme is recreating Huckleberry Finn's voyage in celebration of the 100th anniversary of the ageless book.

Both became impressed with Granite City as they floated by on a

pontoon boat with a makeshift cabin and stopped to spend two days here and get a better look at the city.

"COMPARED TO Europe, much of the Mississippi is an untouched paradise. It's just beautiful, even though it has lots of snakes," Zander said.

He noted that when their boat approached the Chain of Rocks Canal, the scenery changed to "an industrial landscape with its own charm. It's like the canals of central England, Birmingham and Manchester. It creates a type of landscape that has its own charm," Zander related.

Meffert added, "There are great pictures here. It has its own beauty."

ZANDER SAID a trend being set in Europe may find its way here, that of turning idle factories into luxury apartment buildings. "Old factories are the most expensive places to live. Apartments built into old factories are the most fashionable way to live and have the most prestigious addresses in Europe. A lot of old factories are suddenly being classified as protected," Zander said.

"Ten or 20 years ago in Europe, this would have been thought of as ugly. Now it's beautiful. Your trends

come from Europe. I think this will, too," he predicted. "A European college professor going through Granite City would say, 'Marvelous,'" he added.

The two took great interest in the plating of Granite City by the German Niedringhaus brothers. Told that now, about 90 years after the city was platted, Granite City Steel is just beginning to outgrow the property designated for it by the original plat, Zander said, "Ah, one German plan that worked. Most of them don't."

AIR POLLUTION, a chief concern in this region, is not the problem here that it is in many industrialized parts of Germany, Zander said. Also, the Germans

were surprised at the quality of the water in the Mississippi River, which most Americans consider muddy and polluted.

"This river is not polluted at all, according to European standards. In the big rivers in Europe, you cannot eat the fish. The water is too polluted.

"We stop and swim and fish and I have eaten the river fish here. It is excellent," Zander commented.

The journalists arrived in America nearly three weeks ago and spent most of their time in New York City reading about the Mississippi. Then they flew to St. Louis, drove to Granite City to purchase supplies for their trip and set out for Hannibal,

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'HUCK' GROWS UP. German journalist Hans Conrad Zander, right, and photographer Cornelius Meffert, both of Stern magazine, one of Europe's largest magazines, chat on their boat on the Mississippi riverfront Thursday evening as they stop in this

area on their way downriver. The two are honoring the 100th anniversary of the penning of Huckleberry Finn by recreating his float from Hannibal to near New Orleans.

(Press-Record Photo by Patrick Foley)

German journalists

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Mo., home of Mark Twain, where they purchased a pontoon boat and small motor and pitched a tent on it.

BEFORE LEAVING Hannibal, they interviewed and photographed a 94-year-old woman who remembered Mark Twain's funeral. "She was a marvelous woman—so refreshing. Old people here seem much more alive in America than Europe."

While they thought they had planned the trip well, they had underestimated Mother Nature. The tent on the boat didn't last too long. "We underestimated the winds here. It is so windy. We finally stopped at a lumber yard and constructed a wood and canvas cabin for the boat," Zander said.

Then they set out "to be a romantic" on the river, he noted. "We haven't decided which of us is Huck and which is Jim," he added.

THEY ENJOY floating at a slow pace and observing the countryside, they said. Zander says they particularly enjoy pulling into coves on islands and swimming and fishing. They spent two days in one cove, just enjoying, as Huck Finn might have.

One place they disagree with the devil-may-care attitude of Huck is in neatness on the boat. "We must know where every spoon is. It has a place and must be there. You can't observe the countryside if you spend a half-hour searching for your spoon. It gives us freedom to know where the spoon is," Zander said.

Zander said he believes Europeans are more familiar with Huck Finn than Americans, "because they read more." He says the success of their magazine, which has the style of Life Magazine here, is an example, carrying 350 to 400 pages each week.

"In America, you don't read. You are sitting in front of your television set all day. I haven't got a TV in my home. It is washing your brain. I get a sick head after two hours of TV.

THEIR LEISURE on the river has been disturbed numerous times by speeding boats. "The way

Americans drive on the river is just for speed. We are like old people. We like to float and see things. Europeans are not in as much of a hurry as Americans," he observed.

While they have encountered several driving rains on their journey, for the most part it has been slow and enjoyable, Meffert said.

When they floated to Granite City, they found no suitable place to dock, so they continued to St. Louis and rented a car to drive back here and photograph Granite City Steel, old apartment flats and other sites they considered interesting. They picked up materials on the city's history at the Chamber of Commerce and stopped by to chat with Press-Record reporters.

MEFFERT AND Zander come to America annually to do a feature on American life. Three years ago, they did a feature on American television preachers, two years ago they featured the use of electronics and computers in American Schools and last year they did an in-depth feature on development and use of artificial hearts in Salt Lake City.

"We like to come to America. Germans are bitter. Here we get fresh air, we are not crowded and we get to talk to Americans and see America from various points of view," Zander said.

They were intrigued by the number of overweight people they have seen. "We were interested in the weight of Americans, but we have been treated with great gentleness everywhere. Being overweight may make people more patient," he observed.

THEIR JOURNEY this year will continue for about four more weeks toward New Orleans. However, they could care less about reaching New Orleans or seeing the World's Fair there. "Huck Finn's boat, in the book, disappeared somewhere north of New Orleans. I hope our ship will sink somewhere near New Orleans," Zander joked. "But not until I get the cameras out," added Meffert.