

# Ohi:Yo´

The Iroquois called it *Ohi:yó* meaning “Good River.” The French called it “*La Belle Riviere.*” It has become something considerably less and much more.

The Ohio River begins at the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers in Pittsburgh and ends as it joins the Mississippi near Cairo, Illinois. The 981-mile river flows through or along the border of six states, and its drainage basin includes parts of 14 states. Running east-west through much of its length, it knits together the cultures of the East, Appalachia, the South and the Midwest which can be manifested in the sometimes curious accents heard along the way.

The river had great significance in the history of the Native Americans, as numerous civilizations formed along its valley. For thousands of years, Native Americans used the river as a major transportation and trading route. In the five centuries before European conquest, the Mississippian culture built numerous regional chiefdoms and major earthwork mounds in the Ohio Valley, such as Angel Mounds near Evansville, Indiana, as well as in the Mississippi Valley and the Southeast. The Osage, Omaha, Ponca and Kaw lived in the Ohio Valley, but under pressure from the Iroquois to the northeast, migrated west of the Mississippi River to Missouri, Arkansas and Oklahoma in the 1600s.

In 1669, René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle led a French expedition to the Ohio River, becoming the first Europeans to see it. After European-American settlement, the river served as a border between present-day Kentucky and Indian Territories. It was a primary transportation route for pioneers during the westward expansion of the early U.S. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia* published in 1781–82, Thomas Jefferson stated: "The Ohio is the most beautiful river on earth. Its current gentle, waters clear, and bosom smooth and unbroken by rocks and rapids, a single instance only excepted."

During the 19th century, the river was the southern boundary of the Northwest Territory. It is sometimes considered as the western extension of the Mason–Dixon Line that divided Pennsylvania from Maryland, and thus part of the border between free and slave territory, and between the Northern and Southern United States or Upper South. Where the river was narrow, it was the way to freedom for thousands of slaves escaping to the North, many helped by free blacks and whites of the Underground Railroad resistance movement.

The Ohio River is a climatic transition area, as its water runs along the periphery of the humid subtropical and humid continental climate areas. It is inhabited by fauna and flora of both climates. For anyone born in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond, to put flora and fauna and the Ohio River in the same sentence might cause eyebrows to reasonably arch. The Industrial Revolution’s legacy was a dirty, polluted, dammed and locked perversion of a river, especially the nearer to Pittsburgh. As one drives the roads parallel to its banks, there is hardly a moment when there is not a giant power plant (or the billowing smoke therefrom) visible either through

the front or rear windshield. Due to efforts of citizens and government over the past 50 years, the river is considerably cleaner today. But that is not the only reason. Many of the factories, warehouses and mines that employed hundreds of thousands are hulking ghosts; the river cleaner simply from their absence. And many of the towns those people lived in are close to ghost towns, hollowed out and pale versions of better times. Many of the storefronts are used for almost anything else than new merchandise; bric-a-brac, recycled antiques, local crafts, real estate listings. The residents left are overwhelmingly white, proud and fiercely patriotic; pristine American flags hanging even from buildings that seem abandoned.

However, these towns are small architectural treasures, the main streets and Victorian homes waiting patiently for a renaissance that may never come as the country and economy have changed, seemingly without a thought for places like this.

It's not all bad news. Virtually all the people I met, no matter the gender, age, status or condition, were warm, friendly, open and giving. It seemed to me that the rewards of small town life were more important to them than the economic challenges ahead of them. The big cities, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati and Louisville are thriving, diverse and looking forward. Some of the small towns that have colleges or operational industry are doing well. A tiny few, like Maysville KY, have become tourist attractions based on the perfection of its downtown next to the river. The effect is one of bending time; as the river lazily turns on itself, you come upon the future of one city or town and the past of another.

All images in this project were taken within ½ mile of the river.