

# SJCPL Writes | 2021 Issue

## Local Natural Environment



St. Joseph County Public Library

*"Peaceful Easy Feeling" by Julie C.*



EDITOR’S LETTER

It’s been more than a year since COVID-19 first hit the United States, and though not everything is “back to normal,” a tangible feeling of excitement could be felt by all at the start of the summer. While life has certainly been difficult for many, one of the silver linings I’ve seen has been the way that everyone seems to be venturing out into the natural world. More people are visiting parks, seeking out summer festivals, and finding excuses to spend time outside.

This year’s Summer Reading Challenge was branded “Tails and Tales,” the focus being on animals. When WNIT reached out to the Library about their upcoming documentary release on the St. Joseph River, Sara Maloney, Manager of Research and Technology for SJCPL, and I put our heads together. We saw this as a natural (no pun intended) opportunity to combine our efforts and create a spotlight for the writing and history of nature in South Bend.

The result was a series of interconnected programs revolving around writing and history, all of which we used to highlight our call for submissions for *SJCPL Writes*. We turned the Library’s monthly adult writing group, The Write Space, into a summer-long writing retreat series along the river. Sara and I each gave a presentation at these retreats, inviting two additional guest speakers—English Associate Professor Yelizaveta Renfro from St. Mary’s and Travis Childs from the South Bend History Museum. Additionally, Sara and I created writing activities for kids to try out at all SJCPL branches. It warmed my heart to see how many kids were interested in writing about the St. Joseph River.

I believe this collaboration allowed us to reach a wider audience, resulting in this year’s publication. We were also able to diversify our content in more ways than one. While we published exclusively short fiction in our first issue, we announced this year that we were seeking nonfiction, poetry, and art pieces. We received submissions for all these genres, including a lovely poem written in Spanish.

This publication could not have been possible without several SJCPL staff working together. I want to thank my editorial staff: Samira Hassan, Vicente Mendez Perez, Shirley Ross, Darla Rowe, Joseph Sipocz, and Rachel Yike. We also owe our gratitude to the Communications Department at SJCPL for expanding our reach on social media and helping us prepare the print publication.

I am truly impressed by the writing and art we received; it is wonderful to see this local talent in St. Joseph County. Although *SJCPL Writes* is an online literary magazine, I hope you are able to enjoy the beautiful wordsmithing while basking in nature’s glow. We are also fortunate to be able to offer a limited print publication this year. If you see one at your local branch, that means one of the writers could be close by!

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Editor-in-Chief  
North Liberty Branch Manager

MASTHEAD

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Vivo en una ciudad Y entre todo Corre un río de bella inmensidad	I live in a city And through it all Runs a river Of boundless beauty
En mi ciudad Hay muchos sonidos Ambulancias y conciertos Hay trenes y buses Que vienen y van, Que vienen y van	In my city There are many sounds Ambulances and concerts There are trains and buses That come and go, Come and go
En mi ciudad Hay muchos caminos Carreteras y senderos Hay bicicletas y aviones Que vienen y van, Que vienen y van	In my city There are many paths Highways and trails There are bicycles and airplanes That come and go, Come and go
En mi ciudad Hay muchas palabras Bibliotecas y tiendas Hay mercados y escuelas Que vienen y van, Que vienen y van	In my city There are many words Libraries and storefronts There are markets and schools That come and go, Come and go
En mi ciudad Hay muchos colores Parques y puentes Hay flores y fuentes Que vienen y van, Que vienen y van	In my city There are many colors Parks and bridges There are flowers and fountains That come and go, Come and go
En mi ciudad Hay muchos lugares Casas y hogares Hay personas y animales Que vienen y van, Que vienen y van	In my city There are many places Houses and homes There are people and animals That come and go, Come and go
Y entre todos y todas, Entre el todo y la nada, Corre el río de bella inmensidad	And through it all, Surrounding us all, In between nothing and everything, Runs the river of boundless beauty
Que viene y que va, Que viene y que va	That comes and goes, Comes and goes
Fluyendo y yendo Por donde siempre Ha ido y Siempre irá	Flowing and going Where it has always gone and Where it will always go
En mi ciudad Hay muchos olores Pasto y rocío Hay escarcha y café Que vienen y van, Vienen y van	In my city There are many smells Grass and dew Frost and coffee They come and go, Come and go
En mi ciudad Hay muchas fronteras Barrios y bosques Hay pobreza y riquezas Que vienen y van, Vienen y van	In my city There are many boundaries Neighborhoods and woods Poverty and wealth They come and go, Come and go

En mi ciudad Hay muchos espíritus Cementerios e iglesias Hay historias y futuros Que vienen y van, Vienen y van	In my city There are many spirits Cemeteries and churches Histories and futures They come and go, Come and go
En mi ciudad Hay muchas paradojas Fábricas y águilas Hay granjas y orillas Que vienen y van, Vienen y van	In my city There are many paradoxes Factories and eagles Farms and shorelines They come and go, Come and go
En mi ciudad Hay muchos asombros Luciérnagas y relámpagos Hay tortugas y estrellas Que vienen y van, Vienen y van	In my city There are many wonders Lightning bugs and lightning bolts Turtles and stars They come and go, Come and go
Y entre todos y todas, Entre el todo y la nada, Corre el río de bella inmensidad	And through it all, Surrounding us all, In between nothing and everything, Runs the river of boundless beauty
Que viene y va, Viene y va	That comes and goes, Comes and goes
Fluyendo y yendo Por donde siempre Ha ido y Siempre irá	Flowing and going Where it has always gone and Where it will always go
Abrazando a cada campo, Cada vecindario Cada uno y cada una Doblando Desbordando Reflejando Transportando Susurrando Corriendo	Embracing every field Every community Each and every one of us Bending Rushing Reflecting Carrying Whispering Running
En mi ciudad Con su bella inmensidad	In my city With boundless beauty

*Carlos Centellas's background countries are Argentina and Bolivia. 12 years in Argentina, 18 in Bolivia, and now 6 years in the US. He is still an explorer in the US. He loves learning English every day. He is a Zumba instructor where his mission is spreading joy wherever he goes. He is thrilled to share a poem as the unique Centellas Beyer family in a way they show their two little ones their beloved South Bend home. He said that he knows you did the math, he is 36!*

*Allison Beyer is also 36 and originally from Michigan. She has always loved poetry from a very young age. She loves painting, singing, dancing, gardening and bird watching.*

*Carlos and Allison have worked together on various projects over the years—translating texts, dancing salsa, moving across the world, navigating cultures not their own, and raising their beautiful children together. For this project, They wrote the first draft in Spanish and then went back and forth, taking turns changing ideas, words, and poetic turns of phrase. They had fun. Then, translating it to English was a bit harder for them! The inspiration for the poem came from their life in South Bend, from the river that surrounds them. The river frames and witnesses so much of life here—the good, the bad, the violent, the blessed. A walk along the constant river always does good for the mind and soul.*

Crepe Paper Roses  
By Rachel Boury Baxter

Flicker sprinkler,  
drops and streams  
cutting through air  
sodden with rays of noon.

Roses dry and crinkling  
like crepe paper from  
an Independence Day picnic  
several days past.

It is the blush-faced season,  
the time of bare toes and  
hot raspberries eaten  
right off the bush.

Everything melts  
except those spirits frozen in time,  
summer nostalgia  
at an all time high.

Dry like a rose in need of water,  
I've seen many Julys -  
The air is as thick as mud, but  
slippery, it slides through your fingers

when you try to hold on too tight.

*Rachel Boury Baxter is a poet, writer, and mom living in South Bend, Indiana. She has a B.A. in English writing and English literature from Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, Indiana). In 2016, she founded the publication, Poetry in Form, a celebration of poetic form. Her first collection of poetry, Mother Scorpion, was released in April 2020.*

Documento sem nome  
By Matthew Michel

walking home a tomato  
I watch the fireflies float up  
blinking in the summer dusk

*Matthew Michel studied in Syracuse University's Bird Library. More recently, he attended classes at Santa Ana College remotely, from Nepal, where he teaches as a volunteer for Sri Gaugan Ma. Vi. (Lekhnath, Kaski.) He writes stories and poetry and helps other people to make movies, music, and books.*





## South Bend Riverwalk By Bill Spalding

From Sturgeon Lake to Lake Michigan,  
The St. Joseph River flows as far as it can.  
It flows all the way from beginning to end,  
Even through the Indiana town of South Bend.

The sharp turn on the river provides a name  
To the city that's home to Notre Dame.  
IU South Bend marks the beginning of a route  
Along a river that's home of river trout.

Behind the Schurz Library, across the street,  
The Riverwalk begins, and it cannot be beat.  
To walk on the trail, you go west (not east),  
And you will see lovely families of ducks and geese.

Across the street from a parking lot with a ramp  
Veterans Memorial Park looks like a great place to camp.  
The river provides benches for taking a break,  
And watching fish make their way to the lake.

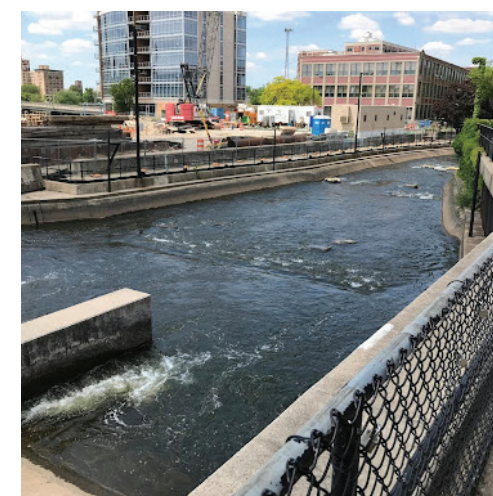
It flows by the YMCA and the Brick.  
The Farmer's Market has many choices to pick.  
The river flows on surrounded by trees,  
And you can hike the trail with relative ease.

Two boathouses lie along the path.  
Falling out of a boat will feel like a bath.  
A nearby park is named after a man  
Who was our mayor and our governor: Joe Kernan.

Joggers come out at the crack of dawn  
To jog by Howard Park's wide-open lawn.  
The river literally divides the city in two,  
But it unites citizens with a fun thing to do.

Whitewater rafting can be locally done  
On the East Race, and it's so much fun.  
Rafts, helmets, paddles, and life vests  
Cannot prevent rafters from getting wet

South Bend's economy will continue to grow  
As the St. Joseph River continues to flow.  
Kayaking and rafting on the East Race  
Have made South Bend a pretty great place.



*Bill Spalding was born at St Joseph Hospital in Mishawaka, IN on Thursday, March 9, 1995, the second of three sons of Dr. Michael Spalding and Mrs. Cynthia Spalding. He grew up in South Bend, graduating from St. Anthony De Padua School in 2010 and Marian High School in 2014. He then attended IU South Bend, where he earned a bachelor's degree in history in 2019. He has always been fascinated with how important the St. Joseph River has been for South Bend's history and economy, and he finds it upsetting that the river walk is so under-appreciated. No matter how different we are, the river reminds us that we are all part of the same community.*





Heron  
by Kelly Davis Wilson

*Kelly Davis Wilson grew up in Elkhart, IN but spent summers on Birch Lake in Southern MI and always loved the nature around her but it wasn't until she lived in Florida and South Carolina that she took the opportunity to hike in nature preserves and the rolling hills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. That is where she really experienced the beauty and wonder of nature. Kelly moved back to South Bend three years ago, where she took advantage of kayaking, biking and hiking the St. Joseph River and other natural areas of the state. Ms. Wilson enjoys painting birds, particularly Great Blue Herons, and when the emotion strikes, writing about nature. She is employed at REAL Services in South Bend. Ms. Wilson also enjoys spending time with her family, especially her three beautiful grandchildren and gardening at her home in River Park.*

Diamonds on the Water  
by Kelly Davis Wilson

Diamonds on the water, what a lovely sight to see,  
Diamonds on the water, flicker and flash before me;  
They bring back memories of Birch Lake's summer glimmer,  
Now new adventures of paddling the glistening curves of the St. Joe River.

Shimmer, shine, and sparkle, sunlight dancing over the water,  
A gift from God, I behold nature's beauty as I wander;  
I kayak past bridges, parks, inlets and rocky stairs,  
Floating slow, I spy turtles and ducks, feel the gentle breeze in my hair.

Great Blue Herons take flight on the river green,  
Swallow's swoop and chirp as I pass underneath;  
Fishermen on the riverbank, throwing out their line,  
The dam is just ahead, pull hard, use all my might!

I turn around and float downstream,  
People watch from the shore, wishing they were me;  
The sun is lowering, now a golden fireball in the sky,  
Families enjoy picnics, children playing nearby.

The current moves in its silent flow,  
It gently carries me as I relax in the evening glow;  
Diamonds on the water, what a lovely sight to see,  
Diamonds on the water, flicker and flash before me.

Naming elements  
By John DiTillo

What makes a creek a creek? Water, clearly: rushing past rocks or sliding over sand, making its way seaward, maybe just wide enough to jump across, maybe not. A creek is any flow smaller than a river, according to Home Ground, a guidebook of North American landscape terms edited by Barry Lopez and Debra Gwartney. But this definition says nothing of the source.

Some of the most beguiling places I have set foot are small streams – a snowmelt canyon in the Tetons, a jade-blue waterfall above Jacmel on Haiti's southern coast, a rain-damp hollow in St. Patrick's County Park. Only one has ever caused me to ask if it is a creek, though, and why or why not. And it flows less than a mile from the busy city street where I live.

It is hard to say when I first took note of the water running next to Angela Boulevard. Driving around the roundabout, I was usually on the lookout for things like strollers and Mack trucks to avoid. Riding my bike, my focus was on the gravel bar around the bend, where I would sit and watch the osprey. From the river, the trickle is hard not to miss, because two bridges there in quick succession draw your attention and make you choose between paddling for the V's of the eddies or ending up among the cottonwoods that drifted into the piers at high water and stuck.

This place bore all the classic creek characteristics: flowing water, rocks, plants – that kind of thing. I knew where it met the river, but where it came from was a mystery. I was not aware of crossing it when I drove down Portage, or any other street for that matter. Maybe it veered north into the neighborhood. It bore no signs. No one I know knew its name.

So I began to wonder. What is this place? What was it like before the roads and buildings? Did the original peoples wade in it, hunting crayfish? What did the Potawatomi call this spot before the lines of Indiana were drawn? What do they call it now?

The waterfall where the stream meets the river looks and acts a lot like the ancient limestone cliffs of Missouri, where I grew up. Only up close can you see that they are sculpted amalgamate. Concrete. Upstream, the banks span some three-to-five feet for the distance of a soccer field or so, then broaden out to form a shallow pond. Above that, the waterway disappears into an eight-foot underground concrete pipe. Water runs perennially from this pipe – even during dry spells like this spring, which was the driest even the old-timers could recall – suggesting a groundwater

spring somewhere in the underland.

Only up close, standing on the smooth sidewalk nearby, could I see that this place was absolutely full of life. Red-winged blackbirds make a mellifluous racket. Bees buzz about. Umpteen species of wildflowers vie for sun under white pine, river birch, sycamore, willow, and tulip trees. One day when I had some time, I sat and watched for a while. Dragonflies darted about like ecstatic acrobats. A large turtle, maybe a snapping turtle, bobbed at the surface then vanished under concentric circles. A mallard mother and her six ducklings dabbled at the far shore.

It seemed evident to my untrained eye that this area had undergone relatively recent restoration. The feeling that natural forces were at work here was also unmistakable. Those big rocks could be glacial erratics, who knows?

It is not on any map that I could find. A friend shared a digital copy of an 1863 map of South Bend. Where this stream is is blank. There is a squiggly line marked "Portage Creek" that flowed not far off, starting at a place called Kankakee Lake and meeting the St. Joseph River at what is now Keller Park. Neither the lake nor the creek now exists.

I dug a city street map of Elkhart, South Bend, and Goshen out of my roll-top desk. It shows nothing here. Then again, both Auten Ditch and Bowman Creek are little blue lines without names, and Juday Creek is spelled "Judy."

According to the most famous internet map app, the watery patch next to Angela does not exist (try telling that to the snapper!). There is the park, there is the road, there is the industrial warehouse, but no creek. With the most spectacular GPS-location tool our glittering technological society has to offer in your hand, you can truly not know where you are in the world.

The lens of the watershed – the earthly arteries that define the surface of the planet – offers a different take. We are connected to the Atlantic Ocean because the Great Lakes flow into it via the St. Lawrence Seaway, and our river flows into Lake Michigan, and this little rivulet in question runs right into the river. You can shut your phone off, look around, and say, "Well I'm right here by this creek."

It made sense to take clues from the place itself, the critters that live there. The mother mallard must be praised for her choice of a home, as each time I revisited she was still followed by all six of her ever-larger offspring. The turtle wouldn't be there if there weren't good things to eat. This is no ditch, no gutter. My field guide tells me



the yarrow growing there is an “alien,” though it appears comely, neighborly, and right at home. The mullein in meteoric bloom and the modest daisy fleabane are wildflowers, lovely to me, but common in poor fields, roadsides, and “wastelands.”

No doubt a road runs past it. Anyone on foot cannot miss the grumble of engines, the cough of exhaust. The reeds and pond bottom are clogged with windblown trash, alas. Polluted, probably, but desolate moonscape it is not. Butterflies flutter amid the bright orange butterfly weed. Bumblebees go bonkers for the purple wild bergamot. The streamside thicket is thrumming with life and abloom with every color in the rainbow. Perhaps what is wasted is not the land but our own attention.

For years I only saw this stream in the corner of my eye. It was in the corner of my mind, if at all, as I went on my way somewhere else. Maybe its namelessness says something about our collective posture toward place, the ways in which we hold the landscape in our imagination, and how it holds us.

I wanted to know the stories that people had to tell about this place, about how and when we name water. Did brakemen in the 1900s on the old coal line railroad glimpse herons stalking the pond as their train chugged past, and did they daydream about a pole and a line? A little trickle among uncountable others may simply not have made the cut for the 1860s map. Maybe the mapmaker missed it, just like the mapmakers miss it today. The West Bank trail crosses the stream on a neat little bridge near the roundabout at Riverside, and I was chatting with friends at that very point some weeks back when they said they knew a fellow, an engineer who was the retired head of Public Works, and he might be able to shed some light on things.

So I sent him an email, and he very kindly wrote me back. The gist of his generous, detailed response was this: the area is indeed part of a Public Works project to divert stormwater runoff (thank goodness, lest it combine with sewage during heavy rains and overflow into the river, poisoning it). The original plan called for an underground culvert that people would neither see, nor care to (as he pointed out). The city asked the design team to try again, and they came up with what can be seen today: an attractive, biodiverse, dynamic, trapezoidal pond/creek waterway intended to mimic Mother Nature’s ways. The water flows all the time not because of some long-lost historical spring, as I had wrongly guessed, but because of river water pumped up to the pond and thence the “creek,” thanks to a high-efficiency low head pump installed at the time of construction.

After reading his message I had to just sit for a bit. It was as if somebody had lobbed a load of river rock into the placid puddle of my mind and sent the brain waves splashing this way and that. Certainly I felt glad – gratitude for the conversations and choices that resulted in such a fine place for a walk. I also felt duped.

That stuck with me for a week or two, until I found myself camping with my wife and two young children up in the Manistee National Forest. I lay awake under the Milky Way, and my thoughts drifted back to the not-creek creek. The sheepishness of knowing I’d been on a wild goose chase melted away and something less tangible and more permanent took its place.

True, it is a human-made place. But it is also made by something else. The pump brings water up; gravity brings it down. Humans didn’t invent gravity. People planted trees and flowers, but the plants couldn’t sow their seeds without the pollinators. In a couple of years it would be a wasteland indeed if all the flowers died. So the insects are also to thank. A creek, once buried in a culvert, is no longer a creek. And so the sky (which humans also did not make) is an integral aspect of creekness.

Even in a ten-foot concrete tube, flowing water is still in the process of changing, as the natural world always is. River bottoms shift, channels change course, dams are grinded out. In time – a thousand years, ten thousand – this place will no longer precisely resemble the idea of what it was made to be, because it is constantly remaking itself. Birds plant new trees. Tree roots break pavement. Floods wash land away. Wind wears rocks to sand, and sand flows to the sea.

To call the stream not a creek, then, is to make an assumption and an oversight. If we assume that humans are somehow apart from nature, then roofs and steeples and parking lots cannot be headwaters. Our limited life spans and attention spans make it hard to see flux in geologic time. This place – every place – is participating in processes beyond human manufacture: the hydrological cycle, the shifting tectonic plates, the growth and death and rebirth of galaxies.

Right now, less than a mile from my house, water is spilling over the little falls and becoming the river. There is no secret spring upstream. There is a pump made of metal, yet where did that metal come from: Mars? The pump must run on electricity, which if it is connected to the grid means it runs mostly on burning coal, which is to say burning bits of earth. If it runs on solar panels, then that is sun power, which brings us back to the sky again.

Everything is connected to everything else.

Thus, we have a choice to make. We can be mindful of the more-than-human world in which we make our lives and try to work with it. Or we can work against it. Collaboration or interference. The engineers who helped bring the pond and stream into being alongside Angela Boulevard opted for the former, much to the benefit of the people who live here, the flora and fauna, and the river. Not to mention everybody downstream.

The email that changed my thinking about the stream also mentioned a rationale for doing the project the way they did. Before my time in town, there was a community-wide effort to articulate a shared vision, a kind of City Plan. Turns out, people want to live somewhere that is inviting and pleasant, not the opposite. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan explores the embodied experiences at the heart of this ancient human endeavor in a wonderful book called *Space and Place*. When humans work against nature, the result is often a desolate, dysfunctional sort of space: voids, vacancies, drive-through dead zones. When we work with the natural processes that make life possible, we cultivate a sense of place: fullness, vibrancy, interconnectedness, flourishing.

An underground culvert is a space. A pond pouring into a creek is a place.

If we are not too distracted by the devices of our own invention, if we are not too harried by human schemes beyond our personal control – bills, fads, wealth disparity, gun violence, strip mines, wars, the news – perhaps we can learn to notice the dynamics that create places that speak most to our souls and make us feel alive. Perhaps we can form a place in our imaginations where humans do not despoil the earth but rather honor and belong to it. Perhaps we can learn to live there.

Such was my lofty goal when I set out with muck boots, work gloves, and notebook to the mouth of the not-creek creek. I stole a page out of *The River Why* and aimed to trace the thing to its source. Along the way I’d gather garbage up into a large black trash bag and look for signs of life.

There was the sound of water falling on rock into river. I waded upstream in ankle-deep current, picking tattered plastic bags and bottles and wrappers and straws – so many straws – out of the reeds and driftwood sticks. I turned over a rock and saw it crawling with living things: sowbugs and flatworms. These benthic

macroinvertebrates, a.k.a. “benthos,” are species of bottom-dwelling creatures who form the basis of aquatic food webs. Sowbugs are moderately intolerant of pollution, whereas flatworms can handle a little more funk.

I walked through the tunnel under the Riverside bridge just as an eighteen-wheeler rumbled over, was greeted on the other side by birdsong and toad leaps. A logjam of junk loomed, like a convenience store had shipwrecked upstream. I was sweating. From down in the verdant corridor of wildflowers, the road was audible but invisible – a world away. An electric blue damselfly blazed by. I picked up a shard of Styrofoam plate, saw it was now a home to benthos, put it back.

Boulder-hopping and squelching in the mud I went, up to the spillway of the pond, where the cascade provides enough oxygen for gilled snails to proliferate. I skirted the pond, bushwhacking in the brush, startling toads into the water with each step. Step, plop, step, plop. My bag was nearly full. At the top of the pond there is a deep, clear pool. Mama mallard eyed me. Discarded “natural” Fiji water bottles and sunken beer cans rotted. Inside the culvert it is cool; you can see your breath if you hike in far enough and bring a light. Even on a hot day. You can hear a trickle whispering in the distance in the darkness.

Back outside, heavy-bellied cumulus clouds promise rain.

*John DiTillo works in the Jr. High at Good Shepherd Montessori School, where he leads students in service and citizen science on the St. Joseph River Watershed. You can often find him in his canoe with his wife and two young children. He turns 36 in October.*



It was very late in the evening when my friends and I first noticed Gnome Park. We were all packed in a cream colored Toronado driving East on Mishawaka Avenue, going from one bar to another. A female voice shrieked from the back, "It looks like gnomes live there! Stop! Stop!"

My friend Dan was driving, as he usually did, and he pulled over to a side street. We all piled out of the car and shot across the road to the park. Giddy, we ran up and down the stone lined pathways past the gnome's house and down the stone stairways.

After a quick reconnoiter to search for the gnomes, we settled down by the bank to drink a few beverages that were legal for some of us, and hung out by the slow moving river. We were down the hill so we could hang out unobserved. Perfect!

Gnome Park became a favorite destination. We found the park up topside absolutely suitable for hide-and-go-seek. In the park there is a large Civil War memorial that isn't especially legible in the dark and a grand bandshell. Mostly, though, we spent our time down by the river.

Battell Park, I later discovered, has been a park forever. Workers built the distinctive rock gardens, pathways, and walls in the 1930s as part of the Works Project Administration, as a make-work project during the Great Depression. Thank you, WPA. 'Make work' has a negative connotation, but this, to me, was essential infrastructure spending. It was and is such a joyful park. The 'gnome's house' hides a pump for the water feature. The stonework is distinctive and extensive. It is listed on the National Register.

According to the signage, the park closed at dark, but no one ever bothered us there. In fact, we kind of felt it was our place to gather. We were old enough to not worry about a parental curfew, but young enough to not have our own houses to hang out in. Gnome Park was our park. We weren't always alone, as we could occasionally see couples walking together down the stone steps. We didn't usually acknowledge them and they ignored us, so we were happy to share our secret world.

Down by the river, there was a bit more bank than there is now. We had room for a group of four to six friends. Across the river it was a blank. I was thinking that the remains of the Ball Band factory were over there, but I now see it is Kamm's Island Park. There was nothing ever happening there, either. It could have been the dark side of the moon for all I cared. Our spot was dark. Dark for dark business, we

thought. The elegant stone walks, stairs, and walls by the lazy flowing river felt perfect. The night sky in the city was usually starless, and we felt like we were miles away from civilization.

We made small talk and small plans. We once stayed up past 2 a.m. to watch a lunar eclipse in the park. My friend Kevin was an Eagle Scout, so he would often build a small campfire. A modest fire by the river on a quiet warm evening was a perfect setting for storytelling. Kevin was a poet, and his works were long and atmospheric, with a contemplative Tolkien feel. We all loved them. I usually told my stock of pre-teen jokes. Ask me about the Singing Toilet sometime. Kevin's hero in his poems was Subeye, his idealized subconscious self. Or maybe Sub-I. This was storytelling in the ancient oral tradition, after all. In one story, Subeye finds that his girlfriend was pregnant with twins. One, he said, and he'd have to leave the country. Two, he definitely had to go off-planet.

In those days we had time but no money. It was common for us to share an eight-pack of Little Kings between five friends. Who got the spares? Dan was always one and done; a perfect designated driver. We had a secret word - rosebud - in case the conversation got too serious. We were young and idealistic, so, of course, it sometimes did. We had our small circle of friends. Once we found careers, spouses, and/or kids, we stopped going to Gnome Park together.

I still love Battell Park and the stone steps to the river. I even go there with my kids from time to time. It's a part of the wonderfully extensive series of walks alongside the river that gives our city its name, and it's often busy with joggers. I still think of the park being as mystical as Stonehenge. We never found the gnomes, but as far as I am concerned they are still hiding there.

*Joseph Sipocz has been coming to SJCPL since 1975 when he was a Sophomore at LaSalle High School, and has worked here since 1993. He has worked in a number of library departments, and is currently set up at River Park Branch. He enjoys reading the Saturday Night Stories for the Library's social media since the beginning of the COVID lockdown. He's been able to read from his favorite authors including Edgar Allan Poe, Hunter S. Thompson, Neil Gaiman, and Kurt Vonnegut, many of which he first read as a library bound teenager.*



"Cool Down After Jog" by Julie C.

**Julie C. has worked at the Francis Branch Library for 7 years as a shelfer and now a branch associate. She enjoys gardening and especially growing dwarf and state fair zinnias and lavender. Julie has canoed the river five times with the ease of St. Patrick County Park's canoe rentals and everytime is an adventure!**



## **MISSION STATEMENT**

SJCPL Writes seeks to reflect the experiences of the community in St. Joseph County by providing an inclusive space for teens and adults of all backgrounds to publish their works of fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and art.

View current and past issues at <https://sjcplwrites.wixsite.com/litmag>.

## **RIVER RETREAT BOOKLETS**

This summer we invited patrons of all ages to help us celebrate the St. Joseph River! See the writing responses we received from children at all SJCPL branches and take a peek at some of the writing and history handouts from The Write Space: River Retreats. Ask about how you can receive a booklet at any SJCPL location.

# **SJCPL Writes | 2021 Issue**

## **Local Natural Environment**



St. Joseph County Public Library