Emiquon, the birth place of American archaeology, ex

(Photo by Chris Young.)

A Floodplain is R

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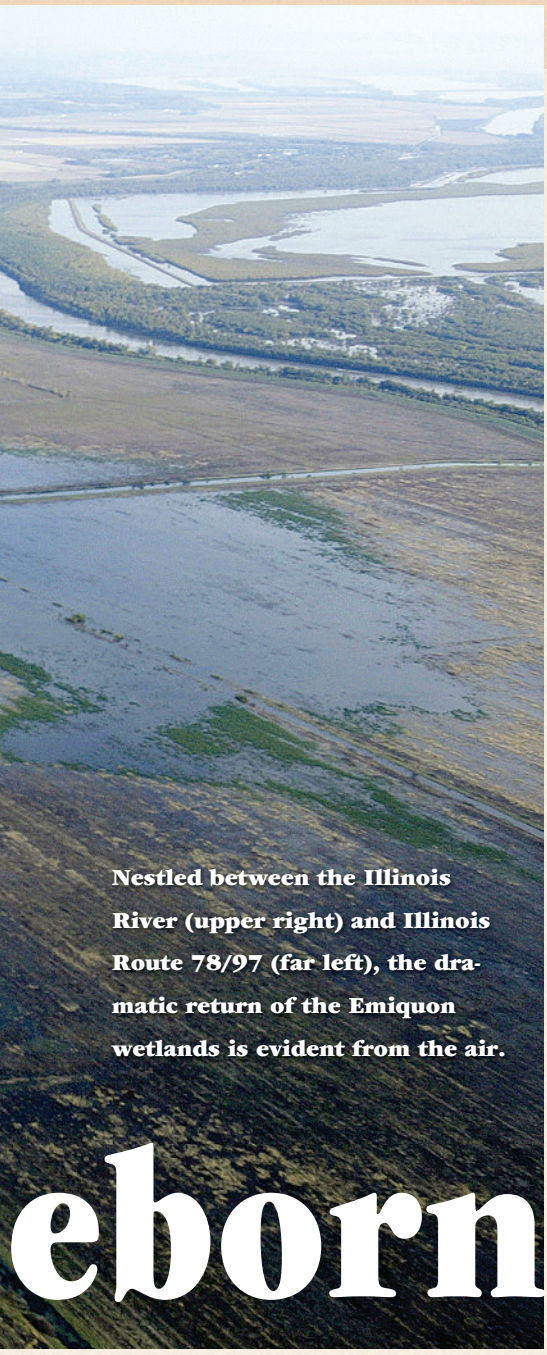
Emiquon—a word that means "squash" or "pumpkin" in some Native American languages—was, until recently, 7,100 acres of agricultural land. Today, a large lake spreads over 2,000 of those acres, a lake so big that from its center, the shorelines fade into the distance.

In some ways, Emiquon turns the field of dreams cliché into a rich reality—when the lake appeared amidst the crops, the waterfowl flocked to its shores and plants sprouted in its banks. This is a conservation story that stretches hundreds of years and many cultures. This is Emiquon.

One hour south of Peoria along the Illinois River, Emiquon is one of the largest floodplain restoration projects in the country outside the Florida Everglades. Once known as the jewel of the Illinois River, Emiquon harbored a complex system of backwater wetlands and lakes that were home to diverse plant and animal communities. For thousands of years, it has supported generations of people who have lived off the land, using its resources for food and shelter.

One of the richest Native American archaeological resources in the country, with nearly 150 documented sites, Emiquon sits in Fulton County, where, in 1927, a man named Don F. Dickson began conducting excavations on his farm. Dickson's findings set off other excavations in the area, and eventually

periences a rebirth.



Nestled between the Illinois River (upper right) and Illinois Route 78/97 (far left), the dramatic return of the Emiquon wetlands is evident from the air.

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caught the attention of the archaeology department at the University of Chicago. As the story goes, the department was strapped for resources during the Great Depression, and, unable to afford research abroad, they came to central Illinois instead. The teams from Chicago developed and used procedures that still guide field work today, establishing Fulton County as the birthplace of American archaeology.

The summer of 2008 brought additional archaeological investigations to Emiquon when Michigan State University began a series of excavations to uncover more history buried beneath the impressive ridgeline that overlooks Thompson Lake. Burial sites remain unexcavated, but a rich and unusual history will be tapped during this multi-year project, since the archaeology here hints at a history of warfare and conflict.

These archaeological digs have uncovered evidence of many hundreds of years of Native Americans—perhaps 600 generations—some of whom still travel to the grassy ridgeline each spring to pay their respects. Tharran Hobson, an Emiquon-based restoration ecologist for The Nature Conservancy in Illinois, says, "The reason people came here centuries ago is the same reason people come now: biodiversity."

In the 1920s, farmers leveed the land, separating it from the Illinois River. Draining the floodplain made it suitable for farming, but such a deep human footprint robbed the ecosystem of its natural functions. For more than 80 years, the lands at Emiquon remained isolated from the river, preventing it from functioning as a natural floodplain. But in spring of 2007, The Nature Conservancy turned off the pumps that had dried out the land for nearly a century. Nature displayed her resilience, and within months, something remarkable happened: a wetland was reborn.

Construction of a levee in the 1920s allowed floodplains to be drained. Water returned when the pumps were turned off in 2007.

In addition to being important ecologically, Emiquon is one of the richest Native American archaeological sites in the United States.

The numbers alone are staggering. The historic bed of Thompson Lake—a lake which once spread across Emiquon but has not been seen in more than 80 years—began filling with water, first to 400 acres, then to more than 2,000. Tens of thousands of waterfowl, including 17 duck species, have taken to the waters as they migrate through Illinois. Other uncommon birds, like red-necked grebes and black-necked stilts, have been spotted along

Bald eagles are among the notable species nesting in the newest Illinois River floodplain wetland.

(Photo by Jim Miller.)

Emiquon hosts tens of thousands of migrating waterfowl, including 17 duck species.

Thompson Lake. More than 30 species of fish have been introduced, some 300,000 trees have been planted and Yellow Springs Instruments donated $100,000 worth of equipment to monitor and measure parameters like temperature, pH balance and water depth. The University of Illinois–Springfield opened a field station in April 2007, directed by Dr. Michael Lemke, which gives scientists and students the access and tools to study freshwater ecosystems. Lemke can often be seen balancing in a small boat, retrieving data from the houseboat-shaped buoys that hold the monitoring equipment.

Where cropland stood less than 2 years ago, wetlands are emerging.

Out on the lake, it is hard to imagine that this was cropland less than two years ago. Broods of ducks scramble and quack after their mothers, muskrats bob in the water and then dive below the surface, a large beaver dam grows stick by stick. Life here is rich and getting richer. With the partnership of the Department of Natural Resources, a now-empty wetland near Dickson Mounds will be used as a hatchery for rare fish that will eventually populate Lake Thompson. Using local genotypes, this hatchery will produce non-game fish such as red-spotted sunfish, helping to recreate the assemblage of fish—some 50 species—that once thrived in these waters.

Restoration at Emiquon is ongoing, eventually leading toward the goal of reconnecting it to the Illinois River. The many partners that work here continue to balance the needs of people and wildlife; as restoration continues, visitors will be able to bird-watch, taking in the sight of tens of thousands of waterfowl alighting on the water, or the several dozen black-crowned night herons that have adopted Emiquon, or perhaps glimpsing the bald eagles that winter in central Illinois. Dickson Mounds, a branch of the Illinois State Museum and a National Historic Site, continues to expand opportunities for visitors.

Between Dickson Mounds Museum, DNR, the University of Illinois–Springfield, The Nature Conservancy and other local partners, Emiquon is now much more than just a preserve, and even more a conservation success story. Jason Beverlin, deputy director of the Illinois River Program, says that Emiquon is now a campus, a place for nature-lovers, students and scientists, and one of the best places to study floodplain restoration. And perhaps future generations will again know this campus as the jewel of the Illinois River.

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