



Chapter 3

A WATERWAY UNDERWAY — EVENTUALLY

“A harbor, whether for ships or ideas, is a good thing, for it invites the world to come and go, and the life in it grows strong because it takes something from the world and has something to give in return.”¹

Finally the waterway was underway. Or was it?



THE ART OF WILLOW MATTRESS MAKING

During those years around the turn of the century, a trend developed to protect areas along the river’s path through bank stabilization.

Floyd M. Clay in A History of the Little Rock District Corps of Engineers wrote that bank stabilization in those days was a developing science. The first step was to find a willow grove, second to cut it, and third to haul the trees to the site where massive willow mattresses were woven by hand and anchored to an unstable bank.

“Weaving of willows was an art . . . , and one in which both hands and clothes would take a tremendous punishment. The mat joints were secured with wire, and the combination of wire, splinters, heat, humidity, and mosquitoes made one confident that he had earned his \$60 per month (\$90 base pay, less \$30 for subsistence),” Clay reported.

If nature took its course and caused other trees and saplings to grow through the mats, taking root and anchoring them firmly, the mats could hold the banks for years and even decades.²