

Smithsonian's Stories from Main Street podcast

Episode 1: Take Me to the Water

Episode Transcript:

Hannah Hethmon (Host): *Water is life, but it can be deadly as well. Water allows us to travel and it blocks our paths. Water determines where we live and work, what we eat and drink. It's an essential biological and natural resource....that people have struggled to access and control it throughout all of human history.*

Water shapes cultures and ways of life. It can be found at the center of rituals and ceremonies around the world, and we're inspired by water to create art, literature, and music.

Just as we are made of water, so is our world. Water covers around 71% of the Earth's surface. There's water in the clouds above us and there's water hidden beneath the soil. It's the movement of moisture through our atmosphere that determines the weather.

Water—so common, yet so strange—defines our little blue planet.

I think it's safe to say that every person in America has a story about water. What if we could ask them about their stories and listen...really listen? I think we'd start to see patterns and connections that we never expected. Maybe we'd see the ways Americans a thousand miles away are different from us, and the ways in which we're all the same. That's what we're going to be doing in this podcast, listening to water stories of everyday people in small towns throughout America.

Specifically, I'm gonna be taking you on a listening tour of stories collected as part of the Museum on Main Street Program. For 25 years, Museum on Main Street, a program of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, has brought Smithsonian exhibitions to small towns and asking the people in these diverse communities to make the exhibits their own.

I'm Hannah Hethmon, and I'm going to be your host for this auditory adventure. I grew up in Maryland, where I spent a lot of my free time as a kid exploring the wetlands of the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

So when the folks at Smithsonian asked me to listen to all the incredible stories that people have shared with them as part of this program and to curate them into a podcast that shows off the many voices of small-town America, I found myself drawn to the water stories collected for Museum on Main Street's Water/Ways exhibition.

Since 2016, Museum on Main Street's Water/Ways has been traveling all over, stopping for six weeks at a time in over 100 small towns in America. The stories you're going to hear in this

series are those collected by volunteers and submitted by everyday people. They're raw, they're real, and, as such, they're a unique window into America, a country as ever-changing, multi-faceted, and diverse as the waterways that cover our continent.

And now I'll let the Lansdowne, Maryland High School Choral Ensemble sing us in....

[Music Plays: [Take Me to the Water" sung by the LHS Choral Ensemble](#)]

Michelle M.: So water to me is really my heart and soul. When I was young and my dad passed away, I would always go down to the creek and just listen to the water, and the sounds of water going over the rocks always gave me peace. Later in life, as I tried to find what I wanted to do and be and I went out on the ocean for the first time, the colors and the magic of the water, so many different shades to the water, from the pure satin when the ocean is flat to all these shades of blues and greens. It's just magic, the colors in the water. So water to me again it's just this beautiful mystery, this beautiful comfort. It's like a warm blanket. Whether you are looking at it or swimming in it or listening to it. Studying water has allowed me to look at all the wonderful, beautiful things that live in it, that find it home. But again to me it's really just the sound and the appearance of water that I love the most.

Hannah: *Human bodies are 60% water, and we begin our lives in wombs filled with water from our parent's body. From the moment we take our first breath, our lives start to become shaped by the water outside of us, whether we realize it or not. Water brings us into the world and water is there as we grow and discover the world beyond our own fingers and toes.*

Anoushka Concepcion: My name is Anoushka and I grew up in Queens, New York. And, I've always loved the water, always been fascinated by it.

Violet Spolarich: I always have to brag to the fact that I've lived in on the Willow River for 85 years.

Bruce Conmy: Okay, hi. My name's Bruce Conmy. I grew up in Fargo, North Dakota, and everybody in that area of the world goes to the lakes.

Carolyn Lange Hatlestad: Our two oldest sons were baptized in our outdoor worship service on Games Lake. They were the first ones that our church did that and our pastor took water from the lake and baptized them. And then our third son, who was born in September—and that was after the church services—so we couldn't baptize him outside with the water.

But Phil's mom is the most wonderful, wonderful woman. She was bound and determined he was also, our third child, was also going to be baptized by lake water. So she went out, and since we had named him Andrew, she also went to Lake Andrew, got a quart jar, put water in that, went to Games Lake, got water from that, and we had that in the baptismal font. And so all three of our sons were baptized with the water that we live around and that has always been a very powerful part of our family.

Hannah (Scripted): *Around the world, people grow up with experiences of water unique to their home country. And when they immigrate to America, they bring those experiences with them, expanding our collective childhood memories of the water beyond the limits of our own borders.*

Maria Petrova: My name is Maria Petrova and I'm originally from Bulgaria. I grew up on the Black Sea coast in the town of Varna which is right on the water. From very early on I was connected to the water, not only by going to the beach, but the fact that my dad was in the Merchant Marines.

Angela K.: My family is from Jerusalem and with this comes endless opportunities for encountering large bodies of water. As a small girl, my grandpa and grandma took us all over: to the Mediterranean Sea, the Sea of Tiberias, and the Red Sea. However, my first vivid memory was of our first visit to the Dead Sea.

Georgia: I grew up in Greece. So most Greek people connect their well-being with the water.

Hannah: *Of course, not everyone grows up by the ocean or the sea or the big clear lakes of Minnesota. But something draws us to the water as children, and we often find creeks and puddles that are just as exciting as the oceans and seas we've never seen. As a kid, the runoff creek in my best friend's tidy suburban neighborhood and the creek in the wetland woods behind my country home—the one I reached by walking along the railroad tracks—were both sites of countless imaginary adventures and hundreds of hours of carefree play.*

Carolyn Lange Hatlestad: I grew up on a farm in North Dakota where there isn't a lot of water. My memories of water and any kind of enjoyment were running through a sprinkler or the stock pond, which in North Dakota is a man-made hole in the pasture where the cows drink water and defecate in the water, and that was my summer swimming hole—swimming along with the cow pies. [Laughs.] Not a very pleasant atmosphere! So, coming here, living in Minnesota with these beautiful lakes, has just been incredible. I love going back to North Dakota because that is where my home is, where I grew up, where my family is, but I always love coming back to the lakes and the trees.

Hannah (Scripted): *As we grow into adulthood, water often becomes a part of our identity, shaping who we become and serving as a point of connection between our own individual selves, the people who raise us, and the collective identities and histories that are far bigger than any one person or family.*

Juanita U.: When I was five years old, my father took me to the ocean. We'd always gone to the bay before this. We got to the beach, and he let me go free. I stood in the waves, and after 15 minutes of sheer fun and pleasure, a wave caught me and dragged me down, turned me upside down and upside down again. And when I finally stood up, got my bearings, looked back to shore, my father had moved not one inch. His arms were crossed, but he was smiling, nodding

at me. I knew then that he was trying to teach me something, but I was still pretty angry. Nevertheless, I understood later on, he was teaching me not to panic. No matter what the conditions are in the ocean, no matter what the conditions are in life, don't panic.

Hannah: *Across North America, Native peoples revere water in their spiritual practices.*

Tom Cook: We're here at this place, just up the hill from our ancient Homeland. Our direct ancestors lived along this river for a thousand generations. To the Indian mind the water is alive, sentient, responsive, and absolutely part of yourself.

Hannah: *The knowledge that healthy waterways are vital to life is not new. Long before the idea of America as a country existed, long before Europeans came to this continent, the people already living here celebrated and respected the waters around which they built their lives. That respect continues today, and Native Americans are some of the most outspoken when it comes to the great need to protect our waterways. In the next story, Mike Swan talks about the importance of water to the history of his people, the Ojibwe.*

Mike Swan: In asking this question about what does water mean to me, I could answer it in two different ways. One is the spirituality side of me being Ojibwe and how the Ojibwes are connected to the land. You know, we were dependent on water for everything. You know, even our food source, our drinking every day, living by it, and doing our culture.

But there's another side of me too. My background is biology, and I was an aquatic biologist. Basically, what I studied was the interaction between water and land and lakes. They call it limnology.

Ojibwes, we migrated to this area because of the rice. That's in our prophecies, the Ojibiwe prophecies. Like I said, we've had wars for it. The wild rice, the reason why we came here was there's no other place in the world, basically, where wild rice grows. It only grows here in Minnesota and Wisconsin, and part of Canada.

And the reason why it grows there is because the water's clean. It can't exist in polluted waters, and it can't compete with other plants that can outgrow it, like water lilies or weeds, or any that looks like that, lake weeds or anything like that.

The thing that's unique about Minnesota is, there's a point here where, actually, three major watersheds converge. The Mississippi, the Great Lakes, and the Hudson Bay. So we are...basically, Minnesota's at the top of the watershed, basically. And the water is pretty pristine around this area. And that's the reason why the wild rice grows in here.

We need clean water to drink, to conserve it. And sometimes here in Minnesota, we take it for granted because we have so much. And to keep it clean it's, you know, that's not one person, but all of us. We all have to share that responsibility that we are on the top of the watershed. What we do here is gonna affect the people down in New Orleans. Something to think about.

Hannah: *At the beginning of this episode, I hypothesized that by listening to these water stories, we might begin to hear patterns and ideas that connect us. One pattern I have heard over and over is that love for the water and connection to the water inspires people to defend it against pollution and mismanagement. For some, protecting waterways and wetlands and the plants and animals they support has become their life's work.*

Scott Glup: I've worked on six natural wildlife refuges in five different states. I've worked in Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, and now in Minnesota. I have been in Minnesota for about 13 years. You can't find anybody that doesn't say that they don't want clean and abundant water. Everybody wants that. That is why I am here. Water really is the key to all of this. It's not just wildlife habitat, but I view it as our future.

My name is Scott Glup and I work for the Fish and Wildlife Service. I have been working for the US Fish and Wildlife Service for 31 years.

We need it to sustain life, not just for humans but wildlife and all of creation and not only do we need water, but we need high quality water. We need good, clean water.

Many people are aware of the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico, the hypoxic zone. Much of that area—which in some years can be 8,000 square miles where most life in the ocean dies—is coming from southern Minnesota and Iowa and other farm states because of the nitrates that are going down the Mississippi River because of the land use. And one of the best ways to curtail that is by restoring wetlands because wetlands help to clean the water; they help to store the water so that we are not flooding our downstream neighbors. They help to do all of those kinds of things.

The question is, is it possible to have a form of agriculture that can coexist with wetlands? We can have wetlands and sustainable wetland resources and sustainable agricultural resources. I have great faith in the capacity of humans. I think not only is it possible, but it is a must. We have to figure that out. I do believe that it's not too late. I wouldn't be doing what I do if I felt that it was too late.

Hannah: *The scent of a rain shower. The sound of rain on a rooftop. A cool swim on a hot day. Waves crashing on the shore. Water appeals to all our senses.*

Our relationship with water is both personal and communal. We look to water to provide peace and solitude in the midst of our hectic daily lives. We see natural beauty along riverbanks and we pause to admire sunrise and sunset at the water's edge. Yet water also has a way of bringing us together. We gather at the shore of the ocean, a lake, or a river to swim, fish, kayak, or boat.

Water sustains us, but it also can take away our breath with its force and unstoppable power. Our oceans, seas, lakes, rivers, and streams contain multitudes....they are teeming with life, and every changing. No matter how well you think you know a body of water, you can always be surprised, and there's always more to learn.

Jenna S.: Years ago on the island of Maui at sunset I was with some friends. The drumming circle was going and people were dancing and fire dancers were dancing. All of a sudden everyone turned to the water and before we knew it there was a mother whale bringing her baby to shore to, what we assumed, was to teach the baby to swim in shallow waters. So the

mother was responding to the beats of the drums, and it was just one of the most magical experiences that I've ever had. That's my story.

Hannah:

Thank you for listening to these stories. I hope that they inspired you to think about your own water stories, to reflect on how critical water is to so many aspects of our life, and conserve and protect our water sources so that they remain clean and plentiful and full of life for future generations.

If you have your own water story that you would like to add to the Smithsonian collection, you can learn how to record and share it by visiting museumonmainstreet.org/stories. That's museumonmainstreet.org/stories OR you can use the free Be Here Stories app to upload a story directly from your phone. That's the Be Here Stories app. In both places, you can hear the full collection of stories from all over America. On the Museum on Main Street website, you can view hundreds of stories contributed to the Stories from Main Street initiative and watch documentaries created by rural youth through Museum on Main Street's [Stories: YES](#) project.

Museum on Main Street is an outreach program of the [Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service](#) that engages small town audiences and brings revitalized attention to underserved rural communities. In partnership with state humanities councils, Museum on Main Street brings traveling exhibitions, educational resources and programming to small towns across America through their own local museums, historical societies, and other cultural venues.

These exhibitions are designed to engage communities and become a catalyst for conversation about life in small-town America, to start dialogs, build excitement, facilitate connections, and open doors to your community's history, culture, people, and sense of local pride. See a full tour schedule for Museum on Main Street exhibits and learn more about the program at museumonmainstreet.org.

Thank you to our storytellers whose voices can be heard in this episode. Several of these stories in this episode recorded by Pamela Ferris Olson as part of the Women Mind the Water project. Stories also originated from recordings supported by the Minnesota Humanities Center and the Water Bar and Public Studio. The rest of the stories in this episode came from the main Stories from Main Street Archive. You can see a full list of story credits, links to all the stories used in this episode, and an episode transcript in the episode description on your podcast app.

Thank you to all the Museum on Main Street collaborators who helped collect these stories.

A special thanks to the MuseWeb team, Nancy Proctor and Heather Shelton, who have been instrumental in gathering and curating stories for Museum on Main Street.

This episode was produced for the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service by Better Lemon Creative Audio. It was produced, written, narrated, and edited by me, Hannah Hethmon.