

Hidden Falls Staircase

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We met him on the bank of the Mississippi, near a swaybacked cottonwood with a ganglion of exposed roots. He was a spry, white-haired man of about seventy. My children and I were in search of the waterfall at Hidden Falls Park, and our new friend was eager to set us in the right direction.

"Make sure to look at the staircase," he said, as we tramped through the grass away from the river. "It was a WPA project. It's really something."

The man told us he'd worked at the Ford plant until retiring and would visit the falls on his lunch breaks. He said he lived nearby and took frequent walks along the river. Before I could reply, he pointed to a pavilion that had come into view. "Follow the trail through those trees just beyond the pavilion," he said. "The staircase is at the top of the falls."

As we stepped from the August sun onto the shaded trail, we could hear the waterfall. My son ran ahead to spy it first. When I caught up, I saw my son's disappointment before I spotted the trickle of water that perhaps explained why we were the sole party hunting for Hidden Falls that day.

"Maybe there's more water earlier in the summer," I said. "Why don't we go see the staircase?"

The staircase, in contrast to the falls, was a child's daydream made real. Its stone steps wound along a fairy-tale wall. At the top we found an overlook we'd passed on our drive down Mississippi River Boulevard to the park entrance. We could as easily have found a fire-breathing dragon or a sleeping princess. Halfway back down the staircase, I sat against the wall and let the kids play. They climbed and jumped and shouted as characters in another world. I wished I could thank the white-haired man for sending us to this place of man-made wonder amidst God-made beauty.

Months later, as public officials and media pundits compared our nation's economic crisis to the Great Depression and some suggested New Deal strategies to speed our recovery, I wished again that I could talk with that man. I wanted to know what allowed his parents' generation to confront the fear of Not Enough with a stone staircase that enraptured my children seventy years later. I wanted to stand upon inherited wisdom the way that swaybacked cottonwood, though it looked so precarious, stood upon a great expanse of tenacious roots burrowing deep into the earth.