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Murder on the Mississippi

Kentucky Bend is author's book setting

By Michael Ray
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James Brewer sees things that aren't really there.

Brewer stands on the banks of the Mississippi River near Cates' Landing in Lake County, watching for the Riverstar to swing into view just beyond Island Number 10.

During the Civil War, a battle had raged across the river at Cates' Landing as Union and Confederate soldiers fired cannons at each other. At least three boats went down at this bend in the river where the current moves so fast that boats can be slammed helplessly into the bank.

This day, though, the only shots heard come from Brewer's 1866 Winchester Yellow Boy rifle.

Brewer is here to investigate a murder.

A murder that takes place only in his mind . . . and in the pages of his next novel.

Brewer is an Elizabethtown

mystery writer whose work-in-progress is partially set in Fulton County.

Brewer writes about the Mississippi River in the period just after the Civil War. "There are a lot of novels about the Civil War," said Brewer, a retired army major, "but not much has been written about the Reconstruction era."

The novel, "No Justice," features Masey Baldrige and Luke Williamson, men who fought on opposite sides during the war and now find themselves working together in the tumultuous period of Reconstruction. Baldrige is an insurance investigator who, in this novel, is working for the Pinkerton Agency. Williamson is a riverboat captain.

A robbery-turned-murder just across the river in New Madrid, Mo., ends up with the suspects fleeing to Watson's Point, better known today as Kentucky Bend or Bessie Bend and sometimes as Madrid Bend.

"A very important part of the

story takes place in this area," Brewer said.

Brewer picked Kentucky Bend as the setting for his story because of its isolation and the peculiarities of law enforcement in the 1870s. "Law enforcement was very territorial and would rarely cross county lines to pursue a criminal," Brewer said, much less a state line.

That makes the Bend the perfect place for a criminal to hide out. The narrow strip of Kentucky is isolated by a horseshoe bend in the river which leaves the land accessible only by the river or a narrow land bridge from Tennessee. Basically, Brewer said, there was no law in the Bend.

Brewer came to Fulton and Lake counties to look over the scene of the novel for himself. He prides himself on the accuracy of his historical novels. "Good historical fiction is grounded in fact." Besides, he says, "You can't make stuff up that is as rich as what really happened."

Brewer's passion for accuracy

prompted him to tour the sites that are important to his novel in the company of an archaeologist, who was able to describe what the area would have been like in 1873.

Some of the key action in the novel occurs near Island Number 10 on the river and at Watson's Point.

Brewer says it's important for him to walk the land where his novels are set. Smells and sounds encountered there can help breathe life into his stories. While surveying the Bend,, Brewer took out his replica 1866 Winchester rifle and fired a few rounds to hear the sound of the rifle shot. The rifle is a replica of one that Masey Baldrige acquires in the second novel, "No Virtue," which will be released next month.

Sometimes – though not on this day – Brewer dresses in period clothing and camps out to get the feel of the time period about which he writes. All of

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Mystery in the county

Planning a murder takes careful thought. So does solving one. Mystery writer James Brewer, right, traveled to Fulton and Lake counties where key action in his next novel takes place along the Mississippi River. He took along Bill Lawrence, an archaeologist with the Tennessee Department of Conservation and Environment, to ensure the historical details of his novel are accurate. The two toured Kentucky Bend and stopped here near Cates' Landing in Lake County. (Photo by Michael Ray)

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that effort helps him to write novels that earn glowing reviews from reviewers who have compared his novels to the writings of Mark Twain and Margaret Mitchell.

Few mysteries have been set during the Reconstruction and Brewer sees "a lot of parallels between then and now. The industrial revolution was underway then; now it's the information explosion."

Yellow Jack, or Yellow Fever, was killing thousands. "They didn't know how you got it or how to cure it. They were filling up a lot of cemeteries.

"You had a generation that had just lost a war and they were bitter about it," Brewer said. "Sounds familiar, doesn't it?"

"A generation of former Southern soldiers were trying to rebuild their lives and cope with losing a divisive war, not unlike many Vietnam veterans of today.

"I'm not going to say it was a better time, but it was a simpler time."

Brewer is no stranger to the

area he's writing about in this story. His family lived near the river for three generations and he was born in Tiptonville.

As for the future, Brewer has been approached by two movie companies about turning his novels into movies. He hopes a television movie series might evolve featuring Masey Baldrige and Luke Williamson.

His first non-fiction book, "The Danger from Strangers," made the academic bestseller list. He is now working on a second non-fiction book which will be about the Civil War.

"No Justice" is scheduled for release in the summer of 1996.