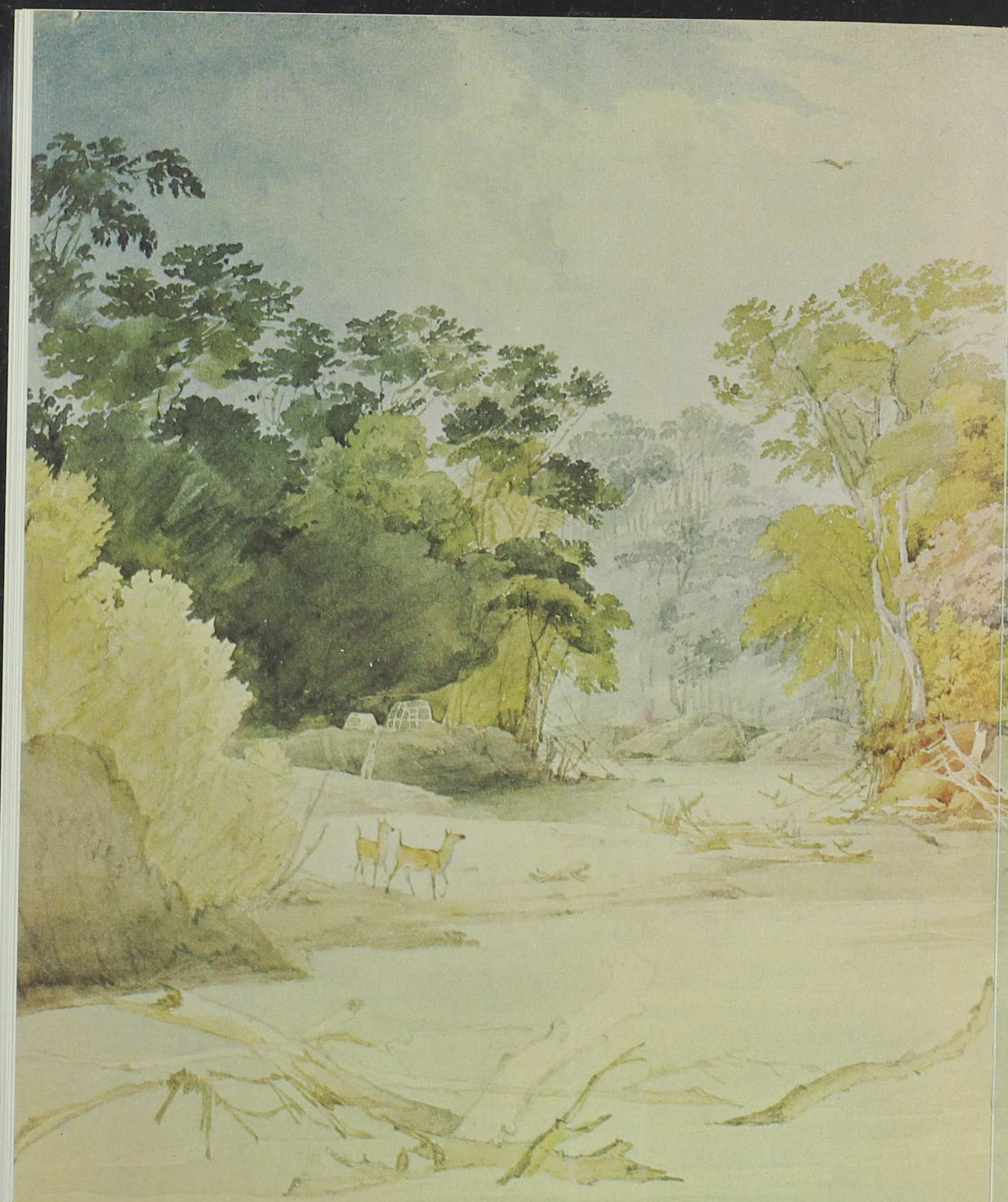
Maximilian's Missouri, 1833-34

In 1833 the Prussian nobleman and established naturalist and ethnologist Alexander Philip Maxmilian, Prince of Wied, took a year-long journey up the Missouri from St. Louis along the Iowa-Nebraska border to the upper reaches of the river to study Indian tribes in the wilds of the American Plains. A student of the eminent German naturalist Alexander von Humbolt, Maximilian had spent two years in the jungles of Brazil following his service in the Napoleonic Wars. There he had sketched the Brazilian aborigines and made notes on their customs, returning home to publish the book that had made his reputation, *Reise nach Brasilien in den Jahren 1815 bis 1817*. He had similar plans for his trip to North America—he would keep a travel journal with detailed notes on the habits of the North American tribes; he would gather and transport back what artifacts he could; he would have sketches made of everything on the spot; and when he returned he would write and publish another book to rival his first in hard scientific interest and in public appeal.

Toward that end, he hired a young German artist named Karl Bodmer to make the trip with him and sketch the Indians, the landscape, the American scene. Born near Zurich in 1809, Bodmer had first learned his craft at the knee of his Uncle Johann Jakob Meyer, before going on to study Art and engraving in Paris. In 1832, he and his brother, also an artist, began a sketching tour of their native Germany, and it was on that tour, at Coblenz near Wied, that Bodmer



The Missouri, with Nodaway Island, April 25, 1833 by Karl Bodmer (courtesy Joslyn Art Museum and the Northern Natural Gas Company of Omaha)

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Evening bivouac of the travellers on the Missouri, summer of 1833 by Karl Bodmer (courtesy Joslyn Art Museum and the Northern Natural Gas Company of Omaha)

met Maximilian. A year later, the youth found himself on the edge of the American frontier, sketching furiously the animal life, the land, and the men around him amidst the raging of the Missouri River, the pounding of Midwestern weather, and the savagery of Pioneer-Trader-Indian relations.

He worked in water-color on heavy sketching paper, usually between 9″ × 11″ and 12″ × 18″, in whatever accommodations he could find. While Bodmer painted, Maximilian interviewed Indian and fur trader alike, took notes on all he saw and heard, and supervised the gathering and labeling of artifacts and plant specimens. By the time they were finished, they had a boat-load of paintings and pipes and leatherwork, as well as two nearly trained bears. They lost many of the artifacts on the return trip, but the bears and the paintings survived. Back in Europe, Maximilian turned his notes into a book and Bodmer his watercolors into dramatic aguatints to illustrate *Reise in das Innere Nord-America in den Jahren 1832 bis 1834*. The full text can be found

A Beaver Lodge on the Missouri, July 17, 1833 by Karl Bodmer (courtesy Joslyn Art Museum and the Northern Natural Gas Company of Omaha)

in English in Reuben Gold Thwaites' *Early American Travels*, volumes XXII through XXIV; much of the text, many of the water colors, and a few of the aquatints can be found in Davis Thomas and Karin Ronnefeldt's *People of the First Man: Life Among the Plains Indians in Their Final Days of Glory* (E.P. Dutton: New York, 1976); an extensive collection of the watercolors, owned by the Northern Natural Gas Company, is housed at the Joslyn Museum in Omaha.

After Maximilian had finished his book, he stored Bodmer's watercolors and pencil sketches, along with his field notes, at his estate on the Rhine, where they were forgotten for over a hundred years. They were discovered in the early 1950s at the Wied estate as the result of serious inquiries about their possible existence by Dr. Stanley Pargellis of the Newberry Library in Chicago, German scholar Dr. Joseph Roeder, and Prince Karl Viktor, Maximilian's great, great, grandnephew. In 1962 the Northern Natural Gas Company of Omaha bought the Maximilian-Bodmer Collection, as a public service, and assigned it to the Joslyn Art Museum for study and display. There, today, the lucky visitor can see the exquisite work by Bodmer that together with Maximilian's notes and the published writing and aquatints constitute an early record of trans-Mississippi exploration considered second in importance only to the journals of Lewis and Clark.

We would like to thank officials of Northern Natural Gas and of the Joslyn for allowing us to visit and photograph the Bodmer works that appear here. The collection at the Joslyn is extensive. Many of the works have now been published in the Thomas and Ronnefeldt book mentioned above and some have been published in museum catalogues and specialized publications. Several here do not appear in Thomas and Ronnefeldt and are for the first time made available to a general Iowa audience.

—C.P.

The Bellvue Agency, 1833 by Karl Bodmer (courtesy Joslyn Art Museum and the Northern Natural Gas Company of Omaha)

The White Castles on the Missouri, 1833 by Karl Bodmer (courtesy Joslyn Art Museum and the Northern Natural Gas Company of Omaha)

View of the mouth of the Big Sioux River, May 8, 1833 by Karl Bodmer (courtesy Joslyn Art Museum and the Northern Natural Gas Company of Omaha)

(courtesy The Children's Aid Society, New York)