

Comment by the Editor

THE ROLE OF THE RIVERS

Samuel de Champlain, chevalier, explorer, crusader, and governor at Quebec, zealous in the service of the king, anxious to add to the realm of New France, and imbued with the spirit of discovery, gave heed to Indian rumors of a "great water" far to the west beyond Lake Huron. Hoping to find a short route to the Orient, he dispatched the intrepid Jean Nicollet in 1634 to find the mysterious sea and carry gifts to China. At the end of a year Nicollet returned saying that he had found only Indian villages but that if he had proceeded three days farther upon the Wisconsin River he would have reached the sea.

For over forty years the lure of the Father of Waters enticed missionaries and explorers into the wilderness, some in quest of a passage to China and others searching for a mighty river called "Messepí". It was as though the "great water" was a siren calling the Frenchmen to take possession of the heart of the continent. But not until 1673 did Louis Joliet and Father Marquette paddle their canoes down the broad Mississippi; and it was nine years later that Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, claimed the great Valley in the name of Louis XIV, King of France.

Followed then a century and more when the Mississippi and its tributaries served as the principal arteries of transportation for soldiers, miners, fur traders, and settlers. France, Spain, and England fought for possession of the rich domain — and in the end, all of them lost. Venturesome traders and explorers paddled their swift canoes into the creeks and bayous, cordelled their clumsy flat-boats to the headwaters of the Missouri, and floated their bull boats down the shallow streams heavily laden with valuable pelts. Tons of lead were shipped to St. Louis from the mines of Dubuque and Galena. At last came the settlers, migrating down the Ohio and up the Mississippi and Missouri, bringing a potential commerce that was to fill the inland waters with keel-boats and packets. Thus the rivers continued to occupy the center of the geographical stage.

With the steamboats came the classic era of river traffic. Hundreds of palatial packets plied the waterways, carrying both passengers and freight. In 1843 the steamboats of the Mississippi Valley carried more than half the total tonnage of the whole United States. By day and night, in fair weather and foul, through floods and low water the pilots navigated the uncharted, shifting channels with amazing skill, dodging snags, sliding over sand-bars, following the current down-stream and seeking slack water up-stream, steering their course for two thousand miles by the location of obscure wood piles, dead trees, and points on the shore line or by sheer

memory on pitch-dark nights, reading the surface of the water for reefs or shoals or submerged wrecks, and remembering accurately the stage of the river at every bend and crossing from one trip to the next. The risks were enormous, but so were the profits. One steamer, operating on the Missouri River, cleared \$65,000 in 1866. Those were the golden days of river traffic, before the advent of the railroads. Possession of the Mississippi River was one of the decisive strategic achievements of the Union forces in the Civil War. And so the Father of Waters held the leading rôle as the drama of the Great Valley unfolded.

But now since the channels have been dredged and charted, snags removed, canals constructed, and crossings marked by signs and lights so that navigation is comparatively easy and safe, alas, river commerce has moved ashore to the railroads and motor trucks. Gone are the gilded, gigsaw packets. The time will come, however, when heavy freight will return amphibian-like to the waterways and the rivers will again assume a place of prominence. "The Mississippi should be made a loop of the sea", said Theodore Roosevelt. And optimists dream of the day when every river town in the Middle West will be a seaport.

J. E. B.