

Adventures in a Bark Canoe

After I had paddled my bark canoe through the Des Moines Rapids with my wife and others in it, and had put them on board a steamer for Saint Louis, I dragged my canoe up the east shore of the rapids, with a line, for a distance of four miles, when I stopped and spent half of the day in collecting some very interesting minerals. These I placed in the bottom of my canoe, ready to get on the first steamer passing up to take me again to Camp Des Moines at the head of the rapids.

At length, as I sat on the wild and wooded shore, waiting, I discovered a steamer several miles below me, advancing through the rapids. While it struggled up against the current, I set too and cleaned my fowling-piece and a noble pair of pistols which I had carried in a belt at my side through my buffalo and other sports of the West. Having put them in fine order and deposited them in the bottom of the canoe before me and taken my paddle in hand, with which my long practice had given me unlimited confidence, I put off from the shore to the middle of the river, which was there a mile and a half in width, to meet the steamer which was slowly stemming the opposing torrent. I made my signal as I neared the boat and desired my old friend, Captain Rogers, not to stop his engine, feeling full confidence that I

could, with an Indian touch of the paddle, toss my little bark around and gently grapple to the side of the steamer which was loaded down with her gunnells near to the water's edge. Oh, that my skill had been equal to my imagination, or that I could have had at that moment the balance and the skill of an Indian *woman*, for the sake of my little craft and what was in it!

I brought my canoe about with a master hand, but the waves of the rapids and the foaming of the waters from the sides of the steamer were too much for my peaceable adhesion. At the moment of wheeling to part company with her, a line, with sort of "laso throw", came from an awkward hand on the deck and, falling over my shoulder and around the end of my canoe with a simultaneous "haul" to it, sent me down head foremost to the bottom of the river. I went tumbling along with the rapid current over the huge rocks on the bottom, whilst my gun and pistols, which were emptied from my capsized boat, were taking their permanent position amongst the rocks, and my trunk, containing my notes of travel for several years and many other valuable things, was floating off upon the surface.

If I had drowned, my death would have been witnessed by at least an hundred ladies and gentlemen who were looking on. But I *did not*. I soon took a peep above the water, and for the first time in my life was "collared", and that by my friend, Captain Rogers, who undoubtedly saved me from making

further explorations on the river bottom by pulling me into the boat, to the amusement of all on deck, many of whom were my old acquaintances. Not knowing the preliminaries, they were as much astounded at my sudden appearance, as if I had been disgorged from a whale's belly. A small boat was sent off for my trunk, which was picked up about half a mile below and brought on board full of water. Clothes, sketch-books, and everything else were entirely wet through. My canoe was brought on board, which was several degrees dearer to me now than it had been for its long and faithful service; but my gun and pistols are there yet, and at the service of the lucky one who may find them.

I remained on board for several miles, till we were passing a wild and romantic rocky shore, on which the sun was shining warm. Launching my little boat into the water, with my trunk in it, I put off to the shore, where I soon had every paper and a hundred other things spread in the sun. My camp that night was at the mouth of a quiet little brook, where I caught some fine bass and fared well. A couple of hours paddling the next morning brought me back to Camp Des Moines.

A few days after this, I put my little canoe on the deck of a steamer ascending the river, and landed at Rock Island, ninety miles above, on some business with General Street, the Indian Agent. When I had finished that mission I "put off" in my little bark, descending the river alone to Camp Des Moines,

with a fine double-barrelled fowling-piece, which I had purchased at the garrison, lying in the canoe before me as the means of procuring wild fowl and other food on my passage.

I left Rock Island about eleven o'clock in the morning, and at half-past three on a pleasant afternoon in the cool month of October, 1835, ran my canoe to the shore of Mascotin Island, where I stepped out upon its beautiful pebbly beach with my paddle in my hand, having drawn the bow of my canoe, as usual, on to the beach, so as to hold it in its place. This beautiful island, so called from a band of the Illinois Indians of that name who once dwelt upon it, is twenty-five or thirty miles in length, without habitation on or in sight of it. The whole island is a lovely prairie covered with a high and luxuriant growth of grass. To the top of the high bank fronting the river I went with my paddle in my hand, quite innocently, just to range my eye over its surface and to see what might be seen.

In a minute or two I turned toward the river, and, to my almost annihilating surprise and vexation, I saw my little canoe twenty or thirty rods from the shore and some distance below me, with its head aiming across the river and steadily gliding along in that direction, where the wind was roguishly wafting it! What little swearing I had learned in the whole of my dealings with the *civilized* world seemed then to concentrate in two or three involuntary exclamations which exploded as I was running down

the beach and throwing off my garments one after the other. Dashing through the deep and boiling current in pursuit of the canoe, I swam some thirty rods in a desperate rage, resolving that this *must be* my remedy as there was no other mode; but at last I found, to my great mortification and alarm, that the canoe, having got so far from the shore, was more in the wind and travelling at a speed quite equal to my own, so that the only safe alternative was to turn and make for the shore with all possible despatch. This I did, and had but just strength to bring me where my feet could reach the bottom. I waded out with the appalling conviction that if I had swum one rod farther into the stream my strength would never have brought me to the shore, for it was in the fall of the year, and the water so cold as completely to have benumbed me and paralyzed my limbs. Hastening to pick up my clothes, which were dropped at intervals as I had run on the beach, and having adjusted them on my shivering limbs, I stepped to the top of the bank to take a deliberate view of my little canoe which was steadily making its way to the other shore — with my gun, with my provisions and fire apparatus, and my sleeping apparel, all snugly packed in it.

The river at that place is near a mile wide; and I watched the mischievous thing till it ran quite into a bunch of willows on the opposite shore, and out of sight. I walked the shore awhile, alone and solitary as a Zealand penguin. At last I sat down and

in one minute passed the following resolves from premises that were before me and too imperative to be evaded or unappreciated. "I am here on a desolate island, with nothing to eat, and destitute of the means of procuring anything: and if I pass the night, or half a dozen of them here, I shall have neither fire or clothes to make me comfortable: and nothing short of *having my canoe* will answer me at all."

For this object, the only alternative struck me, and I soon commenced upon it. An occasional log or limb of drift wood was seen along the beach and under the bank. These I commenced bringing together from all quarters, and some I had to lug half a mile or more, to form a raft to float me up and carry me across the river. As there was a great scarcity of materials, and I had no hatchet to cut anything, I had to use my scanty materials of all lengths and of all sizes and all shapes. At length I ventured upon the motley mass, with paddle in hand, and carefully shoved it off from the shore, finding it just sufficient to float me up.

I took a seat in its center on a bunch of barks which I had placed for a seat, and which, when I started, kept me a few inches above the water and consequently dry, whilst my feet were resting on the raft which in most parts was sunk a little below the surface. The only alternative was to go, for there was no more timber to be found; so I balanced myself in the middle and by reaching forward with my

paddle to a little space between the timbers of my raft, I had a small place to dip it where I could make but a feeble stroke, propelling me at a very slow rate *across* as I was floating rapidly *down* the current. I sat still and worked patiently, however, content with the little gain, and at last reached the opposite shore about three miles below the place of my embarkation, having passed close by several huge snags which I was lucky enough to escape.

My craft was unseaworthy when I started, and when I had got to the middle of the river, owing to the rotten wood with which a great part of it was made and which had now become saturated with water, it had sunk entirely under the surface, letting me down nearly to the waist in the water. In this critical way I moved slowly along, keeping the sticks together under me. At last, when I reached the shore, some of the long and awkward limbs projecting from my raft having reached it before me and being suddenly resisted by the bank gave the instant signal for its dissolution and my sudden debarkation. I gave one grand leap in the *direction* of the bank, yet some yards short of it, and into the water from head to foot. But I soon crawled out and wended my way a mile or two up the shore, where I found my canoe snugly and safely moored in the willows. I stepped into it and paddled back to the island at the same spot where my misfortunes commenced, to enjoy the exultations which were to flow from contrasting my present with my former situation.

The Island of Mascotin soon lost its horrors, and I strolled two days and encamped two nights upon its silent shores — with prairie hens and wild fowl in abundance for my meals. From this lovely ground, which shews the peaceful graves of hundreds of red men who have valued it before me, I paddled off in my light bark, and said, as I looked back, “Sleep there in peace, ye brave fellows, until the sacrilegious hands of white man, and the unsympathizing ploughshare shall turn thy bones from their quiet and beautiful resting-place!”

Two or three days of strolling brought me again to Camp Des Moines, and from thence, with my favorite little bark canoe placed upon the deck of the steamer, I embarked for Saint Louis. When I had landed from the steamer, *Warrior*, I left all other considerations to hasten and report to my dear wife, leaving my little canoe on deck and in the especial charge of the captain till I should return for it in the afternoon and remove it to safe storage with my other Indian articles to form an interesting part of my Museum. On my return to the steamer it was “*missing*”, and by some *medicine* operation forever severed from my sight, though not from my recollections, where it will long remain, and also in a likeness which I made of it just after the trick it played me on the shore of the Mascotin Island.

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