

## Comment by the Editor

THE RAMBLER

To-day the Mississippi Valley is the most inland portion of the country. It lies farthest from the border, and is buttressed not only by its mountain walls but by the settled abodes of millions of people. But the time was when the valley was the distant and mysterious goal of the adventurous, when the Upper Mississippi ran along the outer edge of civilization and out of the West came only tales of Indians and wild animals.

In the twenties and thirties of the last century travellers from Europe, if they were sufficiently hardy and venturesome, trailed westward on the Ohio and ascended the Mississippi to Galena or Fort Crawford or Fort Snelling. They brought all sorts of predilections and prejudices. A few came with dyspepsia or with a monocled mind, some — as Latrobe puts it — “with their eyes shut and mouths open”; but for the most part they came in a high spirit of adventure and with keen appreciation for the wild charm of a new and beautiful country.

The course of the Mississippi below St. Louis often received the curses of travellers like Dickens who did not go north of that city or Captain Marryat, another Englishman who burst out:

I hate the Mississippi, and as I look down upon its wild and filthy waters, boiling and eddying, and reflect how uncertain is travelling in this region of high-pressure, and disregard of social rights, I cannot help feeling a disgust at the idea of perishing in such a vile sewer, to be buried in mud, and perhaps to be rooted out again by some pig-nosed alligator.

But the Upper Mississippi and the sea-like prairies that stretched away on either side captivated them all. They sometimes complained of the barbarities and primitiveness of the frontier towns but they returned full of the eulogies of the natural scenery. And most of them straightway proceeded to write books, which made pleasant reading for the stay-at-homes and provided valuable sources of information for readers of later generations.

The two volumes of descriptions by Charles Joseph Latrobe are among the most entertaining and valuable of these publications. Under the title *The Rambler in North America* he drew word pictures of the scenes and peoples of the time that are unusually vivid and accurate. Latrobe, while born in London, was of Huguenot extraction and his Latin temperament shows at every turn of the page.

He came from Europe with Pourtales, a young Swiss count, in 1832 and on shipboard they formed a friendship with Washington Irving who was just then returning to America after an absence of seventeen years. They travelled in New England with Irving and in the fall made a tour with him from St.

Louis to the southwest into the Pawnee hunting grounds. Irving has described this expedition in *A Tour of the Prairies* and he introduces Latrobe in the following fashion:

Another of my fellow-travellers was Mr. L., an Englishman by birth, but descended from a foreign stock; and who had all the buoyancy and accommodating spirit of a native of the Continent. Having rambled over many countries, he had become, to a certain degree, a citizen of the world, easily adapting himself to any change. He was a man of a thousand occupations; a botanist, a geologist, a hunter of beetles and butterflies, a musical amateur, a sketcher of no mean pretensions, in short, a complete virtuoso; added to which, he was a very indefatigable, if not always a very successful, sportsman. Never had a man more irons in the fire, and, consequently, never was a man more busy nor more cheerful.

In the fall of 1833, Latrobe with two companions visited the Upper Mississippi, and portions of his account of that trip are reprinted in this number of **THE PALIMPSEST**. An amiable and sympathetic observer, he caught and put into words the spirit of the French and Canadian boatmen, the wild beauty of the river and its shores, the joy of primitive camps, the fantastic glory of the prairie fire. Perhaps it was the spirit of adventure that took Latrobe a few years later to Australia where he became superintendent of the district of Port Phillip. When that district was organized as Victoria he administered its affairs as lieutenant governor.

## ROMANCE AND THE PLOW

It is interesting to note the changes in the Mississippi Valley remarked by successive travellers. The early voyageurs passed only forts and Indian encampments. Then — particularly in the thirties — primitive villages sprang up; rough, western towns, picturesque but with few accommodations for the traveller. As migration increased these towns took on more of the trappings of civilization. Order and government became installed. When Latrobe passed up the river there was no Wisconsin, no Iowa, no Minnesota. The territory of Michigan extended to the river, and beyond it was no organized government. Two years later, when Murray came by, Michigan held sway over the entire territory but a year later it yielded the western domain to the Territory of Wisconsin. The territory of Iowa was formed in 1838 to include the land west of the Mississippi running north to the Canadian boundary; and not until 1846 did Iowa content itself with its present limits.

Whites came with increasing numbers, till they filled up with their handiwork the wild reaches where the red men had followed the trail of the bison, where wolves had howled at night outside the camp of white adventurers, and where the prairie fire had swept its course.

The travellers now stopped at village taverns and finally at city hotels. They came to see people, not scenery, and each year they observed a land more like

that from which they had come — settled, comfortable, and conventional. The freshness, the untamed, bloodstirring wildness was slipping away. Romance still rested in the valley but it was changing its form. It was now the romance of achievement, of subjugation. Through human activities the bison and bear and wolf vanished, and in their place stood mild-eyed cattle, subservient horses, and countless and prosaic pigs and chickens. The beauty of the river bank was broken by power plants and warehouses and railway trackage. Forests dwindled and virgin prairie grass gave place to far reaching acres of rippling corn fields.

It is a romantic story — this change — and a story of great human appeal, for to mankind the story of itself is always the most interesting. But with prosperity often comes dullness. The magic spirit of romance burns high when the struggle is on, but it pales with possession. As opulence increases, romance dies. Fortunate it is that nature has its own defenses and clings to its own romance. Rivers still flow in their downward courses, wooded ravines escape the plow, bits of original prairie survive, and here and there places of marked beauty so engage the deeper appreciation of mankind that they are preserved as parks. And so mankind, if it is to retain its idealism, must find in literature and history the spur and incentive to escape the plow of materialism and hold fast to the romance in life.

J. C. P.